



## **Our Mission**

Catie's Closet mission is to improve students' school attendance, emotional well-being, grade progression and ultimately, graduation rates by providing in-school access to clothing and basic necessities to students who are homeless, living in poverty or low income.

## **History**

Catie's Closet began as a tribute to Catie Bisson, a graduate of Lowell High School who was passionate about the power of education. In 2010, Catie passed away at the age of 20 due to a connective tissue disorder. In high school Catie became aware that her peers were not coming to school because they didn't have the necessities (i.e. clean, appropriate clothing, toiletries and hygiene products) they needed to attend or thrive in school. She championed them in her own way by sharing clothes from her own closet. Catie felt strongly that education should not be a privilege, and we created Catie's Closet as a way to honor her memory.

Catie's Closet began serving students in Lowell High School in May of 2010; today, CC supports 42,000 low income students in 73 schools throughout 8 school districts in MA & NH. The founders, Catie's extended family, want to make a significant difference in local communities and partnered with School Districts in Lowell and Boston to engage every school.

## **Leadership**

Catie's Closet Board members have been selected strategically for expertise and community commitment: 4 live/work in Boston, several bring key business disciplines of finance and accounting, senior marketing and credit union officers. Specific board members include: partner, PriceWaterhouseCooper, LLC; regional account executive Hewlett Packard Enterprise; Vice President and Of-Counsel, State Street Bank; financial advisor, Morgan Stanley.

Staff. Catie's Closet has 7 FT and 3 PT employees. It is managed by an Executive Director/Founding Partner who has more than 30 years in retail management and leadership. The ED has leveraged professional expertise and knowledge of retail operations to implement Catie's Closets. The ED has demonstrated skills leading teams, scaling operations and broad business acumen. The Director of Operations, a former school teacher, has initiated many of the early school partner relationships and continues in this role.

### BIO of ED:

Executive Director Mickey Cockrell is a proven entrepreneur in the non-profit sector. Prior to co-founding Catie's Closet, Mickey spent more than 30 years in Business Management. Her primary experience has been in the retail sector, providing leadership for Jordan Marsh, Filene's, and other retailers. Most recently, she served as Vice President for Kohl's. During her career, Mickey has held the title of Buyer, Marketing Manager, Human Resources Manager, Multi-Store Manager, and Asst. Director of Stores.

She is an innovator and problem-solver and is known for creating high-impact marketing strategies and unique models for delivering unparalleled customer service. Mickey's notable contributions include driving company expansion and operational efficiencies. Mickey serves as a Board Member for CTI (Community Teamwork Inc) and is also a consultant for entrepreneurs developing start-up companies.

## **Program**

Catie's Closet's (CC) goal is to decrease absenteeism and increase high school graduation rates so students are better prepared for the workforce and college. By providing clothing and hygiene products to low-income needy students, CC has demonstrated the validity of this approach to increasing retention and high

school completion in 73 currently participating schools, and a projected additional 25 schools within the next year. The impact is immediate. Feeling more like all the other kids, they gain confidence and can focus on school. Our approach is a low-cost, highly effective, community-engaged initiative.

There is an overwhelming need to serve these current 42,000 students and projected 65,000 total students in 2019 – representing almost 25% of the estimated 300,000 students in Massachusetts' 424 low-income pre-K-12 schools. Our program includes:

\*In-School Closets: serve 42,000 children; 73 MA & NH public schools (50%+ are disadvantaged)

- Partnering with school leaders, CC determines place to construct school Closet, prepares/paints room, installs fixtures, delivers merchandise, sets up Closet as small boutique with age-appropriate, fashionable items, hygiene products
- School staff identify/invite students to Closet and “shop” (no item or visit limit)
- A volunteer “Champion” maintains each Closet, orders inventory. Each school maintains a minimum of 1,500 units/\$20K inventory (thrift value)

\*Distribution Center (DC): serves 50 schools; 50,000 children

New/ gently used clothing, basic necessities and school supplies are collected and housed in 2 DC's (Dracut MA and Boston MA). We engage 326+ active volunteers in CC communities who host clothing drives and collect/sort donations. DC maintains all CC inventory, fills Special Orders.

\*Catie's Online Portal (Special Order System): serves over 100 children/ week.

CC Distribution Center has relationships with more than ten social service agencies (e.g. Department of Children and Families, International Institute.). Partners submit “Special Orders” via email, online, phone for children with immediate needs – all represent children in transition, and many are from new immigrant families.

## **Proposal Project/ Request**

Project – *Catie's Closet Grows*

Purposes and Beneficiaries – To open closets in new schools: 20 in Greater Boston, 1 in Springfield, 4 in Lawrence. More than 15,000 low-income, homeless and immigrant children attending targeted schools meet federal poverty level criteria. These children are essentially socially handicapped – without appropriate clothing or necessary hygiene products – they are often absent due to the accompanying ostracism and bullying. Catie's Closet's supplies will enable students to regain their dignity and support their school attendance.

Activities - Requested funds will support and outfit the CC spaces as mini-stores. None of these requested funds will alter the public-school rooms. CC will purchase mobile, portable metal shelving and rack systems for donated clothing/ toiletry items. Portability is essential in the rare case of a room reassignment. The process is as follows.

1. Purchase equipment. This Catie's Closet project will ensure cost-effective purchase of portable racks, rails and shelving fixtures to outfit the 30 designated unused, donated classroom spaces in targeted Boston, Lawrence and Springfield public schools.
2. Complete installation. This expansion in 25 new Catie's Closets' schools will commence in early summer and be fully operational for student use during the next year.

Timeline: Commence purchase in early summer. Installation and space renovations complete by June 30, 2020.

Achievement Strategies Records of student use in new Catie's Closet spaces. All appropriate school personnel in the 25 new schools will be informed of Catie's Closets' opening and understand the procedure for utilizing the space and introducing pupils to the resource. Staff will follow appropriate record keeping determining usage. It is anticipated that more than 10,000 target school children will utilize the Closets before the end of 2019.

Funding: A grant award from Framingham State University would support the 2019 expansion of Catie's Closet in-school program. The cost of each closet is \$10,000 as detailed in our program description. It is a

one-time investment generating years of ongoing support through the lifetime of the school. This makes the project a highly productive life changing opportunity for thousands of students each year. A gift that keeps on giving. Your investment is also sustainable as we leverage free space in schools, free active contributing volunteers and free donations from each community.

All closet expansion funding has been utilized to build new closets in schools. We have a perpetual waiting list and generate funding via grants, corporate donors and individual donations.

## **Collaboration/Partnerships**

Key partners listed in chronological order:

*Schools:*

- Lowell Public schools - Lowell High was the site of the first closet. The collaborative process, staff training, and closet installation template were developed with the school administration, teachers and student representatives.
- Boston Public Schools District Office – Catie’s Closet (CC) has an exclusive partnership with the Boston Public Schools. BPS approached CC and requested Closets in each of its 125 schools, prioritizing those schools with the highest Opportunity Index. CC currently operates 22 closets and we have a 5-year plan to open closets in 100 schools by 2021.
- Lawrence Public Schools & Director of Community, Family, and Student Engagement – coordinating installation in three new schools.
- Springfield Public School– Open two new schools

*Social Service Agencies:* Although specific cities are listed, each organization serves many communities in their areas. Coordinating resources for children in transition including: Centerboard – Haverhill; Child Services of Roxbury – Roxbury; Community Teamwork – Lowell; Department of Children and Families – Lowell & Boston; MA Department of Mental Health; Family Resource Center - Lowell and Lawrence; Healthy Families; House of Hope - Lowell; International Institute – Lowell; National Family Institute– Haverhill; Wayside Youth and Family- Lowell and all metro Boston; Youth Villages – Springfield and Lawrence.

*Non-Profit Partners:* Hope and Comfort –Needham, supplementing donations of basic necessities; Dignity Matters –Framingham, supplementing donation of basic necessities; Boys Club Girls Club of Greater Lowell – utilizes Catie’s Closet in support of their kids.

*Business Partners:* tonneson + co – Boston and Wakefield - providing free accounting services for life of organization; Nixon Peabody– Boston -providing free legal services for life of organization; Presidents and CSR Managers which engage employees as volunteers and conduct clothing drives. Examples include: Capital One; WinterWyman; NetScout; tonneson + co; Trip Advisor; InsightSquared.

*Social Media:* provides outreach to the community via our 10,000 followers who support Catie’s Closet as volunteers and hosts of clothing drives.

## **Outcomes/Successes**

Outcomes Catie’s Closet will measure impact with qualitative and quantitative measures— number of closets opened, number of student beneficiaries, number of volunteers engaged at new sites, number of corporate and other partnerships in new communities, qualitative surveys and testimonials from constituents.

At the end of the 2019/2020, Catie’s Closet will have accomplished the following.

1. Opened 25 new closets: Boston; Lawrence, and Springfield, 1. Determined by operation.
2. Met with new building principals at least once. Determined by CC appointment logs.
3. Served 15,000 new children in target schools. Determined by volunteer logs in each of the new closets.
4. Developed active partnerships with a minimum of 20 new Boston, Lawrence, Springfield

companies/organizations. Determined by meetings held (log).

5. Secured/trained a minimum of 300 new volunteers. Determined by CC records.

In addition to these quantitative measures, Catie's Closet will collect qualitative feedback by surveying school partners: staff who interact directly with students, regularly bringing them to Closets. On a recent 2018 survey, 110 responses were received from principals, social workers, nurses, guidance counselors, and teachers representing 88% of our partner schools. Results included:

95% Net Promoter Score when asked how likely it is that they would recommend Catie's Closet to a friend or colleague. This includes 95% active promoters (score 9 or 10 on a scale of 0-10) and 0% detractors.

63% bring students to their closet at least 1/per week (15% do so every day).

82% saw a significant positive impact in student self-esteem.

72% reported significant/some positive impact on student achievement

74% saw significant/ some positive impact on student class participation

*(also attached, a personal story)*

Our ongoing evaluation and assessment of our work allows us to gauge our productivity and effectiveness. Student surveys convey their desire and need for our services. School administrator surveys underscore student feedback as well as engagement improvements. Data collected from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as well as District data departments have shown an improvement in absenteeism of 29.8% and graduation rates of 21%.

### **Service Philosophy- Students/Staff/Volunteers**

Internally Catie's Closet promotes equity and inclusion in our hiring practices for paid or volunteer positions and we are a female led organization. Our goal is to ensure representation of people of color, education level, and that we have an appropriate focus on percentage of women/men in leadership positions. We seek with and work with people who believe in our philosophy of inclusion as noted below.

Catie's Closet, as an organization, was established in response to a need for acceptance in our students' school environment. A lack of equity and inclusion takes on multiple definitions in our Catie's Closet culture. It goes beyond sex and color, heritage or lifestyle. It must involve fostering a culture of compassion and open-mindedness. It begins with how we treat each other and giving every member of our team, whether paid or volunteer, a voice. Developing an environment where everyone is encouraged to contribute.

Catie's Closet incorporates equity and inclusion into our mission work by providing basic needs to any student in need regardless of race, gender or income. The criteria Catie's Closet uses to evaluate or select a new school or school district ensures students, regardless of resources, are able to access clothes and toiletries to be able to meet their potential and stay in school.

Our basis of equity is giving people what they need in order to have an equal chance at opportunities. Catie's Closet creates academic and social equity by giving students who are oppressed by the barriers of poverty the very basic essentials that are required to be as academically challenged and prepared as their peers.

Since we do not always have direct interface with our students, we rely heavily on their feedback. No one knows better than the students themselves what they need to feel included or feel compatible with their peers.

We highlight and encourage empowerment for our students by giving them the power of choice, amplifying their often-unheard voices, through choosing what makes them feel comfortable and confident. By doing this, our students are more likely to feel included by their peers, but also gives them the confidence to share their lived experiences and encourages them to go beyond what society expects of them and share their strengths and talents to become a part of the school community.

We pride ourselves in being open learners in culturally competency - understanding the abundant values and beliefs of our students and recognizing their lived experiences as being opportunities, not barriers, to their success. We take every child's needs seriously and with compassion for this reason. We pride ourselves on service, understanding that the child is the expert of their situation and that the role of our organization is to do what we can to help foster what they need to continue going to school.

### **Organization Setbacks/Challenges**

The biggest challenge we encountered was in procuring the lease in Boston. While in the 11th hour of negotiations on a space last year, the location was reallocated to the Mass Department of Mental Health. We reviewed 3 alternative potential spaces and finalized our lease in November. We are excited about the location at 63 Sprague Street in Hyde Park.

While the intent last year was to conduct all operations in the Boston distribution center, lack of one did not slow down or hamper our goals. We ramped up and met our goals utilizing the Dracut DC.

Our Boston team has received ongoing training with me and my experienced team members. They are prepared to lead the process.

While awaiting the new space, our Boston team spent 50% of their time in Boston visiting schools and engaging the community. In terms of leadership development, the team participated in 2 online webinars and attended 2 seminars/ conferences. This will be an ongoing focus for all of the Catie's Closet team.

### **Goals**

Short-term: Our aggressive expansion across the Merrimack Valley and Boston—establishing Closets in 100 public schools in three years to serve an additional 56,000 kids—will bring us closer to our ultimate goal to help students living in poverty take advantage of education so they can realize their potential and break the cycle of poverty.

Primary short term & long-term outcomes include:

- All of the economically disadvantaged children we serve will have access to basic clothing and necessities.
- Chronic absenteeism rates improve
- Students' academic success, emotional well-being, and ultimately, graduation rates improve

Long-term: As we replicate our model to cover the entire Boston Public School system, we will document the rollout process, and establish an expansion model that will be subsequently launched in three other key communities in Massachusetts: Worcester, Springfield & New Bedford. Long-term, our goal is to serve the more than 300,000 Massachusetts children living in poverty via five distribution centers strategically located across the state. And as we expand into Massachusetts, we will set the stage for national expansion by developing an affiliate program.

### **Conclusion**

A child missing school because she doesn't have enough clothes or basic necessities, such as deodorant or feminine products, is a tragedy that can have lifelong consequences. Our simple, proven approach is helping to change this. By offering low-income students' basic necessities and fashion-forward clothing that kids are proud to wear, Catie's Closet helps boost their confidence and keep them in school. And because we provide these resources right in school, eliminating bureaucracy and red tape, this intervention is fast, effective, and inexpensive.

Your support gives these children basic dignity—which empowers them in all aspects of their life. With you, we really can give all kids a more equal chance at a better life.



## **ALEXANDRA – MY STORY**

**Sometimes life can feel isolating. But, when hopelessness rears its ugly head, we need to share our stories.**

**My childhood was one most people couldn't fathom. I was six years-old when I was sexually assaulted for the first time. By nine, I was selling my mother's drugs, so I could feed myself and my three brothers. I was forced to move into foster care and carried four outfits between homes in a black trash bag. They were in poor condition and didn't match. I used the same toothbrush for years at a time. I didn't look like the other kids, so it was difficult to relate to them. Depressed and exhausted, I usually skipped school because I could not get out of bed.**

**When I was sixteen, my teacher encouraged me to visit Catie's Closet. I walked into an open room filled with the clothes that my friends and peers wore; things that I was never able to wear or own myself. That day marked the first time I felt a sense of dignity and faith that I could turn my life around. The impact that Catie's Closet made went far beyond the clothes, it gave me hope. I beat my depression by the time I graduated high school.**

**One day, a boy arrived in one of my foster homes. He was dirty and wore borrowed shoes. He carried that same black trash bag that I carried. I had to help. At 19, I adopted him and a few years later adopted a girl.**

**My transformation since my visit to Catie's Closet has been life changing. Today I am 23 and want to share my story... to tell others You are not alone.**