

Mary's House helps young women transition out of foster care system

By Rose Marie Scott-Blair

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If you've been in foster care all your life and are suddenly on your own, what happens next?

About 450 young adults in San Diego County face this quandary every year. They turn 18 and are "aged out" of the system.

About half find a bed in several transitional housing facilities run by various agencies in the county. The other half are pretty much left to find their own way in the world, said Krysta Creighton, a local expert in the field.

But six lucky girls wind up in Mary's House in west Escondido, the only transitional housing in the county with a family-style setting.

Potential residents are referred by the county, "but we are very selective since one person can change the whole dynamics of the house," said Creighton, director of Mary's House, which is operated by the YMCA of San Diego County. "We're looking for girls who are motivated and ready to make a commitment to whatever goals they have identified for themselves."

The girls share the six-bed-



Krysta Creighton is the director of Mary's House in Escondido, a transitional shelter for young women who have "aged out" of the foster care system. John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune

room house in a semi-supervised environment, and are responsible for doing weekly chores, buying their own groceries and making their own meals.

"We want them to develop the skills to live a self-sufficient and independent life," Creighton said.

Since the program began in 2003, about 50 girls have lived at the house, with an average stay of a year. Residents must be between 18 and 24, and can live there no longer than two years.

"These girls are on a much

faster track to independence and self-support than kids who have a safety net of family and friends," Creighton said. "Mainstream kids have the luxury to make mistakes and can move at a slower pace in deciding what to do with their lives."

During its first five years, Mary's House was privately funded, but in 2008 it began receiving state funds under a new Transitional Housing Placement

SEE Mary's House, Page 7

MARY'S HOUSE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Plus program, called THP-Plus. However, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed eliminating all of the \$25 million in annual statewide funding for THP-Plus in his proposed 2010-2011 budget.

"There has been a huge advocacy effort to save the funding and we are safe for the moment because the Senate Budget Subcommittee voted last month to reject the governor's proposal," Creighton said.

Mary's House also receives a lot of support from Promises2Kids (formerly called the Child Abuse Prevention Foundation), which owns the property.

"They help us with big costs, like replacing a propane tank," Creighton said. "They gave us a van so we could transport all the girls at the same time and they pay for its maintenance and registration. And they donated laptops for all the girls."

But life in Mary's House is not easy, especially if a resident doesn't have a car. Alexis Bourassa, 19, works as a telemarketer in Pacific Beach and spends 2½ hours on the bus to get to work, after a one-mile hike to the bus stop.

"We've found that those who have the freedom and independence of a car are more successful than those who have to rely on public transportation," Creighton said.

Tatjana Sebro, 22, was at Mary's House for five months in 2009, moved out, but came back when she found she had "too much freedom and no stability."

"This is like a big loving family, and I don't take it for granted anymore," she said.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN FOSTER CARE ENDS?

A 2009 annual report for the state's Transitional Housing Placement Plus program, called THP-Plus, shows what young adults who are forced to leave the foster care system at age 18 were doing before participating in the program:

- 19 percent were homeless or living in an emergency shelter and 39 percent had been homeless at some point.
- 31 percent did not have a high school diploma or equivalent credential.
- 27 percent had no income and the median income of the other 73 percent was \$8,400, well below the federal poverty line of \$11,201 for a single person.
- 40 percent were in school and 45 percent were working, but 36 percent were "disconnected" from both work and school.

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Sebro enrolled in Palomar College in January and is looking for employment, but may choose to enlist in the Air Force or Navy.

Andrea Garrett, 19, is a full-time student at MiraCosta and a waitress at a Del Mar restaurant 22 hours a week.

"In the 15 months that I've been at Mary's House, my grades have gone way up because they helped me find a way to balance things and transition to being an adult," she said. "I now understand that I have the responsibility for what life is all about and have to be ready for whatever life throws at me."

Rose Marie Scott-Blair is a freelance writer from Escondido.