

## May - National Foster Care Month

### A Time to Renew our Commitment to Children in Foster Care

*By Cecilia Espinola, Director, Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency*

Each month, we're greeted by another headline from somewhere in America about the tragic death of an abused or neglected child. Child abuse takes the lives of three children in our country every day. In 2002, an estimated 1,400 children died as a result of abuse or neglect, according to the most recent federal government information. In Santa Cruz County, the Human Resources Agency's Family & Children's Services Division receives approximately 3000 family referrals annually for suspected child abuse or neglect. In the current fiscal year, it is projected that Santa Cruz County Child Welfare Social Workers will provide services to over 4000 children ensuring their safety and providing support to their families. While the first priority is always to maintain children safely in their own homes, when that is not possible, placement with relatives or in foster homes provides a supportive environment for children until they can be safely returned to their parents.

May is National Foster Care Month. This designation is a reminder that each year in our country about 170,000 families care for over 500,000 children whose parents can't take care of them. Foster families offer much more than the temporary shelter of four walls and a roof. They open their hearts and share their lives with children in need while their parents receive counseling, parenting education and other services to enable them to be reunited with their children. Our system is dependent on having foster home resources for children of all ages, from newborns to teens. These resource families and the social workers that support them take on one of the greatest challenges our society generates. They restore a sense of hope and stability in the lives of children whose families are in crisis. Thanks to these unsung heroes, thousands of children in foster care are reunited with their birth families or adopted into loving homes every year.

But for every child who finds a permanent family, there's another who waits too long, often bouncing through a series of foster homes and schools without adult support or guidance. Throughout the country there is a shortage of foster homes and estimates of the number of homes needed range into the millions. In a typical month, Santa Cruz County has 275 to 300 children in out-of-home placement. Approximately 100 of these children are placed with relatives. The remaining 175 to 200 children are placed in licensed foster homes or group homes. Currently, Santa Cruz County has 110 licensed foster homes, but more are critically needed. There is also a great need for foster homes able to care for teenagers and sibling groups. Unfortunately, without the anchor of a permanent home, too many children "age out" of foster care to uncertain futures. Statistics show that forty percent end up on public assistance, twenty-five percent become homeless, and an astounding one in five end up in prison. The costs to society and the wasted potential of so many young lives are enormous.

National Foster Care Month is a time for us to renew our commitment to finding safe, stable permanent families for the more than 91,000 abused and neglected children in foster care in California. And it is an opportunity to change the perception that children in

foster care are the responsibility of someone else. In Santa Cruz County in any given month, approximately 275 minor children are placed in the care of relatives or foster families. They are **our** children; their well-being is dependent on the willingness of our entire community to care for and about them. There are countless opportunities to make a difference in lives of children living in foster care. With too many headlines about innocent children falling through the cracks, people may ask in frustration, “What can we really do? Where can we start?” This month, let us resolve, as a community, to give every child in foster care a safe, stable, permanent family. These children need to know they have someone on their side. The place to start is right here and the time to start is right now. Tonight, somewhere in Santa Cruz County, a child will wait for a bedtime story. Can you help?

For more information about becoming a foster parent or other ways to make a difference for a child in foster care, contact the Human Resources Agency Family & Children’s Services Foster Care and Adoptions Program at 454-4375 or visit [www.fostercare4kids.com](http://www.fostercare4kids.com).

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