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## NEIGHBORS

# Loving homes needed for county's 'most vulnerable'

■ Campaign aims to encourage more families to take in foster children

By **Stephanie Sumell**  
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Camarillo resident Karen Gamboa said it's easy for some people, especially those who live in an affluent city, to turn a blind eye to children who are suffering. "We can choose, as people who in live in Ventura County, to see what we want to see," Gamboa said. "We go to the grocery store. We take our kids to school. We live very comfortable lives. But that doesn't mean their pain doesn't exist. It just means we choose not to see it."

Perhaps that is why the county has more foster children than it has families to care for them.

Foster VC Kids, a division of Ventura County's Children and Family Services, aims to change that through a campaign called Homes with Heart.

The purpose of the campaign is to encourage more individuals and families to take in foster children who need love and support. The campaign includes a website, social media outreach, events and pink fliers with handprints and stories from foster youths.

Homes with Heart also offers informational meetings on becoming a foster parent. Attendees have the opportunity to ask questions,

voice concerns and meet current and future foster parents.

The next gathering is at Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley from 6 to 8 p.m. Sat., March 21.

"We have about 1,000 children in need of foster homes in the county," said Elizabeth Thasiah, the foster home recruitment, development and support program manager for Ventura County's Children and Family Services. "Homes with Heart is a public education campaign to help county residents understand what foster care is and why the county needs loving caregivers for kids in foster care."

Thasiah said Homes with Heart seeks to recruit families from every city in the county so that children removed from their homes can avoid further trauma.

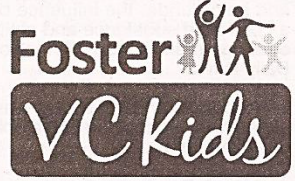
Due to a lack of available homes, she said, children are often separated from their siblings, friends, classmates and extended support network.

"These children are suffering," Thasiah said. "It is in their best interest to keep them with their siblings, keep them in their schools and keep them in their community where their extended support network is located, but we often just don't have enough homes."

She said that though most

children are reunited with their families, a foster family leaves "a mark of stability" that is lasting.

"You are making a lifelong impact on a child," she said. "They've been able to forge a trusting and stable relationship with a family."



Ventura County Children & Family Services

Part of the initiative is a program called Faith in Motion.

The program works with members of local churches, synagogues and other faith communities to recruit foster families.

Faith-based congregations are encouraged to develop support services to help foster families.

Tami Barnett, the program's coordinator, often visits congregations to provide information on foster care.

"These people are recruiting out of a sense of call and mission," Thasiah said. "The campaign begins within their communities where they internally reach out to try to help these kids."

Thasiah said the county is also

appealing to firefighters, police officers, teachers, nurses, doctors and other public servants to take in "the most vulnerable sector in Ventura County."

"These children should never be without a family at any moment," Thasiah said. "They need to be tucked in at night. They need to be read stories. They need someone to teach them how to drive cars. They need someone to ask them how their day went."

Gamboa said she and her husband, Patrick, first became interested in foster care when their friend took in an infant five years ago.

At the time, she said, they had two children of their own.

"My husband and I didn't feel we were ready to have more biological children at that time but thought this was something we could do," Gamboa said. "We felt like God was calling us, as Christians, to use our time and our talents to serve those around us."

Since then, she and her husband have taken in about 10 children at different times—two of whom they adopted.

They also consider a 21-year-old man, who aged out of foster care three years ago, to be part of their family.

The couple's experience as foster parents led them to start a ministry called Defending the Fatherless to support foster families in the community.

Gamboa said her experience as a foster parent, however challenging, has been an "immense blessing."

She said some people shy away from foster care out of fear that they will become too attached to the child—an issue, she said, that pales in comparison to the pain and suffering children feel when they are uprooted from their families due to substance

**'I can't imagine if these children, even the ones who have left our home, hadn't come into our lives.'**

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abuse, abuse or neglect.

"These children need people to get too attached," Gamboa said. "The hard part isn't for us. The hard part is for them."

Which is why, she said, people need to open their hearts and their homes to children in need.

"It's so rewarding," Gamboa said. "I can't imagine if these children, even the ones who have left our home, hadn't come into our lives."

For more information on becoming a foster parent, visit [www.fostervckids.org](http://www.fostervckids.org).

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*within last 30 days:*

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Firebird Ct	In Escrow
Westpark #401	In Escrow
Goldenridge Ct.	In Escrow
Marrisa Way	Just Sold
Anacapa Dr	Just Sold





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Homes with Heart also offers informational meetings on becoming a foster parent. Attendees have the opportunity to ask questions, voice concerns and meet current and future foster parents.

The next gathering is at the County of Human Services Agency in Ventura from 9 to 11 a.m. Sat., March 21. The meeting will be in both Spanish and English.

"We have about 1,000 children in need of foster homes in the county," said Elizabeth Thasiah, the foster home recruitment, development and support program manager for Ventura County's Children and Family Services. "Homes with Heart is a public education campaign to help county residents understand what foster care is and why the county needs loving caregivers for kids in foster care."

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