

Fostering Hope

Coalition Newsletter

Spring 2020

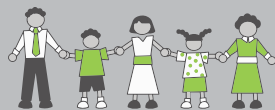


Coalition CareLine Launched to Provide Rapid Support to Struggling Parents Affected by the COVID-19 Crisis



Serena, a school bus driver and foster parent currently out of work due to COVID-19, called the Coalition CareLine when struggling to apply for unemployment. Serena did not have access to a computer, so she was unable to complete the unemployment application online. She tried for days to speak to someone at the Department of Labor to file over the phone,

but they were too busy to take her call. She received a call from Shelley Thomas-Benke, Director of FosterServe Volunteers, who assured her she would be able to help! Shelley gave instructions to Serena on how to download the Zoom app onto her phone which allowed Shelley and Serena to video chat. Via Zoom, Shelley and Serena went through the unemployment application line by line with Serena giving the information, and Shelley filling in the application on her computer. Serena had an additional issue and asked Shelley if she could help with that as well. Serena had learned when filing her taxes this year that someone else had claimed the children in her home on their taxes. To rectify the situation, she would need to send a lot of documentation to the IRS, but she didn't know how to get copies made during the shelter-in-place order. Shelley agreed to meet with Serena at the Coalition office, while maintaining social distancing protocol, to make copies of the paperwork Serena would need to claim the children on her taxes. Serena was incredibly relieved and happy that Shelley was able to help her when no one else could. Because of Shelley's support through the Coalition CareLine,



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Continued from page 1

Serena could focus on her children's needs.

Cedrice contacted the Coalition CareLine because her middle school son was withdrawn and not taking his medication. Stephanie Barbee, a Family Works Specialist, called Cedrice and listened to her situation. Stephanie gave her reassurance, empathy, and a listening ear - what so many of our parents need. In addition to this validation, Cedrice took advantage of a video series on therapeutic parenting for traumatized children created specifically for the COVID-19 pandemic. The video series,

coupled with some additional information from Stephanie, allowed Cedrice to better handle her son's needs. Her church also stepped up to provide respite care. With a little breathing room and perspective, Cedrice no longer felt completely overwhelmed. Additionally, Stephanie talked with her about the weekly therapy her son would be more reliant on since he wouldn't take his medication. With Stephanie's comfort and support, Cedrice was able to get back in the driver's seat to guide her son's healing.

Letter from the Board President

Now more than ever, we are grateful for the incredible foster, adoptive, and guardianship parents who are on our community's front line when it comes to helping kids heal from trauma. I'd like to invite you to take a moment with us to appreciate them. They are doing hard, creative, and brilliant work during these times to make sure the most vulnerable kids have what they need.



Another thing I am immensely proud of is our team at the Coalition. Before the stay at home order was even in effect, we had all staff working from home. The speed, creativity, and agility with which the Coalition pulled off that transition was truly something to behold. And it's thanks to donors, volunteers, and advocates such as yourself that we could execute that pivot with the urgency our families deserve.

But that didn't end at the transition; this team has treated each day of the pandemic like it was our first week. The Coalition is currently offering the only training for relatives in the region, meaning kids get to stay with their families and communities. Our groundbreaking placement programs are still taking new cases, and several adoptions have been scheduled to occur as soon as the stay at home order lifts. Our investigators are contacting high numbers of relatives - after all, everyone is home and answering the phone.

Within a month, we launched the Coalition CareLine, an effort to proactively reach out to foster, adoptive, and guardianship parents struggling to help their kids heal. The team has called hundreds of families and supported many of them with everything from groceries and diapers to support groups, training, and crisis

intervention. They launched a video series on therapeutic parenting skills tailored to the present moment. The Coalition's response has received praise from child welfare agencies around the country and numerous parents and advocates here in St. Louis.

But everyone here at the Coalition would agree that, while we're grateful for our parents and professionals, we're equally grateful to you, the generous, visionary community who has made all of this possible. Your commitment to our community was remarkably evident on Give STL Day. Your efforts lifted the Coalition up so that we could fill this unique role and lead our foster care community through this crisis. Thank you just doesn't cut it.

This crisis is undoubtedly scary, but it is also an opportunity; we have a chance to show our kids that a parent can care for them in times of stress, support them through uncertainty, and see their trauma and meet it with love and understanding. For many, it could be the first time they have seen such a thing. By supporting foster and adoptive families, we make it more likely that our most vulnerable children will remember this as a time that made them more resilient and more whole.

Rest assured that we have no intention of wasting that opportunity. And as you read the following pages, take a moment to appreciate your great contribution to something so worthwhile. We couldn't do it without you.

Thank you for being a part of our family, and thank you for caring about our kids,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe Bergan". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Joe Bergan, Board President

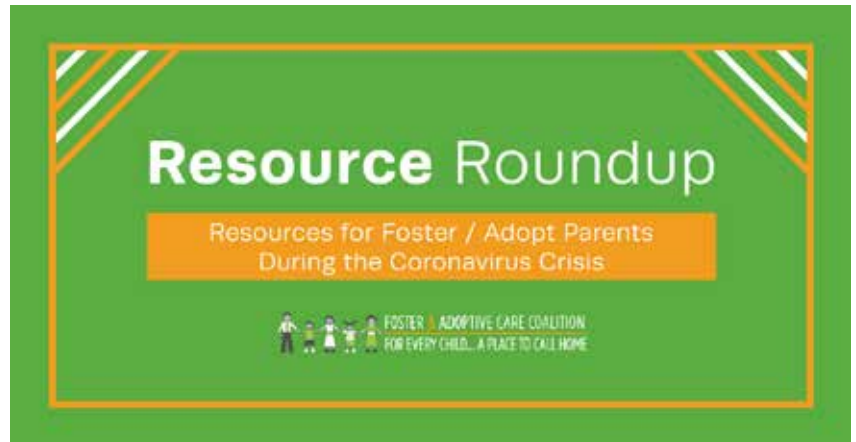
Resource Roundup Emails Sent to More Than 3,500 Foster, Adoptive and Guardianship Parents Daily

In response to the COVID-19 Stay at Home Order, we knew our families would need us now more than ever. Since March 19th, we have created a comprehensive list of community resources to support foster and adoptive caregivers and social services professionals.

Our Resource Roundup includes resources that address finances, mental health, education, food, keeping kids busy, self-care, parenting and relaxation, weekend fun, therapeutic parenting videos, FAQs on the Stimulus Bill, resources by age group, unemployment resources, and Metro East specific resources. Our resource roundup page can be accessed at www.foster-adopt.org/resource-roundup.

“Can we publish the link to your resources guide online at hazelwoodschoools.org? It’s a FANTASTIC resource!” - Matt Phillips, Assistant Superintendent of Hazlewood District and foster/ adoptive parent.

“Whoever is behind putting this developing resource page up, BLESS THEM! It’s easy to access and current and emerging with new important information. It has been helpful to foster and adoptive



families at my church. My role at church uses my social work skills to link people to resources. We have many families that are low-income that live paycheck to paycheck. These resources are so helpful to have! THANK YOU!!!” - Katy Stern, Director of Diaconal Ministries New City Fellowship

“I was doing some research and landed on your FANTASTIC COVID-19 resource page for your families! This is the only one I’ve seen like this and I’m sharing it with New York agencies as an example. Way to go!”

YouTube Series On Therapeutic Parenting During Troubled Times

As we all have transformed to wear many hats during the COVID-19 pandemic, we understand this is a difficult time for parents. Being empathetic, understanding, and playful during this time is hard work. Children continuously look to their caregivers on how to respond to their environments. Our Director of Family Works, Anne Zink, created a series of video blogs to help our caregivers navigate this difficult time. These tools can be utilized to regulate your children’s responses and your own. Our series on therapeutic parenting is available at youtube.com/thefosteradopt.



A Tribute to John Kuntemeier, Tenacious Advocate for Children in St. Louis

The sole reason we are able to be innovative is because of the investments of forward-thinking, dedicated individuals that care about the welfare of our children. Today, we give tribute to John Kuntemeier, who passed away in February. John was a dedicated Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Volunteer who throughout his life was an advocate for many children in the St. Louis area. Working alongside our staff, John continued to go above and beyond to understand the child welfare system.

John understood children will always need a place to call home, and his legacy will forever be a testament and promise that every child deserves to grow up with a family. We are forever grateful to John and his loving family for their generosity to the Coalition's Now & Forever Campaign. Please know, John continues to live on through every case closure, every connection to a family member, and every time a child finally finds their place to call home. Thank you.

Stories of John from Our Staff:

Several years ago, John took it upon himself to research and locate a local STARS training. This is when he first found the Coalition. Connie and I were trainers for the foster parents at the time; he called and asked if he could attend. At the time, John was a CASA volunteer, appointed to a case that one of our Coalition staff members worked on. Initially, I questioned his motivation for attending because the class was on Saturday mornings for 9 weeks! His response was, "I am trying to do everything I can to understand the child welfare system, specifically, what resource parents were 'taught' in STARS." He was lovely to have in class and a great participant. His advocacy and dedication to the children of St. Louis will be deeply missed. - *Nickie Steinhoff, Chief Strategy Officer*

I worked with John on a 30 Days to Family® case when the children we were serving first entered care. I could tell immediately that he was taking his role as the children's CASA very seriously.

He would call me regularly to try to learn about the system and how it functioned. I told him that he could look into taking a foster parent training class, not to become a foster parent, but to better understand the system and serve the children. Next thing I knew, he was signed up for a STARS class at the Coalition. Throughout the case, I was able to watch him grow both as an advocate and as a person. The children he was serving changed him, and it was clear that he came to love them very deeply. I kept up with John and the children through the years and was always glad to know

that he was still involved with them. He was a sweet and kind person. - *Kelly Sullivan, Project SOAR*

John was a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) on a case with two siblings I was recruiting for adoption. Mr. John took his role seriously. He worked effortlessly at building a solid relationship with the siblings and taking the time to get to know them individually. It was important to him that he learned their unique personalities, as well as understood their trauma. Mr. John was a straightforward and persistent man - useful qualities to have when you are advocating permanency for older teens. The older teens on John's case

had the challenges of multiple placements and being in foster care for a long period of time. Unfortunately, older teens are the most vulnerable population and the hardest to find adoptive families for. Mr. John made it his business to learn the foster care system. Because he understood the importance of Family Support Team Meetings, he participated in person until he was too ill to travel and later by phone. He was committed and dedicated and provided a great listening ear to the youth he served. It was Mr. John's mission to encourage, support, and celebrate all the youth he served. He never wanted to miss any achieved milestones, including school events, graduations, and extracurricular activities. - *Edna Green, Wendy's Wonderful Kids, Extreme Recruiter*



\$169,169 Raised for Children Impacted by Foster Care on Give STL Day



On May 7th, you showed up in a HUGE way on Give STL Day! In just 24 hours, 400 donors (including 150 new donors!) came together virtually to support the Coalition’s mission. Our goal was \$120,000 to help find families for kids in St. Louis foster care. You blew right past that goal and donated \$169,169!

Your generosity brought our families to the top! You put the Coalition in 2nd place among the 977 participating nonprofit organizations. Because you went above and beyond, our mission

can go even further. Your generosity means that we can find even more families for our community’s most vulnerable children.

We could not be more grateful for the commitment you have for our kids. We were touched by how you used this stay-at-home time to elevate the needs of our kids by encouraging your friends and family to help, too. Thank you for this amazing community-wide effort and for sharing our vision:

For Every Child... A Place to Call Home

Birthday Buddies During COVID-19



Birthdays are often tough for youth in foster care, and because of the COVID-19 shutdown, a foster child could feel even more sad and lonely.

Through our Birthday Buddy program, donors can help ensure that foster children have joyful birthday moments and memories. At this time, Birthday Buddies can make a monetary donation to sponsor a foster child’s birthday. We purchase birthday gifts to be safely delivered directly to the child’s placement provider.

Brothers Marcus and DeAndre have birthdays in April and May. Even though the foster family of 7 couldn’t leave the house,

their foster mom decorated the basement like a firehouse and played a hip hop version of “Happy Birthday to You” as the boys walked down the stairs. Six-year-old DeAndre always helps in the kitchen and wants to be a chef when he grows up. When a pretend kitchen set came into view as he descended the stairs, DeAndre was so excited he started to cry! And although Marcus is not very expressive, when a bicycle was revealed as his Birthday Buddy gift, his mouth dropped open. His foster mom said she has never seen him so amazed and shocked. It was a spectacular birthday they will never forget, and their Birthday Buddies were a big part of making it special.

You can give an amazing birthday to a youth in foster care too! Visit our website at www.foster-adopt.org/birthday-buddies.

Lifting Up Princesses with the Cinderella Project



The Cinderella Project is so much more than giving a free prom dress to girls impacted by foster care. It's an experience! The giveaway went on as planned in late February. Many of the VIPs (very-important-princesses) arrived at ReFresh nervous that they would have to settle for an uninspiring dress that would not fit their body type. Thankfully, hundreds of volunteers and donors worked together to make sure they had nothing to fear! The boutique had approximately 4,000 beautifully arranged dresses to choose from. Volunteer fairy godmothers were matched with each VIP to make sure they felt beautiful and special

during their appointment. Here are a few comments from the girls:

"I loved all the beautiful dresses and the women who made me feel like a pretty princess!"

"I enjoyed my fairy godmothers and how they didn't judge me and instead lifted me up."

"I liked how every single person here is invested in the well-being of each princess. The customized care made me feel so special and loved."

"I enjoyed the judgment free environment."

A HUGE thank you to all of our Cinderella Project supporters and volunteers! Even though most of the proms were canceled due to COVID-19, the girls are still getting glammed up and taking photos to share with friends and family on social media.

Celebrating the Career of Our Wonderful Debbie Genung

Our dear Debbie Genung retired this past February. We are grateful for her legacy of hard work, compassion, and relentless advocacy for vulnerable children.

When she was hired in 2006 as the Director of Development, Debbie was the Coalition's sixth employee. Her passion for kids shone bright over the next 14 years. She developed our signature event, Hope in a Handbag (formerly Old Bags), founded the Junior Board, grew an outstanding Governing Board, and drove the growth of the Coalition's budget from less than \$500,000 to nearly \$5 million. Her hard work expanded our staff to more than 60 of the toughest, smartest advocates in child welfare.

The numbers are impressive, but the true impact could never be quantified. Debbie created lifelong relationships in our community, both with individuals and organizations. She brought the kind of warmth, attention, and humor that would come to define the Coalition's brand.

During the month of February, we celebrated Debbie's wonderful career in different ways. At the Coalition, we had a staff meeting to honor her, where we shared our favorite memories

and best wishes, while enjoying the "Debbie breakfast" which she religiously ate each morning: yogurt, granola and berries. Some of you also joined us at the Rock 'N' Raise event, where friends and family had the chance to honor Debbie's hard work. Through our website, many of you shared your kind words, sweet memories, and generous contributions to the Educational Advocacy program in her honor.



Thank you to all of you who joined us in celebrating the career of Debbie Genung!

At the end of Debbie's last day in the office, we stood up, waved, and clapped, as a rush of mixed emotions, mostly deep gratitude, filled the Coalition's headquarters that Debbie helped build up. Her legacy will always be with us!

We Rocked 'n' Raised On February 29

Rock 'N' Raise 2020 was a blast! On Saturday, February 29th, the Coalition and friends gathered for an evening full of fun and music featuring Spontaneous Nugent, a group of talented St. Louis musicians. The band organized the event at no cost to the Coalition. All donations went directly to support our mission, and we raised more than \$2,000! We're grateful to everyone who came out to show their support.

Thank you to Spontaneous Nugent and Llywelyn's Pub for hosting this fun event to support children impacted by foster care!



Upcoming Coalition Events

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, and restrictions on large public gatherings were put in place, the Coalition joined the rest of the non-profit community in postponing our upcoming public events. Hope in a Handbag, which was scheduled for April 16, was rescheduled to August 27. The Junior

Board Trivia Night was rescheduled from March to August 22.

The safety and wellbeing of our incredible community is our first priority. We are continuing to accept ticket and in-kind donations for our August events. We will update our community as plans and changes to our events are solidified. Thank you!

SPORTS MADNESS

TRIVIA NIGHT
AUGUST 22, 2020

Hope in a Handbag
AUGUST 27, 2020 | 6PM-9PM | HILTON ST. LOUIS FRONTENAC

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