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Comfort Kits

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8 May 2020

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Abstract

Most foster children are moved from home to home and may not necessarily have something to carry their belongings in or have time to bring anything of value to them. CASA of Monterey County is an organization that train's volunteers who become CASA's (court appointed special advocates) with a passion to help youth in the community. They pair children waiting for someone to help advocate for the wishes of the child in court, as well as monitor and keep updates on children that have been moved out of Monterey County. The Comfort Kit project provides foster youth with a drawstring backpack, age appropriate activities, and resources that are available to them in a mini brochure. The goal of this Comfort Kit was to address the basic forms for youth as well as providing a positive social and community connection with their CASA. While these kits were unable to be created at this time, due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the framework was laid out and this project could be continued when CASA of Monterey County reopens.

Keywords: CASA, Monterey County, Comfort Kits, advocate, youth, foster youth

Agency & Communities Served

The Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program began in Kings County, Washington by Seattle Superior Court Judge David Soukup in 1976. The CASA program was not fully established until 1977. This program was created because Judge Soukup saw a need for advocates due to the countless foster youth cases he had seen where children in foster care did not receive the same representation as the parents (California CASA). The first CASA program was created to recruit, train, and supervise everyday people who volunteered to build meaningful relationships and advocate for abused and neglected children in juvenile dependency court (California CASA).

Since its implementation in Washington, there are currently 1,000 CASA programs nationwide that serve foster youth in 49 of the 50 states, with 44 programs in California alone. CASA of Monterey County was established as a has been in the community since 1995(c)(3) Non-Profit Organization and with CASA's first graduating class in 1996 advocating and providing support. CASA volunteers continue to uphold their oath and commitment to help advocate for children's rights and ensure that every child is heard and seen.

In 2018, California had a total of 59,172 children in foster care with a high number of Hispanic/Latino youth and Caucasian (Kids Data, 2018). CASA of Monterey County as of January 2020 advocates and provides support to youth between the ages of birth to the age of eighteen, with continued support to those who chose until the age of twenty-one. In 2018 there were 389 youth in the foster care system in Monterey County and CASA served approximately 316 of those youth (CASA of Monterey County). This organization is a pillar in the community

and has been advocating for the foster community since 1994, making differences in children's lives.

Problem Description

Foster children often struggle to build trust and create strong relationships with their peers and older adults. Moving from place to place limits the amount of time children have to build and create strong and meaningful relationships with those around them as well as the community in which they reside. It is important that these connections are built to prevent building negative social connections, have a support system to help address mental health concerns, and prevent the lowering of self-esteem which can impact foster youth strongly due to their vulnerability.

Transitions

In the United States, a child is removed from their parent or primary caregiver every two minutes (Kinship House, n.d.). Too often foster youth are placed with resource families that are out of county and far away from where they grew up, these youth end up switching schools, and leave the positive connections they had gained in their lifetimes only to attempt to build new ones. All this while having to attend therapy, meetings, and court and live their lives. All these transitions can impact their academics profusely, transferring students face multiple barriers, such as failure of the schools to deliver records timely, being placed in the wrong classroom, or failing to receive credit for the work done if they did not complete a full school term, leaving them further behind (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). On top of this "studies have shown that students in foster care are a "distinctly disadvantaged subgroup" that perform worse than their peers in academic performance, with a higher percentage of

students diagnosed with disabilities and held back one or more grades, challenges that are compounded by changing schools” (Wiegmann, W. et al., 2014). All these transitions affect their lives in so many ways and can impact the positive connections they could build with their peers and adults.

Multiple Placements

Many children will move from foster home to foster home an average of 4 to 6 times (Kinship House, n.d.). Transitioning to a new foster home can be difficult for the child(ren). The foster care system provides temporary, safe living arrangements, and services for children who cannot remain safely at home because of risk for maltreatment or inadequate care by their primary caregiver(s) (Kids Data). Infants and children experience many forms of abuse and neglect and require extra sensitivity in areas of their life (Child Advocates). Placing children away from siblings and or moving them from home to home can cause a disruption in their learning as well as their upbringing and can cause difficulties in building a positive connection with others and their community.

Personal Belongings

At the initial removal from their homes foster youth are usually given a trash bag to carry their belongings in when they go to an emergency placement, they are asked to bring a few things they like to distract them of what is happening. Most of the time they do not have anything to call their own. Foster youth are given a trash bag to carry their things without thinking of what it means to them. “In many cases these children are ushered out of their home with all of their worldly possessions stuffed into a lowly garbage bag. All the while, learning to cling to their garbage bag, like an only friend” (Mayes, 2019). A system that is supposed to

provide support, protection, and safety for these children to allocate them a trash bag to carry their belongings is something that needs to be adjusted. They deserve more than this when they are forced to pick up their lives and move somewhere new.

Consequences

Low self esteem

Low self esteem is not uncommon with foster youth, a lot of this is centered on the general or severe neglect from the primary caregiver or being in an abusive family. “Feeling worthwhile is necessary for youth to develop positive self-esteem and succeed personally and in school [...] those who have low self-esteem feel unsure of themselves and have difficulty in several areas of life (Stevens, 2017). Addressing low self esteem is crucial especially in that of foster youth, they go through a lot at such a young age and attempting to address it on their own is difficult. Studies have shown that a stable, consistent, and caring adult presence is precisely what many such youths lack as they reach the age of legal adult maturity and may no longer have access to foster care services (Spencer et al, 2010).

Mental health concerns

“Up to 80 percent of children in foster care have significant mental health issues, compared to approximately 18-22 percent of the general population (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019). According to The American Academy of Pediatrics, Healthy Foster Care American Initiative, identified mental and behavioral health as the greatest unmet health need for children and teens in foster care. There is an increased risk for emotional, physical, behavioral, and academic problems for children in foster care and those in group homes the outcome is worse (Kids Data). Addressing the mental health needs of youth is crucial because

many forms of mental health go unnoticed, since some children internalize their pain and without any support it can cause damages to themselves and others around them.

Negative social connections

Not being engaged in the community can lead to building negative relationships and getting involved in gang's or "the life" which can lead to youth being commercially and or sexually exploited. In 2014, 1,607 cases of human trafficking involved minors of those cases 121 reference the child welfare system (Polaris Project). Foster children are targeted due to their increased vulnerabilities and the "comfort" that this life can give them. Too many youth are ageing out of the system before being reunited with their families and the problems that these youth face are the lack of strong, healthy, and stable relationships which are key ingredients for any adolescent's successful transition to adulthood (Spencer et al, 2010). Aging out of the system creates challenges for many youth, as a percentage experience inadequate housing, low educational and career attainment, early parenthood, substance abuse, physical and mental health problems, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Kids Data). Which can lead to negative social connections in the community.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Foster youth go through many transitions	Foster youth struggle to build trust and create strong	Low self esteem and questioning their worth
Foster youth often have lived in multiple foster homes		Mental health concerns are not addressed properly

Foster youth have few personal items	relationships	Negative social connections are formed (gang involvement & human trafficking)
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Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project and Project Purpose

CASA of Monterey County has a longstanding tradition where the CASA volunteer gives a homemade quilt to their CASA child, at their initial introduction. A Comfort Kit is a care package made of a drawstring backpack, age appropriate activities, and resources that are available to them.. A child is often uneasy in a new home and being away from who they know, with new people coming to visit and asking them questions. This Comfort Kit would make their transitions easier by providing stress relieving activities and knowing that someone cares about their wellbeing.

The Comfort Kit also doubles as an item for them to store their personal belongings as most foster children are moved from home to home and may not necessarily have something to carry their belongings in. Due to the many transitions that foster youth go through they often have few personal items that they can call their own. This Comfort Kit will be addressing the basic forms of mental health for youth, as well as providing a positive social and community connection with their CASA's.

Project Justification

Personal possessions are important to everyone, however understanding the meaning of possessions and how that meaning is developed is centered around a child's personal characteristics and social interactions, possessions are an extension of one's self and how it

becomes important when meaning is attached to it (Chang & Walisky, 2018). The Comfort Kit will be something that a child will be given by their CASA, which is someone that is important in a child's life because they are there for them to ensure that they are being heard. It is important to strengthen this bond, this will be helpful in building that positive connection and resilience. The resources that contribute to resilience come in many forms, from individuals' skills and personality, to supportive relationships with other people (Osgood et al, 2010). Apart from building this bond it will address mental health concerns, and low self-esteem which arise due to the lack of connections, many studies have found that children and youth with friends do better across a range of dimensions than those without friends...generally, friendships are thought to positively shape the social, emotional and cognitive development of children and adolescents (Shook et al, 2009). There have been project's similar to the Comfort Kit's that have had successes, for example a comfort case is a "[P]roper bag, filled with comfort and essential items, to these brave youth in foster care on their journey to find their forever home" (Comfort Cases, n.d.). Another successful project similar to this is the Journey Bag. Both projects had been centered toward ending the use of trash bags to carry items and providing youth with something to keep and carry their items wherever they may go.

Project Implementation

The Comfort Kit project was an idea that stemmed from CASA of Monterey County's already implemented gift of a quilt to their CASA youth prior to their initial meeting. The CASA advocates pick out a quilt that they would like to give to the child which is a long-standing tradition that CASA of Monterey County has.

An outline of what the project logistics, who the donations were going to come from, what was going to be in the Comfort Kits, and why this would benefit CASA of Monterey

County was presented to Edna Chinn, the program director and approved after adjusting the donation request to specify a specific number of drawstring backpacks, and journals. The donation letters as seen in Appendix B and C, were drafted to request donations from Granite Rock and California State University Monterey Bay. The donation letters were reviewed by the Philanthropy Director with suggested edits and were revised and adjusted. Both letters were sent to the Philanthropy Director for final approval and sent to the Program Director along with the planned Google Form assessment as seen in Appendix D.

The project was to be implemented by the end of March when the graduating CASA winter session begins to schedule their initial meetings with their child. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shelter in place mandate on Monterey County the Comfort Kit project had to be stopped. After the kits were to be assembled a survey was to be sent out to the advocates to fill out and involve the child as well. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

Assessment Plan

To assess the success of the Comfort Kits, a questionnaire was to be sent out asking both the advocate and child to participate and be involved. The questions were formatted on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being needs improvement and 5 being great. The questions on the survey were in regard to the advocate reactions, the child's reactions, and whether the contents were age appropriate for the child. As well as a write in option for any suggestions that could help make this better for future CASA children and what the child liked the most, the questions can be seen in appendix D. Upon receiving the responses from the advocates, a S.W.O.T. analysis chart will be created to see the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the project as well as a separate chart indicating what the child liked most to measure the success of

the project and provide CASA of Monterey a detailed report of what worked and what could be adjusted for future Comfort Kit's.

Expected Outcomes

The Comfort Kit is expected to help youth know that someone cares about their wellbeing, to help them build positive social connections, provide emotional support opportunities for them and resources that are available in the community. To bring a mini escape in a journal, healthy stress relieving activities, and a place to store something special. It may be something small but even small actions account for large movements. With the survey responses, it is expected to see a lot of 5's on the responses which indicate that there are no improvements needed and that the child liked the Comfort Kit.

Project Results

Unfortunately, due to the country's COVID-19 outbreak and Monterey County's shelter in place mandate the Comfort Kit project was unable to be implemented. This project was going to start with CASA of Monterey County's new CASA class. The expected outcomes were to help strengthen the connection between the advocate and the child, as well as provide them with resources available to them in the community, and small mental health activities. With what was able to be done prior to the COVID-19 closures, this project was not able to be implemented.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the Comfort Kit Project was unable to be implemented due to county closure's and limitations. This project would have been successful and brought a smile to many children's faces. One of CASA of Monterey County's vision is that the youth who exit from the foster care system will have established, permanent connections to help them

become productive citizens (CASA of Monterey County). Permanent connections begin at their initial meeting and grow from there. The recommendation is to implement this kit when the shelter in place mandates are lifted, the organization is a pillar in the community and many people volunteer and are willing to come in to assemble these kits. The letters are already drafted and can be adjusted as CASA of Monterey sees fit for donations of the items. The goal was to implement this with the graduation of the new CASA class to see how these kits helped. It is recommended that these donations be allocated 1 to 2 months in advance also to partner with the Department of Health and Human Services and Public Policy to host a drive for more small items to be placed in the kits to make them more enjoyable for the youth.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Present Proposal to Edna	Proposal	November 4, 2019	Stacey
Present Updated Proposal to Edna	Final Proposal	November 12, 2019	Stacey
Donation Letter (Draft #1)	Draft a formal Letter and proposal	January 2020	Emilce
Donation Letter (Draft #2)	Edit the proposed letter with suggested Edits from the Director of Philanthropy	February 5, 2020	Teresa and Myself
Survey (Draft #1)	Google Form with Questions for the Advocate to fill out	February 12, 2020	Caitlin
Donation Letter (Final)	Formal Letter and Proposal for Granite Rock and CSUMB Approval from Edna	February 26, 2020	Stacey and Emilce

Survey (Draft #2)	Google Form with Questions ready for the Advocate to fill out Approval from Edna	February 26, 2020	Stacey and Emilce
Donation Letters (Final Draft)	Get final approval from Teresa to send out Letters with CASA of Monterey County's Letterhead	March 12, 2020	Teresa and Emilce
Survey	Survey Monkey with Questions for the Advocate to fill out.	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Emilce
Send Donation Letters	Donation Letter to Granite and The CSUMB Bookstore	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Emilce
Donations	Receive Donations from both Granite Rock and CSUMB Bookstore	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Stacey and Emilce
Assemble Kits	Comfort Kits	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Emilce
Send Survey Monkey to CASA's	Survey Monkey	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Emilce
SWOT Analysis	Create a SWOT Analysis on the responses from the survey	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Stacey and Emilce
SWOT Analysis	Present SWOT Analysis and responses from the survey to Edna	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Emilce and Edna

Appendix B

CASA of Monterey County
945 S. Main Street, Ste. 107
Phone : (831) 455-6800
Fax : (831) 455-6802
Email : Info@casafmonterey.org

March 12, 2020

Granite Rock
350 Technology Drive
Watsonville, CA 95076
(831) 768-2000

To whom this may concern,

My name is Emilce Perez; I am a senior at California State University Monterey Bay and interning at CASA of Monterey County. I am working on my Capstone Project that will be implemented in the Spring of 2020.

At no fault of their own, children in Monterey County require out-of-home placement because they have been abused, neglected, and terribly mistreated, and are unable to safely live with their families. These children are placed in foster care. CASA of Monterey County trains and supports community volunteers who advocate for children, upholding the children's rights while pursuing a safe and permanent home. For 25 years, CASA of Monterey County and its advocates have been on the frontline of service for foster children, building positive, trusting relationships and ensuring that they receive the services they need.

Foster children through many transitions while living in the child welfare system. While in foster care, many children are uprooted from their lives, sometimes unexpectedly, and they bounce from one foster care placement to another. When their placement changes, so do the people they live with and the schools they attend.

In order to address this issue CASA of Monterey County is proposing a comfort kit project to provide CASA youth with a drawstring backpack, age appropriate activities, and resources that are available to them in a mini brochure. This comfort kit will be addressing the basic forms of mental health for youth as well as providing a positive social and community connection with their CASA. Most foster children are moved from home to home and may not necessarily have something to carry their belongings in or have time to bring anything of value to them. We need your help! Would you donate 50 journals and pencils to help CASA of Monterey County make "comfort kits" for foster youth? These bags will include valuable resources for the children, while leaving room for them to pack their personal items for wherever their journey leads.

CASA of Monterey County values the generous support from companies and community members like you. This contribution will help make them feel more comfortable during and oftentimes chaotic and confusing time of their lives.

Sincerely,

Emilce Perez
CASA of Monterey County
emilce@casafmonterey.org
(831) 455-6800

Appendix C

CASA of Monterey County
945 S. Main Street, Ste. 107
Phone: (831) 455-6800
Fax: (831) 455-6802
Email: Info@casafmonterey.org

March 12, 2020

California State University, Monterey Bay Bookstore
4314 Sixth Avenue
Student Center/Bookstore
Seaside, CA 93955

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Sincerely,

Emilce Perez
CASA of Monterey County
emilce@casafmonterey.org
(831) 455-6800

Appendix D



CASA of Monterey County Comfort Kit

Dear Advocates,

My name is Emilce Perez. I am an intern at CASA of Monterey County and a Collaborative Health and Human Services Major at California State University Monterey Bay. This survey which you are invited to participate in is part of my Senior Capstone Project. The purpose of this survey is to obtain feedback from the comfort kits that were created to provide children with a drawstring backpack with valuable resources for the children while leaving room for them to pack personal items. Thank you for taking time out of your day to fill this survey out and for all that you do for foster youth in Monterey County.

With appreciation,
Emilce Perez

What was your initial reaction to the comfort kit?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Need's Improvement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Great

Were the contents age appropriate for your CASA child?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Need's Improvement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Great

How was your CASA child's reaction to the comfort kit?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Disappointed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Happy

What was your CASA child's favorite thing?

Your answer _____

What is something that can be changed?

Your answer _____

Submit