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Local foundation expands mission

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Braces, band equipment, dental care and prom costs are expenses parents often struggle to provide for their children.

But when a child is in the welfare system or foster care, those childhood extras can often be impossible to find. One Broward nonprofit organization is looking to change that.

"Broward Cares for Kids provides services and things that children in foster care wouldn't normally be able to get through the state," said board member *Howard Bakalar*, of Plantation.

Created in 2004 to raise funds to support kids in the local welfare system, the Broward Cares For Kids Foundation has provided necessary items for thousands of abused, neglected and abandoned youngsters. And this summer, they have re-emerged with a new logo, website and focus.

"We are growing with a broader purpose because we had never looked at things like the medical needs of all of our kids in care, like dental and vision, and the needs of undocumented kids," Bakalar said.

Bolstered by a new team of board members, the organization had its kickoff event at the ChildNet headquarters in Plantation. The highlight was the distribution of 400 stuffed duffel bags and pajamas, courtesy of two national grants.

Board member *Lisa Gaeta* had spotted the two grant programs, My Stuff Bags and the Pajama Program, on *Oprah Winfrey's* show and applied on behalf of the foundation. Inside the bags were blankets, toys, stuffed animals, toiletries and pajamas, all comfort items youngsters in crisis can cuddle with and call their own.

But the focus turns now to how to continue providing for the kids. All the fundraising is handled by the small but growing team of active board members and child care advocates who volunteer their time.

"We are an outlet for individuals and corporations that have an interest in improving the lives of these children in foster care," Gaeta said.

A local pediatric dentist has agreed to provide services for children who don't qualify for Medicaid, but the organization has other needs, including pediatricians, dermatologists and ophthalmologists. Funds also are needed to help provide extracurricular activities, birthday parties, prom and homecoming expenses, laptops, gift cards and much more to kids in dependency care.

"We are completely devoted to the kids in our care," Bakalar said.

Call 954-414-5995 or visit www.browardcaresforkids.org.

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