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MAY IS NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH
*Casa Valentina Providing Affordable Housing and Support Services
To Young Women in Miami-Dade County Aging Out of Foster Care*

MIAMI (May 4, 2006) – Nationally, more than 20,000 youth age out of foster care each year when they turn 18 and are no longer eligible for state funded housing and support. The obstacles they face trying to transition from foster care to independent living are insurmountable, and the statistics speak for themselves. More than 50% of youth who age out have not graduated from high school; only 38% are employed 12-18 months after leaving the foster care system; one forth report encounters with the juvenile justice system; and over 60% of the young women leaving foster care will have a baby within four years.¹

In reality, a foster child's 18th birthday often triggers a descent into a life of poor health and education, unemployment, substance abuse, criminal behavior, and in many cases homelessness. In fact, research shows that housing is the greatest need and biggest obstacle for youth struggling to transition from foster care to independent living. One third of Florida's foster children are likely to become homeless within three years of aging out,² and according to recent research from the University of South Florida, two-thirds of the homeless population in Miami-Dade County are ages 18-23.

May is National Foster Care Month and a great opportunity to bring attention to the dire situation facing these youth and to support the caring organizations in our community working on behalf of the more than 800 who age out in Florida each year. Casa Valentina is a new non-profit organization addressing the immense and unique challenges faced by young women in Miami-Dade County who age out of foster care without the life experience, financial stability and support they need to survive on their own. Facing life alone on the streets of Miami, young women in this situation are vulnerable to prostitution, pregnancy, violence, sexual abuse or worse. Nearly 100 girls age out of foster care in Miami-Dade County each year.

"Affordable housing is at the heart of each and every problem these girls have," said Sharon Langer, chair of the Casa Valentina Executive Committee. "At Casa Valentina, we want to give former foster girls a safe and stable home environment. With that in place, they can focus their energy on education and employment and on learning the life-skills they need to achieve independence."

Through public education, fundraising and special events, Casa Valentina is working to establish a first-of-its-kind residential program that will provide former foster girls with supportive housing to help them transition from foster care to independent living. They are currently researching prospective housing sites for development in 2006, and their goal is to provide about a dozen

girls with a place to live and the support services that are vital to their success by the end of this year.

There are many different ways to support Casa Valentina during National Foster Care Month and beyond. Visit www.casavalentina.org to learn more about how to make a contribution, host an awareness-raising gathering or become a volunteer.

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Casa Valentina's mission is to provide young women in Miami-Dade County who age out of foster care with safe, affordable housing and the support services they need to become successful, independent adults. Visit Casa Valentina online at www.casavalentina.org.

¹Wertheimer, R., Youth Who "Age Out" of Foster Care: Troubled Lives, Troubling Prospects (Washington, D.C.: Child Trends, 2002)

²Annual Report on Homeless Conditions in Florida, Fiscal Year 2002-2003