



Duffel bag drive being launched for foster children



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Some people may have emotional baggage but what foster children really need is actual baggage. That's why a duffel bag drive is being launched in January for kids uprooted from their families in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

ChildNet community relations director Dr. Elizabeth Wynter says some children are taken from homes on short notice and they frequently put all their belongings into whatever is available.

"Oftentimes, it is a traumatic situation and a hasty removal so they grab their things and they throw them in a trash bag or pillow case," she said. "Within 23 hours [they will] be placed in a foster home or with relatives and we don't want them to leave with their things in trash bags."

About 100 children enter the child welfare system every month in Broward ranging in age from newborns to 17. There are 2,600 in the Broward system and about 100 are available for adoption, Wynter said.

In **Palm Beach County** an average of 90 kids enter the system each month with 1,700 currently being cared for and 60 up for adoption, she said.

Undercover Angels CEO Ginger Gilley has been recruiting various organizations as collection points for duffel bags that will be given to ChildNet for distribution.

"We started brainstorming with the board about how we can get enough duffel bags to supply them for a year and we talked to the Florida Panthers organization and they loved the idea," Gilley said. "So, they are going to do a duffel bag drive where the fans can bring in a new or like-new duffel bag when they go to games."

Those games are scheduled on Jan. 15, 17, 19, 27, and 29. Representatives from radio stations 101.5 LITE-FM and Magic 102.7 will staff the collection points during those home games at the BB&T Center, she said.

Beginning Jan. 5, collection boxes supplied by Republic Services also will be installed at PriorityONE Credit Union branches in Broward, Gilley said.

Duffel bags may seem to be a low priority, as needs go, but Wynter said they are very important for the children.

"[A duffel bag] is something that lets them know they matter, that they're not trash," she said. "They are important and people care about them."

Gilley says most people probably won't miss their duffel bags.

"I have three in my closet that I've used once," she laughed.

Gilley said backpacks and child-sized luggage with wheels and handles also would be welcome but duffel bags are more flexible.

The goal is to collect 3,500 duffel bags in January.

The Florida Department of Children and Families has contracted with ChildNet to provide child welfare services for abused, neglected or abandoned children in Broward since 2002 and **Palm Beach County** since 2012.

"We just try to help wherever we can," Gilley said.

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