

Opinion

Opinion: How Santa Clara County can improve children's lives



Former Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge Len Edwards, right, is still working to help the county improve children's lives. (Patrick Tehan/Bay Area News Group File Photo)

By **LEN EDWARDS** and **DANA BUNNETT** |

PUBLISHED: February 25, 2018 at 7:15 am | UPDATED: February 26, 2018 at 3:35 pm

It is a common story, one I saw hundreds of times while presiding over our juvenile court. A child comes to juvenile court because she has been abused or neglected by her parents. She has not only experienced trauma in her home, she experiences it again, because she has been placed in a foster home with strangers. While those strangers may be loving and caring, they are not family, and her life has been turned upside down.

The girl who appeared before the juvenile court judge should have been placed with a relative – someone she knows. That is the law. However, in Santa Clara County that only happens about 30 percent of the time, and even that placement can take months. We know that other social service agencies in California place over 80 percent with relatives. We can improve our numbers. Using search engines and techniques known to social service providers, relatives can be identified, engaged, and their background checks completed all in a day or two. Often the children can be placed in relative care without having to spend any time in a shelter. Our data show that on average children in relative care will have a more stable placement, experience fewer behavior problems, will be more likely to stay in their same school, and be more likely to be placed with their siblings.

At Kids in Common we want the best possible outcome for her and for all of our children. That is why we have been collecting data about child health, education, and well-being for years. Such data create a basis for action and produce effective strategies for change.

That is not all. We also need to focus on education and employment outcomes for foster youth. That is the work of the Foster Youth Aligned Action Network (FYAAN), a coalition of county leaders who are implementing strategies to achieve parity for foster youth. Developing individualized educational plans is leading toward their goal of 86 percent of the current freshman class graduating from high school on time, leading to a 65 percent college enrollment rate, and 33 percent who will earn their bachelor's degree by age 26. This would be a vast improvement over the current high school graduation rate of 43 percent and only 9 percent earning a four-year college degree. And doing this should improve the average income of former foster youth at age 24 — \$699 a month — compared to their non-foster peers earning \$1,530 per month.

These two strategies — placing children with relatives and focusing on education — will be featured in the recommendations of the Santa Clara County Joint Foster Youth Task Force Foster Care Committee in March and appear in the 2018 Children's Agenda Data Book.

The annual Children's Agenda Data Book reports data on how our children are faring. The data book provides a way to hold ourselves accountable for whether we are improving children's lives. It provides a basis for action and powerful strategies for change, helping us to create a community where our children are safe, healthy, and successful in learning and life.

We each have a role to play in making life better for children in Santa Clara County. Whether you work with kids, are a policymaker, a funder, a grandparent, a community activist, or want to volunteer, you hold a piece to the puzzle. Find out how our children are doing by reading the 2018 Children's Agenda Data Book (kidsincommon.org) and use the information to help make a difference.

Len Edwards served for 26 years as a Santa Clara County Superior Court judge. He is co-chair of the Children's Agenda Network, an initiative of Kids in Common. Dana Bunnett directs Kids in Common, a program of Planned Parenthood Mar Monte.



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