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Dear Friend:

November 2007

In the spirit of the season in which days grow shorter, I intended to shorten this annual letter, but couldn't. There is just too much to report, too much that merits telling. In our first year since opening our Fruitvale clinic, we have much to be grateful for: the expansion of services into San Francisco and Contra Costa counties, and the success of our therapy programs that reached more than 1,600 children this year - 200 more than the year before. We are also training another remarkable group of interns to work as community psychologists and clinicians, and make our troubled world a bit less so.

Still there is much to do. Our programs are not able to reach all the children who need them, even in our own community, let alone the 75,000 foster care children in California - or the 500,000+ nationwide. ***Foster children are in fact domestic refugees - casualties of social and political conflicts, but strikingly similar to children displaced by war.*** Like other refugees, foster children are often moved without notice. Sometimes, a garbage bag of belongings accompanies them on the ride to an unknown shelter or home. Like refugees, foster children can become victims of commercial sexual exploitation, substance abuse, and further physical abuse and neglect. They suffer the emotional stress and damage caused by separation from parents and family.

While the core of our mission will always be serving more foster children, we are also committed to increasing our collective awareness about what their lives are like - and the impact of even simple interventions. A recent news article featured a woman philanthropist who buys backpacks for children in the social service system who have nowhere to put their worldly possessions. A backpack instead of a garbage bag - even that makes a difference. What follows are some of the meaningful ways that WestCoast makes a difference.

WestCoast improves the outcomes of foster children through our two-year-old STAT program. By offering this short-term stabilization and assessment program for all youth who enter foster care in Alameda County, we have helped more than 3,000 children. Most of these children were removed from their homes for reasons of neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. In addition to youth entering care for the first time, more than half the children we work with in STAT are experiencing change of placements. These youth are being sent to their second, third, fourth (or more) different homes because of difficult behavior. Over half have experienced severe abuse and neglect; a quarter have been

hospitalized for psychiatric reasons and/or previous suicidal or homicidal attempts. Our work with these children at the moment they are placed or moved ensures more appropriate placements, better diagnosis of mental health problems, identification of issues that are likely to occur, and a plan for treatment that will improve their chances of stability and security while in the foster care system.

While statistics are important, it is the individuals and the personal struggles and triumphs that emerge from our work, that move us. One boy, referred for an assessment because he was lonely, hopeless, and refusing to go to school was surprised to finally feel understood when he read a letter written for him by one of our assessors, "How did you know that about me? If anyone wants to know about me they can just read this." We often write fables or stories for our young clients to help them understand difficult things about themselves. Their responses to these stories also help us understand more about them. When one child read a story written for him about a tiger he said, "We need to fix it and write a new ending. We need to say the tiger felt sad because he didn't get to say goodbye to his friends and family and teacher, but now he is learning to deal with his anger."

In addition to helping children understand their feelings, we teach practical skills to help change their behavior. For example, when asked how he was able to get control of his temper, an eight-year-old shared what he learned in therapy: "As soon as I feel the anger, I put my hands up in front of me and say: Stop! Then I walk away and shake the anger out of my hands."

These are just glimpses into the lives of our clients - children who carry years of frustration, alienation, trauma, and abuse around with them like possessions. Our therapists help translate those feelings into something tolerable and become a consistent source of support in their world. One child writes, "As a foster kid you automatically feel like you don't belong, like nobody gets you. It affects how you think about yourself...you don't feel good about yourself." WestCoast therapists help these children build inner resources, so they can feel, as one child put it, "...like I can handle things, and the things I can't, I can talk about. Bit by bit I am getting stronger."

WestCoast is also growing stronger - and this strength is affirmed by an increased demand for our services in other communities. We will continue to grow to meet the needs of foster children and need your support in doing so. Last year WestCoast provided \$380,000 of uncompensated services to children. To take advantage of the opportunities in front of us and reach more children this coming year, we need to raise at least \$500,000.

As always, we are grateful for your support - each time we open one of your return envelopes, we are reminded that there is a whole community of support in our midst, eager to help. May each of you enjoy peace and good health in the coming year.

Stacey Katz, Psy.D.
Executive Director