

# Grant helps foster children stay in homes

## Families, young adults eligible for housing vouchers

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The Fort Collins Housing Authority is providing the ruby red slippers that foster care youths need to find a place to call home.

For the first time, the housing authority is administering 50 federally funded housing choice vouchers with the aim of providing stable housing for youths receiving foster care. Their purpose is to reunite foster children with their families and to prevent young adults ages 18-21 who are "aging out" of the foster care system from becoming homeless.

"This program is designed for families who need housing to get their children back or who would lose their children if they don't have (access to) adequate housing," said John Tuchscherer, federal programs manager for the housing authority.

The housing authority, which administers affordable housing programs for low-income families in Fort Collins, received the vouchers through a one-year, \$381,900 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Family Unification Program. The grant began July 1.

The vouchers can be used on the open housing market as long as the landlord is willing to accept the form of payment, Tuchscherer said.

Voucher recipients -- either low-income families whose children are in foster care or youths who are exiting the foster care system -- are required to pay 30 percent of their adjusted income for rent, with the voucher covering the remainder up to the fair market value for Larimer County, Tuchscherer said.

The families or the young adults are expected to sign a one-year lease and can continue to receive assistance through the program in subsequent years as long as they qualify, he said.

The housing authority is working with Larimer County's Department of Human Services Children, Youth and Family Division and The Matthews House, a nonprofit in Fort Collins, to generate referrals that will connect families and youths with the housing allowances provided by the program.

The Children, Youth and Family Division will identify families who lost their children or are about to because of inadequate housing.

"It's really important to not have housing as a barrier for them to have their children," said Denise Suniga, deputy division manager for the division.

National statistics show that 40 percent of young adults aging out of foster care will become homeless, Suniga said.

"A lot of times they don't have the same family connections. They don't have a lot of support," she said.

The housing authority is working with The Matthews House, which helps youths obtain housing, employment and education, as well as meet other basic needs.

"Most young adults at age 18 still go home on breaks in college or if they hadn't quite made it to self-sufficiency," said Jerri Howe, executive director of The Matthews House. "These youth have no home to return to. It's very important they get a stable environment established very quickly."

At this point, Howe has a list of 20-plus Fort Collins youths eligible for the vouchers, she said.

"Hopefully having stable housing will be one less thing for them to worry about, so they can put their energy into goals that

will help them become self-sufficient," Howe said.

The vouchers do not require a co-signer, said Nicole Armstrong, transitions facilitator at The Matthews House.

"They typically don't have somebody to sign for them. Finding housing for that reason is difficult," Armstrong said.

Housing is a key component of self-sufficiency, Armstrong said.

"If you don't have a home, there are so many additional obstacles and challenges," she said.

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