Orange County Rescue Mission transitioned its 61 children to distance learning with plenty of community help

Facility making the most of working with distance learning

The Orange County Rescue Mission in Tustin is in the business of building bridges.

Bridges that help families cross over from homelessness to self-sufficiency. And an education for their children is key in building a foundation for future success.
But like all children, their education is happening differently in these days of the coronavirus.

In normal times, children living with their families at the massive and multi-purpose Orange County Rescue Mission attend classes at nearby Heritage Elementary School. But currently, they are on the same distance-learning path as so many school children in the county are.

So a few rooms at the Rescue Mission have been converted into distance-learning classrooms.

The 61 resident children, most of whom are elementary age with a few middle-schoolers thrown in, wear their matching school uniforms as they do their school work in socially distanced and moveable pods equipped with tabletops and comfortable chairs. The kids have Chrome books and everything else required keeping their schooling going.

When COVID-19 shut down in-class instruction this past spring the Rescue Mission staff got moving, fast.

“We had to get creative and transfer common spaces to learning environments,” said Anna Song, chief development officer. “We had to quickly pivot toward a distance-learning model.”

The Rescue Mission is trying to make its distance-learning model as close to regular schooling as possible.
“We want them to have some sense of normalcy and routine,” Song said. “That’s why the kids wear their school uniforms although they’re doing distance learning.”

A retired credentialed teacher is on site Mondays through Fridays to lend a hand with understanding lessons and staying on track.

The O.C. Rescue Mission received plenty of help in providing for the students’ learning needs, from Heritage school and the Tustin Unified School District and from businesses such as Tangram Interiors, which provided the desk pods, and Cox Communications, which supplied technology gear and increased the Rescue Mission’s bandwidth.

The Rescue Mission receives no government funding. It relies solely on donations. Among the items it needs are shoes and socks – every parent knows how fast kids wear out and outgrow shoes and socks.

“We always need diapers,” Song said. “Our largest group here is single moms with kids.”

Concern is widespread that distance learning is not as productive as in-class learning. That’s especially a concern at the Rescue Mission.

“Children who have experienced homelessness often face academic challenges,” President Jim Palmer said, “sometimes falling behind their peers. It is our goal that the homeless children living on our campuses would not only be kept from falling behind in their education, but that they might even thrive and exceed expectations during this unprecedented time.”