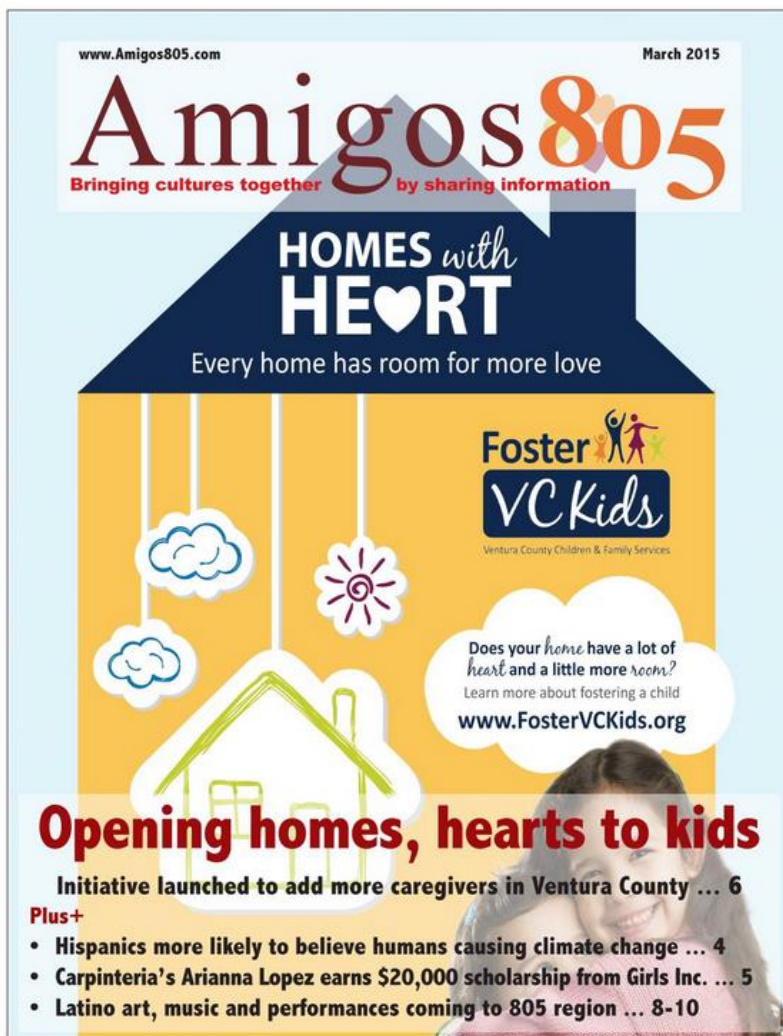


Amigos805

Bringing cultures together by sharing information

March cover story: Opening their hearts, home to foster children



Foster VC Kids seeks to double amount of foster caregivers in Ventura County

By Frank X. Moraga / Amigos805

While National Foster Care Awareness Month actually falls in May, Elizabeth Thasiah wants to raise that awareness immediately because of the urgent need for foster care families in Ventura County.

“We just can’t wait. The need is so important and so we don’t want to delay. For us, every day is Foster Care Awareness Month,” said Thasiah, foster home recruitment, development and support program manager for the County of Ventura Children and Family Services.

There are about 500 caregivers available through five active

foster care agencies in the county to provide for about 1,000 children in need of foster families, she said.

For that reason, Foster VC Kids, a division of Children and Family Services, has just launched its “Homes with Heart” initiative to expand its network of caregivers.

“We hope people will stop for a moment and think about setting another place at the table for children who need encouragement in school, when they’re sad or afraid and need daily affection,” Thasiah said. “Every child needs a home with heart.”

Raising awareness is vital, she said.

“It’s a silent crisis. We have a lot of things that the public is aware of but foster care is not one of them,” Thasiah said.

As part of the initiative, Foster VC Kids is presenting a series of informational meetings, promoting its new website – www.fostervckids.org – and expanding its outreach efforts to the faith-based and Hispanic communities. The goal is to double the number of active caregivers in the county, she said.

In addition to the 1,000 children in child welfare, there are also 200 children who are being cared for by relatives, Thasiah said.

The number of children in child welfare has grown in recent years, with factors including general neglect of the children due to drug or alcohol abuse and a very small percentage for sexual abuse (less than 1 percent), she said.

The recent economic downturn also may be a possible factor.

“While we don’t have the evidence to say when people lose their jobs it affects the stress in the family and leads to alcohol and drug abuse,” Thasiah said it does play a role.

While the economy has rebounded, “It takes a long time to catch up. When a community is devastated, it’s not a quick turnaround,” she said.

The primary goal of the program is to ensure family reunification by promoting a normalized life for the children and providing increased family support.

Until that becomes possible, foster care provides that safety net to protect children who are removed from homes.

Ideally, it’s best to relocate the child within the same neighborhood so they won’t miss any school time.

“Every time children move from their schools they lose about three months of education,” Thasiah said. “It’s devastating for children to be pulled out of schools, but it’s common practice to move them to another community.”

In rare cases, children are placed with relatives out of the county or out of the state, she said.

Additional caregivers would also help siblings to be placed in foster care together, rather than separated, she said.

If foster families are not found, children are placed in group homes, such as Casa Pacifica in Camarillo, which can handle about 100 children at a time, she said.

For those interested in becoming foster parents, one of the first places to visit is the website at www.fostervckids.org, where they can find information on times and dates of foster care informational meetings and a Frequently Asked Questions page with details on how long it takes to become a foster/adoptive parent.

To increase the number of caregivers, Foster VC Kids has been expanding its outreach efforts to the faith-based community through its “Faith in Motion” program, Thasiah said.

“We have recruiters speaking with congregations and encouraging them to start foster ministries and recruit internally.”

With Ventura County’s Hispanic population exceeding 40 percent, and a corresponding number of Hispanic children in need of foster care, growing the number of Hispanic and Spanish-speaking families is also priority, she said

“It would be nice to see 40 percent of (Hispanic) caregivers,” she said. “We have a small number of Spanish-speaking caregivers.”

Reaching out to the Hispanic community

Leading the effort in the Hispanic community is Victoria Gonzalez, community services coordinator and a foster home recruitment and support specialist for the Foster VC Kids.



She has been working with a small group of Spanish-speaking foster caregivers through a support group and is hoping to expand the group through word-of-mouth and other networking opportunities.

“It’s something that they really enjoy,” she said. “Right now we have about 15 or 16 families.”

Gonzalez provides potential caregivers, including relatives, with information about the program.

They first must take part in a 90-minute orientation class, then complete 20 hours of pre-service training where they learn everything from licensing and regulations to first aid and dealing with children who have experienced trauma, she said.

They then complete the licensing application, undergo a background check, obtain a TB clearance and go through a home inspection before they are licensed, she said.

Caregivers are reimbursed for food, shelter and other expenses, between \$670 and \$890 per month, Gonzalez said.

“On top of that, they get medical and dental coverage for the child to keep them healthy and we have other types of services to help them support the child,” she said.

Personal stories

Gonzalez is well-acquainted with foster care.

“I used to be a foster parent myself,” she said. “It’s very rewarding. You don’t have to have the perfect house, just as long as you provide a home and a commitment to the kids that you are going to be there for them.”

Gonzalez has since adopted the children.

“It’s so wonderful to give a piece of your heart to someone in need. If anything, they give us so much more in return. That is what ‘Homes with Heart’ is really about – stepping up to help others in need.”

“Homes with Heart” was officially launched Feb. 27 during a presentation at the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, Gonzalez said.



Like Foster VC Kids and share the **Homes with Heart** initiative to help us find homes with a lot of heart and a little more room!



Amanda and Sean Maxson from Ventura said becoming certified foster parents has been an enriching experience.

“As a father, there are of course some tough parts to being a foster parent, just like it is with your own biological children,” Sean Maxson stated in a media release. “But meeting the kids, letting them know that they are in a safe and loving environment and then seeing them blossom has changed our lives forever. We always reassure every child we care for that we will love them unconditionally and we will support them as they wait to go home. Some kids have never had this.”

The families attend a variety of information meetings, receive mentoring and respite care through the program.

“Going to meetings and foster parenting classes really opens up your eyes,” Amanda Maxson said. “If you’ve never seen what these kids go through, and don’t understand the urgency there is for more loving homes, the county’s meetings and classes are both educational and a great place to

start. We found there are excellent resources and support, and hope that there are others that will consider helping these innocent children and teens.”

Thasiah said some people are hesitant to become foster parents.

“We have noticed that families have their reservations to opening up their homes because it’s the unknown,” she said. “However, we hear from our foster families how rewarding it is when they help a child through this difficult time in their lives and offer hope and the knowledge that they are not alone. We have also seen examples of birth parents who express tremendous gratitude for the support they have experienced from foster families as they find stability and are reunified with their children. We encourage people to consider becoming a Home with Heart and find out more today.”

Rosalinda Vint, a former foster youth, is now a key ambassador for Woman of Substance & Men of Honor, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing support to young men and women that have been incarcerated and in the foster care system, Foster VC Kids reported.

Vint has been an advocate to help transitional-age youth (TAY) find jobs and stability.

“Being a foster child myself, I feel so passionately about helping,” she stated in the release. “No matter the abandonment, the loss of hope, or the abuse that is inflicted on a child, these kids have to know there is potential for a bright future. Being a Home with Heart, it not only can give these children stability and a sense of gratitude, but it can be exhilarating for the parents too.”

Thasiah agreed.

“All these kids want is for the caregivers to provide them with a normal life,” she said. “They can bring a lot of joy to the home. They are children with a lot of love to give. It can be joyful to be a foster parent, and the experience for the child lasts a lifetime.”

For more information

- > The next Spanish-language informational meeting will be held on Tuesday, March 3 at Ventura Missionary Church, 500 Highpoint Drive, Ventura.
- > Informational English- and Spanish-language meetings will be held from 9 to 11 a.m. Saturday, March 21 at the Human Services Agency, 855 Partridge Drive, Ventura.
- > English-language sessions will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. April 28, May 19 and June 30 at the same location.
- > Call 805-654-3220 or visit www.vchsa.org or www.fostervckids.org for more information.

<http://amigos805.com/march-cover-story-opening-their-hearts-home-to-foster-children>