



Shoes and accessories are part of Clothing Our Kids' mission to assist the less fortunate elementary and now middle school students in Sussex County schools.



Delaware State News/Glenn Rolfe
Karen Borges, Clothing Our Kids Volunteer Center director, fills an order for a middle school student identified by school staff as being in need.

Clothing Our Kids continues to dress students for success

Charitable group expanding service to middle schools

By Glenn Rolfe
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MILLSBORO — With a decade discreetly attiring less fortunate elementary school pupils under its belt, Clothing Our Kids is graduating into middle schools.

"We're doing it one school at a time," said the group's president Bob Blouin. "We've already done Georgetown Middle School. We're working on Mariner now, working with the school counselors, nurses and principals. Then, we'll move on to the other middle schools."

Clothing Our Kids notes that sixth, seventh and eighth graders are just as vulnerable and as much in need as their elementary counterparts, if not more so.

About three years ago, just prior to the pandemic, the organization added its service to Head Start and pre-K programs, in addition to elementary schools.

"That was a raving success," said Mr. Blouin. "Then, COVID hit, and

all those programs were shut down or severely limited. Now, we are cranking back up on what I would call both ends of the spectrum."

Clothing Our Kids' volunteer effort was founded in 2012 by Mary Rio, whose husband, an assistant principal at a Sussex County elementary school, shared the story about a girl who came to school each day in the same soiled clothing.

To address the need, Ms. Rio kept inventory in a guestroom of her home. When that was not enough to support all lacking school clothing, she expanded into her garage.

Friends heard of her generosity and offered to help. Through donations and more than 100 volunteers, the charitable organization moved to the Volunteer Center, east of Millsboro, eventually filling it and growing into a second suite.

Ms. Rio supplied 850 items of clothing to 150 students in 2012. But since Clothing Our Kids' founding, over 28,000 children have received more than 161,000 pieces.

Today, the group is made up of nearly 150 volunteers — there is no paid staff — and is dependent

on donations from its neighbors. Except for Volunteer Center and warehouse costs, 89% is spent on program expenses, organizers said.

The organization receives clothing requests from school nurses, counselors and other administrators who are aware of students' personal situations. The brand-new clothing is packaged at the Volunteer Center and delivered to the school representative privately.

After filling the first middle school order for a student in foster care, Volunteer Center director Karen Borges said, "These are the stories that tear your heart out, knowing that she had so little after being left in a foster home. One can only imagine what her young life has been like."

Ms. Borges said each standard order includes a week's worth of clothes, comprised of five outfits, underwear, pajamas and a hoodie. "And if they request shoes, they'll get shoes and socks," she added.

Distribution can also include seasonal items — coats, hats and gloves.

Expansion into middle schools received the blessing from Clothing

Our Kids' governing board.

"The board looked at it and said, 'Let's challenge ourselves a little bit and put our foot to the pedal a little bit and expand it to the middle schools,'" Mr. Blouin said. "It's quite an undertaking, but we're doing it very methodically, one school at a time, getting them up and running. It's a great collaborative effort."

Ms. Borges added, "I'm glad we're going slow. It's hard to figure out what we need and not overbuy."

Mr. Blouin said the time is right for growing.

"The key is ... we celebrate our 10 years by expanding," he said. "That's good for us, good for the kids of Sussex County and good for the volunteers because it's more volunteer opportunity, also."

In addition to donors' contributions, the entity holds fundraisers, including a golf outing Oct. 10 at The Peninsula Golf & Country Club.

For information, visit clothingourgids.org.

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Clothing Our Kids Volunteer Center near Millsboro is the hub for clothing, shoes and other necessities in serving elementary and middle school students in Sussex County schools.



The Clothing Our Kids Volunteer Center near Millsboro has wall-to-wall racks, shelves and bins filled with clothing and other necessities.