

# Upward Bound House gives homeless families a new home



Upward Bound House

The Santa Monica nonprofit Upward Bound House develops apartment buildings for homeless families with children, then recruits volunteers to decorate the spaces.

## **Volunteers redesign apartments for each new family.**

By Alexandria Abramian-Mott  
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Here at [Upward Bound House](#), extreme makeovers are happening every month -- just without Ty Pennington, the cameras or the network TV budget.

The Santa Monica nonprofit, which provides housing for homeless families with children, offers an unusual volunteer opportunity: a chance to play interior decorator. Called Adopt-an-Apartment, the program grew out of a natural need, says David Snow, executive director of Upward Bound House.

"Families come to us with very few possessions," he says. "Some of them only have their cars. And when they leave, we encourage them to take everything they possibly can, so we're left with empty units."

Volunteers raise money, shop for furnishings, then decorate the apartment. They can sign up for an individual phase, but most take on all three, seeing a project from inception -- when they receive information about the incoming family's needs, interests, even color preferences -- to installation. Once a family moves in, it can stay for up to nine months.

Brady Walters, a facilities manager for Eurest Services and Google, worked with six co-workers to raise \$1,500 that they spent at Target, IKEA and Bed, Bath & Beyond. They also stocked the fridge and pantry. "That ended up being the tricky part: They liked black and red, and the carpeting is hunter green," says Walters, whose team is gearing up for another makeover this summer. "But we managed to make it work, and we really gave the bathroom this spa-like feel."

Snow says volunteers "think of the most amazing details."

"They'll put out cookbooks if a kid is an aspiring chef, or a robe and slippers for the mom, or have warm chocolate chip cookies waiting for the family when they first arrive," he says. "So when that family walks in, they feel appreciated and loved again."

The rules: No paint (not enough time or resources, given the turnover of units), no new window

treatments (blinds are already installed) and no candles (fire hazard).

Beyond that, volunteers are free to make design decisions down to the spoons, sheets, shower curtains and throw pillows. And, like professional decorators, they have to stay within a budget, \$800 to \$1,500 for everything except major kitchen appliances and beds, which the nonprofit supplies.

"All of the beds are twins and go with the families when they graduate from the program," Snow says. "We have mattresses in inventory, though never enough, so if a group or individual is able to provide mattresses, this is invaluable."

In the last six months, the waiting list for apartments has more than tripled to six months, sometimes longer. This fall Upward Bound House will open a second facility with 18 units in Culver City. But unlike the Santa Monica apartments, the new building will function as emergency shelter with a three-month limit on stays. That, says Snow, means "more turnover, and more need for apartment adopters."

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