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**Backpack Drive**  
**Los Angeles County Bar Association Barristers**

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**I. Project Description**

Nearly one hundred times a day, a child in California is placed in foster care. Often, these children enter the foster care system without warning -- they have no chance to say goodbye to friends, neighbors, or teachers. They are moved from one placement to another an average of four times. All too often, the precious few possessions of these children represent the only stability in their lives and they are forced to stuff their belongings into plastic garbage bags as they are shuffled yet again to another school or placement. The message these children receive is loud and clear: They are considered society's throw-aways. To change this message, the Los Angeles County Bar Association Barristers (the "Barristers") held two Backpack Drives, collecting new and gently used backpacks and other travel bags as well as school supplies to donate to the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles ("CLC"), which acts as court appointed counsel for most foster children in Los Angeles County and the Aviva Family and Children's Services Center ("Aviva"), a local foster care agency.

**II. Project Planning/Development**

**A. Identification of Need**

Nationwide, about half a million children and young adults live in foster care. Most are removed from their homes because their parents are unfit to raise them. The majority of these children languish in the system--bouncing from one home to the next with no sense of stability, security or belonging. The damage caused by the system is quite real. About three quarters will perform below grade level in school, and nearly half will not complete high school. Medical records for foster children are often fragmented and incomplete. Health care is inconsistent. Once they leave the foster care system, typically around age 18, many are ill prepared for independent living -- more than half are unemployed, almost a third will become homeless, and one in five will be incarcerated within two years.

Los Angeles County has more children in out-of-home care than any other county, accounting for an astounding **one in ten** foster youths in the United States. This means that Los Angeles County, as a community, serves as 'parent' to 30,000 foster youth. Some children stay in foster care for only a few weeks or months while their parents get their lives back on track, but thousands of others cannot safely be returned home and "grow up" in foster care. Babies who were drug-exposed at birth may go directly into foster care from the hospital. Older children often enter the foster care system without warning. They leave home without their favorite stuffed animal and without pictures of their family. They may end up in unfamiliar schools and distant parts of town. Brothers and sisters may be separated and have few, if any, opportunities to visit. While some are cared for by foster parents, others live in group homes where paid staff provides care to youth in rotating shifts. Children in California's foster care system are moved from one placement to another an average of four times, typically without advance notice, giving them few opportunities to form permanent attachments. Their primary contacts are social workers with high caseloads and high turnover rates.

Each year, the President of the Barristers chooses a focus for his or her year. The focus chosen for that year was foster children. The need for luggage for foster children was the subject of a magazine article. The article discussed the fact that foster children were using trash bags for their clothes and books. The President contacted the CLC to see if this was a problem in Los Angeles. CLC advised her that due to the lack of luggage and backpacks, CLC gave trash bags to foster children to use to carry their belongings. The need to provide luggage to foster kids is particularly acute in the Los Angeles area due to the large number of children in the system and the frequency within which they are moved. Affiliates in other areas may identify different needs by talking to the local court appointed counsel for foster kids.

The Barristers President decided to focus on a project to donate backpacks and school and hygiene items. Although there are probably many items foster children need, a former school teacher suggested that backpacks would be good to donate since they encouraged kids to stay in school. Both Aviva and CLC expressed a need for luggage, totes and backpacks in order to facilitate the children's social and educational development. Discussing the idea with various people expanded and helped to develop the concept. For example, a former social worker said that foster kids always wanted their own hygiene products that their foster family did not provide such as soap, shampoo, deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste, combs, etc. The decision was made to limit the first drive to luggage, tote bags and personal hygiene items. For the second drive, the Barristers President sharpened the focus to backpacks and school supplies.

## **B. Determination of Project Goals and Design**

### **1. Decisions to be made**

#### **a. Options - Project Goals**

The primary goal of the backpack drive was to unite local lawyers and law firms to address the needs of foster children. The sheer number of foster children in the Los Angeles area alone caused the Barristers to set goals to collect hundreds of backpacks, totes, and other carrying bags. Despite such ambitious goals, the items collected in the backpack drive exceeded the goals set.

The first backpack drive was held in Winter 2004-Spring 2005, and over 750 items were collected. Aviva received items in such numbers that they were able to satisfy their needs and donate items to other foster care centers. CLC received over 2,000 backpack and tote items as well as pens, pencils, notebooks and other school supplies.

Aviva was willing to accept gently used luggage and backpacks. They were willing to check the items to ensure they were appropriate to go to the foster youth. However, CLC requested only new items. They felt that foster youths often receive second hand items that should be thrown out. They wanted to give new items only. However, they were willing to accept unused bags that were from law conferences.

Affiliates should consult their local court appointed counsel for foster kids and local foster care agencies to determine what the children need the most and what each is willing to accept. Affiliates can then weigh the needs of the foster kids with their own budgetary concerns and determine what can realistically be done.

**b. Options - Project Design**

Barristers decided on this specific project designed to help foster children because the plight of foster children was selected as the focus for the year. Barristers has a community service element as part of its mission.

The backpack drive was designed to raise awareness of the plight of foster children who are already at risk for emotional, behavioral, developmental, and physical health problems due to the abuse and neglect they have experienced. The social cost is massive.

Barristers' projects are designed to create opportunities for new and young lawyers to develop leadership skills, to interact with judges, to establish a professional reputation beyond their employer and to instill a commitment to community service. These goals align with the mission of the Barristers organization to promote public service projects, to improve the availability of legal services to the public, and to provide a forum for addressing legal and social issues of importance to the profession and to the community.

As part of the design of the backpack project, one lawyer wrote an article outlining the plight of foster children, which aided in publicizing the event. Other lawyers assisted in collecting and coordinating the delivery of the items to Aviva and CLC. Barristers were able to network and connect with many local lawyers and their firms—both junior and senior attorneys. Moreover, local church groups contributed to the drive, as did approximately eight corporations in the area.

This project can be implemented by small and large affiliates. Indeed, two people from the Barristers conducted the main portion of this project. However, affiliates can expand the scope of the project by involving more members to participate or can divide the project by spreading the tasks among more people. If membership permits, a committee should be formed. Subcommittees can be formed to focus on different areas of the project. For example, subcommittees or individuals can be assigned to focus on generating publicity for the project, finding an appropriate non-profit beneficiary, determining the items to be collected, obtaining co-sponsors, organizing the drop-off sites, and arranging for the pick-up of items.

**2. Decision making process**

The idea for the backpack drive was the result of Barrister interaction with both judges and other foster children's projects. Once conceived, the idea was presented to the Executive Committee and voted on. Once the project idea was passed, three Barrister leaders participated in the planning and execution of the backpack drive. Several Barrister committee members directly assisted in carrying out the drive. Other young lawyers assisted by enlisting the help of their firms, which served as drop-off and collection locations.

The senior bar did not provide the Barristers with a budget for the project. However, they did publicize the project by putting it into their monthly newsletter. Affiliates should try to obtain some funding from their senior bar for the project. In order to receive funding from the senior bar, the affiliate should make a detailed proposal of the project, including the need in the community for the project, the goals of the project and a timetable. If that is not possible, affiliates should try to enlist help from the bar in other areas, such as publicity and donations from the senior members.

### **3. Considerations In Project Planning**

#### **(a) Community Resources**

The project was done in partnership with the CLC and Aviva. One preliminary consideration in planning the project was obtaining the full commitment to the project from the CLC. Employees at CLC are overwhelmed due to staff shortages and heavy workloads, so approval for participation depended upon getting to the decision-maker. Another preliminary hurdle in planning the project was finding out if agencies can receive used items (and what type of items) for foster children. The final preliminary consideration was finding an appropriate agency willing to collect, store and distribute backpacks to other foster agencies or directly to the foster children was a consideration of the project.

#### **(b) Personnel**

It would be helpful if there is a network of volunteers. A chairperson is needed to organize and coordinate a core group of volunteers in charge of different tasks – fundraising, publicity, contacting possible co-sponsors, logistics - finding appropriate drop-off sites, finding messengers or volunteers to help pick up and deliver the donated items, contacting retailers, wholesale distributors who may be able to donate to the drive. The core group would be responsible for coordinating their group of volunteers. Each drop-off site should have a contact person who will be responsible for secure short term storage until the donations are picked up. If the organization is unable to pick up items from donors or drop-off sites, then volunteers are needed to help pick up the donations.

#### **(c) Revenue Availability/Fund Raising**

This Project was developed without funding from the senior bar. The senior bar assisted by placing an article in the Association's newsletter. Most of the publicity was through email or other co-sponsors. This project can be successful with committed volunteers.

In order to obtain the items to provide to the foster kids, the Barristers sent letters to Costco, Target, Wal-Mart and Sam's Club. A handful of Targets and Wal-Marts responded with small donations. The majority of the donations came from Barristers, their law firms, and senior bar members. The more publicity that was generated, the more donations that poured in. Publicity did not cost anything. One Barrister drafted a flyer, another obtained the donation of copying services to send with donation requests to retailers. The flyers were sent out by e-mail. Barristers volunteered their office to be drop-off sites and CLC and Aviva were asked to pick up the items at these offices.

(d) Other Equipment And Physical Needs

The project required geographically convenient drop-off sites to temporarily store the backpacks for pickup. Some office buildings have security issues so that needs to be researched. Copy centers or law firms might be good sites willing to help. When space is an issue at the drop-off site, the non-profit, messenger service or volunteer should pick up the items on a weekly basis. Some people purchased items on the web and had them delivered directly to the CLC.

**III. Implementation - How to Replicate the Project**

**A. Timetable**

It took approximately 18 months to get the full commitment to the project.

18 months prior - Discuss the idea with members of the affiliate.

17 months prior - Form a core committee and determine the need in the community. Start a dialogue with the local court appointed counsel for foster children to determine what items are in most need (and what items they will not accept, e.g. scissors). Early contact with the decision maker by letter and close follow up by telephone can speed the process. Find out if used items can be donated to foster care agencies. Make a decision as to the type of items that will be donated. Prepare a proposal to submit to the Senior Bar.

14 months prior - Obtain approval of the project from the Senior Bar. Determine whether there are any insurance concerns. Determine whether the Senior Bar will provide funding and publicity for the project and whether the bar can serve as a drop-site.

9 months prior - Find appropriate non-profits or agencies to receive the items. If the non-profit or agency is willing to accept used items, an agreement should be obtained that they will be responsible to check the safety of items before giving them to the children. Determine whether the non-profit/agency can pick up the items from the drop-off sites. Look for messenger services willing to pick up and drop off items for little or no cost. Determine whether the non-profit or agency will write donation letters for donors who would like to claim items as a tax deduction.

8 months prior – If desirable, find groups to co-sponsor the project, such as other bar associations, boy/girl scouts, other community groups. Begin recruiting volunteers to help with the actual drive - coordinating pickups, publicizing the drive, providing space to store the backpacks etc.

7 months prior – Begin soliciting donations from law firms, law enforcement, judicial officers, elected officials and other community groups and businesses. Determine whether there are any state or local requirements regarding soliciting donations. Have a volunteer create a database and send solicitation letters to potential donors. Contact the Presiding Judge of the local courthouse and ask him/her whether you or he/she can send information about the project to judicial officers.

6 months prior – Begin collecting items. Assign volunteers to work with the agency or non-profit to coordinate the pickup of items. Find geographic drop-off sites willing to hold items for pickup - law firms, copy services, coffee places, etc. The drop-off sites should have a designated secure

area where items will be stored until pick up. The area can be as small as a locked cabinet or file cabinet. However, the smaller the area, the more often the items need to be picked up.

3 months prior - Find out deadlines for publicity and prepare an article, press release and/or flyer to promote the project. Describe the need for the project and list the contact information for each drop-off site including the name of the contact person, address, phone numbers and email.

2 months prior - Begin publicizing the project. Confirm that the drop-off sites have a designated space and the person who the non-profit or agency should contact to pick up the items.

The drive - A volunteer should contact the drop-off sites weekly to see if they need a pickup or arrange for them to contact the non-profit. If the drop-off sites contact the non-profit directly, the volunteer should check in to see that pickups are happening as they should be.

Donations may come in after the drive is over. Notify drop-off sites that further donations should be sent directly to the contact person at the non-profit or agency.

## **B. Recruitment & Training of Volunteers/Personnel**

An affiliate needs to recruit a core volunteer group. Once most of the decisions have been made, tasks can be delegated to volunteers. Volunteers willing to participate have several options, and their time contributions can be utilized in both the planning and in the execution stages. The same volunteers need not be involved in both stages. By making a few phone calls and sending the information gleaned to one person, then agency names, contact information and wish list items can be gathered by several people, and consolidated.

One volunteer can contact potential co-sponsors. Some volunteers can just ask their firm to be a drop-off site and be willing to call for pickups. Some volunteers can work on soliciting retailers for in-kind items. Some volunteers can work on publicity. Other volunteers can arrange for drop-off locations and possibly supervise the short term storage of the items, if they participate in the execution stage. Still other volunteers can pick up items and deliver them to the agencies or to the storage/holding facility as part of the execution stage.

Keeping a list of volunteers who would be willing to help out the final week is advised. If people have a truck or can access a larger vehicle, asking them to set aside a day or hour or one "delivery trip" can help in the final stages.

Training of volunteers is not required. If desired, a brief speech can be written and distributed if agencies or corporate donors are to be telephoned. A general wish list can be copied and volunteers can just tick off items of priority if the number of volunteers calling is significant.

## **C. Publicity**

This is perhaps the most important element to the success of the project. Barristers found that e-mail was very effective, and found that many e-mails got forwarded to others, which served to further "get the word out". Since many attorneys attend functions where tote bags are give-

aways, an agency's acceptance of these items (new or barely used) added to the success of the program, and highlighted the involvement of attorneys.

One successful backpack drive provides familiarity and publicity for the next. The Barristers Executive Committee members received telephone calls and e-mails after the drive ended, from people who still had items to donate. Gathering this contact information into the hands of one person who then informed the people of the next backpack drive facilitated donations and word-of-mouth, as well as providing a "head start" on collections.

Interestingly, the judicial and Children's Court involvement seemed to spur more attorney involvement. Once the Los Angeles Superior Court (LASC) judicial officers heard about the program, the LASC contacted the media. Also helpful was the commitment of the minority bar associations. Several of the volunteers were members of the Barristers as well as one or another minority bar association. Co-sponsorship significantly increased the number of people who were contacted for donations by e-mail.

Not surprisingly, the creativity of the idea as well as the feel-good aspect encouraged helpful word-of-mouth publicity.

At the last stage (the give-away), the press involvement was facilitated by the judicial officers or elected officials promoting the project. Media savvy (staff) personnel associated with these positions can arrange press releases and photo opportunities, so well-known local personalities as well as the actual hands-on directors are honored with credit for the project.

#### **D. Day-to-Day Operations**

One or more volunteers at the various collection or drop-off locations usually supervises the locking up of the donated items. Either these volunteers or others transport the items to the agency or to the storage/holding area, as the available space fills. This activity may be performed on an as-needed basis or perhaps weekly. If a significant corporate donation of items is made, special arrangements for shipping or pick up may need to be arranged. If the accepting agency decision-maker is involved at the early stages, this person often has contacts or resources that can offer temporary storage or help in moving items.

Consider that having too many items accumulate is a problem many agencies would enjoy having. Finally, setting a closing date is one necessary task, and as that date approaches, the day-to-day management becomes more intensive, as donations typically increase just before the last day. This is the time to call in those whose names were reserved with a commitment to donate a "delivery trip" or transportation help.

### **IV. Evaluation and Impact**

The two backpack drives conducted by the LACBA Barristers received overwhelming support and participation. In the initial drive, over 750 pieces of luggage and backpacks were collected as well as boxes of school supplies and hygiene products. Aviva and CLC presented the Barristers with a recognition plaque commemorating the backpack drive and community service it provided.

The drive was a catalyst for other Los Angeles County Bar committees and community based organizations to hold their own backpack drives to benefit other foster care agencies. "Awareness" was accomplished. In the second backpack drive, over 2,000 new items were collected and delivered to the Edmund D. Edelman Children's Court for distribution to school age foster children. These as well as the school supplies collected provided an exciting start to the new fall school year for 2005.

Aviva and the CLC both wanted the Barristers to repeat the drive. They sent letters stating that many of the children were very excited to receive the backpacks and wanted to know what was inside. The CLC attorneys felt that backpacks were more practical than teddy bears given out by the CLC for school aged children. The goal of the project was to make foster children feel that someone cared. Backpacks made the children blend in better with the other children at school.

Measuring the success may take time, with more children entering the system each year, the need for these items does not go away. Many kids get a new backpack each fall, but when no foster child has to put their belongings into a trash bag, that's success. Impact can be seen in the faces of the kids when they receive a backpack with school supplies inside.

The LACBA Barristers received the ABA Outstanding Public Service Project Award at the ABA Annual Meeting held in August 2005 in Atlanta.

## V. Bibliography And Other Resources

- A. Affiliate Contact: Luci-Ellen Chun, Esq.  
P.O. Box 1306  
Monterey Park, CA 91754  
Telephone: (626) 437-3977 cell  
e-mail: [lechun@hotmail.com](mailto:lechun@hotmail.com)
- B. Agency Affiliate: Aviva Family and Children's Services Center:  
Shari London  
7120 Franklin Avenue  
Los Angeles, CA 90046  
Telephone: (323) 876-0550
- Children's Law Center of Los Angeles  
Princess Ramey  
201 Centre Plaza Drive, Suite 10  
Monterey Park, CA 91754-2178  
Telephone: (323) 980-1700