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### FOSTER CARE

By Bill Cirone, Contributing Writer

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#### **Foster Care: Making a difference in the life of a child**

We know the goal: All children should have a healthy and safe childhood, nurturing parents, and a loving home. Sadly, for too many children in our community, the harsh reality is that their current home is no longer healthy and safe, and they are in need of emergency or long-term foster care.

In fact, Santa Barbara County is in a foster care crisis. Right now, more than 400 children are separated from their families as a result of physical and mental illness, incarceration, abuse, neglect, or abandonment, according to Rena Smith, a social worker with Family Care Network, Inc.

These children, ranging in age from newborns to those who are 18, may be placed in out-of-home care for as little as 24 hours or may wait in foster care settings for months or years until a more permanent home is available.

This means these children must leave their neighborhood, schools, counselors, supportive adults, and peers when the only home available is many miles away in another community. When there are no families here to open their doors to them, it becomes extremely challenging to maintain sibling relationships and work towards reuniting with family.

It is hard to imagine the difficulty and trauma of being taken from a home and then moved away from everything that is familiar and comfortable.

As these children wait in shelters for a more permanent place to live, they are in dire need of local foster families to provide a safe and loving home, for caring and committed adults to nurture them and provide hope for a brighter future. They desperately need individuals and families willing to make a difference in the life of a child.

As Smith of the Family Care Network stated, we all have an opportunity to become an ambassador of hope by sharing our understanding of the need in our community, by taking action through our time, creative energy, and resources, or by opening our home to a child in need.

My office's Foster Youth Services program is pleased to work closely with the Family Care Network, a private, nonprofit children and families services provider serving foster and high-needs children and families living on the Central Coast. In the agency's 20-year history, it has grown to serve more than 2,000 children, youth, and families annually in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties.

Family Care Network currently serves more than 100 children and youth per month in northern Santa Barbara County through Therapeutic Foster Care, Emergency Shelter Care, and Transitional Housing services. With support from the Santa Barbara County Education Office, Family Care Network also provides academic tutoring and support for the students and families they serve.

Last year, in response to the severely increased number of children and youth needing foster care in the county, the agency was awarded a grant to expand these services into southern Santa Barbara County.

Anyone interested in learning more about the Family Care Network or about how to become a foster parent, can go to <http://www.fcni.org>, call Rena Smith at 845-5763, or email her at [rsmith@fcni.org](mailto:rsmith@fcni.org). Information about the County Education Office's foster youth programs is available from Gloria Sanchez Arreola at 964-4710, ext. 4416.

As Anne Frank stated, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

*Bill Cirone is Santa Barbara County's superintendent of schools.*

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