

Philanthropy & Nonprofits

Building a community 'Network' for kids

BY EMILY RANCER
Staff Writer

About 60 percent of foster children end up homeless within two years of turning 18, according to Jim Roberts, chief executive officer of Family Care Network. To avoid that outcome, The San Luis Obispo-based nonprofit aims to provide more support to stop that trend, and it helps about 2,000 children every year within San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties.

With 17 different programs, Roberts said, "Everything is designed to keep kids at home, in communities and in families." These "different flavors" of programs, Roberts said, include therapy foster care, emergency shelter care, transitional life-skills programs and more.

Roberts founded Family Care Network 21 years ago, and the nonprofit has since grown to a paid staff of 160, a volunteer group of 400 and an annual income of about \$12.5 million.

But Family Care Network doesn't just offer support to children within the foster care system – it also helps them when they get out. For those who reach age 18, they are essentially told by the system, "Here's the door, have a nice life," Roberts said.

Family Care Network

Location: San Luis Obispo **Director:** Jim Roberts

2007 Income: \$8.27M

www.fcni.org

Description: Offers family-centered programs to keep kids in healthy homes.

Local

Family Care Network runs a transitional youth center in Goleta called la Mirada and a similar center in San Luis Obispo that teach life skills such as personal finance and tips for job interviews to nearly 30 young adults.

And what better mentors for troubled or foster youth than college students? Every year Family Care Network hires between 40 and 50 unpaid interns from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, to help with all facets of the organization.

"Let's say there's a sociology or psychology major and they're exploring what direction they may want to go in as a career. We will put them through our training of programs and then we'll be able to match them up with certain clients," Roberts said. "They may work with a clinical social worker and may be involved in supervised activities or recreational activities. They may actually go out to a home

and [take care of] a foster child."

Roberts said many of his current staff started as interns. With more programs now in Santa Barbara, Roberts said his nonprofit is also looking to the University of California, Santa Barbara, for more interns in that area too.

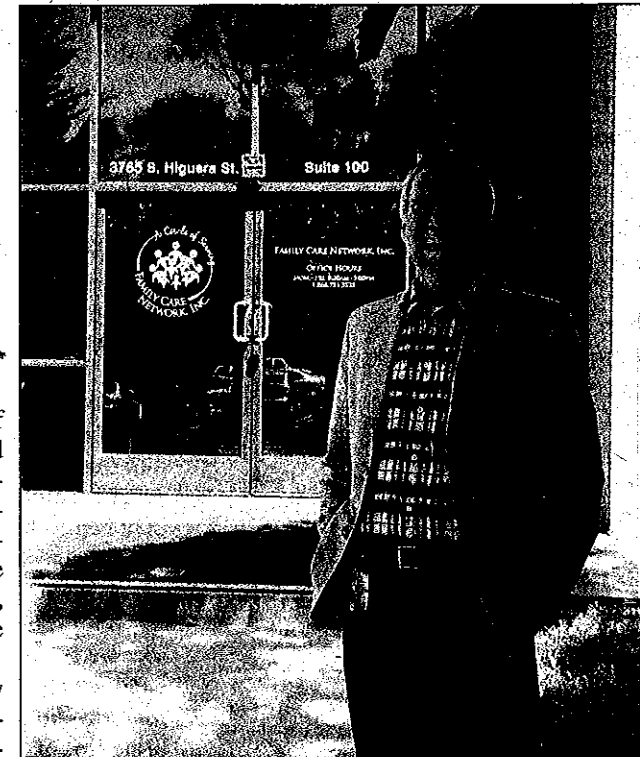
"I like to see Family Care Network as a conduit for pulling the community in to work with the most needy families in the area," Roberts said.

He said that before his nonprofit was founded, the Central Coast lacked such intense support for at-risk children. Roberts added that some of the organization's most serious work is with

children who have "intensive needs" or children with mental health problems, aggression, suicidal thoughts or who are generally difficult to manage – "kids in

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to really, really help and have really good outcomes."



LORA WEREB PHOTO

CEO Jim Roberts founded Family Care Network 21 years ago in San Luis Obispo. The nonprofit helps 2,000 kids every year.

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the past where they would have said, 'Stick them in a group home,'" Roberts said.

Because of Family Care Network's efforts, he said the number of children placed in homes has dropped 70 percent in San Luis Obispo County within the last 10 years. "So instead of having 160 kids in group homes out of the county, it's now less than 30 or 40," Roberts said.

Although most of its funding comes from county contracts and grants, Family Care Network hosts two annual fundraisers to gain community support: Miracle Miles for Kids, which is a 10-kilometer walk/run from Morro Rock to Cayucus Pier, and Taste of the Central Coast, which is a more traditional dinner auction.

Despite having grown the nonprofit so significantly throughout the Central Coast, Roberts said he doesn't have any plans to expand beyond the two counties anytime soon.

"I don't have a 'bigger is better' mentality," he said. "We want to do what we do really, really well and have really good outcomes."