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**Hamilton County's Foster Children Overcome Tremendous Obstacles to Graduate**

**Cincinnati (June 22, 2009)** More than 50 teens in Hamilton County's foster care system will bid farewell to high school and say hello to their futures at this year's "Celebration of Dreams" event.

The 11<sup>th</sup> annual event will be held June 24 at the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Theater in Oakley. The event includes dinner and an awards ceremony featuring student speakers, a keynote speaker (Dr. O'dell Owens) and speeches from both agency and county leaders. The ceremony also includes the presentation of certificates, scholarship awards and other gifts for the graduates.

The teens invite their foster families and other important people in their lives, such as caseworkers, CASAs and guardian ad litem.

The night will be spent honoring teens who have overcome tough backgrounds – sometimes abusive backgrounds -- to graduate high school. One of this year's graduates is Willie Jones. Jones was abandoned by his biological mother at age 3 and his father died three years later. Discipline and family problems led him into the custody of Hamilton County's Department of Job and Family Services.

Jones entered the agency's Independent Living Program as a teen. In the program, JFS workers prepare older foster children to live on their own. Training includes daily living skills, referrals for education, training or employment, relationship development, and tactics for connecting with community services.

"Since I've entered the program, I've felt really proud of myself," Jones said. "I never realized how much the little things counted and how proud you feel when you accomplish something. Such as buying a loaf of bread – normally people wouldn't care about it, but being able to say you bought it with your hard-earned money is great."

And his hard work has paid off. He recently graduated from Walnut Hills High School and accepted an athletic scholarship to Brevard College, a small liberal arts college in western North Carolina. He has dreams of running in the Olympics.

He's the perfect example of why Celebration of Dreams exists, said Moira Weir, director of the Job and Family Services Department, which hosts the event, along with the Foster Child Enrichment Council. The Council also funds the scholarships through community donations.

“Young people like Willie have experienced tremendous obstacles and have to work harder than their peers to achieve academic success,” she said. “They, along with their foster parents and those close to them, deserve a celebration and a pat on the back. This event is a fantastic opportunity to say congratulations to them and thank you to our foster parents, caseworkers and others who have provided the necessary support to make this day a reality.”

Weir said she is hopeful this is not an end for the graduates, but a beginning that will include college, a trade school or success in the working world. Many foster children who turn 18 often find themselves on their own, long disconnected from their biological families and without roots and a support system. They’re especially vulnerable to social problems and struggle when it comes to financially supporting themselves.

The agency recently kicked off a new initiative, the Higher Education Mentoring Initiative, to assist foster youth in graduating high school and transitioning to higher education. The agency is working with the University of Cincinnati to recruit and train mentors, and soliciting donations to assist the children with education costs. The University of Cincinnati will provide an on-campus liaison to assist foster children who move to that campus.

“This group has already shown they are fighters,” she said. “Taking the next step will be a challenge, but their dedication and determination will help them be a success at anything they choose to do.”

Hamilton County’s Department of Job and Family Services currently serves about 850 foster children a day. Citizens interested in becoming a foster parent and helping to change a child’s life should call 632-6366 or visit [www.hckids.org](http://www.hckids.org). Those interested in making donations to the Foster Child Enrichment Council can call 732-5151 or visit [www.helpfosterchildren.org](http://www.helpfosterchildren.org)

### **About Hamilton County’s Department of Job and Family Services**

The Department of Job and Family Services administers federal, state and local programs for those in need. The Department helps with local child protection, elderly protection, child care, child support enforcement, workforce development, cash assistance, food stamp disbursement and Medicaid disbursement. Servicing Hamilton County since 1947, the Department helps hundreds of thousands each year and is accredited by the Council on Accreditation, an international, independent, not-for-profit child and family service accrediting organization.

### **About the Foster Child Enrichment Council**

The Foster Child Enrichment Council is a volunteer community group whose mission is to provide positive experiences that enhance the quality of life for abused and neglected children. We serve children in foster and kinship care. The Council has been in existence since the mid-1980’s and is a 501 (c) 3 tax-exempt organization and is the only means through which people can give financial donations to Children’s Services.

Funds are raised through grants, private donations and the annual sale of Entertainment Books. Celebration of Dreams is possible because of private donations and many volunteer hours. If you or anybody you know would like to assist or be part of the Council’s activities you can contact us at: P.O. Box, 18283, Cincinnati, OH 45218 or by leaving a message at 723-5151 or visit our web site at [www.helpfosterchildren.org](http://www.helpfosterchildren.org).