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TEACHERS' DONATION BENEFITS CHILDREN AND YOUTH SERVICES

Uniontown, PA – A unique donation by the Uniontown Area Education Association will benefit the Fayette County Children and Youth Services' (CYS) independent living program.

With a goal of family reunification, CYS works to ensure county children's safety by investigating allegations of abuse and neglect. The CYS independent living program aids youth ages 14 to 21 who are without permanent resources, through lessons such as life skills and job preparation.

CYS Deputy Administrator John Fritts said the program does many wonderful things to bridge some of the gaps in teenagers' lives and provide a sense of normalcy, including hosting overnight retreats, skill-building events, tours and other activities.

This summer, eight independent living teens will take their first vacation retreat to Erie, Pa.

"These are, essentially, the kids who will age out of our care and may not have established any kind of permanency," Fritts said. "Many of the kids have never traveled before and this is where the teachers' union came in. They wanted to do something a little special - not a blanket gift, but something a little more personalized."

Rather than a traditional monetary donation, the education association donated luggage for the teens to use on their vacation and well beyond their time in county care.

Education Association President Doug Zajac said he and his fellow teachers chose to donate to CYS after learning the kids often used grocery or garbage bags to transport their personal belongings.

"Being a teacher firsthand, we get to see some of these kids' struggles in life and how it really plays a role for them to know somebody has their back," Zajac said. "Hopefully this will help them not only enjoy this trip but enter into their new lives feeling better about themselves."

"Most of the kids in these situations have the kindest, biggest hearts and they've just lived their lives in very unfortunate circumstances, so any time we can help a child in need, that's our first priority."



Zajac said it was important to the 218 teachers' union members to also help younger children, prompting them to donate three pack-and-play units to CYS.

"A lot of times a foster mom needs to take an infant in, but they may not have a crib, so we wanted to make sure we purchased some of those, too," he said. "Research shows how even at a very young age, anything that shows love and generosity will affect how that child is going to grow up."

CYS Administrator Gina D'Auria said the agency operates on limited county, state and federal funds which can only be used for family services - making the teachers' donation extra special.

"This kind of donation gives us an opportunity to do a little bit more for the families we serve," D'Auria said. "Our independent living kids will most likely be with us through adulthood, and they don't have access to a lot of things kids growing up without child welfare typically have, like luggage or the chance to take a trip."

D'Auria said having support from Fayette County residents and other organizations is both exciting and necessary.

"It allows us to do more and allows the kids to see the good things in their community and how people want to give back," she said. "Hopefully that will translate into their adult lives and they will give back to the next generation."

Fritts said that while relationships between schools and child welfare services nationwide have been historically rocky, that is not the case in Fayette County.

"It's great that our local teachers can see the benefits of what we do and that they're so willing to work with us to improve these kids' lives," Fritts said. "It's been a great relationship so far, and when you really get down to it, you see we're all on the same team for these kids."

For more information on how you can support Fayette County Children and Youth Services, email ginadauria@fcc.org or jfritts@fccys.org. For more information on the Uniontown Area Education Association, email dzajac3@gmail.com.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.info.

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