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JAMIE HENDERSON: First 5's Year 15 report card rates A's across the board

When election time rolls around, there are often so many propositions on the ballot it can become overwhelming. It can be a challenge to read all of the proposals, study their backgrounds, evaluate their pros and cons and know exactly how each will impact society if implemented. Then, after a proposition passes, how often do we continue to track it or wonder how effectively it has served its purpose?

Fifteen years ago this month, California voters approved Proposition 10, the Children and Families Act of 1998, also known as First 5. This initiative added a 50-cent tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products. It authorized that revenue would be collected through a trust fund at the state level and allocated to all 58 counties based on the number of live births in each county during the previous year.

First 5 Kern funds services that meet local needs based on local decision-making and priorities. Working with providers throughout Kern County, services are more clearly defined to avoid service duplication and better meet individual family needs, enhancing cost effectiveness for all programs involved.

Revenues fund 41 local programs that promote early childhood development for children, from prenatal to age 5, and their families. The focus on these first important years is based on brain development research, which shows that 90 percent of brain development occurs by age 3.

Children exposed to healthy, loving, early learning environments enjoy greater academic achievement, are more likely to graduate from high school and college, and are less likely to be involved in crime. School readiness has a profound impact on the lifelong learning process.

Just last year alone (2012-13), programs funded by First 5 Kern provided services to tens of thousands of children throughout Kern County, from Delano to Buttonwillow, from the mountain communities to Boron, and from Maricopa to Ridgecrest.

Here are a few examples:

- * 1,478 children were enrolled in year-round early care and education programs.
- * 1,268 children with no preschool experience participated in summer bridge to enhance kindergarten readiness.
- * 3,023 parents participated in parent education classes.
- * 3,500 children ages 0 to 5 were enrolled in health insurance.
- * 4,335 children ages 0 to 5 received oral health services including dental screenings, teeth cleanings, fluoride treatments and oral health education.
- * 4,216 children ages 0 to 5 received free immunizations.

With one in four California children living in poverty, there is still much work to do, but First 5 Kern is steadily improving family stability in Kern County. A local fiscal impact report shows that every \$1 of First 5 Kern monies spent produces a \$17.49 return to Kern County's economy.

Additionally, First 5 Kern's effectiveness is continually tracked and evaluated every year. Annual reports document program outcomes, providing details of First 5 Kern activities to the state as well as our local stakeholders.

First 5 exists because the voters understood -- when they originally passed Proposition 10 and twice voted against efforts to overturn it -- that it pays to invest in our greatest natural resource, our children.

Wonder no more. Voters made a wise investment when they passed Proposition 10.

Jamie Henderson is the executive director of First 5 Kern. Community Voices is an expanded commentary of 650 to 700 words. The Californian reserves the right to edit all submissions for length and clarity.