

Local businesses can contribute to foster children's growth

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A program of the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services called "Our County. Our Kids." is giving local businesses the opportunity to help improve quality of life for foster children and their resource families, according to a press release.

The program is heading up a June 23 event when three groups will visit businesses in Santa Barbara and Goleta, Lompoc, and Santa Maria, raising awareness and encouraging participation in the Inspire Business Program.

Local businesses can help provide opportunities for children in foster care and their resource families to enjoy being out in the community, such as eating out or participating in extracurricular activities.

Matt Pennon, resource family recruiter and trainer for Our County. Our Kids., and a past resource parent himself, said that while resource families get reimbursement, the families are taking on a lot more than before when they accept a child.

"It's a unique population that doesn't get light shined on what they do," Mr. Pennon said.

Foster children don't have things that most of us take for granted, he said. The program is aimed at helping families give their foster children a normal childhood that provides stability and helps them grow into strong adults.

Mr. Pennon said sports and academics help develop us as individuals, and what we do in younger years provides a foundation for children to become amazing individuals and amazing contributors to society.

"Socialization is a key component — getting them out in the community, letting them develop friendships and network, and helping them with self esteem."

Local businesses can participate by, among other options, giving discounts to resource families, or jobs or internships to the children.

Mr. Pennon said there is no cost to partnering and the business gets to decide what it wants to offer. The program is designed to meet the needs of every business,

"Allowing them to support the children in care in whatever way works best with their business model."

Resource families often need help creating the level normality for their foster children that other children experience. Mr. Pennon said many families have one to three biological children, then take one or two more who often have traumatic history.

Helping redefine those kids' childhood is "what Inspire is meant to do."

The children are in care because there was a safety concern, and Inspire wants to keep the negative past from defining their childhood, instead giving them one that many children take for granted, Mr. Pennon said.

In addition to running a good business and making a profit, Mr. Pennon, who used to work in the private business sector, said, "there's a component of giving back to the community, especially serving a portion of the community in a way that hasn't happened before."

Individuals can also contribute to Inspire's mission by participating in Fan Out on June 23, raising awareness, and even by considering become a resource parent. To learn more, visit ourcountyourkids.org or email Mr. Pennon at M.Pennon@OurCountyOurKids.org.

<http://www.newspress.com/Top/Article/article.jsp?Section=LOCAL&ID=568128357640830992>