

Immediate Release: December 1, 2015

Contact: Lisa Gardner

JMG

(207) 441-8411

lgardner@jmg.org

MAINE FOSTER CARE YOUTH REACH MILLION \$ DOLLAR MILESTONE

Augusta, ME – Whether it is access to higher education, rent for a first apartment, a car, or laptop – there are certain critical assets *all* young people need as they transition into adulthood and independence. For youth in foster care, covering these expenses can be especially challenging. On Tuesday, December 1st, a crowd of former and current foster youth, service providers, supporters and community leaders and legislators gathered at the State House to celebrate a significant milestone. Through a statewide program called Opportunity Passport™; through hard work and determination, these youth managed to save, and received matching funds, for a total of one million dollars – money they have used toward necessary expenses that bring them closer to leading meaningful and productive lives.

“I can honestly say that without the program, I would have been in a shelter or on the streets.” Kyle Snyder was 19 and on the verge of being homeless when he enrolled in Opportunity Passport™. “I didn’t have family to turn to. The program gave me the chance to access enough money to put a deposit on my very first apartment, and taught me at a pretty young age what I need to do to hold onto it.”

Kyle Snyder is one of 500 current and former foster youth who have participated in the Opportunity Passport™ program since it started in 2004. He said the program’s financial literacy course significantly increased his ability to manage his money, to set goals, and to stick to a budget. The program also allows participants to open a matched savings account. Every dollar the youth save is matched, dollar-for-dollar, up to \$1,000 a year, which can be used toward specific expenses such as rent, college courses, training programs, childcare and much more.

Maine Health and Human Services Commissioner Mary Mayhew spoke during the celebration at a press conference at the State House. The commissioner said, “I have to start by saying congratulations! One million dollars is an amazing accomplishment. You are far ahead of many adults when it comes to your ability to save and manage your money. This milestone is evidence of the effectiveness of the program and of the public-private partnership that delivers it. It is young people and adults working together, utilizing existing resources and expertise to foster independence in our youth, and to strengthen Maine’s communities.”

The Opportunity Passport™ program is delivered through the Maine Youth Transition Collaborative (MYTC), a team of public and private partners including the University of Southern Maine’s Muskie School of Public Service, Jobs for Maine’s Graduates (JMG), Goodwill Industries of Northern New England, and Maine’s Department of Health and Human Services.

JMG serves as the program coordinator, enrolling youth and providing them with a minimum of 12 hours of financial literacy education, as well as on-going mentoring support. Kim Lipp, executive vice president of JMG, said, "The ultimate goal is that these youth build financial capability to set goals, save, and manage their money as adults. It's something most people could benefit from."

The Opportunity Passport™ program was developed by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Foundation has provided significant funding and guidance to the program for the last ten years. Sandra Gasca-Gonzalez is executive director for the Jim Casey Initiative. “Financial capability is absolutely critical if

young people are to become successful adults in today’s world,” Gasca-Gonzalez said. “The reality for most young people in foster care is that money is frequently exchanged on their behalf and they were left out of conversations about their financial livelihoods. The Opportunity Passport™ is designed to empower our young people with financial education and practice with saving and spending as they venture into adulthood.”

The program has also caught the attention of Maine-based funders. The John T. Gorman Foundation is committed to improving the lives of people in Maine, and has provided support allowing Opportunity Passport™ to expand and serve more youth.

Mariah Trimble-Smith has been in Opportunity Passport™ for eight years now. The program has helped her move out of a group home; buy a car so she could work; and, pursue a college degree. Mariah said, “I was placed in foster care when I was fourteen. Until I enrolled in the program, I didn’t know anything about finances – whether it was how to save and budget, or how to handle a crisis like major medical bills. And, now I do. So, for me, this is more than just celebrating a milestone. It’s about celebrating the future. The skills and experience I’ve gained through Opportunity Passport™ will be with me for the rest of my life.”

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The Maine Youth Transition Collaborative (MYTC), made up of public and private partners from across Maine, works with young people, the child welfare system, and community members to ensure that youth transitioning from the foster care system to adulthood have the resources and personal connections they need to be successful. MYTC works with communities around Maine on the issues vital to a young person’s economic self-sufficiency, such as post-secondary education and employment.

For more information about MYTC, including a full list of partners, visits <http://www.maine-ytc.org/>