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More housing for female teens leaving foster care

By Michelle Knight knight@theacorn.com

Six young women set to leave Ventura County's foster care system this year will have a place to call home because of a \$30,000 grant from the United Women's Leadership Council.

The council, a volunteer humanitarian group formed two years ago, earlier this month awarded a one-year grant for housing and support services to PathPoint, a Santa-Barbara based nonprofit that also runs Ventura County's Independent Living Program.

"Our council is excited that we are able to now help the transition of six young women leaving the foster care system," council Chair Lydia Ledesma-Reese said.

Marielle DeFazio, PathPoint vice president, said the grant means the nonprofit can serve more youth and offer more longterm housing opportunities.

On average, 30 young adults each year age out of the county's foster care system; half are women. National and state statistics show that most former foster girls face a cycle of homelessness, substance abuse, pregnancy and gang involvement. Many don't finish high school and few go to college, according to a report by the Children's Advocacy Institute.

PathPoint will use the council's grant to help the women by offering them housing or rental assistance for up to one year. At the same time, the nonprofit will help them move toward financial stability and selfsufficiency by setting educational or vocational goals and learning life skills. The women may live in a shared apartment, rented rooms known as host homes or other stable living arrangements.

PathPoint, formerly known as Work Training Programs, is the provider for the Ventura County's Independent Living Program, which supports foster youth ages 16 to 21 as they transition into adulthood. The council's grant will help emancipated foster girls ages 18 to 24.

Two young women have been identified for assistance so far, and one of them could be placed in a home next month, DeFazio said.

Mentoring, housing, coping and life skills are among the social needs of women coming out of foster care, the council learned last year in an informal survey of current and former foster girls.

In August, the council awarded a \$10,000 grant to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Ventura County for a countywide mentoring program for 20 female foster youth ages 15 to 18.

By the month's end, all 20 girls are expected to be matched with a mentor, said Lynne West of Big Brothers Big Sisters.

The United Women's Leadership Council, operating under the United Way of Ventura County, launched in 2007 to focus attention on improving the lives of women by identifying gaps in social services and working to fill them with public and private agencies.

The council, one of more than 100 nationwide, chose as its first undertaking to help young women aging out of foster care, contributing at least three years of effort and \$300,000. Through membership, donations and other fundraising efforts, the organization has raised \$120,000 so far and has less than 18 months to raise the remaining \$180,000.

"Work that our council does is meaningful to our community in that we are now mentoring and housing foster youth as they start their journey into adult life," Ledesma-Reese said. "We plan on doing more."

Michelle Knight is a member of the United Women's Leadership Council.