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New Initiative Launched for Teens and Young Adults in Foster Care

COLUMBUS, OHIO – The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) and Big Brothers Big Sisters are teaming up to launch a new initiative to help teenagers and young adults who have been in foster care transition more successfully to adulthood. “Connecting the Dots from Foster Care to Employment and Independent Living” will break down silos and bring together foster care caseworkers, staff at Ohio’s One-Stop Career Centers, Big Brothers Big Sisters mentors and Ohio employers, with the goal of helping teens in foster care prepare for work, vocational training or college, and independent living.

“For too long, children leaving foster care have had few places to turn and few people to lean on, but that is about to change,” said ODJFS Director Michael Colbert. “We have a unique opportunity to make a very big difference in the lives of teenagers and young adults who greatly need a place to turn, and greatly need positive adult role models to help give them confidence and show them the way to a brighter future.”

For younger teenagers still in foster care, Connecting the Dots will offer mentoring, educational supports and work readiness training, so that if they do turn 18 before finding permanent homes, they will be better prepared for life on their own. For older teenagers and young adults, it will offer improved independent living and employment services so that they will have more support, more guidance, more connections and more knowledge as they transition to work, vocational training or college, and independent living.

“The statistics are eye-opening,” said Edward N. Cohn, President and CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio. “Foster care youth face some of the most difficult odds in our communities.”

“We are pleased that through Connecting the Dots, our partner Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies in the pilot communities are teaming up with ODJFS to provide needed support for these at-risk youth,” continued Cohn. “Big Brothers Big Sisters, the nation’s oldest and largest mentoring network, has a track record of positive outcomes in children, and we will be bringing our in-depth mentoring experience and statewide Ohio presence to this relationship with the goal of helping foster care youth prepare for a successful future.”

Connecting the Dots will operate as a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families demonstration project at five pilot locations: Cuyahoga, Lake, Summit and Hamilton counties, and a collaborative including Montgomery, Preble, Clinton and Greene counties. Best practices learned in the pilot counties will be shared with counties across the state.

Approximately 1,000 to 1,300 young people in Ohio age out of foster care each year. Nationally, 81 percent of males formerly in foster care are arrested by age 24, 48 percent of females become pregnant by age 19, 33 percent of former foster youth have household incomes below the poverty level, 25 percent have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (compared to 15 percent of Vietnam War veterans), and 22 percent have experienced homelessness. In fact, 40 percent of America's adult homeless population spent some time in foster care. By providing better support to the 24,000 young people nationally who age out of foster care each year, it is estimated that more than \$5.7 billion could be saved over their lifetime.

On July 25, ODJFS will sponsor the second annual "Connecting the Dots Conference for Foster Care Teens and Young Adults." Last year's inaugural conference brought together 200 young people from across the state and featured seminars on employment, higher education, legal rights and personal health.