Providing the Essentials for Arizona’s Foster Children

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A volunteer sorts items in the organization's 18,000-square-foot warehouse

Many hands make it work
Today, in the state of Arizona, there are 14,000 children in foster care. When a family is in crisis, and the Department of Child Safety steps in, it is often another family member who is called upon to temporarily care for children. But all too frequently, that family member may not be able to provide for some basic needs at a moment's notice, which is where Arizona Helping Hands steps in.

“Arizona Helping Hands is the largest provider of essential needs to children in our foster care system, though our core program is providing children with a safe place to sleep,” says Dan Shufelt, president and CEO.

Shufelt says that in 2013, at what he describes as the height of the foster care crisis, the organization learned that many families in urgent foster situations had no one to turn to for essentials, so, they shifted their mission.

“We stepped in back in 2013 and started providing foster families in that type of situation with twin beds and cribs to give those children a safe place to sleep. And that was our toe in the door of helping children in foster care throughout the state of Arizona. And we haven't looked back.”

In 2019, the organization provided 2,582 children with twin beds. Cribs were provided for 978 infants, many of whom Shufelt says were released into foster care from neo-natal intensive care units after overcoming substance abuse.
In addition to beds, Arizona Helping Hands provides clothing, diapers and personal care items, as well as back-to-school items and even safety items to encourage other families to step up and become foster homes.

The organization also wants to make sure that children know that they are loved, which is why it launched a Birthday Package program.

“We want these kids to have a sense of self-esteem and want them to feel loved and supported and we want them to celebrate their birthday,” says Shufelt. “I’ve had many children in foster care who have never celebrated a birthday, and it’s not right. We have to do better than that.”

A representative for any child in Arizona’s foster care system can apply online for a birthday gift package. Pre-COVID-19, volunteers would head into the office every day and, taking the submitted applications, they “shop” throughout the organization’s 18,000-square-foot
warehouse. Whether it is a Barbie doll or craft set, games, books or stuffed animals, volunteers find the perfect items for each individual child. The gifts are then wrapped and placed in bags with special messaging, “to let those kids know that they are not forgotten; that they are loved.”

“In 2019, we provided 3,596 children with a birthday package. Ten children every day of last year received a birthday package because of the work that we are doing at Arizona Helping Hands.”

Volunteers are instrumental in the birthday program but also assist in other ways. Last year, 1,400 volunteers donated 13,000 hours of service. Of course, the coronavirus changed everything. After closures in March, volunteers began coming back in early June. The organization hopes to increase the number of participants this month and possibly reopen its doors the first week in August. Residents who are interested in volunteering can complete an application at azhelpinghands.org.

Another way that residents can support foster children is to donate to the organization’s Back-to-School Drive. Any donor can go online at ahhbacktoschool.org and make a $35 contribution, which will buy a backpack stuffed full of educational tools to help kids start the school year prepared for success.

“We rely on the generosity of our community in everything that we do, and everybody has the opportunity to utilize their time, talents and treasure to help others in our community,” says Shufelt. “And that's what we rely on, generous people who have chosen to support an organization like ours that truly makes a difference for children who have been abused and neglected.” | CST
Photos courtesy of Arizona Helping Hands