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## Leaders realizing foster kids need help after 18

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More lawmakers across the country, including those in Ohio and Hamilton County, are paying attention to the problems foster children face once they leave state protection - increased jail time, homelessness and the next-to-nothing chance of attending and completing college.

"Foster kids are really the responsibility of those of us in government," said Greg Hartmann, a Hamilton County commissioner behind a program that started last month to help foster children get mentors and attend college.

The Higher Education Mentoring Initiative is recruiting mentors to develop long-term relationships with 50 foster children a year.

A combined effort of Hamilton County Job and Family Services and the University of Cincinnati, the program also aims to provide more resources - including money - to foster children enrolled at UC. Social work students at UC will be matched with foster children who are high school seniors so they can help them with college preparations.

Job and Family Services will identify foster children who show the drive to succeed. The idea is that investing in foster children now can avoid more expensive problems later - such as prison, unemployment and homelessness.

The culture created for foster children needs to change, said Moira Weir, director of Hamilton County JFS. "We've emphasized survival skills, such as getting housing," she said. "No one told them college was a possibility."

Of the roughly 150 foster children who leave the protective system each year in Hamilton County, just three went on to post-secondary education last year.

Hamilton County is not alone in its efforts to help foster children.

Kentucky provides health-care benefits for foster children who are enrolled in college and under state care until age 21. All former foster children in Kentucky may receive Medicaid coverage until age 19.

At 18, foster youth in Kentucky can choose to remain in state custody to pursue their education - even to finish high school. Direct foster care is available. Tuition is waived at state colleges, and financial help is available through the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services for other education-related expenses.

"We know what happens to youth when they turn 18 and are not prepared to live on their own," said Debbie Kallmeyer, a foster care specialist in the cabinet's 12-county region that includes

Boone, Kenton and Campbell. "The real challenge is to convince (youth) to stay in; it is voluntary. And there are expectations of them to manage their education."

Another cabinet program matches former foster children or those still in state custody and enrolled at Northern Kentucky University with youth about to leave the system.

Providing a college option can make a difference in the life of a foster child.

Ohio's Education and Training Voucher Program offers foster children and former orphans up to \$5,000 a year for four years for college tuition, books and qualified housing expenses. Money is available on a first-come basis.

Nationally, the Foster Care Mentoring Act, introduced in the Senate in May, would provide \$15 million to statewide foster care mentoring programs and use another \$4 million on a campaign to recruit mentors.

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