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**Virtual graduation open house honors teens in foster care**

*22 high school seniors attend event in partnership with Indianapolis Colts*

**INDIANAPOLIS (June 23, 2020)** – Twenty-two high school seniors in foster care celebrated their high school graduation with a special virtual open house Tuesday.

Project Open House honors teens in foster care as they accomplish this life milestone despite challenges placed in front of them. The central Indiana graduates applied to participate in the program hosted jointly by the Department of Child Services, the Indianapolis Colts and Cargo Services Inc.

This year’s celebration brought the graduates and their supporters together via Zoom, where guest speakers congratulated them on their achievements and arranged for them to receive pizza and gifts at their homes. The graduates received well-wishes from Indiana Governor Eric J. Holcomb, program sponsors and Blue, the Colts mascot, who came bearing signs: “We can’t wait to watch you change the world!”

“I feel a great sense of pride for all of you tonight. This is a great achievement,” DCS Director Terry Stigdon said. “It takes a lot of heart and a lot of determination to face adversity and come out victorious.”

When the program launched in 2016, it had just five graduates, Cargo Services Inc. CFO Steve Fugate told the graduates. The program has grown and changed each year since, but gathering online was a first no one expected, he added.

“In 15 to 20 years, when we look back over the last 20 to 25 graduations that we’ve had, this will be the one – you guys will be the ones – that we remember because it is so unique,” he said.

Colts GM Chris Ballard commended the graduates on all they overcame to reach graduation day. The Ballards fostered two children and ended up adopting both; the cause has remained close to their hearts



ever since. He encouraged the graduates to draw on the experiences they've had so far as a source of strength.

"Every time that you think that it is getting hard, and you think that you're not going to push through, ... you've done it before," he said. "As hard as it's been, you should be very proud of the accomplishments and what you're going to do going forward."

Each of the 22 graduates received gift boxes filled with cards and gifts they opened together at the end of the call. In the fall, most of the graduates plan to attend college to continue their education. Others will enter workforce or head to the military.

DCS' support of older youth doesn't end at graduation, Stigdon said. Teens aging out of foster care are eligible for older youth services, including financial assistance, resources and mentoring, to ease their transition to adulthood.

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***About Indiana DCS:*** *The Indiana Department of Child Services protects children from abuse and neglect and works to ensure their financial support. Indiana Child Abuse/Neglect Hotline: 800.800.5556. Child Support Customer Service Kidsline: 800.840.8757 or 317.233.5437. [www.in.gov/dcs](http://www.in.gov/dcs)*



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