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For Immediate Release

Friday, June 20, 2014

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Foster Youth Graduation event celebrates academic success

(Madison) – A special group of foster youths was honored this week at a unique graduation party hosted by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF). First Lady Tonette Walker and DCF Secretary Eloise Anderson presided over the celebration, which was held at the Executive Residence, recognizing former foster youth who recently graduated from high school or completed milestones in post-secondary education.

Among the attendees were: Dejanai Baker (Kenosha Tremper High School); Jordan Castillo and Gordon Chandler (Jefferson High School); Steven Chivers (Viroqua High School); Samantha Clements and Sandra Gregory (Indian Trail Academy); Trent Fredli (Sun Prairie High School); Brandon Frosch (Madison West High School); Kaylee George (Dodgeland High School); Laura Hintz (Bay Port High School, Howard-Suamico); Cassandra Marek and Janai Stoopes (Reuther Central High School, Kenosha); Dizaray Martin (Harold Vincent High School, Milwaukee); Preshas Mason (Milwaukee Center for Independence); Nevada Mueller and Samantha Ostergaard (Lincoln High School, Wisconsin Rapids); Giovanna Mulock (Cudahy High School); Faith Oestreich, Jesse Worley and Dylan Zweifel (Janesville Parker High School); Terry Reece (the Challenge Academy, Fort McCoy); Emily Rodriguez and DaRon Thompson (Hamilton High School, Milwaukee); Heather Saunders (Penn Foster High School, Milwaukee); Serena Shelton (DePere High School); Diana Sisk (Reedsburg High School); Desalina Smith (Alliance High School); Torrie Thomas (Madison East High School); Tiffany Underwood and Marlene Walters (Mary D. Bradford High School, Kenosha); Sarah Welby (Oregon High School); Isaiah Williams (Menomonee Falls High School); Tessa Zeigler (Hortonville High School); Carlos Cortez from the Milwaukee School of the Arts and Michael Phillips from Milwaukee Excel. Also receiving certificates were: Larissa DeLaPaz for completing her General Educational Development through Waukesha County Technical College; Bregetta Wilson for earning a Bachelor's Degree from Cardinal Stritch University; and, Brittany Hernandez for earning a Bachelor's Degree from the University of Massachusetts.

“I’m honored to be a part of celebrating the accomplishments of these young graduates,” said First Lady Tonette Walker. “These young men and women have shown great determination in overcoming many obstacles that foster youth face. It’s wonderful to see that they have made an important investment, through education, to create positive opportunities for their future. They are role models for all foster youth.”

Thirty-eight graduates from across Wisconsin were recognized during the ceremony, representing the one-hundred and twenty-two foster youth who were reported as having reached

commencement this year. While most of the students at the ceremony were celebrating their graduation from high school, two students celebrated completion of their Bachelor's Degrees.

Youth in foster care often face significant obstacles in achieving academic success. Nationally, only about 54% of foster youth will graduate from high school; only 2% will go onto college. Most suffer not only the loss of their biological family, but have had to face multiple foster home moves, changes in case workers and being uprooted from friends and schools. On average, foster kids will move six times between kindergarten and 12th grade.

"These students deserve to be recognized for their academic achievement," said Eloise Anderson. "They are shining examples that despite whatever hardships a person might face, you can still achieve your goals through hard work, determination and perseverance."

Former foster youth Greta Munns of Eau Claire also spoke, and inspired the graduates about their future. Munns serves as UW-Stout's first Foster Care Liaison.

Some of the youth at yesterday's event were currently in foster care. Through the new 2013 Wisconsin Act 334, out-of-home care may be extended to 21 years of age for youths with individual education program plans.

For more information on Wisconsin's foster care services or to find out how you can be a foster parent, please visit the Department of Children and Families website at: www.dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/foster/ or visit the Coalition for Children, Youth and Families website to learn more about the "Shelter from the Storm" campaign at www.fosterparentsrock.org.

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(Editor's note: photo/s available of youth/s in your area to accompany article, upon request to DCF)