

The Fort Smith Children’s Emergency Shelter provides shelter and care, in a safe and structured home-like environment, for children and young adults, ages six and older, who have been removed from their home by the Department of Human Services due to neglect and/or abuse. The CES allows children in crisis the opportunity to *just be kids!* Do South® reached out to Ashley Fitzhugh, Development Director of Fort Smith Children’s Emergency Shelter, to learn more.

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How did the Children’s Emergency Shelter come to be? The CES was founded in the mid-1990’s when the Junior League of Fort Smith asked the initial question, “what is happening to our children in crisis?” A feasibility study was performed, committees were developed, and with the help of Chuck Fawcett, Philip Merry, and this great community, the CES opened its doors in November 1997 to homeless foster care children of Arkansas.

Who does the shelter serve and in what ways? The CES serves children and young adults, ages 6 and older, who are residents of the state of Arkansas and have been removed from their homes by the Department of Human Services due to neglect and/or abuse. Every child is a victim and has done nothing wrong to be in the situation they are in. Every child that comes to the CES or enters the GetREAL24 program receives everything they would need to live...new shoes and clothes that FIT, support with schooling (or career choices), life-skills training, medical care and therapy services, food, and most importantly a safe bed in a stable home.

What has been one of the most memorable moments for CES? In 2017, we not only celebrated our 20th Anniversary, but we were awarded with “Non-Profit of the Year” for the state of Arkansas by *Arkansas Business*. This award followed our mission expansion of serving foster youth ages 18 and older—GetREAL24. GetREAL24 is an independent living program that provides a safe and stable home for foster youth “aging out” of care. GR24 is the only program of its kind in the state that gives young adults “aging out” of care the opportunity to live independently among their peers while receiving the life-skills and support system necessary to become successful contributing members of society.

What is one of the biggest challenges for Children’s Emergency Shelter? Every child that comes to the CES has experienced trauma while under the care of their family. Our children struggle with trust, post-traumatic stress, food insecurities, and coping mechanisms. As a staff, we take steps and participate in training procedures, as well as provide necessary therapy and tutoring services, which help the CES staff become better equipped at serving the challenges related to our children and their emotional and behavioral needs.

How have you seen the support for CES grow over the years? Sebastian County continues to have the highest percentage of foster youth in the entire state of Arkansas. As our needs have grown to meet the level of care our children require, the support of the community has increased through advocacy and monetary support. We are so thankful for our continued supporters, volunteers, and advocates...unfortunately, the need to care of our children in crisis is not going away. As long as there are children in care, the CES will need increasing community support.

What is something readers would be surprised to know about the shelter? We go through approximately 2,000 rolls of toilet paper per year, wash almost 90 loads of laundry per week, and can go through 4 gallons of milk each day J

How can our community get involved and support CES? Our greatest need is always monetary support. A few years ago we stopped accepting donated clothing and shoes, and created a fund for these items. By having the financial opportunity to take our kids shopping for new shoes and clothes that *fit* their bodies, *fit* their style, and help them *fit* in at school has had a tremendous impact on our children's self-esteem and self-worth. It also gives our kids an opportunity to experience a level of normalcy. In addition, a donor's dollar will go further if we spend it due to discounts we receive and the fact that we are sales tax exempt.

Are there any special events coming up that we should know about? Havana Nights! Grab your flip flops and fedora, Friday, May 31 will be the 7th annual Havana Nights fundraiser for the CES. This Cuban-themed fundraiser raises over 1/3 of the CES budget.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us? Every day is a "first" for a child who arrives at the CES. This could mean they will experience their first day of school, first opportunity to have a new pair of shoes that FIT, first visit from Santa, or first *Happy Meal*. The children do not all arrive and leave at the same time, so the need is unending. A child that arrives at 2am on an April morning, will most likely be in need of "first day of school" supplies. He/she will also need new shoes and clothes that fit; he might have his first dentist or eye appointment while at the CES; and for the first time in his/her life the child will have the opportunity to let their guard down, be cared for in a stable environment, and have the opportunity to *just be kids!*