



DSWs reporting to work at one of two Airbnbs.

When the request came for volunteers to care for coronavirus-positive children, Tiffany Hernandez immediately knew this was the one call she had to answer. The veteran social worker understood the risks of assuming this particular Disaster Service Worker (DSW) assignment. However, the urgent nature of the request coupled with the reality of children in foster care forced to cope with a serious illness, outweighed Tiffany's personal concerns.

"These children have already been through trauma," said Tiffany, who has three young children of her own. "Now they're going through something really scary, and it's important that they are surrounded by people who sincerely care about them. Even with the health risks, I felt strongly that I had to help, however possible."

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, DCFS was faced with a brand new challenge: what to do if a child in foster care tested positive for the highly contagious COVID-19 virus, but was either asymptomatic or didn't show symptoms severe enough to require hospitalization.

The department sought out an innovative solution with the help of former foster youth Sixto Cancel, founder and CEO of Think of Us, a non-profit organization focused on helping agencies find creative ways to improve the foster care system.

Through this partnership, the department established the Airbnb Program to temporarily care for COVID-positive youth with nowhere else to go. The home environment offers a safe place for them to stay during the recommended isolation period until they have tested negative and are no longer contagious to those around them.

Twenty-four employees ultimately volunteered after the initial request went out in May, intentionally stepping up to the plate despite the risks to help the department at a critical moment. With two Airbnb properties currently in use, these staff work in teams to cover six shifts for each unit, ensuring that two DSWs are always there to provide round-the-clock care for these youngsters. A total of five children have come through the program to date, two of whom are currently still at one of the units.

Like Tiffany, Adriana Bermudez also volunteered for this DSW assignment due to a strong desire to support foster youth during this particularly challenging time. Once a foster youth herself, she saw this as an opportunity to use her 23 years of experience as a community health worker with DCFS to give back to the children who came through the system after her.

Getting used to working the night shift has been the hardest part for Adriana, who is on hand to provide care from 11:30 p.m. to 9:30 a.m. Despite the unusual schedule, getting to know



DSW Tiffany Hernandez.

these resilient kids and knowing that she is helping to provide them with a loving environment is all the reward she needs.

The children follow basic routines, including mealtimes and bedtimes, but staff also try to make their stay comfortable and fun. They are greeted with welcome baskets tailored to their age with clothing, toiletries and snacks, and both facilities have board games and puzzles that keep both staff and youth entertained. Staff also encourage age-appropriate chores that develop life skills, such as laundry and meal preparation.

Wanting to help them feel safe and comfortable, the staff also try to figure out what each child likes and what motivates them. Upon discovering that two older girls enjoyed baking, Tiffany brought brownie supplies from home for them to make together. She delighted another young girl when she made her favorite foods—broccoli and fettuccini alfredo—for dinner one night.

“We aren’t the primary workers for these kids, which can be scary and stressful, on top of testing positive for COVID-19,” Tiffany said. “We try to make the isolation period fun and help them see that they don’t need to be scared. They get excited when they see we’ve taken their interests to heart, and I love knowing that I can help make them feel comfortable and safe.”

All DSWs use personal protective equipment such as face masks, gloves, gowns, shoe covers and shields or eye protection as needed. Both Tiffany and Adriana follow strict protocols when shifts are over, including separating all clothing and showering before interacting with their own family members.

Despite the risks inherent in this assignment, however, both also noted the enthusiastic and team-oriented attitude of everyone working with the Airbnb Program. Adriana affirmed that there is a real sense of togetherness and a willingness to help each other among team members, creating a positive atmosphere even under the circumstances.

She attributes this in large part to the tireless efforts of the administrative team overseeing the program. As the program manager, Assistant Regional Administrator Sabina Sayre has made it her mission to do everything in her power to make the program successful. Diana Santoyo-Padua, herself serving in a DSW capacity to support the program during the ongoing pandemic, is similarly passionate about making sure the program runs smoothly and that staff have everything they need. Together they are always on call to support the DSWs, ready and available to answer questions, address concerns or advocate for the program as needed.



DSW Adriana Bermudez

Both Adriana and Tiffany want to help others understand why the Airbnb program is so important, and ultimately how rewarding it can be to care for children at such a critical moment. Adriana hopes that her positive experience will encourage other staff to volunteer for the program. She wants them to know that it’s not as hard as they might think, noting that the department works hard to protect employees, children and families dealing with the pandemic.

“It’s been really nice to give the children in these homes some sense of normalcy,” Tiffany said. “Sure, there may be concerns about the pandemic, but at the end of the day these are children who have been through a lot and who now need our love and support. I want them to look back at this time and know that they were surrounded by people who genuinely cared for their wellbeing and who made sure they were safe and happy.”

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