

## A new program helps foster kids in Orange County avoid homelessness when they age out of public care

*Walker, Theresa. Orange County Register, Dec. 19, 2019.*



Orange County United Way's Welcome Home OC initiative is helping find apartments for 25 voucher holders.

For three years after he aged out of foster care, at age 18, Christian was homeless. During that time, he was hit by a car and suffered a traumatic brain injury. He was in a coma for six months and his speech and memory were affected. Over most of the last year he's lived at The Link, a homeless shelter in Santa Ana.

This week, Christian, now 22, moved into his own one-bedroom apartment, in Tustin. **That change is the result of a new rental-assistance program from the Dept. of Housing and Urban Development to help young adults ages 16 to 24 who face homelessness when they leave the child-welfare system.**

**Christian holds one of the 25 vouchers from the HUD program, called Foster Youth to Independence, or FYI, awarded to the Santa Ana Housing Authority.** The Orange County agency is one of only two in California to receive part of \$1.7 million issued this year to pay for the housing vouchers; the other is Kings County Housing Authority in Hanford.

Christian, who asked that his last name not be disclosed, graciously played tour guide on Thursday, Dec. 19, to a gaggle of visitors who crowded into his small apartment. The group included HUD officials, staff from the county's Social Services Agency, and representatives of Orange County United Way's Welcome Home OC program, which is helping find available apartments and providing furniture. Some noted the power of self-sufficiency.

“To have a place to call your own is significant,” said Christopher M. Patterson, HUD’s regional administrator.

Patterson has a personal connection to the foster youth program. As a younger person he bounced around in the state of Washington’s child-welfare system. And before being appointed to his current job earlier this year, he ran group homes in the Northwest through an agency he founded called Breakthrough.

A voucher system for young adults leaving child welfare systems, Patterson said, will succeed only if it gains the trust of the youth it is serving. Those people, he added, are all too familiar with disappointments and betrayals, and the voucher system must prove different.

“There are kids right now probably sitting on the sidelines waiting to see if this is real,” he said.

Nationally, about 23,000 young adults age out or are emancipated from foster care every year. In Orange County, in the fiscal year that ended in June, some 143 people graduated out of foster care, according to the Social Services Agency. When things quieted down, Christian was asked what he liked best about the apartment. Smiling broadly, he said: “It’s mine.”

Lourdes Chavez, a supervisor in the county’s children and family services department, connected Christian to the voucher program and will help him find work and handle other needs.

Chavez also helped fill in some gaps, when Christian was asked about his experience in foster care, which he entered at age 9. His mother struggled with drugs; he was taken in by an aunt in Riverside, but later shuffled through 12 group homes during a two-year period starting when he was 18. And, upon exiting foster care, he suffered the accident that has left its mark — literally, in the form of a tracheotomy scar on his throat and, figuratively, in the confusion that he sometimes still experiences.

Christian was one of 60 young adults who were under consideration when Chavez was determining who should get 25 vouchers. He is the second, so far, to move into a subsidized apartment.

Christian recalled how excited he was in October when Chavez told him about the Foster Youth to Independence program. After that, he noted, things moved fast.

“I wasn’t expecting that at all,” Christian said. “I’m glad that she did that.”