



All It Takes Is a *Heart* to *Help*

Foster Care and
Adoption in Napa County

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It's Time to Talk About *Foster Children*



Napa County has a need — and you can help fill it

by Jennifer Bonnett

Foster children need your help, and they're right here in Napa County. These are kids you know. They're the children on your son's T-ball team. The kids your daughter plays with at recess.

There are 140 foster children in Napa County, according to the most recent county figures. And they are in need of loving local homes.

"This is something that's not happening in a third-world country, but here in Napa," says Shahrukh Chishty, program director of foster care and adoption at Aldea Foster Services.

Willing families are needed to foster children, especially older youth, sibling sets and Spanish-speaking youth, according to county officials. Providing for these children could mean providing an emergency home for a short period of time, serving as a foster home until reunification with biological parents or becoming an adoptive parent.

There are other ways to help foster children, too. Mentors are needed to work with transitional youth between the ages of 18 and 21. You can also support foster children through donations and charity efforts. You could even consider hiring a foster child at your workplace.

In the end, Chishty feels more awareness is needed about the local foster care issue.

"One way to make awareness is to just talk about it."

Why it's important

If there aren't enough good homes available in Napa County, children have to leave the community, uprooting them from their schools, friends and familiar surroundings.

"Although we are a small county ... there have been many times when we have not been able to find a foster home placement within our Napa County foster homes," says Maria Sabeh, Napa County child welfare services worker.

Remaining in the community in a loving foster home leads to better outcomes for these children, including less chance of drug and alcohol use, teen pregnancy and incarceration — and those things ultimately lead to a better community, Sabeh says.

Sometimes, related family members, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles, take on a foster parent role.

"From research we know relative foster placements are generally more stable than placements with unrelated foster families. Siblings are less likely to be separated," says Doni DeBolt, director of outreach and communications with Lilliput Children's Services. "Children maintain community, cultural and family connections. Relatives are often willing to adopt or become permanent guardians when birth parent reunification is not possible."

Foster parents play an important role in providing foster children with consistent love and a stable environment. Just like any child, foster children need to go to school or visit the doctor when they get sick. They need someone to listen to them when they are sad or share joy in accomplishments. They need someone who can teach them to create healthy relationships with others so they will have a better chance at being successful adults.

BY THE NUMBERS

FOSTER CARE IN NAPA COUNTY



In July 2014, there were **140** children in foster care in Napa County.

Most children in foster care in Napa County are between the ages of **11** and **15**.

Napa County children are placed in foster care due to:



physical abuse
(4%)

neglect
(94%)

The median number of months children remain in foster care:



12.5 MONTHS

Where are children placed?



FOSTER HOME
(27%)



RECEIVING HOME
(27%)



RELATIVES
(33%)

A Chance for a Better *Future*

When 20-year-old Julio Obando entered the foster care system at age 13, he struggled to let anyone in. But after his uncle took custody of him, he learned to open up. Today, Obando is studying to be a chef.
PHOTO BY ISRAEL VALENCIA

All it took was one loving adult to put Julio on the right path

by Susan Winlow

Julio Obando has big goals and dreams for his future. Obando speaks enthusiastically about his cooking and catering classes held at the Culinary Institute of America through Napa Valley College, career goals — he just got a job as a cook on the popular Napa Valley Wine Train — and his professional admiration of British celebrity chef Marco Pierre White.

“He’s a huge inspiration to me,” Obando says. “He has a passion for what he does.”

So does Obando.

But not long ago, the now 20-year-old had no passion or future goals.

He arrived in Napa from Guatemala at age 5. At 13 he found himself in the foster care system in Napa County after his mother landed in jail. He briefly lived with the family who adopted his much younger brother, but soon he went to live with his uncle who took custody of him. He credits the loving support of that uncle with turning his life around.

But before that turnaround, embarrassment, anger, apathy, drugs and trouble at school became the norm for the boy who internalized his emotions. He grew his hair long, covering his face and eyes as if to hide from the world, he says.

His grades plummeted. In ninth and 10th grades, he got mostly F’s and was 150 credits short from graduating.

He credits the loving support of [his] uncle with turning his life around.

“To make a long story short, I didn’t care,” Obando says. Then his uncle showed him the harshness of life without an education — he took Obando to labor with him in the vineyards one summer. Obando called the experience an eye opener. The switch flipped, the non-communicative Obando opened up, accepted help and graduated on time from high school with A’s and B’s.

Success also came with help from others, including organizations such as Aldea Children and Family Services and county social workers. Obando speaks regularly with Grace Lee, his social worker with Napa County Child Welfare Services. She, as well as other social workers, helped him with such things as tutoring, counseling and researching financial resources, Obando says.

At 18, Obando qualified for extended foster care. Lee found Aldea transitional housing for Obando after a prior living

option didn’t work.

“It’s really intended to help them become independent after this program is done,” Lee says. “I want to make sure by the time he’s 21 that he has established stable housing and stable income and is connected to all the resources so he can take care of himself.”

She has no doubt about Obando’s future success.

“He’s been a very self-motivated young man,” Lee adds.

WE NEED **YOUR** HELP



Joey and Jimmy*

These brothers, aged 8 and 12, are legal orphans. Their mother had her parental rights revoked due to substance abuse struggles and they had to leave their last foster home when the parents became pregnant. Joey can do 27 pull-ups and Jimmy routinely stumps teachers with his questions.



Mark*

This 13-year-old lived with his grandmother until she died of cancer. Then he lived with his half-sister’s family, which he left after being abused, belittled and denied medication. Since last year, he’s been moved four times. Yet, he’s a wonderful kid with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Titanic and a knack for cards.



Antonio*

Raised by Spanish-speaking parents in poverty, this gay 17-year-old entered the system after protecting his mother from the attacks of his father. His two siblings have been adopted by separate families, and he still longs for a place to call home before he pursues his dreams of acting or nursing.

*Names have been changed

Billie Lara is pictured with children of her former foster children, who are now adults, at a recent family reunion. Lara has fostered more than 90 children since 1993. She says she believes she was put on earth to be a foster parent to children who need homes.

PHOTO BY MOLLY WASSENAAR



The Gifts of Being a Foster Parent

WHAT IS CONCURRENT CARE?

Some foster children return to their biological parents. Others cannot. What's important is that foster parents be willing to do whatever is best for the child — whether it's serving as a foster parent or becoming a permanent part of his or her life through adoption. **Concurrent care means foster parents have appropriate licensing and preparation to fulfill either role.**

"We don't want children lingering in foster care," says former Assistant Child Welfare Director Jennifer Marcelli. "It's important for the child to go as few places as possible, and to really connect and bond with families who can either help support them to go home or commit to them in the long run."

Although it can be hard to say goodbye to a foster child, providing a stable, nourishing environment while birth parents work toward regaining custody is in the best interest of the child. If that's not possible, a willingness to adopt means the child will have one less transition to make — because he's found a forever home with you.

Couple transforms lives by giving kids a home

by Mike Blount

When Billie Lara made a promise to her daughter's friend in 1993, she didn't know it would lead to her and her husband providing love and care for more than 90 children in the foster system. But looking back, the 62-year-old says she wouldn't have it any other way.

Lara and her husband first became foster parents to provide a home for their daughter's friend, who was living in an abusive home at the time. But a visit from a social worker convinced them that they could help even more children.

"The social worker said that she had a couple of girls who needed homes and thought that I would be perfect for them," Lara says. "She asked me, 'Would you consider it?' My husband and I talked about it and we took both of them in the next day."

Recently, Lara and several of her former foster kids, now adults, gathered for a family reunion at her home. Lara says seeing her children go on to lead happy and productive lives fills her with joy. But in the beginning, she was unsure.

"I had fears about whether I could make an impression," Lara says. "I worried that I wouldn't be able to give them what they needed or that they would even listen to me."

Lara says it's important for new foster parents to be realistic and focus on the long-term commitment before taking on the responsibility. Lara tells people who are thinking about becoming foster parents that the children might take some time to warm up to them at first.

"I think a downfall for a lot of new foster parents is that they think the child will be instantly grateful for taking them in or that the child is going to trust them as soon as they walk in the door," Lara says.

For Lara, the investment of time and love has been well worth it. Many of Lara's children have gone on to college. They keep in touch with her and let her know what they're doing. They still come to her for direction.

Lara and her husband continue to foster children to this day, including six kids they currently have living in their home. She hopes more people will discover the joy of becoming foster parents.

"There's a lot to the positive side of being a foster parent," Lara says. "They have given me more gifts than I have given them. I know why I am here on this earth, and it's for my kids. I love my kids."

"They have given me more gifts than I have given them."

Billie Lara
Foster parent

After raising three daughters, Hilda and Daniel Moreno fostered a set of siblings who needed their love. They adopted both boys.
PHOTO BY ISRAEL VALENCIA



All You Need is Love

Morenos committed to helping foster siblings

by Jennifer Bonnett

When asked why they chose to open their house to help foster children, Hilda and Daniel Moreno reflect back to their childhoods. Hilda Moreno's parents took in a girl in Mexico and raised her as their daughter until she got married. Her husband's family did the same for a young boy.

"Since I was a young girl seeing my parents take responsibility and help people out, I feel like I should just carry it on," Hilda Moreno says, through an interpreter. "I want to help people and give them the love that they need. Both of us wanted to open our homes and give children the chance our parents gave other children."

Foster families provide temporary homes until children can either be reunited with their own parents or another permanent plan such as adoption can be made. Not only do foster parents prepare to provide shelter and supervision, they accept the challenge of nurturing the children in their care by providing stability, acceptance, guidance and love.

After taking classes and becoming licensed to be foster parents, months went by with nothing. Then the Morenos got a phone call asking them to foster siblings, then ages 5 and 6.

In October 2013, the Moreno family met the boys, who moved in as foster children two weeks later. The family would end up adopting them.

In the beginning, the Morenos admit it was a bit hard having young children around again, since they had already raised three girls who were then in their late teens, but Daniel Moreno was excited to have more males in the house.

The boys had some trauma resulting from the experience of being removed from their birth parents' home. In the previous two years alone, they had been in foster care with six different families.

The family receives support from a county mental health therapist who visits the boys at school and at home to talk about their feelings and their past. Every time they needed something, the social worker was there, according to the Morenos' daughter Itzel Moreno.

Now 20, the eldest child in the family also speaks highly of Lilliput Children's Services, which helped facilitate the

adoption. She said their representatives always made sure the family had everything they needed by checking on them through phone calls and home visits.

And for Hilda Moreno, she is happy that she was able to provide more than a shelter, but a true home.

"The boys completely took my heart, and I saw ... that they needed to be part of a family and receive the love that only a mom and dad can give," she says.

"I saw the need that they needed to be part of a family and receive the love that only a mom and dad can give."

Hilda Moreno
foster parent

THE TOP 5 QUALITIES OF FOSTER PARENTS

1. Patience

Bonding with a foster child will not happen overnight, but your consistent care will eventually win them over. "It takes time," says former Assistant Child Welfare Director Jennifer Marcelli.

2. Communication

Clearly explaining the features of your home life will simplify the transition. "You have to stand strong in your role so they realize they have a parent now," she says.

3. Flexibility

Each child needs something different, and nimble thinking may be needed to find the right approach. "The best interest of the child is so dependent on their situation," she says.

4. Compassion

Foster parents must seek to step into their child's shoes, and understand the motives of his or her actions. "What you see on the outside isn't necessarily what's on the inside," she says.

5. Presence

You just have to be there and care. "The myth is you have to be a perfect parent," Marcelli says. "But it's really about having the heart, the commitment and an open home. That's all you need."

Open Your *Heart* to a Child

Here's how

The process of fostering or adopting a child can seem daunting at first. There are many things you will need to do before you're ready to become a concurrent care family — an adoptive or foster family for a child in need. But you'll get lots of support along the way. Skilled foster and adoption

professionals from Napa County Child Welfare Services, Lilliput Children's Services and Aldea Foster Care are ready to help guide you step-by-step through the process of changing a child's life forever.

1 ATTEND AN ORIENTATION

Held once a month, orientations provide an overview of the foster or adoption process. Orientation is a good opportunity for parents who are curious or considering fostering or adopting to decide if it's right for them and get answers to their questions.

The orientation covers what is expected of foster parents. Call Napa County at 707-253-4761 for information on upcoming foster orientation. To become a Lilliput foster or adoptive family, call 707-299-3909 or visit www.lilliput.org. For information on Aldea's

foster orientation, call 707-557-4560 or visit www.aldeainc.org.



2 SUBMIT AN APPLICATION

At the end of orientation, you will receive a packet of forms to fill out. Potential parents need to submit to a criminal background check. You will need to submit an application within six months of attending an orientation, or you will have to start the process over. The ap-

plication is thorough, only because county workers want to make sure they are providing the child with a trouble-free home. You'll need to get a physical and medical checkup to make sure you are able to care for the child. There will be a home check to make sure the environment

is safe and an in-home interview to make sure you have the space, time and financial requirements for fostering a child.



3 SIGN UP FOR PRIDE

The Parent Resource Information Development and Education (PRIDE) program is an eight-week course that lasts for three hours one evening each week. The extensive training helps prepare new parents for

bringing a child into their home. Some of the topics covered include how the foster system works, how the court is involved and how foster and adoptive parents can help a child overcome trauma they have experienced.



4 RECEIVE A LICENSE

Once all training, evaluations and paperwork are completed, you will receive a license. At that point a social worker will help you determine how many children can come into your home and what kind of child you might be interested in. The social worker will also explain how to obtain financial assistance and medical

coverage through Medi-Cal. You will need to go to first aid and CPR classes, which are both free. The time frame to have a child placed in your home can vary depending on the age range, ethnicity and gender of the child, but typically you may have a child placed in your home by six months from the start of the process.



5 ADOPTION

If you're looking to adopt a child, you'll also go through the Home Study Process — a much more intensive assessment of your home, family and background. Social workers interview anyone living in your home. An

additional background and psycho-social assessment is also required to ensure that you are making a long-term commitment to the child. Timeframes for adoption vary, depending on the circumstance.



Here to *Help*

Napa County Child Welfare Services, Lilliput Children's Services and Aldea Foster Care answer the most frequently asked questions

How do children enter foster care?

Children of all ages enter the system for various reasons, but most often it is abuse or neglect at home. When children come to the department's attention through family members or the police department, Napa County social workers will work alongside Aldea and Lilliput to make sure they do everything in their power to provide families with services that will prevent the need for the children to be removed from their homes. However, when this is not possible, they are placed in foster care.

What qualifications do you need to adopt or foster a child?

In order to adopt or become a foster parent, you have to be certified by a foster care agency or by the state or county. The county requires that you attend an orientation that lasts three hours and covers everything you'll need to know.

How long does the process take?

A realistic expectation for fostering a child is about four to six months before you receive them into your home. Being open about the target age and ethnicity of the child you want to foster can really expedite the process. An adoption can take much longer — sometimes several years.

Why should someone consider fostering or adopting older kids?

A lot of people think that older kids are set in their ways — that the longer they've been in the system, the more damaged they are. It's important to remember that they were removed because of what their parents had done, not for anything they did.

What are some things that foster or adoptive parents should know to set realistic expectations?

Foster parents need to make arrangements to accommodate the child's needs. There may be visits with [the biological] parents, counseling sessions or school functions. Each child has their own unique needs. Many foster parents are afraid to get attached, for fear they will have to let go. It can hurt to have to say goodbye to a foster child, and that's a good thing — it means the foster parent is doing a great job.

What kind of support is available to foster families and children in Napa County?

Napa County Child Welfare Services works with Aldea Foster Care and Lilliput Children's Services to support foster children in Napa County. Lilliput connects foster children to forever homes through adoption. Lilliput also offers Kinship Care Services, providing support to grandparents and other relative caregivers. Aldea provides individual therapy for children and families and also recently began a transitional housing program for youth remaining in foster care past the age of 18. In addition to providing shelter, this independent living program helps them learn skills to transition to living on their own, going to school or getting a job.

How can fostering or adopting change a child's life?

Kids need permanency. You can give these children stability and structure. You can support them and be there for them. Make the situation the best one possible. Even if you don't adopt, make a commitment to be there for them. You can change their lives.



Shahruxh Chishty, Jennifer Marcelli, Maria Sabeh and Brooke Derrick are part of the team of people supporting foster children and families in Napa County.

PHOTO BY ISRAEL VALENCIA

Who Can *Foster* Or *Adopt*?

The answer is nearly anyone. Guy or gal. Solo or hitched. Gay or straight. Parenting rookies or pros. Beyond that, biological relatives make great foster parents because children can remain with individuals they already are comfortable with. But even nonrelated people who already have a relationship with the child

(say a family friend or neighbor) are ideal foster candidates.

You have to be over 18 and willing to work with the child's biological parents, but you don't need to be perfect. If you can provide a safe, healthy and nurturing home, you can make an immeasurable difference in a child's life.

Emergency caregiver

After a brief approval process, an emergency caregiver provides temporary shelter when a child is removed from his or her home by Child Welfare Services.

Foster parent

A foster parent acts as a child's guardian for an extended period of time after receiving a license given by the county or state.

Adoptive parent

An adoptive parent makes a long-term commitment to a child to provide a permanent home through a court process.



A Tradition of Stewardship
A Commitment to Service

Lilliput
Children's Services

707-299-3909
www.lilliput.org

**Call Napa County
Foster Care and help
a child in need today.**

707-253-4761

ALDEA
Children & Family Services

888-99-ALDEA
www.aldeainc.org

OTHER WAYS TO SUPPORT FOSTER CHILDREN

Napa Faith-Based Initiative

Church-led effort established in 2012 to help recruit, retain and support foster parents. The initiative needs:

- Volunteers for service projects
- Facilities for events such as clothing drives (includes business space, as well, not just church facilities)
- Awareness brought through poster placement or fliers in church bulletins
- Help with respite funds to allow foster parents some time off, such as a weekend away

For more information, call Vernice Cooper, Napa County Children's Welfare Services, at 707-259-8693.

Service Groups/Businesses

Service groups, such as Soroptimists and Kiwanis, and businesses can offer support through monetary donations or by contacting these organizations:

Foster Kids Fund: Donations allow for extras such as summer camp, art and music lessons or graduation expenses. www.fosterkidsfund.org.

Expressions of Hope Inc.: Offers a variety of ways to help foster children and families. www.expressionsofhopenapa.org.

VOICES Youth Center: Various agencies help with housing, jobs, education and wellness services for those transitioning out of foster care. www.voicesyouthcenter.org/about-us.

