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The Affordable Care Act gives former foster kids healthcare benefits to age 26, though they may not know it

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Al Diaz / Al Diaz / Miami Herald Staff

Miami Dade College graduate Kenisha Anthony, 22, at right with her younger sister Mylika Anthony, 18, left, after graduation ceremonies at the Bank United Center on The University of Miami campus in Coral Gables on Saturday, May 3, 2014. The Affordable Care Act not only increased the time young people can stay on their parents' health plans, it also extended Medicaid benefits for the Anthony sisters and others without parents who've aged out of the foster care system. In Florida, thousands of young adults are eligible for the benefit regardless of income. The youth-run group called Florida Youth SHINE locates former foster kids who've disappeared off the grid.

find and enroll this population.

"I found SHINE on the Internet and contacted them to join. They helped me deal with the technical issues of applying. Now I can go to the doctor," Anthony said.

Nationally, about 26,000 young adults aged 18 to 22 are released from foster care each year to make it on their own, more than 50 percent with chronic health conditions or mental disorders, according to The Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew researchers estimated that 7,000 to 8,000 former foster youths in Florida could benefit from the Medicaid extension this year if they knew about it.

Rain clouds couldn't spoil Kenisha Anthony's afternoon as she emerged from the BankUnited Center in Coral Gables on Saturday with an associate degree in social work from Miami Dade College. The 22-year-old from Miami had survived the school of hard knocks that is Florida's foster care system to reach this moment. Now a provision of the Affordable Care Act promises to help her make an even better start.

As of Jan. 1, Anthony and others who aged out of foster care became eligible for Medicaid until they turn 26, just as other young adults can stay on their parents' health plans to that age as part of the ACA. But not all former foster children may know about this little-discussed Obamacare benefit, especially if they're no longer in the system.

Anthony learned about it through a group called Florida Youth SHINE, a network of former foster children who are working to

Funded by Florida's Children First (FCF), a nonprofit children's rights advocate, Youth SHINE has grown to 250 members with chapters in Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Their work has included testifying before Florida legislators and child welfare agencies.

"The federal government gives states options for implementing Medicaid. We wanted to make sure our state agencies understood that this federal law required them to offer the Medicaid extension to all foster children," FCF Deputy Director Robin Rosenberg explained.

Before the ACA, Florida limited some foster benefits to children placed in state-licensed homes, so those who wound up with a relative or other unlicensed adult were out of luck.

Florida decided not to cover those who move here from another state. And former foster children who leave Florida may or may not be eligible for the benefit in another state, depending on whether the state chooses to cover foster youths who move there after aging out somewhere else.

A few weeks before the provision kicked in at the beginning of 2014, an implementation guide went out from the Department of Children and Families to help community-based organizations prepare for the benefit. Though the guide encouraged agencies to compile "look-back" databases of aged-out foster children since Jan. 1, 2007, enrollment efforts so far have been limited to those still in the system.

"All we can do is put the information out there," said Bart Armstrong, chief operating officer of Our Kids, the lead community-based care agency in Miami-Dade responsible for educating young people about the new benefit. "There are kids we won't be able to touch because their phone number may have changed or they moved."

In Broward, ChildNet also does what it can to reach aged-out youths through Flite, its one-stop resource center in Plantation. But, "many didn't have a good experience in foster care and don't want to reconnect," Community Relations Director Elizabeth Wynter said. However, Wynter reported, "Ninety-nine percent of youths who came of age since January have decided to stay in the system."

As former foster kids themselves, Youth SHINE's members brainstormed about less obvious places to look for peers who may have fallen off the grid. They networked with homeless coalitions, free clinic associations and public defenders to spread the word.

"They're a close-knit network of friends who can spread the information by word of mouth almost statewide," said Amy Guinan, a Florida Legal Services attorney who advocates for children and works with Youth SHINE. "It's been the most effective outreach I've seen on this issue."

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