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MEDIA RELEASE

3600 Workman Mill Road / Whittier, CA 90601

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CONTACT: Ruthie Retana
(562) 463-3145

Rio Hondo College Students to Give More Than 120 Bags, Suitcases and Backpacks to Foster Youths

Distribution lunch is inaugural effort by new campus group Leaders for Change

WHITTIER, Calif. – Foster youths and youths transitioning from foster care will receive donated backpacks and luggage during a special lunch Saturday, Dec. 6, at Rio Hondo College hosted by members of a new student club dedicated to helping the community.

The group, Leaders for Change, collected more than 120 new and gently used backpacks and suitcases as part of its Case of Hope drive, which targets a need long unmet within the foster care community.

Many foster youths transitioning from home to home often carry their belongings in trash bags and must leave behind treasured personal possessions. In addition, youths who “age out” of foster care aren’t provided luggage when they must leave their foster homes.

“We want to provide children and youth in foster care with something, even if it’s small, that they can keep with them, something stable of their own that can hold their stuff,” said Leaders for Change President Erika Murillo, a former foster youth.

“We want to make the transition from home to home a little easier,” said Murillo, a second-year student double majoring in Nursing and Social Work.

The idea came from club member Rachel Chavez, a second-year Rio Hondo Drug Studies and Human Services double major who is interning with Concept 7 Foster Family Agency in Whittier.

“Through my internship, I learned about the social stigmas associated with foster youth and thought about how awful it would be to leave home or show up at a new home with just a trash bag full of personal belongings,” Chavez said.

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“I tried to put myself in their shoes and couldn’t imagine the psychological trauma they’d already gone through and dealing with that indignity on top of it when a piece of travel gear could alleviate that – it seemed so simple,” she said.

Leaders for Change club members collaborated with the staff of Rio Hondo’s Foster and Kinship Care Education (FKCE) and Youth Empowerment Strategies for Success (YESS) programs, which provide foster youth with priority registration, counseling and life skills workshops, youth mentors, computer and printer services and other support.

They also reached out to the Rio Hondo Associated Student Body, surrounding public school districts and community organizations to get the word out through each group’s networks and through social media.

Rio Hondo College Superintendent/President Teresa Dreyfuss said the drive is emblematic of how Rio Hondo students view their role in the community.

“I’m very proud of our students for seeing this need and addressing it so swiftly and effectively,” Dreyfuss said. “Many of these students are in Rio Hondo study programs that will take them into careers in social service and child welfare. This experience underscores the lessons in compassion that are as much a part of our vocational training as academics.”

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