

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

WITH THE DEBUT OF ITS AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT,
PLACE OF HOPE PROVIDES AGED-OUT FOSTER YOUTH A PATH
TO INDEPENDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT

By Kevin Kaminski / Photography by Eduardo Schneider

According to the National Foster Youth Institute, more than 23,000 children age out of the U.S. foster care system each year after turning 18. Organizations including the U.S. Administration for Children and Families, and the Child Welfare League of America cite similar statistics when it comes to what happens next.

One in three young adults who age out of foster care do not have a high school diploma. Seventy percent of the girls will be pregnant by age 21. More than half of aged-out youth will be unemployed by age 24. And one in four will experience homelessness (often inside of a year). It's a recipe, in worst-case scenarios, for vulnerability that can lead to everything from substance abuse and incarceration to being lured into human trafficking rings.

"Maybe they were in tumultuous environments, maybe they bounced around foster homes; we have a young lady who came into our care at age 17 who had been in 45 foster homes before she got to us," says Charles Bender, the founding CEO of aptly named Place of Hope, the largest comprehensive child welfare organization in the region. "Educationally, they're behind. And, in certain cases, they're still dealing with traumatic events in their lives—from serious sexual abuse to torture—that [require] high levels of therapeutic care.

"They've yet to learn the essential skills needed for independent living. And now, they've [aged out]. Especially if there isn't affordable, structured transitional housing, they feel like, 'What's going to happen to me?'"

Thanks to the largesse of several nonprofit groups and philanthropic individuals, including a lead donation of \$500,000 from the Gary Peters Family Foundation, Place of Hope is helping to answer that question in south Palm Beach County.

The nonprofit organization's Leighan and David Rinker Campus in west Boca Raton recently debuted the Gary Peters Transitional Housing Complex, an eight-unit residential building, each unit with two bedrooms, for aged-out foster youth (as well as homeless single mothers). The money raised allowed Place of Hope to open the first of four planned buildings without debt, thus creating an affordable housing model unlike any in the county. Maximum monthly rent per person, Bender says, will be no more than \$400.

"There's a total lack of understanding that, one, this [aged-out] population exists and, two, that the foster care system in America has been so messed up, historically, which has helped to perpetuate this need," Bender says. "That said, most people don't like the concept of free housing either. They like the concept of being accountable and meeting milestones.

"Ours isn't some, 'Hey, move in and hang out' operation."

Indeed, with opportunity comes responsibility at the new Transitional Housing Complex.

Residents (two, in most cases, to one of the fully furnished, 1,000-square-foot apartments) not only have to find work in order to cover rent and their portion of the electric bill, they're expected to pursue an education. For some, that means completing high school. For others, it means capitalizing on the tuition waiver program at state colleges for those who've aged out. It might even mean going to a trade school.

In return, residents can take advantage of the many resources available at the west Boca campus, which also includes an extended foster care residence (a dorm-like compound for ages 18 to 21 with live-in support) and a post-maternity care facility. For those who come to the Transitional Housing Complex homeless, Place of Hope also offers financial assistance while the resident is looking for work.

"This is an independence program," Bender says. "They have to want to be in this environment. They have to go to independent living skills training. They have to work with a case manager. We're even able to look at their finances to see how they're doing.

"What we're saying is, instead of you working three minimum wage jobs and [for single moms] balancing child care, here's rent that's way down here," Bender says, holding his hand close to the ground. "The idea is to get you on your feet with a living wage so that you [can become fully independent]."

Though the need for such housing is evident, Bender says he won't even consider starting work on a second building until Place of Hope has secured a lead donation. Meanwhile, the launch of the first building is a strong fundraising message—one that will continue to power the goal of four completed eight-unit complexes (and 64 overall beds) at the Marshall and Vera Lea Rinker Village.



CHARLES BENDER: The founding CEO of Place of Hope stands in front of the new Transitional Housing Complex in west Boca.

DID YOU KNOW?

Since launching Place of Hope from Palm Beach Gardens in 1999, the faith-based organization has expanded its footprint to five campuses (two of them for under-18 foster children) to complement the traditional support it provides foster families in several South Florida counties, including Broward. The west Boca campus is entirely dedicated to post-18 housing.

"Our kids have all been through broken relationships," Bender says. "There's some degree of attachment disorder. And there's a level of mistrust. We're showing these kids dignity. We're showing them that they're worth what we're saying they're worth."