



School Scene

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Our County Our Kids works to improve the foster system despite severe lack of resources

BY KASEY BUBNASH

There are more than 400 kids rotating through the foster system each month in Santa Barbara County, but only about 175 families are accepting children. In an effort to tackle this issue, Our County Our Kids—a division of the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services—will watch as the Righetti Warriors take on the Dos Pueblos Chargers at the Righetti High School football game on Sept. 8.

Matt Pennon, a community recruiter and trainer with Our County Our Kids, said the game will chiefly be used to teach families and community members about the foster program. Anyone attending the game can learn more about fostering, adopting, mentoring, and other ways to support local foster youth at the Our County Our Kids booth.

Pennon said the game will also act as a reminder to the community that not all kids have parents in the stands to cheer them on.

“For us, this is just kind of getting in the community and being in a place where we can let parents know that we have this need and that there are probably kids here that have this need,” Pennon said.

While a majority of the county’s foster children are from Santa Maria, Pennon said most fostering families, also commonly called resource families, are located in Santa Barbara. This inequity poses a threat to the program’s goal of limiting the trauma foster children experience by placing them with a resource family in their original school district.

For many foster children, Pennon said school can be a place of consistency and safety. Schools are where many of those children, before entering the foster system, received their only meals of the day. Without enough resource homes in Santa Maria and Lompoc, many kids are sent to different cities and schools.

Many foster kids are even placed in homes outside of the county, Pennon said.

“A lot of people have thought about fostering or really talked about it, but taking them to the next level is what we’re working on,” Pennon said. “A lot of people just don’t know, and we want people to know. So we’re at churches and schools, any public community event, we’re there.”



OUR COUNTY OUR KIDS

Our County Our Kids offers various services for resource families, including training, education, and support. The program works to place children involved with the juvenile court and Child Welfare Services systems into healthy homes.

The task is a difficult one, especially with a total lack of funding. After the Department of Social Services suffered a deficit of nearly \$20 million recently, jobs and funds were cut, according to Gustavo Prado, business specialist with the Department of Social Services. Pennon said he and his supervisor, Prado, are the only employees at Our County Our Kids, and the pair completes the level of work once done by nine people.

"It's intense, but you would be surprised what we can accomplish," Pennon said.

The Department of Social Services works with kids ages 21 and under. Pennon, a foster parent himself, said the system's end goal is to find permanent, safe homes for foster kids. People interested in fostering, adopting, or mentoring local children can call Our County Our Kids at 347-7127.

"It's so important that we step up and wrap around our children to help them out," Pennon said. "These kids don't have a choice about the situation they were born into."

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