

November 22, 2010

Community Challenge | Help Volunteers of America help others

When I talk to people in the community about the work of Volunteers of America, the conversation usually provides me an opportunity to dispel myths about homelessness in our community. There's a common assumption that most of the people we serve who are experiencing homelessness are adults, mostly men, who have been on the streets for many years.

While there are a great number of individuals who fall into this demographic — and are being served by Volunteers of America and our excellent community partners — the myth-busting happens when I tell people that the face of homelessness is just as often the face of a child.

The impact of the recession and Louisville's high unemployment rate is evident at our Family Emergency Shelter. Parents who never thought they would be homeless lose their good-paying jobs, lose their homes to foreclosure, and cannot find affordable housing. They are the working poor, they are coming to us in greater numbers than ever, and they are staying with us longer.

In my myth-busting discussions, people are often shocked to hear that 10,550 children enrolled in Jefferson County Public Schools meet the definition of homeless, a 215 percent increase since 2004. One of those children is Danika, a second-grader who recently came with her mother to the Family Emergency Shelter. She arrived wearing no socks and a light windbreaker not suitable for the cool temperatures. Her mother informed our staff that Danika had no backpack and was taking her school supplies back and forth to school in an old pillowcase.

When children lack the basic necessities in life, it's nearly impossible for them to think about schoolwork. They fall behind, and many eventually drop out. Can you imagine even thinking about the future when the present is so grim?

We are all about the future in Volunteers of America. Those who enter our doors will have the opportunity to thrive and plan for the future. Our program is unique in that mothers, fathers and children are able to live together while they transition back into the community. Children get tutored, mentored and restabilized in school, with a goal of keeping them on grade level. Parents receive help setting educational and career goals and finding employment. No other shelter in the area offers all of these services in one place. And our program is working: In the last fiscal year, 85 percent of the families who graduated from our program moved on to affordable, stable housing.

Of course, as we strive to make life as normal and comfortable as possible for families while they are with us, we rely on a great deal of community support to make that happen. One way we do that is through our Hope for the Holidays campaign — which helps to brighten the season for families who would otherwise go without gifts, a celebratory meal, and the fellowship we all enjoy during the holidays. You can inspire hope this holiday season by contributing toys, games, clothing, gift cards and gas cards for these families. You can also donate new winter accessories such as gloves, scarves and hats for children and adults at any Heine Brothers' Coffee location in the Louisville area. To learn more, contact us at (502) 636-0771.

As you are considering your end-of-year tax-deductible donations, we hope you'll keep in mind that we need community support all year round. Your contribution helps us offer a program that goes beyond the basics to provide a comprehensive, long-term solution to family homelessness in our community. You

can donate online at www.voaky.org or contact our office at the number above.

Finally, on behalf of all of the children we serve, I want to thank you — our generous community — for helping us provide warm coats, socks and other necessities to the children we served last year. Danika's smile literally lit up the room when she received her backpack. Please help us this holiday season bring more bright smiles to homeless children in our community.

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