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San Francisco Chronicle. by Jill Tucker. Thursday, April 3, 2014

Andrew Sterling was 7 when he landed in foster care.

His mom was a crack addict. Her drunken boyfriend frequently beat him.

Sheriff's deputies came to get him, and from that day forward, home became a series of foster families and group living situations - a dozen or so places over 11 years.

There were so many schools that Sterling, now 19, lost count. There are six high schools on his final transcript.

"I can't remember everybody," he said. "I can't remember every friend from every school."

Yet, as difficult as his childhood was, his future would arguably have been harder if he hadn't landed at a semicircle of studio apartments in Oakland built for former foster kids who have nowhere else to go and no one to call when life gets hard or money runs out.

Across the state, about 55,000 children are in foster care. Last year, Sterling was among the approximately 2,000 who age out of the system each year, with 350 in Alameda County alone.

Sterling has seen the worst-case scenarios - overdose and suicide - among former foster kids.

"There are a lot of people that have given up," he said.

The 30-apartment complex, Rising Oaks, officially opened in June, built on the grounds of an old orphanage in the Upper Dimond neighborhood. It's part of the Fred Finch Youth Center, which also offers a range of social and mental health services in facilities adjacent to the apartments.

Extra guidance

The former foster youths receive support from case workers and counselors who offer guidance on jobs, personal finance, college applications and other life skills.

There were 140 initial applications for the 30 spots.

The transitional housing filled a gaping need for foster kids who age out of the system at 18 and are turned out into the world, where they are expected to survive on their own.

Many don't.

Foster children are less likely to graduate from high school than their peers and are at greater risk of substance abuse and incarceration.

'Safety net'

"Creating the safety net for these young adults is at the core of the Rising Oaks mission," said Tom Alexander, CEO and president of the youth center, in a statement when the first residents moved in. "This program offers so much more than a roof."

The project cost \$8 million, with funding from the old Oakland Redevelopment Agency, the California Housing and Community Development Department, Federal Home Loan Bank of San Francisco and Citi Community Capital.

The construction coincided with a new state law that allows foster children to remain in state care voluntarily and receive support after age 18.

The law, phased in over three years, went into full effect in January, allowing former foster youths to receive financial support until age 21 as long as they are going to school, have a job or are participating in job-training programs.

Getting supervision

They are also required to meet with a social worker or probation officer once a month and attend court or administrative hearings twice a year.

Most of the residents at Rising Oaks get \$2,871 in state funding each month, which covers the \$312 subsidized rent and utilities, other services and some spending money.

Some of the money also gets deposited into savings accounts for each resident so they have a nest egg when they move out. Residents are allowed to stay for up to 24 months.

"It's a blessing for me," said Robin Gilchrist, who moved downstairs from Sterling five months ago with her now 1-year-old daughter, A'aniyah Nash. "Look at me. I'm 20 years old. I have my own place."

Gilchrist was already in foster care at her daughter's age. She lived with family members, foster families and in a group home. Getting pregnant limited her options after she turned 18. Rising Oaks will give her stability during her daughter's first years.

"I want to give her the world," she said as she sat on a bench outside her unit, her daughter babbling and laughing in a stroller. "I don't ever want her to see the inside of the foster system."

Upstairs, Sterling talked about his plans and dreams.

He's looking to enlist in the National Guard in the fall, one of the first steps to a career in law enforcement, specifically with a sheriff's department.

Deputies helped

When he was 7, sheriff's deputies were the ones who came and took him away.

"They were really cool," he said. "I got some free hamburgers."

He remembers the deputies came to the court hearing when his mom lost custody.

It's a rare happy memory in a tumultuous childhood.

"Every kid deserves that structure of a mom and dad to hold you up," Sterling said. "I've learned to accept it for what it is."

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