

The Associated Press (GA)

Savings program moves young adults from foster homes to dream homes

By Doug Gross

December 11, 2005

Anita Alston sleeps on an air mattress because she can't afford a bed. Just up the road, Katrina Lawson, a native of Peoria, Ill., is using bed sheets for curtains until she can buy the real thing.

Both of the twenty-something women have learned plenty about working hard and saving money since moving into their first homes last month.

As former foster children - two of the roughly 20,000 each year who "age out" of the system without ever having a permanent home - they didn't need another lesson in doing without.

"The only thing I was ever concerned about was food and a roof over my head for me and my daughter," said Lawson, 24, who moved to Atlanta in 2000 after living with four different foster families since she was 7.

Alston, 23, and Lawson are the first two in the nation to buy homes through a new program geared toward teaching former and current foster children the financial skills most young adults lean on parents, siblings or family friends to learn.

"They make the same mistakes that all kids that age make. But when these kids make them, they have more severe consequence because there's nobody to fall back on," said Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which is working through local groups in 12 cities with about 1,000 teenagers and young adults who have been in foster care. The Casey foundation provides grants to local organizations that work with foster children and which are able to identify and recruit the young adults eligible to participate in their areas.

The program trains participants ages 14 to 23 in all money matters - from opening a checking account and buying car insurance to starting their own small businesses.

About 523,000 children were in foster care as of late 2003, according to the latest available federal data.

The transition from state care to young adulthood often is a rocky one. In a University of Chicago study earlier this year of young adults who aged out of the foster care system, researchers found that more than one-third had no high school diploma or GED -

compared to 10 percent of their peers - and nearly half the women were pregnant by age 19. Thirty percent of the men had been incarcerated at least once and only 46 percent had a savings or checking account.

"It's very easy for them to get stuck out on the fringe," said Lesley Grady, vice president with the financial-training program's local branch, the Metropolitan Atlanta Youth Opportunities Initiative.

Besides training on how to manage money, the program connects former foster children with mentors - from doctors to accountants to counselors. It also provides matching funds for savings accounts that the participants start, ranging from one-to-one matches for those saving to buy a car to four-to-one matches for buying a house.

The matching money comes from the Jim Casey Foundation - named after the co-founder of the United Parcel Service - and other supporters, including the United Way.

Both Alston and Lawson were able to make \$5,000 down payments on their homes.

Alston, who works for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and is pursuing a master's degree in public health, said she relied heavily on professionals she met through the program while closing on her \$134,000, three-bedroom town house just east of Atlanta.

"I tried to connect with people that would help look out for me," said Alston, who spent most of her childhood in Baltimore, one of 17 children raised by her grandparents.

Lawson, who works jobs as a lab technician and as a deputy at the Fulton County Courthouse, laughs about the bargaining skills she picked up through the program.

She turned down appliance after appliance that the seller offered with her \$200,000, four-bedroom house in suburban Snellville, getting a break on the price each time.

"What I should have negotiated was some blinds," Lawson said, laughing about the sheets she uses to keep out sunlight but pulls down when she has guests.

Other participants in the program have started saving for their own homes after hearing about Alston and Lawson, Grady said. Stangler said he hopes the stories of more foster kids will one day sound like theirs.

"By definition these kids were abused or neglected in their homes and taken away; they started out with a lot more to overcome," he said. "Not all of them are buying homes, but what we're finding is that, given the opportunities, the resilience to make it is there with a lot of these kids."