

Donations of dignity: Group collects suitcases for children in state care

By Joni Quinn

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Many of us have moved to a new home at least once in our lives, whether from an apartment to a house or from a room in our parents' home to an apartment of our own.

Imagine making that move with some, or none of your belongings. Or making the move with only as much as you could fit into a trash bag.

This is how many foster children move from their homes into care, or from one foster home to another, say those who work with children in state custody.

Chris, a 14-year-old boy in the care of the Haverhill office of the Department of Children and Families, recalled a move that tore at his heart.

"... DSS (Department of Social Services, the former name of DCF) moved me again after only a few months. They had already thrown all my stuff into the cheap white kitchen trash bags. The pictures of my real family were just thrown in, and some of them got torn or bent," Chris said.

Chris had moved 17 times before, but this was particularly painful because those photos were dear to him.

To help Chris and the 14,000 children in foster care across Massachusetts, a small group of volunteers has organized Suitcases for Kids, whose mission is to provide every child in the care of the Department of Children and Families in Massachusetts with at least one suitcase so that when they move they can pack their belongings with dignity.

Donations will be accepted at three area locations on Saturday, June 13, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Ron Nickerson, creator of Suitcases for Kids in the Haverhill area, said this is the group's first target area for collecting.

"Our success depends on the donations from the community," said Nickerson, a foster father with two sons.

He said the group hopes to begin by collecting 1,000 suitcases during Saturday's drive.

"We want to make this project special for the children. The message we hope to send is 'You are important. You are valuable.' We believe that the love, care, and commitment from this Haverhill area project will light a fire of inspiration and spread Suitcases for Kids across Massachusetts and beyond. So far we have been very warmly received all throughout this community," said Donna White, co-chairwoman of Suitcases for Kids, and a mother of two.

Nickerson has worked with children for more than 25 years in a variety of areas. His foster home in North Andover provides specialized care specifically for children with Reactive Attachment Disorder.

"I've seen kids leave homes with all their things in trash bags so many times. It's absolutely heartbreaking. Their things are always falling out and it's their worldly possessions in there. It's time to give them some dignity," Nickerson said.

After the project in the Haverhill area, Nickerson said his group will decide whether to take the effort statewide, or to another region.

Lucia Vega, a social worker technician in the family resource/adoption unit in the Haverhill office, said she is enthusiastic about this project.

"Suitcases for Kids really interests me because in the unit where I work, we find placement for all children that come into care. I see all the children that walk into our office when they are being "placed" - usually with a black trash bag or, if not, then with nothing in their possession," Vega said.

"It breaks my heart when I see a child leave their home — for whatever the reason might be — and on top of it all, they have nothing with them when they are placed in a foster home," Vega said.

The Suitcases for Kids project is cosponsored by the Haverhill office of DCF, which serves 11 area communities towns.

For more information, contact Nickerson at 508-733-7333, Donna White at 508-842-2529 or the Haverhill office of DCF at (978) 469-8800, ext. 57.

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