

Global Empowerment Mission (GEM) and Back to Play Assemble 1,039 Backpacks to Support Children Affected by Disasters

Volunteers prepare more than \$100,000 in child-focused emergency supplies to support disaster recovery in Venezuela, Colombia, and future emergencies.

DORAL, FL, UNITED STATES, October 13, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- [Global Empowerment Mission](#) (GEM) and its North Carolina-based Smart Partner, [Back to Play](#), brought together community volunteers and staff at GEM's Doral headquarters this October to assemble 1,039 emergency support backpacks designed to provide comfort, essential supplies, and emotional support to children affected by disasters.

The latest volunteer initiative builds on a growing partnership that has helped Back to Play provide nearly 2,000 children in crisis with backpacks in 2026. With an estimated value of \$100 per backpack, the latest packing effort represents approximately \$103,900 in child-focused emergency supplies prepared for humanitarian response efforts, including support for communities affected by recent earthquakes in Venezuela and Colombia.

The initiative also strengthens GEM's ongoing disaster preparedness efforts, ensuring that child-focused supplies can be mobilized quickly when emergencies occur.

Each backpack contains carefully selected items, including hygiene supplies, stuffed animals, blankets, books, art materials, fidget toys, reusable water bottles, flashlights, and other age-appropriate comfort and activity resources. Developed using an occupational therapy-informed approach, the backpacks are designed to provide children with familiarity, opportunities for play and self-expression, and a sense of reassurance during periods of uncertainty.

While emergency response traditionally prioritizes food, water, shelter, and medical necessities, the emotional needs of children can be equally important in the aftermath of a disaster.



Displacement, the loss of familiar surroundings, and sudden disruptions to daily life can leave young survivors struggling to understand what has happened around them.

For a child who has lost a home, a favorite toy, or a familiar routine, something as simple as a stuffed animal, a book, or a set of art supplies can provide a meaningful source of comfort.

Back to Play was founded by Faith Stearns, an occupational therapist and Certified ISR Instructor, following the devastation of Hurricane Helene in Western North Carolina. What began as a personal response to the needs of children affected by the storm has grown into a humanitarian initiative supporting young people experiencing natural disasters, illness, family instability, and other forms of adversity.



Learn More About 'Back to Play' Global Empowerment Mission Smart Partner at www.back-to-play.org

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When disaster strikes, lifesaving aid is our first priority. But recovery goes beyond food, water, and shelter, especially for children who have lost their homes, routines, and sense of security.”

Michael Capponi, President & Founder, Global Empowerment Mission (GEM)

“Back to Play began while I was explaining Hurricane Helene's devastation to my son. I thought about the children who had lost their favorite toys, blankets, and the little things that made them feel safe. I asked myself, ‘Who is helping these kids?’ and realized that person was going to be me. I wanted them to feel seen, loved, and able to find joy again,” said Stearns.

The partnership between GEM and Back to Play has supported children affected by Hurricane Helene in North Carolina, the Los Angeles wildfires, Texas Hill Country flooding, and Hurricane Melissa in Jamaica.

In June 2026, the organizations joined forces at GEM's

Doral headquarters to assemble and pre-position 500 emergency support backpacks ahead of hurricane season. Following the earthquakes in Venezuela, an additional packing initiative helped provide backpacks to more than 120 children affected by the disaster.

The latest effort expands that collaboration as GEM continues its humanitarian response

activities in Venezuela and Colombia while strengthening preparedness for future disasters.

Through GEM's international logistics and disaster response network, organizations such as Back to Play can extend their reach beyond local communities, connecting specialized humanitarian resources with families experiencing emergencies around the world.

“Collaborating with Global Empowerment Mission has allowed Back to Play to reach far more children than we could on our own. With GEM's efficiency, expertise in disaster relief, and expansive reach, it's a wonderful partnership. With their support, we can bring hope to more children in crisis and remind them they are seen, loved, and not forgotten,” said Stearns.

“When disaster strikes, our immediate priority is getting lifesaving aid to families as quickly and efficiently as possible. But recovery goes beyond food, water, and shelter, especially for children who have lost their homes, their routines, and their sense of security. Through our Smart

Partnership with 'Back to Play,' we're able to address a critical part of humanitarian response that is often overlooked. These backpacks may seem simple, but to a child experiencing unimaginable uncertainty, they can provide comfort, dignity, and a reminder that they have not been forgotten. This is what our Smart Partnership model is all about: bringing together organizations with specialized expertise to deliver meaningful impact where it's needed most,” said Michael Capponi, Founder and President of Global Empowerment Mission.

As the organizations continue their work together, the partnership demonstrates how disaster preparedness and recovery efforts can address not only immediate physical needs but also the emotional well-being of children.

AN *inside* LOOK



What's included in a backpack

Each backpack has been thoughtfully curated based on age and gender. They are broken into six groups:
3-5 girl / boy, 6-8 girl / boy, 9-12 girl / boy

Items included:

- Reusable water bottle
- toothbrush / toothpaste packed in pouch
- hand wipes
- crank flashlight
- socks
- playdoh
- fidget toy
- small ball
- coloring supplies
- age appropriate toy
- age appropriate book



Learn More About 'Back to Play' Global Empowerment Mission Smart Partner at www.backtoplay.org

For GEM and Back to Play, the mission extends beyond delivering emergency supplies. It is about helping children regain a sense of security, connection, and childhood during some of the most difficult moments of their lives.

About Global Empowerment Mission (GEM):

Global Empowerment Mission (GEM) is an international humanitarian organization specializing in disaster response, recovery, and resilience. Through strategic partnerships, global logistics capabilities, and community-based programs, GEM provides emergency assistance, essential supplies, cash assistance, and long-term recovery support to communities affected by natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

Learn more at www.globalempowermentmission.org or www.gem.org.

About Back to Play:

Back to Play is a nonprofit organization founded by occupational therapist Faith Stearns to provide comfort, play-based resources, and emotional support to children experiencing adversity. Through its emergency backpack program and community initiatives, Back to Play supports children affected by disasters, illness, family instability, and other challenging circumstances.

Learn more at www.back-to-play.org.

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