



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **UNITED WAY PROVIDES EDUCATIONAL TOOLS FOR FAYETTE KIDS**

**Uniontown, PA** – The United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania, along with a crew of dedicated volunteers, recently spent two days at Hilton Garden Inn in Uniontown, working on a project aimed at providing learning tools for young children in Fayette County, as well as a portion of Greene County.

“We are packing a thousand learning kits to be distributed to pre-K and early learning centers throughout Fayette County and two districts in Greene County,” United Way Westmoreland/Fayette Development Director Kelli Belanger said.

Belanger said the kits are paid for by a grant from the Benedum Foundation.

“The idea started before COVID but after COVID we were asking people what they needed,” she said.

Belanger said a group of preschool teachers reported during the transition to online learning that occurred at the start of the pandemic, they discovered many children didn’t have all of the necessary resources at home. So, the United Way wanted to do something to make sure area kids all had access to some basic learning tools.

United Way Education Programmer Jan Fox said between Fayette and Westmoreland counties, the organization has packed more than 6,000 learning kits since the beginning of the pandemic, with the focus always on preschools and early learning centers.

Fox said all of the items included in the learning kits are educational tools cloaked in fun.

The kits include crayons and small pencils for little hands, along with sharpeners; bubble solution for blowing bubbles, which Fox said works the speech muscles and is also visually stimulating; scissors and construction paper so that children have “something appropriate to cut”; magnetic letters; Play-Doh, which helps young kids build the muscles in their hands and improves grip; counting cubes, which teach counting and number visualization, and that also have shapes on them; a double-sided, magnetic whiteboard; a shoelace to improve hand-eye coordination through threading exercises; markers; and erasers.

Fox said the kits also include “four high-quality books. This time, they’re focused on social and emotional (skills), plus some fun.”

“For the first time, we’re giving handouts, resources for families to use at home,” Fox said, noting that families who don’t have internet connections can still use the materials in the learning kits to work with their children at home.

A WQED free app card also is included in the kits, as well as a 2-1-1 card, which points families to resources that can help in paying bills, obtaining food, and taking care of other necessities.

“Everything serves an educational purpose, disguised as fun,” Fox said.

Fox said packing the learning kits is a big job, noting “We couldn’t do it without the volunteers.”

Employees from Ford Office Technologies, COE Distributing, Erie Insurance, First Energy and Sen. Pat Stefano’s office, as well as Fayette Chamber of Commerce members and other individuals, turned out to help.

“We actually just started paid volunteer incentives at Ford Office Technologies,” marketing director Julie King said. “We’ve always been a company that gives back, but we wanted to enable all employees to be able to do so as well.”

King said Ford Office Technologies has a strong record of volunteer work within the community.

“We want to make sure we are creating strong communities,” she said.

Nathan Denard, a First Energy assistant business analyst in the Smart Meter program, said the company allots employees a specific amount of paid volunteer hours each year.

“It shows how the company wants to help out as much as they can, and they’re giving us the privilege to allow us to do this,” Denard said. “Even though we’re getting paid for it, it’s nice to come out and help out.”

Volunteer Sue Quinn, outreach coordinator for Sen. Stefano, said the senator loves to support such projects.

“Sen. Stefano is always thrilled to support initiatives like this, which will greatly impact early learners in our area.”

Hilton Garden Inn donated its meeting room to pack the kits.

Fox said the finished kits were picked up from the hotel by Head Start/Early Head Start of Fayette County and some Pre-K Counts programs from county elementary schools, along with Intermediate Unit 1. Head Starts in the West Greene and Jefferson-Morgan school districts in Greene County also received a portion of the kits.

Fox said the items in the kits might be too costly for many of the families who receive them to pay for themselves. However, the United Way is fortunate to get bulk discounts on many of the items, and the finished product is appreciated by parents and educators alike.

“Teachers love it. Families have loved it,” Fox said. “It’s a win-win.”

To learn more about the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania, visit [www.uwswpa.org](http://www.uwswpa.org).

To learn more about Fayette County, visit [www.FayetteCountyPA.org](http://www.FayetteCountyPA.org).

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