

Although 18 is the legal age of adulthood, the transition from youth to independence is not one that happens overnight. For many, family members serve as guides through this transition period, teaching financial management, supporting career exploration and even offering monetary assistance to help meet goals. But what happens to youth in foster care who frequently lack familial – and financial – supports during this challenging time?

Nationally, outcomes for unsupported youth are grim. Seeking to reverse these trends in Allegheny County, the Department of Human Services (DHS) established the Independent Living Initiative (ILI) in 2006 to guide youth transitioning from foster care to independence. Through the program, youth ages 16 to 24 receive assistance in applying for post-secondary education or training, financial aid, and scholarships. Additionally, youth are connected to other items and services that may help them to meet their goals, such as bus passes, housing, and financial assistance. These supports, no matter how small, can make a crucial difference in helping youth to begin adulthood on a stable path.

In the last six months of 2017, more than 1,000 youth participated in the ILI and were exposed to opportunities that may have otherwise been unobtainable. The following stories of Delvon and Donald are just two examples of how a little bit of support can help youth to achieve impressive outcomes.

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DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Independent Living



Delvon

At the age of six, Delvon's challenging home life led to a move into kinship care with his aunt. Little did he know this move would have an unexpected impact on his future.

"Moving in with my aunt, I got to spend time with my older brother, who I hadn't really been around before," said Delvon. "He played football, and I wanted to be like him. I asked my aunt when she could sign me up so I could play, too."

Delvon joined peewee ball and quickly realized he had talent. By 11th grade, he

discovered that football could be a way out – an opportunity to experience things he had never even considered as an option. He began receiving offers to play football at the collegiate level, and, with the support of the Independent Living Initiative, went through the process of completing the SAT and other college admission preparations. Ultimately, he decided on Texas Tech, playing football there for two years before transferring to USC.

Despite his cross-country move, ILI was always there to offer support.

"If I called or asked for anything, it was always available for me. They gave me dorm kits to help me get settled in college housing. They sent Christmas presents. Ms. JoAnn [manager of the Independent Living Initiative] would always call and text me during the games and wish me good luck. It meant a lot to me, because being in foster care, these are the things that other kids get that you don't."

After graduation, Delvon received an offer from the NFL and played preseason games with the Colts. Unfortunately, an injury caused his football dreams to be placed on hold.

"I wanted to stay in California, but I needed a job. Ms. JoAnn called me and said, 'I have an opening, and I think you would be a good asset to the kids. You can inspire them to do things like you did.' I ended up taking her up on the offer. Why not work with someone who has been there for you during your challenging times?"

In early 2017, Delvon returned to Pittsburgh to join the ILI staff, offering empathetic support to youth who are in the same place he was in not so long ago. He works with each youth to discover needs and long-term goals, and coordinates with caseworkers, YSPs, schools and other supports to find ways to meet those desires.

"Many kids in the system don't have people who are checking in on them, making sure they are doing their homework, and all of those things a parent normally does. ILI shows these youth that someone cares – that someone is there to watch out for them," said Delvon. "It's nice to be on the other side and know that my work is making a difference, just like ILI did for me."

Donald

Donald is familiar with change. In high school, his foster placements bounced him around to a total of four schools. Through the upheaval, however, two things were consistent: His love of fitness and the support of the Independent Living Initiative.

Donald first began working with an ILI worker in 11th grade. With the ILI staff member's guidance and assistance, Donald completed his Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); participated in community events; found a mentor; and joined FosterClub All-Stars, a seven-week internship program that teaches former and current foster youth leadership and advocacy skills.

"ILI exposed me to programs and services that I would have otherwise never known existed," said Donald. "I began to realize that the list of careers and opportunities that I could pursue was pretty much endless."

"The ILI staff showed me that I could become an entrepreneur and live my passion."

Donald attended Slippery Rock University, where he earned his bachelor's degree in exercise science and philosophy. While at college, ILI allowed him to not only complete his studies, but also to explore his personal interests.

"I didn't have parents footing me any money, but I still had to pay bills. The support from ILI meant that I didn't have to work at the dining hall to stay afloat. I could spend more time studying and really getting involved with clubs, organizations and internships. I could go to graduate school at the University of Texas. That support is one of the largest defining factors that led me to where I am now."

And where is Donald now?

Thanks to the assistance of the ILI program through his early adult years, Donald now operates his own fitness company, coaching athletes and community members to improve their physical abilities. In addition to his Pittsburgh gym, he's used his entrepreneurial spirit and talent to coach in Belize and Kenya.

"The ILI staff showed me that I could become an entrepreneur and live my passion," said Donald. "I know that my determination would have led me to the road I am on now, but the Independent Living Initiative has made the path a lot less rocky."