



DREAMS OF TOMORROW



Various organizations in Louisville are combatting the child welfare crisis. However, a lack of youth support has these lights blinking out.



writing by AURORA GILBERTSON • design by DAVID ROUTT

Driving through the Portland neighborhood, I noted the old, abandoned buildings lining the street, their windows broken. My destination was an old factory, four stories high, towering up into the bright sky of the Louisville morning and casting a long shadow. Paint chipped off of the outside of the structure, revealing the cracked brick underneath. The building had a rough exterior, but looks can be deceiving.

From the moment my team and I stepped through the doors, it was clear that the volunteers inside were dedicated to bettering their community. The group's attendees gave us a warm welcome, explaining the task ahead of us. The job, though slightly difficult, turned out to be rewarding — even fun. I stopped for a moment, surveying the people around me and searching for someone to interview.

I frowned.

I'd been expecting to see young volunteers, as it was an event to help kids in need, but aside from a couple of boys and us, there was no one. Where were the other kids?

When I talked to people at school, I always seemed to hear about Beta Club, KYA and other extracurriculars that require service hours. So why weren't there more than a few youth volunteers in spaces dedicated to

improving an issue that directly affects them or their peers?

In 2024, Kentucky ranked 38th in child well-being, meaning the commonwealth is one of the worst states for children in the nation. Louisville is no exception.

Organizations across the city are working to combat these issues. Whether it's through building beds or providing clothing and food, they work tirelessly to improve child well-being. However, as their leaders age out, it becomes more important than ever for youth volunteers to step up.

Sleep in Heavenly Peace

As I screwed the final nail in place, a thick cloud of sawdust bloomed into the air. Setting the screwdriver down, I picked up the headboard and stacked it on the pile of the others we had already completed.

Sleep in Heavenly Peace (SHP), a nonprofit organization that builds and delivers beds to children in need, hosted their annual, nationwide Bunks Across America event on Sept. 14.

For this particular event, Lowe's donated materials and workers.

"It's just very rewarding to actually build something that you know is going for a good cause, as opposed to just putting it in your Amazon cart and sending it off," Gina LeBert, the field provider manager at Lowe's, said.

The event reached its nationwide goal of 8,000 beds — with 32 contributed by the West Louisville chapter.

Despite the branch's accomplishments, the future of SHP in Louisville is now uncertain.

Tom Recktenwald is the founder and current president of the West Louisville chapter of SHP. Although he has successfully run the group for seven years, Recktenwald explained that he may have to step down due to how difficult managing the organization has become.

"I've been trying for six months to find a replacement for me and I haven't had any success yet," Recktenwald said.

This is why youth are so essential: older generations need teens to step up and keep Louisville's volunteer community alive and vibrant.

While there's a shortage of teens volunteering to combat the commonwealth's child welfare crisis, there's no shortage of people in need. According to Recktenwald, there are over 300 families on the waiting list for a bed in Louisville. Nationally, there are over 150,000 children in need of one.

"Little kids are sleeping with mom and keeping her awake half the night or they're sleeping on a couch or a pile of clothes, whatever they can find," Recktenwald said.

“The little kids, when they see it, they know ‘that’s mine.’ They don’t have much they can call their own, but that’s their bed”

- Tom Recktenwald, founder of the West Louisville branch of Sleep in Heavenly Peace



A study conducted by the National Institute of Health in 2022 showed that kids who didn’t get a sufficient amount of sleep showed greater signs of impulsivity, stress, depression, anxiety, aggressive behavior and thinking problems. The study found that children with insufficient sleep had “impaired cognitive functions such as decision making, conflict solving, working memory, and learning.”

Luke Mickelson founded SHP 12 years ago in Twin Falls, Idaho after he learned a family attending his church and their children had been sleeping on the floor. Since then, SHP has built and delivered 66,377 beds nationwide, as well as expanded into over 325 local chapters.

Recktenwald manages all of the deliveries in Louisville alongside his team. Every week, the group brings and sets up beds for families who have applied for one.

“The little kids, when they see it, they know ‘that’s mine.’ They don’t have much they can call their own, but that’s their bed,” Recktenwald said.

SHP has come a long way since its beginnings, but if Louisville’s youth do not step up, this chapter is in danger of disappearing.

To get involved, check out their website at <https://shpbs.org/>.

Clothing Assistance Program

Boxes filled with mascara, foundation and other makeup products sprawled across the long white tables in front of me, each one meticulously labeled in Sharpie. I took only a moment to survey the refills off to the side, noting which container would supply each box, before families spilled into the room. Each grasped a trash bag in their hands, filling them with anything they might need for the coming months.

As the volunteers across the room attempted to communicate with the event’s attendees, voices and languages clashed, clouding the space with an air of chaos.

It certainly felt chaotic — the constant running between refill boxes made it impossible to focus on one thing for too long — but in the middle of the confusion sat the opposite: a young girl, no older than four, by a shelf of pants. Despite the fast-paced movements and frustrated tones around her, she gently traced a finger over a flower embroidered on a pair of jeans. She smiled and glanced at it one last time before

running off to her mother, who was looking through a separate clothing stack.

The gesture, so seemingly insignificant, cemented me in the present. Everyone in that building was volunteering for little kids like her, who find something lighthearted even in a stressful situation.

The Clothing Assistance Program (CAP) hosted the event on Nov. 4, an opportunity for refugee and immigrant families to find materials needed to settle down in Louisville. Run by the JCPS Diversity, Equity and Poverty Department and the District 15 PTA, CAP houses an assortment of clothes and other materials, free for anyone who needs it.

On Oct. 23, my team and I toured the facility.

We pulled into the empty parking lot and walked up to the warehouse. As we approached the glass door at the front entrance, we spotted a small lobby and a handful of chairs. The main area of the facility was off to the left. This room swam with clothing from infancy to adulthood, accompanied by racks of shoes that hugged the wall near a shelf of beauty products.

However, this was merely what the public saw. Packed



Reason For The Work- Tom Recktenwald, the director of Sleep in Heavenly Peace's West Louisville Chapter, describes the organization and its volunteer process at their events on Sept. 14 at a community build. *Photo by Sadie Eichenberger*

into a room off to the side were industrial shelves stacked with boxes of donations from major companies and nonprofits. There, we learned that CAP doesn't only offer clothes and shoes, but personal necessities like soap, hair products and kitchenware as well.

While browsing the rows of donations, I talked to Justin Willis, the manager of CAP, about the organization's founding.

CAP began when a group of mothers in the school district noticed that many kids had a shortage of clothes or shoes that were falling apart.

"Every kid deserves the ability to show up at school with everything they need to unlock all the opportunities that they want to capture," Willis said.

Originally, CAP was located in a small warehouse, but as they received more donations and supplies, they needed to move to a larger location. This space has allowed them to expand and serve more members of the community.

Today, although CAP has grown into an even bigger organization, it's still short of teen volunteers.

"We need young people with young knees and young muscles that lift and race around and slip through crowds," Willis said.

Willis scheduled the Nov. 4 event on a day off of school and reached out to duPont Manual High School students about the volunteering opportunity. However, only three kids made an appearance.

Naomi Miller, 15, a sophomore at Manual, has been volunteering since she was in the eighth grade, but this was her first experience with CAP.

"I'm doing it for service hours for KYA and stuff like that, but I volunteered for a while and it just makes me feel good," Miller said.

Another volunteer at this event was Nathan Newman, 16, a sophomore at Manual, who has been volunteering since he was six.

"Most of the time it is to get service hours, but it's also a great opportunity," Newman said. "It helps you meet new people, help people and so on."

Families who want to come in for clothing and other products can book an appointment with their



A Focused Flame- Maggie Stone, 15, uses a blowtorch to brand Sleep in Heavenly Peace's logo into a slab of wood on Sept. 14 at one of the organization's community builds. *Photo by Sadie Eichenberger*

school's family resource center coordinator or reach out to another administrator. For families to be eligible for clothing assistance, they must have at least one student enrolled in a JCPS school.

To get involved, reach out to Justin Willis at justin.willis@jefferson.kyschools.us or visit CAP's website, <https://15thdistrictpta.org/cap/> for more information.

Random Acts of Kindness

Ainsley Brown, a senior at Assumption High School, discreetly tucked a small bag of food into another student's backpack before heading over to

Minors Lane Elementary. There, she spoke to a group of fourth and fifth graders about their responsibility in their school's Kindness Ambassadors Club.

"They're always so eager to help other people, even if it's their own classmates," Brown said.

Random Acts of Kindness (RAK) Louisville is a local program run by Andrew Dunn, 21, a senior at the University of Cincinnati. He founded the group in the fifth grade because he wanted to do more for his community.

RAK Louisville not only holds its own events, but also connects volunteers with other local opportunities, like their recent period products drive.

Dunn highlighted the idea that volunteering doesn't have to be a chore.

"Go out and find things that you're passionate about, that you want to volunteer for," Dunn said. "Finding your passion is so important, and the earlier you can find it, the better."

Brown has been volunteering with RAK Louisville since she was five and joined its board three years ago. She has participated in several projects, and underlined the opportunity to visit Minors Lane Elementary and teach kids how to volunteer as one of her favorites.

However, Brown doesn't only volunteer at schools and with kids; she also works at various

food pantries and homeless shelters. Brown enjoys working at the homeless shelter because of the people she meets.

“I don’t just hand them food or blankets or anything. I actually get to sit down and have conversations with them and hear their story,” Brown said.

Brown and Dunn are both active members in their community, which is important given the lack of youth volunteers in Louisville.

To get involved, check out their website at <https://raklouisville.com/>.

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Although I hear about volunteering so often, it seems that there aren’t enough youth volunteers where it matters most — with the youth themselves

As poor as the state of child well-being in Louisville is at the moment, it is more crucial now than ever before that teens help these organizations.

“I think it’s important for our generation to volunteer — Gen Z. I feel like we get written off about our sense of belonging in the community and our laziness,” Dunn said. “I don’t think that’s true. I think we really want to inflict change, and we’re wanting to do that from the ground up.” •

**Find out more about
CAP here!**

Video by Maggie Stone



An Equitable Resource- Justin Willis, the manager of the Clothing Assistance Program, sorts through the facility's clothing storage in Louisville, Kentucky on Oct. 23 *Photo by Sadie Eichenberger.*

