



3910 Oakwood Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90004
(323)953-7350 Phone
(323)661-7306 Fax
www.all4kids.org

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To Whom it May Concern,

This letter is in support of the organization, Hope in a Suitcase which has been providing suitcases to children placed in foster care since 2015. More recently, enhanced support has been provided to our Relative Support Services (RSS) program. Hope in a Suitcase began providing emergency bags to children and youth who were placed with a relative or non-related extended family member (NREFM), when separated from their biological parents. Unfortunately, it is common for children to be separated from their biological parents with nothing but the clothes on their backs. This means they not only lose contact with their parents but lose their home, school, school friends and teachers, church community, neighborhoods, extended family members, their favorite items of clothing, pets, familial interactions, their home culture, and their most important possessions. Imagine being taken from your family with no warning, no opportunity to say goodbye, and no understanding of why you are being taken and where you are going, without the things and people you rely on for comfort. These bags mean that children and youth's basic needs in terms of clothing, hygiene supplies, and even comfort items such as blankets, stuffed animals, and books are met within days of their joining their relative or NREFM's home. The bags also include a note written by a volunteer who assisted with packing the bag. These notes are not only kind thoughts but convey to the child that someone knows what they are going through and cares.

Another barrier to our program's ability to meet the needs of these children is that DCFS isn't always able to provide a clothing allowance at the time of placement. We found ourselves purchasing clothing for so many children and youth that it was on trend to deplete our financial resources available to purchase items to meet emergency needs. Hope in a Suitcase was willing to grow their services to meet our client's needs to provide "enhanced bags" as well as Teen Shopping Days.

Through both of these services, Hope in a Suitcase provides us with bags that provide children 7 and younger with a week's worth of new clothing, enough to support their attendance in school without having to wear clothing more than once in a week, which for many of these kids is typical. This has been deeply helpful to our families and we often hear the gratitude of children and their caregivers for the help.

SPA 4, our catchment area for our RSS program has the highest unemployment rate, concentration of undocumented people, poverty rate, number of new HIV infections, and number of SIDS deaths of any of Los Angeles county's 8 service areas. We serve people who are barely making it financially. With the addition of relative children into their families, often including large sibling sets, the financial burden can be so extreme that they could lose their ability to pay rent or buy food. With the assistance of Hope in a Suitcase, these families can utilize their income to pay for housing, food, and utility costs. Clothing is a critical need that if not fulfilled could put the children at risk to be moved to a foster home with strangers, losing the remaining family connections they have. We have worked with many children who only have one outfit, wearing shoes 2 sizes too small, and teens who had zero underwear or bras. This has a deep impact on the self-esteem and self-worth of these children and youth and rippling impact on their overall development.

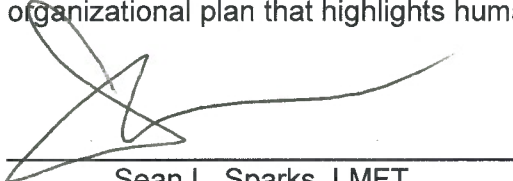
The Teen Shopping Day is another part of the magic that Hope in a Suitcase has created. We refer teens and sometimes their younger siblings to scheduled shopping days at Hope in a Suitcase's location. During this event, the youth are given a specific amount of "points" to spend on clothing items. The teens learn budgeting and also get to select their own clothing and other items allowing them some control over their situation. We receive great feedback from attendees and caregivers report that children and youth walk a little taller when they leave. The Teen Shopping days also allows participants to select new shoes, a bag, and books. The events allow a safe space for children and youth residing in out of home care, to connect with other young people in the same situations as well as caring adults who see them and honor them as important and competent people who are not defined by their circumstances.

Hope in a Suitcase ensures the clothing and other items are of good quality and new. Often service providers operate from a stance that folks who are receiving free items should be grateful for whatever we give them. Hope in a Suitcase believes that those they serve deserve good quality items. For some of our children and youth, this is the first time they have received new clothing. Hope in a Suitcase also doesn't look at those they serve as victims but instead believes in the amazing resilience of these children and families and honors their commitment to love and support the children and youth in their care no matter the personal cost, challenges, and feelings.

Many of our caregivers are grandparents of the children and this often comes with the additional burden of having to set difficult boundaries with their adult children. A number of caregivers shared that it was during the Teen Shopping Day that they were able to meet and connect with other caregivers, which for some was the first time they were able to talk with someone else who was coping with similar challenges. This assists with normalizing their experience and removing shame associated with their adult children's poor decisions and their need for supports for their grandchildren.

When we think about clothing, those of us who are privileged enough to access clothing for ourselves and our children without it causing catastrophic financial impact, it's easy to miss the deep and layered impact of lack of access to basic clothing has on children and families. What Hope in a Suitcase has developed addresses the layers of impact and builds up children and youth by instilling hope, conveying unconditional positive acceptance, extending kindness, modeling agency, and empowers participants to use their voice and choice. The basic premise reminds us of Maslow's hierarchy of Needs and when this basic need is met, families can focus a bit more on healing, connection, and repair. This is an invaluable support service that should be accessible to all children and youth in out of home care. If I could duplicate Hope in a Suitcase for every agency serving children and youth in foster care I would.

I cannot thank Hope in a Suitcase enough for their tireless efforts to meet this growing need through an organizational plan that highlights human dignity, respect, and the idea and truth that it takes a village.



Sean L. Sparks, LMFT
APSS/RSS Program Coordinator
Children's Bureau
3910 Oakwood Avenue
Los Angeles, CA
90004
323-953-7350ext. 451