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SB County launches new effort to find foster parents

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In Santa Barbara County, more than 425 children are awaiting foster homes — and the number grows every day.

Frustrated at the lack of response from potential foster parents via traditional recruitment means, and seeking innovative ways to drive home the message of the needed care, the county Department of Social Services has launched a campaign called "Our County Our Kids."

"With the launch of this campaign and new, relatable brand, SBC will spark interest in families to open their homes and welcome these youth as if they were their own," explains Amy Krueger, division chief of Operations for the county Department of Social Services Adult and Children's Services. "We are so excited to see Our County Our Kids come to life, and we know that this initiative is just what the county needed to raise awareness about the needs of children and youth in foster care."

Rather than using the term "foster care" or "foster parent," the new term in California is "resource family," according to the program's website. The term applies to caregivers who provide out-of-home care for children; the caregivers can be individuals, couples or families. They can also be related to the child, or have a mentoring relationship, or have no previous relationship.

Please see **FOSTER** on **A9**

'We all must do more to help our youth find caring families and homes'

FOSTER

Continued from Page A1

Children within the Juvenile Court and Child Welfare Services system may be in need of a resource parent or family due to abuse, abandonment, neglect and/or because of an incapacitated caretaker or parent.

The effort kicked off Saturday in honor of Foster Care Month. A panel at the Faulkner Gallery included former foster youth, current resource families and others in a discussion of the current state of foster care.

"Our county's foster children are among the most vulnerable members of our population and we need to care for them," said Assemblyman Williams, D-Santa Barbara, a supporter of the awareness campaign, in a statement. "Our amazing resource families help change lives every day and we all must do more to help our youth find caring families and homes in Santa Barbara County and our surrounding communities."

The aim is to find more people interested in supporting the county's needy youth by fostering, mentoring or adopting.

"It's important to understand why recruitment campaigns like Our County Our Kids are launched," Ms. Krueger explained. "We have noticed that families sometimes have reservations about opening

up their homes because it's truly unknown territory for them. We want to share the amazing and heartwarming feedback we often hear from our resource families about how rewarding it is when they make the decision to support a child through some very challenging circumstances."

The initiative includes a comprehensive campaign, a new logo, a specialized website, commercials and print advertisements.

"Each element of the program focuses on recruiting families who can meet the needs of the children, youth and teens who need to be part of a supportive household while separated from their parents and homes of origin," DSS officials said. "While recruitment is the main focus, Our County Our Kids will also work to ensure that the 425 children and youth in foster care across Santa Barbara County receive the services and support they need to develop to their full potential."

Ms. Krueger said a key component of the Our County Our Kids program is the "development of partnerships with local leadership, community stakeholders, and other family and youth oriented organizations. These partnerships will help to build and enhance awareness and relationships with the many distinct communities throughout Santa Barbara County."

Last December, the Department

of Social Services received about \$200,000 in state funds earmarked for foster parent recruitment, retention and support. The funds were part of the state budget act and the state Continuum of Care Reform initiative, according to department officials.

Of the funds to the county, about 35 percent, or almost \$70,000, is being used to support "Our County Our Kids," program officials said. The rest of the money is being used for the Resource Family program, which includes training, mentoring, community resource support, child care and more.

A comprehensive website, includes information about county-wide training programs; fostering children with severe emotional issues and foster children between the ages of 18 and 21 in "extended foster care."

The site also includes information for faith communities interested in helping a family foster a child; or how to find respite care, as well as how to become a Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA, to work within the court system to advocate on behalf of a child in the foster care system.

The website is at www.ourcountyourkids.org/sbc

email: news@newspress.com