

**The Western Edition** – Community Newspaper – San Francisco

“Home Away” relief from homelessness

BY MARK PORTUONDO \* June 30, 2009

This past March, the National Center on Family Homelessness released a startling statistic – according to the center’s findings, which analyzed data from 2005 to 2006, one out of every 50 children in the United States is homeless.

In a year in which billions of federal dollars made their way into the coffers of private auto and banking industries and policy makers grandstanded to voters by publicly lambasting auto execs for flying private jets to Washington, one and a half million children, many of whom are under the age of 6, go to sleep in the streets, weekly hotels, cars or shelters. There are more homeless children in the United States today than at any other time since the Great Depression.

Studies have proven that a litany of severe problems accompany child homelessness. Not only do homeless children lack the safety, comfort, privacy, uninterrupted schooling and a sense of community that kids with stable housing enjoy, but this group also are more than twice as likely as middle class children to have severe health problems. They have four times the rate of asthma and are five times more likely to have diarrhea and other stomach problems. Homeless children’s high school graduation rates are less than 25 percent, and they experience developmental delays at four times the rate of other children, which can disrupt their lives for years to come. By the time homeless children are 8 years old, one in three will have a mental disorder. Dr. Ellen Bassuck, president of the National Center on Family Homelessness, warns that the effects of child homelessness are far reaching.

“The consequences to our society will play out for decades,” Bassuck said.

San Francisco, claiming a known homeless population of anywhere from 5,000 to 8,000, has one of the highest homeless percentages of any major U.S. city. Of this large homeless population, around 25 percent are children. These kids grow up in an unstable environment, where their health, safety and future are truly jeopardized.

Home Away from Homelessness is an organization that is not only bridging the gap in the education and developmental disparities between homeless children and those with stable housing environments in San Francisco, but it also provides a much needed service that many groups seem to overlook: giving kids the opportunity to enjoy being kids.

Founded in 1994 by Jeanie Kortum, Home Away From Homelessness takes homeless children from various San Francisco and Marin shelters and provides a physical, emotional and spiritual respite for them. Partnered with the National Park Service, the organization uses four facilities to help children cope with homelessness. Two of the sites are at Fort Cronkite in the Marin Headlands while the remaining two are at Fort Mason.

“What we try to do is to provide an opportunity for kids to experience nature and open space. To provide a place where kids can be kids,” said Alyson Jacks, the associate director for Home Away From Homelessness. “There are so many kids out there who were born and raised in San Francisco, yet they have never been to the beach or have been across the Golden Gate Bridge.”

Originally starting out with a small cottage in the Marin Headlands, nicknamed the Beach House, Home Away From Homelessness has now incorporated four more programs into its mission. Following the creation of the Beach House, the School House program was then created to provide a comprehensive after school learning community so homeless and formerly homeless children could succeed in their classes. A mentor program, which provides adult mentoring services for children and youth, is also available. Since this program’s founding in 2001, over 70 matches have been established.

Home Away From Homelessness also advocates a Youth Leader Program, in which an older teen helps younger children maintain their academic, social and emotional gains. While promoting these fantastic programs, Home Away’s final program is an educational advocacy program, a campaign where volunteers and educators stress and emphasize the importance of education in alleviating homelessness.

These programs have been so successful that Home Away From Homelessness was awarded the 2006 Silver SPUR Award. Each year, the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association presents the Silver SPUR Award to an individual or company that has made significant contributions to improving San Francisco’s shared urban areas.

Although partnered with the National Park Service, Home Away From Homelessness is largely funded by donations and happily accepts both monetary donations and donations in kind. Particularly needed are school supplies and gifts for the children during the holidays. With the current economic crisis, many programs like Home Away begin to slow down due to lack of funds, but the kids are still there.

*For more information on ways to help, visit [www.homeaway.org](http://www.homeaway.org).*