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Foster youth overcome odds, graduate from college

The odds are often stacked against them. Foster youth are less likely than their peers to attend and graduate from college—in part because they often lack a stable support system and don't have the financial means to pay for tuition, room, board, books and other expenses. Yet, some, with use of Education and Training Vouchers from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, are overcoming the odds.

This spring, 26 current and former foster youth who received the vouchers are walking across the stage to accept their certificates and diplomas for associate's or bachelor's degrees in nursing, accounting, business management, automotive technology and several other areas of learning.

The Minnesota Education and Training Voucher Program helps current and former foster and adopted youth attend colleges, universities, vocational and technical programs. Eligible students can receive up to \$5,000 per school year to pay for tuition, fees, books, housing, transportation and other school-related costs and living expenses.

Ayla Koob, a former Education and Training Voucher recipient, earned degrees in Social Work and Psychology with a minor in Chemical Dependency Counseling from Bemidji State University. The voucher helped her pay for tuition, housing, books and a computer for school.

“Being in the foster care system and thinking about college was a scary thought,” said Koob, now a licensed social worker and a regional coordinator for TXT4Life, a new suicide awareness and prevention organization in Minnesota. “I knew that I wouldn't have the stable support to help me out financially for all the different expenses that would occur while in college.”

During her senior year, she lived off campus. Despite working two jobs, it was hard to work enough hours to cover rent, utilities and other expenses while also finishing up both degrees and serving as president of the Social Work Club on campus. “I am extremely grateful to have received the financial help during my four years attending Bemidji State University, and I believe that the Education and Training Vouchers helped facilitate my success as an undergraduate.”

For the 2014-2015 school year, the Minnesota Department of Human Services awarded 127 at-risk youth an average of \$3,000 in Education and Training Vouchers to attend post-secondary school. They ranged in age from 18 to 22 years, and are first- to fifth-year students. Most received other financial aid, including federal Pell grants, Minnesota state grants, tuition waivers and scholarships. They attended public and private universities and colleges both inside and outside Minnesota.

“Graduating is an achievement in itself,” said Human Services Commissioner Lucinda Jesson. “To do so with few supports—both financial and emotional—is even more remarkable. I applaud and congratulate each of the 26 spring graduates for overcoming difficulties and pursuing their dreams, despite the odds. And, I’m pleased the Education and Training Vouchers helped them move forward in life.”

To qualify for the vouchers, students must be in foster care up to age 18, under state or tribal guardianship at age 18, or under the custody of a relative or adopted from foster care at or after age 16. Students must apply, submit essays and attend an orientation session to receive the vouchers.

Since 2003, the department has awarded the vouchers for continued education and training for 150 to 220 current and former foster and adopted youth each year—in the spring and fall.

And some, like Koob, aren’t done learning yet. She said she plans to attend graduate school for master’s degrees in both Social Work and Public Policy next year.

She also wants to help others learn. “My experiences as a youth and with the foster care system have given me the opportunity to be a voice for youth,” she said. “I was asked to be a keynote speaker at a conference next year for professionals who work with and serve youth.”

Jesson added, “We hope, with the help of this program, more youth, like Ayla, will graduate from higher education institutions.”

The next application deadline is July 1, 2015, for the fall semester. For students interested in applying, check the [department’s website](#) under Education and Training Voucher Program.