

# Foster care group offers kids love, hope

by Meta Cheryl Coffey

Abused and neglected children is an ugly topic but some beautiful people are coming forward as foster parents and making a difference.

Family Care Network is a state-licensed, non-profit foster family agency. It recruits, screens, certifies and trains foster families and places children with these families.

Certified to operate in the counties of Mono, Inyo, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and soon Kern County, the agency is one of two vehicles available to use in becoming a foster parent.

A foster family takes in a child as its own for a designated period of time, but the court maintains custody and responsibility of the child.

Children, up to age 18, are received at FCN through probation and the department of social services. Specific examples of needy children are young mothers, teens needing independent living skills, children with no family and, predominantly, abused and neglected children, according to Vince Giordano, division director at Family Care Network in Bishop.

What does it take to become a foster family? "You have to have an unconditional willingness to love even though the child may not return it," said Barbara Nolan.

Danny and Barbara Nolan of Chalfant Valley have been a foster family for three years. "You must have a strong desire for it," said Giordano, "It also takes three months to certify a family, which includes paperwork, fingerprints

for record check, interview with family and children and a check of the home and grounds. If the family is not acceptable, we give them recommendations for improvement, all of which are controlled by the Department of Social Services." When a family is certified or approved they must participate in a minimum of 36 hours of training per year.

Once the Christian-based facility receives a child they do studies in conjunction with a social worker and determine the needs of the child. At the same time FCN works with foster families on what type of child they are willing and able to work with.

After a child is placed in a foster home, the agency works with the child and family weekly. Monthly training sessions are also provided

on child care and communications. Assistance is available to these children on a 24 hour basis.

The agency also networks with many services and resources to meet the particular needs of children in placement, including educational, vocational, health and clinical needs. These children also need stability and consistency in their lives and this can only be provided by a family.

Foster families are paid by the agency \$525 a month to help cover expenses and families usually keep a foster child for a year, although it can be much longer.

Mammoth Lakes foster parents Clark and Melinda Vaughn, said "the frustration of picking up the newspaper and reading about abused and neglected children and feeling we couldn't do anything

about it made us decide to become foster parents."

They found information on the Family Care Network in their church bulletin, and were inspired to take action.

"We hope something from us will go with her through life. If we've made one difference in one little girl the frustration is lessened."

When asked whether he would do it over again, Clark Vaughn said, "Yes, without any hesitation."

Prospective foster parents should remember that their own children play a vital role in the foster family process.

"They must learn to share their home and parents," said Melinda

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Vaughn.

Training on a variety of parenting skills is available to the natural parents of foster children, with the intention that they may take their children back one day.

After a child leaves a foster family they may go back to his or her natural family.

The probation department or the Department of Social Services makes the final decision regarding a child's custody after leaving a foster family.

"It's a lot more beneficial for a child to remain in the area near school and natural family. [When a local child is sent out of the area] it's like they are being punished," said Terri O'Bryan, social worker for the Department of Social Services. According to O'Bryan, an emergency shelter is badly needed in this area to house abused and neglected children while they await foster homes. Often these children are returned to their parents with guidelines for behavior given to the parents by the courts.

Certified foster parents can also be used as emergency shelters. Frequently, short-term problems are created by such emergencies as parents being arrested or hospitalized after a car accident. Foster

parents are paid \$100 a month for an available bed, regardless of whether it is used and the bed would be used for a maximum of 30 days.

There is a pressing need for quality foster homes in this county and throughout the state. Placement caseloads have been increasing annually 12 percent to 15 percent while available beds have decreased. Many local children must be sent out of the county for placement, or be placed in inappropriate group homes for lack of a foster home.

Interest in being a foster family or referrals for placement may be made to either of the two Family Care Network offices. In Bishop call Giordano at (619) 873-8146.

Interested families should know that Family Care Network is not the only route to take for becoming a foster parent. A family can apply for certification on their own by writing to the State Department of Licensing, Riverside District Office, 3600 Lime St., Suite 625, Riverside, CA 92501 or call (714) 782-4200. Once approved the licensing agent maintains contact with the Department of Social Services concerning foster family availability.