

Fostering care

Local agency seeking homes for county's 1,200 foster children

By [Chris O'Neal](#) 04/23/2015

For 1,200 children seeking a foster family in Ventura County, finding a home, even temporary, is no easy feat. Only 400 volunteer family homes are available at any given time, and of those some are already hosting multiple children. Now, the Ventura County Children and Family Services under the new moniker Foster VC Kids are teaming up with local agencies to raise awareness and bring new families into the fold.

Shaun and Amanda Maxson are one of the families hosting foster children. The couple has had six different placements ranging in age from 11 months to 8 years old over the past two years in their Ventura home. The Maxsons, both in their late 20s, reference the Bible when asked why they've become a foster family.

"There's a pretty clear commandment that you have to take care of orphans," says Shaun. "Our main goal is to make them feel at home and loved and that they're in a safe spot."

The time spent for each child at the Maxson's home varies, ranging from 11 days to two years, and each has its own challenges associated with him or her.

"Most aren't coming in for abuse, most come from neglect," says Shaun. "It's hard having kids brought to your home that haven't had the care that they've needed. . . . That's a challenge, but on the other side, one of the biggest benefits is seeing them progress."

Foster VC Kids works with HOPE4Kids, a volunteer based fundraising organization, and four local agencies: Arrow Child and Family Ministries, Koinonia Family Services, Aspiranet and Casa Pacifica. While there are 400 homes able to foster children, there are several hundred additional children

who live with their relatives or families and either were never removed from home and the county's become involved, or they have already been through the system and returned home with continued monitoring, according to Tami Barnett, Foster VC Kids recruiter and HOPE4Kids founding director.

Foster VC Kids' Homes with Heart campaign is promoting a "best match" scenario for the children, which entail proximity to their original or former homes, relationships with other children and other details that would make the children's lives better. Barnett says that in order for the program to work, however, there need to be enough homes, and currently there are not.

"We need several hundred more homes; we won't stop until we reach that goal," said Barnett, who also spoke of several smaller goals, including being more active in the community and increasing the number of informational sessions for prospective families.

Barnett says that there is an urgent need for families who have experience with medically fragile children.

"[We're] looking in the education community for any foster parent that might have special training and special education and within the fire and police departments," said Barnett. "Those are always some great foster parents."

Though foster families do receive subsidies per child, Barnett says that this is rarely enough to cover normal expenses. Through HOPE4Kids, a strictly donation-based organization, families receive additional monies for everything from activities for the children like sports to basic necessities.

Former foster child and current Casa Pacifica Youth Advocate and Ambassador Erick Alvarez was placed into foster care at around 7 years of age, moving upward of 15 times from home to home as he grew. Now, at the age of 21, Alvarez has taken what he learned and applied it to a new generation of foster kids to help defeat what he calls their greatest challenge, hopelessness and helplessness.

"When you're in that state of mind, you are literally committing spiritual suicide," said Alvarez. "In order to defeat or have victory over that mentality, you have to provide hope and you have to provide help."

Alvarez says that in order to overcome these challenges, he becomes the children's shadow, doing whatever it is they do, from playing dodge ball to helping with homework. Doing so, Alvarez says, gives the children a foundation from which to build.

"The more people this kid has in his life the less hopeless he'll become," said Alvarez, who challenges families to come forward and sign up for even a few days of foster care. "It's only expressed through individuals and communicated through an interaction."

Foster VC Kids' Tami Barnett says that fostering children is easier now than ever before with the ability for families to go through the county and its four contracted agencies. Foster VC Kids will host a Homes with Heart informational meeting on Tuesday, April 28, from 6-8 p.m. at Human Services Agency, 855 Partridge Drive, Ventura. For more information, visit www.fostervckids.org.

HOPE4Kids will host its annual Run and Festival benefit on Saturday, May 2, from 8 a.m.-1 p.m. at Camarillo Community Center, 1605 E. Burnley St., Camarillo. For more information, visit www.hope4kids.myevent.com.

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