FAMILIES PLACED OUTSIDE THEIR HOME COMMUNITIES

Apologies if these suggestions are already being implemented and I’m reinventing the wheel here - this list is based on what the families I see as a legal advocate tell me about what they are missing.

It seems more families are being placed outside their home communities. These families often have nothing – no cash, no food stamps, no phones and no means of transportation. Others have very little – low TAFDC cash benefits and food stamps to live on. When they are placed outside their home communities they do not know how to get the additional help they need. Many of the families have serious and urgent medical needs, and special needs children who need to be enrolled in school I suggest we ensure every family **immediately get an orientation** **packet specific to the community the family is placed in**, with the following essential information, which must be available in Spanish too. Spanish speaking families often have the hardest time getting information or explaining their needs especially when placed in an area with few Spanish speakers:

1. Public transportation routes and schedules as well as information about free or reduced cost bus passes. In fact, ideally every family should get a free bus pass. Bus stop nearest to shelter placement should be marked clearly.
2. Map of the area, with nearest supermarket and other essential locations (see contacts below) marked.
3. Fax number and phone number of the hotel, preferably on a card so the family can hand this out, as well as instructions that they can use the hotel fax free for sending and receiving documents.
4. Essential contacts w phone # and address. These should also be marked on the community map:
5. Food pantries (packet should also include **a food pantry referral letter explaining family is homeless and in a motel w a microwave only**) and soup kitchens. Some food pantries turn away people who do not have a referral letter
6. DHCD, Social Security, Unemployment Compensation and DTA offices
7. School Department with **SPED office and McKinney Vento contact information**
8. Legal services office serving their area
9. Community Health Center which serves the uninsured and accepts mass health, as well as other medical providers who accept mass health including nearest dental office.
10. Mental health clinic which accepts mass health and speaks Spanish if possible. Homelessness is extremely traumatizing for parents and children, and they are often homeless because of some precipitating traumatic event or disability.
11. Community Organizations which provide advocacy and may have faxes and phones to use, such as community action, mayor’s office, the local offices of state reps and senators (state legislators’ staff are often willing to advocate informally for constituents).
12. Local Housing Authorities
13. Goodwill or Salvation Army store or the equivalent – for plates, clothes, cups, utensils, silverware etc.
14. Public Library for **free internet access**, and other library programs including job search groups, free videos, books and free entertainment for children
15. The following basic information clearly explained:
16. Information on SPED rights particularly the “stay put” right – the right to seamlessly continue the same IEP which was in place in the last school attended.
17. Information on McKinney Vento rights for homeless children
18. Information on how to get a Safelink or Lifeline phone, popularly known as the “Obama phone.”
19. Microwave cooking instructions. These families have to live on food stamps and have only microwaves to cook with for months. Pre-prepared microwaved meals are expensive. It is possible to cook real (and low cost non-convenience) food in a microwave, most people just don’t know how.
20. Parks and free activities for children. Also, many YMCA’s and Boys or Girls clubs have very low cost membership for low income families.

The annual “resource guide” circulated by the Network is nice, but it’s too large and covers too wide a geographical area.

I am sure families get some of the above information over time, but I have spoken to two families in the last few weeks who landed in unfamiliar territory with no food, no information, and no directions for local resources.

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