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‘Essentials For Young Lives’ campaign helps the most vulnerable

By **Lou Correa** | 04/29/10 12:00 AM PST

Recessions are hardest on the most vulnerable members of society, and topping that list of most vulnerable are homeless mothers with infants – the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. Even in the most distressing of economic straits, few of us will know the fear and uncertainty of being a mother trying to care for a baby without a place to live or means of support.

The Essentials for Young Lives campaign exists to help women in such circumstances provide their babies with the daily necessities of life. It is a joint effort between HomeAid and California’s First 5/Children and Families Commissions, who mount an annual drive to collect essential items, such as diapers, baby wipes, baby food, shampoo, wash, etc., which are then donated to qualified programs that serve homeless women and children through shelters and transitional facilities.

This partnership began three years ago between HomeAid/OC and the Children and Families Commission of Orange County, which put together the collection drive, appropriately enough, in the days before the Mother Day’s holiday. Since 2008 more than 250,000 essential baby items have been distributed to homeless mothers and their infants.

Last year, the program expanded to Sacramento County. In its inaugural drive, HomeAid Sacramento supplied three months worth of baby products to nine area shelters.

This effort has provided hundreds of thousands of items in the past, but the need is much greater this year as the economy continues to struggle.

This year, for the first time, the Essentials for Young Lives campaign came to the State Capitol. As a Senator, I was very proud to support this campaign. Assemblyman Curt Hagman and Assemblywoman Alyson Huber are also supporting this effort. Representatives from HomeAid Sacramento and Orange County, and the First 5/Children and Families Commissions joined us to kick off the Essentials for Young Lives campaign under the dome with the expectation state legislators will volunteer their offices as collection sites for baby essentials.

While public perception is one of partisan fighting, the legislature came together in a bipartisan and bicameral fashion to address this need by setting up collection sites in all of the members’ offices in order to help out a worthy cause.

The Essentials campaign at the Capitol continues through Thursday, May 6. Following the drive, items will be delivered to local homeless shelters including Mission Solano, River Oak Center for Children, Roseville Home Start, Sacramento Area Emergency Housing, Sacramento Crisis Nursery, St. John’s

Shelter for Women & Children, St. Vincent De Paul of Roseville, Volunteers of America Residential Family Center, Volunteers of America Residential Treatment Program for Parenting Women, Waking the Village, and WEAVE.

Our state government finds itself in an unprecedented continuing budget crisis, the disastrous product a severe recession since the 1930's. While reasonable people can and do disagree on the remedies, we can all agree this crisis has tattered California's social safety net.

Essentials for Young Lives is an example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts: working together, local organizations such as HomeAid and the Children and Families Commissions can leverage limited resources to create opportunity for the wider community's generosity to help those in need and plug the gaps in that safety net.

We are in the midst of California's worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. During these tough economic times, families are struggling to make ends meet. A package of diapers or jar of baby food may seem like small things, but mean a great deal to a homeless mother who needs them for her baby.

Take Shauniece Lockhart, for example. In December of 2008, Shuaniece was a homeless single mother with an eight-month-old baby, when she entered a drug addiction recovery program. Shauniece has now been in recovery for more than 16 months, credits the support and necessities that she received during that time with enabling her to focus on her sobriety, and build a new life for herself and her children.

As you can see, every bit helps. Similar drives are being held throughout the state. For more information or to locate campaigns in other communities please go to www.homeaid.org/Chapters to find a HomeAid office in your community.

Most importantly, open up your hearts. Any donation can make a difference in the life of a homeless mother and her young child.