



COVER STORY

Finding a place called home: A revamped Santa Barbara County campaign aims for more placements of foster youth

BY SHELLY CONE

Editors note: Dylan's name has been changed to protect his privacy.

Little black rain boots sit on the back patio of the home of Matt and Michael Pennon. Dylan, 3, flies across the room, slips his feet into them, and begins to stomp around the expansive yard. He explains that he helps collect chicken eggs and that he doesn't like the rooster. As if sensing this, the rooster at that moment struts over to the fence causing Dylan to turn and become intrigued with a random feather dropped by one of their two swans.

Like Christopher Robin of the A.A. Milne Winnie-the-Pooh series, Dylan gets to spend a lot of time exploring. In addition to the chickens and swans, he has goats, ducks, German shepards, a turtle in his room, and a sleek, gray, hairless cat as pets. There's also a small pond, a swing that dangles from a shady tree, and a greenhouse with veggies growing in neat rows inside. For a small boy, it's a safe paradise in which to learn about nature, and he's become accustomed to it. But his life was once full of uncertainty and fear. Then the Pennons took him in as foster parents, and are now in the process of adoption.

While Dylan's story has a happy ending, the majority of foster children aren't as fortunate.

Implementing change

Statistics show that foster kids who grow up in a group home environment don't fare as well as those in a home of their own. According to a fact sheet on AB 403 ([Foster Youth: Continuum of Care Reform](#)) from the state Department of Social Services, foster youth who live in congregate care or group home placements are more likely than those who live with families to suffer a variety of negative short- and long-term outcomes, like lifelong institutionalized behaviors, an increase likelihood of being involved with the juvenile justice system and the adult correctional system, and low educational attainment levels.

Dylan was in a group home placement before the Pennons took him in, and before that, he wasn't in a good situation at home. The Pennons said Dylan was a much different boy when he first came to live with them. Matt said that he was a little more reserved, having been in a shelter home for a month or so living with a bunch of other people.

"When he first got here I was telling him, 'This is your home, this is your room, we're your dads, you're not going anywhere, we're not going anywhere.' And just letting all that kind of soak in," Matt said.

It didn't take long for him to flourish in his new, permanent environment.

"It's fun to see a child going from a situation where they're just trying to survive and they get to go into a situation where there's love and consistency and repetition and support and then they actually start to thrive. He has become this funny, happy little kid that is so incredibly intelligent," Matt said.

It's those kinds of transformations that prompted new legislation addressing the well-being of children in the foster care system.

The Continuum of Care Reform, a comprehensive framework that supports children, youth, and families across placement settings—which can include anything from a child being placed with relatives, to group care—in achieving permanency. The reform authored by Assemblyman Mark Stone (D-Monterey Bay), includes:

- Increased engagement with children, youth, and families;
- Increased capacity for home-based family care;
- Limited use of congregate care;
- Systemic and infrastructure changes: rates, training, accreditation, accountability and performance, and mental health services.

According to Stone's legislative and communications director, Arianna Smith, who also worked on the bill, Stone served as chairman of the Assembly Human Services Committee for two years, which addressed issues related to foster care and is currently the chair of the Assembly Judiciary Committee, which deals with dependency courts. Prior to that, he was a Santa Cruz County supervisor, where he led an overhaul of the child welfare system.

"Negative outcomes for foster youth and former foster youth is one of the main issues that he wanted to work on when he came to the Assembly, and in addition to AB 403, he has authored a variety of bills to help improve their educational outcomes, access special benefits, and have better placement outcomes," Smith said.

The bill was sponsored by the state Department of Social Services, which developed a report that recommended how to address the negative outcomes of many foster youth. One such recommendation that was included in the bill was to in essence phase out group homes.

That means that counties need to increase the number of placements of children into quality resource parent homes. That's a tough task for a county that was already facing a need for homes.

Amy Krueger, division chief of operations for Adult and Children's Services with the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services gave the *Sun* the following statistics about foster care in Santa Barbara County:

- There are currently 425 children in foster care from Santa Barbara County who need loving supportive homes; the majority of children are from North County (14 percent Santa Barbara/South County, 16 percent Lompoc/mid county, 40 percent Santa Maria/North County).

- Approximately 30 percent (125) of children in foster care from Santa Barbara County are currently placed in another county. Some of these children are placed with relatives, but the majority are placed out of county due to the shortage of available in-county placements.
- Approximately 40 children and youth are placed in residential facilities because there are currently not enough family-based placements available to meet their needs. Continuum of Care Reform requires that the county bring these children back to the community.

Social workers with the county's Child Welfare Services department first look at relative placements. This may be a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, or other relative of the child. That's the best-case scenario when a child needs to be placed out of their biological parents' home.

But sometimes relatives can't or don't want to take in the child. Other times there are no living relatives or no relatives who can be found. So when the county's department of Child Welfare Services has to find placement for a child or sibling group, they sometimes send those children to a group home. And when a resource family or group home can't be found locally, the county will sometimes have to refer the child to a group home outside of the county, making an already traumatic situation even more emotionally difficult.

"They are disconnected from their community, family, friends. Some of these placements are for positive reasons like they are placed with family. But for a lot of kids it's because we don't have an alternate in-county placement," Krueger said.

Reaching out to families

Countywide, the number of resource families has declined. "There's never been enough, and that's not unique to our county," Krueger said. "The numbers have been on a decline in our county for the last 10 years for a variety of reasons. For instance, in south Santa Barbara if someone has an extra room in their house they can make money by renting out a room in their house instead of using the room for housing a child."

More often though, people aren't aware of the need, Krueger said. And others are simply misinformed about foster care.

To create awareness of the county's need and to meet its placement needs, Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services launched a recruitment campaign called Our County Our Kids. The initiative includes everything from a new logo, website, and inspiring visual components such as commercials, video, and print advertisements, to programs designed to provide accurate information about foster care. The goal is to get information to families who may be qualified to become resource families. At the same time, while recruitment is a big part of the campaign, so is assuring that Santa Barbara County foster children get the services and support they need.

Another component to the campaign is the development of partnerships with local leadership, community stakeholders, and other family- and youth-oriented organizations. The 1.1.1 program is one such example. In this program the 1.1.1. stands for one church coming around one family with one purpose, that no child is without a family, according to the [Our County Our Kids website](#). That part of the campaign is based on a belief that churches are natural safety networks that help support families who feel called to become resource parents, and churches help families become successful resource families.

Krueger said the Our County Our Kids campaign is important because the county has noticed that some families sometimes have reservations about opening up their homes because it's such an unknown territory for them. She said part of the campaign is to share the amazing stories they get from current resource families.

What it takes

Even though Northern Santa Barbara County needs resource families, it still takes a certain type of person to be a foster care family.

Jose and Sylvia Gonzalez became a resource family when they took their grandchildren through the foster program. "My daughter took a 360 and everything worked out perfectly and my way of giving something back was to take these kids in," Jose Gonzalez said.

He and his wife went through classes to foster non-relatives and were asked to take in a sibling group. The Gonzalez family knew the siblings were hard to place, because it's more common for resource families to want to take in one child rather than a group of siblings, but they believed they should be kept together so they took them in. Gonzalez admitted that it wasn't easy. The children—age 3, 4, and 6—came from a life very different from the one his family leads.

"The kids just need a lot of loving; they didn't have standards. But with love you can do a lot of things to change bad behaviors," he said.

With love and dedication, the Gonzalez family established discipline and routine. For example, Jose said that at one point the children didn't even want to bathe. They now come in from outside and line up to get in the shower without being told.

"These kids they get mentally abused, they get their hearts broken. You got to just give them your all," Gonzalez said.

While the Gonzalezes became foster parents in order to provide a loving but temporary home to children awaiting reunification with their biological parents, the Pennons knew they wanted to foster to adopt. With both Matt and Michael coming from big families, they knew they wanted a big family themselves. And though the process of becoming a resource family was easy enough, becoming an actual family took some effort. But they, like Jose Gonzalez, added that the rewards are worth the effort.

Last year the Pennons had five placements. The first was an 8-month-old girl with whom they remain involved and visit with several times a week. The girl was reunified with her mother, and both families remain close, Matt said.

For families wanting to adopt, having the child leave can be difficult, but the Pennons said they always keep in mind that the best placement is for the child to be with their biological parent.

Fostering a child when you want to adopt and having them be reunified is hard. "You invest your full emotion, you invest your full time, it's definitely difficult," Michael said.

Having the support of their families and the county social workers has made the process easier.

The Pennons are looking to adopt another child and continue to get calls for placement. In fact, they recently got four calls from the county asking if they could take in children, so they know there's a need.

There are several other ways for people to get involved. Interested parties can just foster, foster to adopt or even simply mentor a child. Foster families can also choose specific age groups they feel most comfortable working with, though teens and older children are most in need of placement and mentoring, according to Krueger.

"I think a lot of people get scared because they don't know what the process is and that there are different levels to get involved," Matt said. "It's an intense process but it's very rewarding."

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