

How \$300,000 could change the future for abused, neglected kids

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TREASURE COAST — Child advocate and nonprofit figurehead Debbie Butler has identified a gaping hole in the already traumatic process of removing abused and neglected children from their homes. The price tag to patch the hole, Butler says, is about \$300,000.

That \$300,000 would buy a house Butler and her team at "Guardians for New Futures" would transform into a kid-friendly haven for children and teens displaced from their homes.

She already has her eye on one property for the future "Sanctuary 4Kids Treasure Coast."

In the course of the last six months, the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) has plucked an average of 47 kids per month from their homes in St. Lucie, Martin, Indian River and Okeechobee counties. The reason for their removal could range from fire to physical abuse



Photo courtesy of Debbie Butler

Guardians for New Futures, the Sanctuary 4Kids Treasure Coast program, will transform a home into a kid-friendly haven for children and teens displaced from their own homes. "These children need a loving distraction while people work in the background to find them a loving, and safe place to live," said Debbie Butler, President, Board of Directors.

to drug bust, Butler said.

In the hours immediately following their removal, kids often find themselves in a scary and confus-

ing limbo.

Sometimes they end up in the back seat of a state employee's car while DCF struggles to con-

tact a grandparent. Other times, they sleep in a state building office while employees work to find them placement in a safe home. They are often separated from siblings. Frequently, they overhear adult conversations regarding their parents or their own uncertain futures that, Butler said, little ears should not have to hear.

"It's not DCF's fault, they're doing the best they can with the resources they have," Butler said. "But the truth is, once a child is removed from the home, it can be several hours to overnight before [DCF] finds a relative or a safe place to take them for a longer period of time."

That is where Butler thinks her organization can fill in the gap.

"These children need a loving distraction while people work in the background to find them a loving, and safe place to live," Butler said. "They can come and watch TV, play Xbox, bake cookies, get a bath, put on fresh pajamas, and crawl into a warm bed."

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