

Volunteers prepare hygiene kits

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Kits will go to area students as school return approaches

ISAAC NIELSEN
Council Bluffs Nonpareil

Packing tape rolled across long rows of tables Wednesday morning at the Mid-America Center as volunteers worked their way down assembly lines, filling cardboard boxes one hygiene item at a time.

By the end of the week, nearly 5,500 Shine Bright kits packed in Council Bluffs are headed to students across the metropolitan area.

The annual volunteer effort, now in its sixth year, brings together hundreds of community members to assemble kits filled with full-sized hygiene products for students entering kindergarten, sixth grade and ninth grade.

The kits will be distributed to students in Omaha, Council Bluffs and Papillion La Vista public school districts — along with Jobs for America's Graduates Nebraska students — before the start of the school year.

This year's packing took place over three days at the MAC, with about 50 to 60 volunteers working each shift before the completed boxes were delivered Friday.

United Way of the Midlands President and CEO Shawna Forsberg said the program began after local school superintendents raised concerns during the pandemic about students arriving at school without basic hygiene supplies.

"It kind of started out of the pandemic, in which we had local superintendents come to us and say they were having kids come to school a little disheveled," Forsberg told The Nonpareil.

"They didn't have the hygiene items that they needed to be prepared, and that leads to kids not being as secure or confident in themselves and sometimes even bullying," Forsberg said. "They asked us to consider if we could put together kits that they could



Volunteers work on an assembly line to pack Shine Bright kits with hygiene products for metro area students at the Mid-America Center in Council Bluffs on Wednesday, July 29, 2026.

send home with the families that really needed it to be ready for the classroom."

United Way chose to focus on transition years when students enter new schools. The kits are also customized by age, gender and hair type, with school counselors helping determine what products should be included.

"We really saw this as a big gap in the community," Forsberg said. "Lots of organizations come together to get school supplies, which are so needed. But we didn't have anyone in the community who was getting the hygiene items."

About 425 volunteers participated over the course of the week, ranging from retirees to high school students and families who return each summer.

"We have amazing supporters who provide financial donations, and then we have 425 volunteers who come out to do this work,"



Volunteers work on an assembly line to pack Shine Bright kits with hygiene products for metro area students on Wednesday, July 29, 2026.

Forsberg said. "That's how United Way is best positioned. We can pull everyone together to bring their best assets to the table and make things happen for others right here in our community."

One of Wednesday's volunteers was Tim Burke, the retired president and CEO of the Omaha Public Power District, who packed kits alongside his wife, Terri, and their grandson. Although the Burkes have

supported United Way since 1982 and sponsored Shine Bright in recent years, this was their first time volunteering at the event.

"It's because of how they impact families in need and how they encompass a full breadth of services to support families in need," Burke said. "These are going to be helping kids who are in school to give them the needed hygiene to help support them in going to school like other

kids. This is really important for us to be able to give back to these kids who need help."

Burke said volunteers also heard stories from educators and organizers illustrating why the kits matter. In one case, schools found some families were sharing a single toothbrush among multiple children. Thus, multiple toothbrushes are packed into each kit.

"Educators have told us that they actually reduce bullying in the classroom because kids come with proper hygiene, with hair brushed and shampooed, bathed, clean clothes, and are therefore less likely to be bullied," he said.

The event also drew volunteers from businesses across the metro. Werner employees filled boxes during Wednesday's shift, while the company also provided trucks and warehouse space to help move and store the completed kits.

"There's nothing like giving back to the community," said Ali John, Werner's senior manager of culture, wellness and community engagement. "To be able to do it in such an organized setting where you feel like you can make an impact in a short time, it's one of my favorite events of the year."

John said she hopes students can feel the care that went into assembling each package.

"I hope kids feel like they were packaged with love," she said.

Carmen Steele, United Way's director of communications, said every kit packed this week is already designated for a student.

"There's great need across the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro, and this is one way that the community can come together and get essential items into students' hands," Steele said. "When they start school in the fall, they're going in there with confidence, ready to learn and feeling good about themselves."

Each kit costs about \$40 to assemble. United Way is still seeking donations to fully fund this year's effort, and Director of Volunteerism Carly Weld said the organization welcomes volunteers at events throughout the year.

"Our volunteers come from all across the community," Weld said. "We have families, we have community members, National Honor Society students. It's truly an event for everyone."

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