

# Foster homes can change lives

**T**he simple fact is that foster youth in our county need a great deal more support than they receive. These students already face tremendous challenges as a result of separation from their biological parents. They deserve a safe and nurturing place to call home.

The Family Care Network, a private, non-profit family-based alternative to the institutionalization of children, has been unable to serve some 75 young people who were referred for placement since the beginning of 2010, due to a shortage of foster families and host homes.

When there are not enough stable and nurturing foster homes available within Santa Barbara County, many children requiring out-of-home care are sent outside our area, further away from family, friends, support networks, and familiar surroundings.

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.

At the other end of the process, nearly one third of Santa Barbara County's foster youth become homeless within six months of their emancipation from care at age 18. Think about that.

While programs designed to prepare these young people for successful independence are very effective,

they do not have the capacity to meet the rising demand. Additional host homes are needed, in exchange for monthly rent.

My office's Transitional Youth Services, which serves homeless and foster youth, works closely with The Family Care Network to meet the needs of these students.



**Bill  
Cirone**

## Guest Commentary

The population served through The Family Care Network's Transitional Housing programs, for foster and former foster youth ages 16-24, is particularly vulnerable. It is a group identified federally and statewide as the most at-risk and the most in need of Human Health Services.

The statistics are daunting. According to a summary of multiple studies released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation:

- 46 percent of former foster youth fail to complete high school;
- 51 percent find themselves unemployed within four years after leaving foster care;
- less than 2 percent of former foster youth complete college;
- 65 percent of California's prison population have spent some time in foster care; and
- 40 percent of those living in state homeless shelters are former foster youth.

From 2002 to 2007, the number of foster children in need of services in Santa Barbara County increased by 81 percent, which will result in an increased number of those "aging out" of the system.

The goal of The Family Care Network's Transitional Housing Programs is "to help former foster youth successfully transition to permanency, self-sufficiency and adult independence."

In addition to providing safe, affordable housing, The Family Care Network provides youth with individualized life skills development, case management, counseling, and

job readiness training.

With the personalized guidance of staff, each youth sets goals based on their particular needs, with a focus on the areas of planning and organization, educational advancement, employment, community supports, living spaces, finances and savings, and health and safety.

Former foster youth need a place to live while receiving these services, and host homes are badly needed for that purpose. Host homes consist of families or individuals willing to open a room in their home to a former foster youth enrolled in Family Care Network's Transitional Housing Program in exchange for monthly rent and staff support as needed.

The results of these programs are well documented. Two years ago, a survey of 458 youth in the Transitional Housing Plus Program found a 19 percent gain in employment, a 13 percent increase in hourly wage and a nearly 100 percent improvement in education, health, and housing stability among those taking part.

A study last year spearheaded by Professor Mark Courtney at the University of Washington demonstrated that every dollar invested in former foster youth ages 18 to 21, resulted in a return to society of \$2.40 based on improved education, employability, and a reduction in the demand for public services.

Host families enable these programs to bear fruit and truly change the lives of youth who have already faced enormous challenges in their young lives.

Anyone interested in learning more about The Family Care Network or about how to become a foster parent, can go to [www.fcni.org](http://www.fcni.org), or call (866) 781-3535.

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

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