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News & Media

Keys to Independence

Tallahassee – A pilot program helping local youth get their driver's licenses is now the law of the land – or at least the state – thanks to the passage of SB 60 and HB 217.

Known as the Keys to Independence Act, the law expands and makes permanent a program specifically aimed at helping youth in the state's child-welfare system get driver's licenses and pay for their insurance.

The \$800,000 pilot was established in 2014 and supported by a grant through the Department of Children and Families. The program reimburses youth and caregivers for the costs associated with driver's education, insurance and other costs related to getting a driver's license.

"Children in foster care need to be prepared for adulthood like all children," said Carol DeLoach, chief executive officer for Devereux Community Based Care, the non-profit organization responsible for the child-welfare system in Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee and St. Lucie counties. "Learning to drive, getting your driver's license and paying for insurance – those are all important steps on the long road to independence."

Locally, 43 young people have enrolled in the program and started the process of getting a permit. Of those youth, 16 have received a learner's permit, and six have earned a driver's license.

The new law also will expand eligibility for the program and add a grace period to make program completion easier for youth who experience multiple placements while in foster care.

It's the latest development in a growing initiative to make foster care as normal an experience as possible.

"Getting a driver's license is a rite of passage – every teenager wants to be able to drive," said Rep. Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart. "This important legislation is part of our continuing efforts to improve the lives of children in the foster care system."

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Contact: Christina Kaiser
(772) 528-0362



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