**Nomination essay of 1,000 words or fewer highlighting how a program or team member has made a meaningful difference in the community.**

Cape Cod Foster Closet co-founders Sharon and Andy Palmer are former foster parents who cared for over 30 children on the Cape, providing a safe and loving home to our community's most vulnerable child population.

Recognizing the significant needs of children coming into care – often with little to no belongings – they founded the Cape Cod Foster Closet (CCFC) in 2021. Starting out of their garage, the couple collected donations of clothing and baby equipment, which were distributed to foster parents within hours of receiving a new child into their home. Within weeks, the operation outgrew their home and CCFC moved to a leased storefront boutique in Orleans. Soon, hundreds of children received clothing and essential items.

The impact of the Closet quickly led to a partnership with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Cape and Islands Area Office, our local child welfare agency. CCFC established a small closet inside of the DCF Office, which social workers can utilize during the workday. Staffed by CCFC volunteers, the DCF Closet remains organized, stocked, and functional so no child showing up at the office has to go without.

In 2025, thanks to the generosity of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Falmouth and the Martha's Vineyard Bank Charitable Foundation, we opened a store in Falmouth to better support Upper Cape families. In its first six months of operating, the Falmouth Store served over 30% of the total number of families utilizing our services. To meet this growing need, we will be expanding the hours of the Falmouth store in March 2026 to accommodate after-school and weekend shopping for families. We can now also support caregivers on Martha's Vineyard by placing items on the ferry as freight, paid for by CCFC.

In addition to supporting unrestricted foster families (who make a commitment to care for children they do not know), we have grown to serve grandparents raising their grandchildren and other kinship caregivers. Across the Cape and Islands, children deemed unsafe to remain in their home are increasingly placed with kin. In addition to the isolation and challenge of caring for a child in foster care, kinship caregivers also face unique challenges with familial relationships that can become strained through the process of caring for their loved one's child. National research shows kinship caregivers experience higher levels of stress and depression and receive minimal support in comparison to unrestricted foster families.*

CCFC's support of foster and kinship families is multifaceted. The provision of clothing, toiletries, and other essential goods is at the heart of our programs. Our

Falmouth and Orleans storefront spaces allow children and caregivers to shop for free with dignity and respect. When families aren't able to shop in person, our team of dedicated volunteers will fill online orders for the children and deliver the items to the families. Three times a year, we offer large giveaway events with brand new items, such as sneakers, bathing suits, backpacks, and winter coats. At each of these events, children and youth have the ability to make choices and select items based on their preferences. We estimate that since our founding, we have given away over 3,000 bags of clothing, as well as over 500 brand new winter coats, bathing suits, and backpacks.

Recognizing the isolation that both caregivers and children in care experience, CCFC developed a series of Family Fun Events to bring the community together. Free and hosted at partner organizations across the Cape, these events provide an opportunity for bonding and making connections with all kinds of family constellations, helping families understand that they are not alone. Past activities have included bowling, nerf battles, drumming, hip-hop dance classes, magic shows, and more.

Reflecting the commitment of our founders, we approach every child and caregiver who calls or walks through our doors with the dignity, respect, and care they deserve. While our founders remain active on the Board of Directors, they have passed on the day-to-day operations of the Closet to Executive Director, Ali Geroche, who has lived experience as a kinship caregiver and was a client of the Closet prior to leading the organization. As the Cape Cod Foster Closet celebrates five years in 2026, we are proud to be serving the Cape and Islands youth of today and the future. With our community's support, anything is possible.

*Garcia, A., O'Reilly, A., Matone, M., Kim, M., Long, J., & Rubin, D. M. (2014). The Influence of Caregiver Depression on Children in Non-relative Foster Care Versus Kinship Care Placements. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 19(3), 459–467.
*Riehl, C., & Shuman, T. (2019). Children placed in kinship care: recommended policy changes to provide adequate support for kinship families. *Children's Legal Rights*