

# Group assists former foster youths

## Young adults often struggle to make it on their own

By Greg Moran  
STAFF WRITER

For foster-care youths who become adults, it is the little things that can cause big problems.

For some, money for a basic car repair can make the difference between holding on to a job or losing it. For others, it's a mattress to sleep on in their first apartment.

For Meredith Hall, it was a pair of eyeglasses.

Hall, who was placed in foster care when she was 4, attended Grossmont College while working full time and eventually transferred to UCSD. But while there, she started having trouble seeing the classroom board.

The \$300 cost for glasses was far beyond her reach. While other students could turn to parents for help, Hall could not.

Instead, she turned to Just in Time, an all-volunteer group that had just started

**Online:** For information about volunteering at Just in Time or making a donation, go to [jitfosteryouth.org](http://jitfosteryouth.org)

up to provide the basic needs for foster-care youths who have "aged out" of the system.

"They came through in a week, and I was able to get some glasses," Hall said. The next year, the group surprised her with a laptop computer for her studies.

Hall was one of the first of thousands

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## FOSTER

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## Organization's help points to flaws in system

of foster youths whom Just in Time has helped in ways large and small since 2003.

Last year, the group distributed more than \$260,000 in furniture, food, educational supplies such as computers and printers, and emergency assistance to about 600 youths.

The group's assistance addresses a long-overlooked portion of the child-welfare system — those youths who have been dependents of the court system, lived in numerous placements and suddenly find themselves on their own.

Each year in San Diego County, between 200 and 250 such youths turn 18 and become emancipated from the system. Many have to fend for themselves.

Deputy Public Defender Jeanette Day, who works in the child-welfare courts representing children, was struck by the plight of these teenagers in 2003. At first she suggested to a friend that they assemble holiday gift baskets with staples and sundries for some of the teens, Day said.

"A lot of these kids were struggling, just hanging on," Day said. The effort grew from word of mouth and contacts in the child-welfare system. Soon Day said they were delivering gently used furniture to youths setting up their first apartments and providing



Meredith Hall (center), program director for Just in Time, met with Sarai Quinones (left) and Abdi Yusuf, who are clients of the organization. Charlie Neuman / Union-Tribune

Now, Just in Time is a non-profit with a 14-person board of directors. It focuses on helping young adults ages 18 to 26 until they become self-sufficient, said board member and Vice President Diane Cox.

The organization depends on grants and donations; it also is supported by businesses. Beds and mattresses are donated by Sleep Train, Cox said.

Youths who get assistance are screened first, Cox said. They have to be in school, employed or both, and working toward being independent, self-sufficient adults.

"They need to know someone is pulling for them, and if they are in a bind, they can call us," Cox said. "We try to do just the kinds of things parents would do for their own children."

Bob Fellmeth of the Children's Advocacy Institute at the University of San Diego School of Law said Just in Time addresses the needs of "one of the most at-risk populations we have."

"I love them," he said of the Just in Time volunteers. "But

this also points out the failure of the state to help these kids."

Fellmeth is pushing a pilot program that would use money from Proposition 63 — the measure that levied a tax on millionaires to fund mental health programs — to establish special court-supervised accounts for youths about to age out.

The accounts would be handled by a trustee who would develop a plan with the youths. Reports would be given to the court every six months on how much progress they were making toward their goal of going to college or getting work.

Fellmeth, whose institute is a leading voice in the state on child-welfare issues, said he is still garnering support for the comprehensive approach. In the meantime, Just in Time will continue to help those youths whom it can get started.

Hall recalled that the transition from foster care to independent living can be harsh. "All of a sudden you realize you are in charge of your life,

and no one is going to tell you what to do," she said. Most foster youths never had to open a bank account, buy clothing or cook.

"They have to make their own decision and oftentimes, no one has prepared them or shown them how to make those decisions," Hall said.

Hall will help in her own way. She graduated last spring from UCSD with a degree in political science and literature, and is working now.

Hall is the first full-time paid program director for Just in Time.

"I feel like I have something to give back," she said. "I feel fortunate I have a college education. And I feel I should encourage people who were in the same place I was just a few years ago."

Greg Moran: (619) 542-4586;  
[greg.moran@uniontrib.com](mailto:greg.moran@uniontrib.com)