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Grant aims at aiding youths' transitions

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AUGUSTA -- Ed Schnopp knows what it's like to try to move from the state's foster care system into the life of an independent adult.

The 22-year-old from Gardiner spent 15 years in the system. But, similar to others his age, he lost health insurance a year ago and needed help to get into college.

"Once you turn 21, you lose health care, and sometimes it's hard," said Schnopp, now a student at the University of Maine at Augusta.

A \$525,000 grant from a St. Louis-based private foundation, announced Friday, will help future young adults such as Schnopp make a smoother transition into the work force and help them navigate the health care system.

The Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine will administer the money from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. The state will be eligible for up to three years of funding, which could total about \$1.5 million.

Maine is one of 12 sites around the country to receive the money -- but is the only state to receive the grant, with other money going to cities.

Each year, about 300 Maine young people leave the state's foster care system. Through a new group called the Maine Youth Opportunities Initiative, teens who have been in foster care at age 14 or older will get help with education, employment, health care, housing and personal support from mentors.

To qualify, the youths must be 14-23 years old, complete a financial literacy training program and live in Maine.

Support from businesses such as Bangor Savings Bank, L.L. Bean and UPS helped the effort.

Services also made available for foster youth will include a personal debit account for short-term expenses, a matched savings account to help them save money for education expenses or housing down payments, and help getting into continuing education courses.

"You'd be hard pressed to find a population of young people who are faced with such obstacles," said Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

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