

A SHELTER, A PLAYSPACE, *A Difference, A Future*



No one will ever claim that a homeless shelter is an ideal place for a child. But in more than 140 shelters across Massachusetts, there is a place, stocked with books and puzzles, train sets, doll houses, construction paper and Legos®, where children who reside there with their parents can learn, play and imagine.

Horizons for Homeless Children's (HHC) Playspace Programs work with 2,200 children every week. For those children, that means the chance to escape the turmoil of shelter life and instead focus on preparing imaginary meals, constructing ABC-block towers or sounding out letters with the help of a Playspace Activity Leader (PAL) volunteer. It means the chance to be a kid, a release from the worry and pressure of homelessness that even a two-year-old can experience.

Our partners at shelters where Playspaces are located provide overwhelmingly positive feedback regarding the impact the space can have on children living there. Nicole Lussier, Program Director of Open Pantry Teen Parent Program in Springfield, summed up the effect that a simple place to play has on homeless children:

"The Playspace here at Open Pantry has made such a difference in the lives of so many children. It gives them a time to play and to get away from the stress of living in the shelter. They love their "PALs" and always greet them with a hug, take them by the hand and lead them upstairs to play. At the end of the shift, they come back downstairs singing songs and carrying crafts that they've made. The kids know that the Playspace is theirs, and they take pride and ownership of it."

In a Playspace, social and academic foundations for future success are established for today's homeless children. Children can explore their world, make friends and play pretend in a Playspace: the happy pursuits of a normal, developing child.

"I really can't say enough about the Playspace Programs," shares Nicole. "The program helps these kids learn and develop, to socialize, to be kind and learn to share. It helps them transition out of shelter to the next phase, and it shows them that there can be happiness in the midst of all the stress in their lives."

DURING FY11

- + 16 Playspaces were installed statewide
- + 28 PAL trainings took place across Massachusetts
- + A corps of 1,540 PALs volunteered each week in more than 140 Playspaces
- + 127,700 collective hours were spent volunteering with homeless young children in shelter-based Playspaces