



Cathey Brown: Budget cuts threaten to rob homeless kids of hope



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Six-year-old Jabar could barely contain his excitement. It was Monday night, and the nice lady, Miss French Toast, had promised she would come back on Monday. For three weeks, Jabar and his brothers had shared a room with their mom in a Dallas area shelter. There is much he doesn't understand or like about his situation, but the group he and the other kids get to go to when Miss French Toast comes is the highlight of his week.

Jabar is just one of over 1,000 Dallas children who are homeless. You may be asking, "Homeless children in Dallas? Where are they? We don't see them standing on the street corner holding a sign."

Homeless children are the invisible victims of a parent's job loss, domestic violence and economic downturns. Some live in cars, others in cheap motels or in apartments with three other families. Others, like Jabar, live in a shelter designed for families.

In his short life, Jabar has experienced more trauma and loss than most of us living in this "glitzy," affluent city will face in a lifetime. Children who experience homelessness are more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems, to have witnessed violence and to be behind academically. They typically have more chronic health problems than other children. In Texas the odds are stacked even further against them — in a 2010 National Report Card published by the National Center on Family Homelessness, Texas ranked 50th.

Fortunately for Jabar, he's among more than a thousand Dallas homeless children who have access to services designed especially for them and provided by Rainbow Days Inc., a local nonprofit organization. The core service is a weekly support group where children have the freedom to be kids while learning important coping skills and hearing life-affirming messages of hope.

Under the guidance of a caring leader, children learn that they are not alone, that the problems in their families are not their fault and that there are healthy ways they can learn to cope with the difficult feelings and situations they face. They have help with homework and they go on fun outings with their families. In the summer, they attend camp, and they celebrate the start of school at a party where they are given the supplies and uniforms they need.

Unfortunately, the continuation of these services is in jeopardy. Offered free to the shelters, this safety net for homeless children costs \$650,000 annually. As of today, 40 percent of that amount has been eliminated because of the projected loss of federal funds provided through the Department of Housing and Urban Development. With only four months before the busy summer season, tough choices have to be made immediately.

Jabar doesn't know that he is at risk of growing up to repeat the cycle of poverty, or that his chances of going to prison are greater; or that because of constant disruptions in his education, he may not catch up academically, increasing the likelihood that he will drop out of school. He doesn't understand the complexity of local and national politics that determines funding for programs that help him. He just knows how good it feels to laugh and be told he is unique, valued and special. Jabar is beginning to have hope that one day, things will be different for him and his family.

Now you know that Dallas, like every other big city in our country, has children who are homeless. Children who have found hope through an organization that is in the business of giving hope. And how do you put a dollar value on hope?

Cathey Brown is founder and CEO of Rainbow Days Inc. in Dallas. Her email address is catheyb@rdikids.org, and readers can learn more at rdikids.org.



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