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NEWS

First 5 Yolo celebrates 15 years of helping young children

By JULIE GALLELO/Special to The Democrat

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They couldn't contain their smiles. The camaraderie and sense of accomplishment was apparent as commissioners, agency representatives, nonprofit executives, and community advocates for children came together for a small celebration Friday morning in Woodland to mark First 5 Yolo's milestone 15-year anniversary.

Three notable champions for children spoke to the assembled group and were honored for their service.

State Senator Lois Wolk, former State Assemblywoman and former Yolo County Supervisor Helen Thomson, and Yolo County Supervisor Don Saylor have each taken a turn as chairperson of the First 5 Yolo Children and Families Commission.

"It was such a privilege to serve as the original chair of First 5 Yolo," said Wolk. She served as chairwoman of the Children and Families Commission, from 1999 until 2002.

"All the good that First 5 Yolo has accomplished for the health, wellbeing and development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in Yolo County over the past 15 years is the result of the collaborative efforts of dedicated commissioners, a strong staff, a partnership with the county and local nonprofits, and the voters of California, who approved Proposition 10 in 1998."

Research shows a child's brain develops most dramatically during the first five years and that what parents and caregivers do during these years to support their child's growth will have a meaningful impact throughout life.

The First 5 money from the Proposition 10 tobacco tax builds on this research, and has routed nearly \$2 million a year, for a 15-year total of \$26.5 million, into Yolo County; investing in the futures of the county's youngest children. First 5 Yolo conducts periodic needs assessments to ensure its grants are directed to areas where the money will have the greatest impact.

Thomson, who was also a Yolo County supervisor, expressed her excitement over the many accomplishments achieved during the 15 years.

Thomson, a long-time mental health advocate said, "I'm especially gratified the Integrated Family Services Initiative includes money for social and emotional health. It also provides training in child mental health for local practitioners."

First 5 Yolo knows it cannot rest on its laurels. Current chairman and Yolo County Supervisor Don Saylor added, "The challenges and needs continue to be significant.

"Nearly one in four Yolo County children live in poverty. For children 0 to 5 years of age who don't receive adequate nutrition, health care, parental support, or early learning opportunities it can mean they start school at a disadvantage and often never catch up," stated Saylor.

Conversely, 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.

Through partnerships and collaborations with other local organizations, First 5 Yolo investments have enabled tens of thousands of families and children to receive needed medical and dental care, fresh food, preschool opportunities, library reading programs, parenting classes, home visits and other valuable services.

Some of the outcomes and successes celebrated Friday at First 5 Yolo include more than 3,000 West Sacramento children attended preschool at no cost; a 65 percent increase in early learning activities at the Yolo County Library; more than double the number of licensed foster parents in Yolo County -- now at 80; and thousands of subsidized dental visits for young children and pregnant women.

In addition, through the efforts of the Children's Health Initiative, 97 percent of the children in Yolo County have health insurance; last year alone, more than 1,200 families received support and case management through First 5 Yolo's Family Resource Center Initiative; and high-risk mothers are getting intensive education and support through home visits in the Step by Step program.

Commissioners at First 5 Yolo are exploring ways to ensure the achievements accomplished in Yolo County continue for many years. Tobacco tax funding is declining, partly as a result of educational programs that have helped to decrease tobacco use. Reduced funding from tobacco revenues will affect First 5 Yolo grants to partner agencies and community organizations.

First 5 Yolo is convening forums and discussions to develop new community partnerships and collaborations with the goal of keeping children at the forefront of policy and budgeting decisions. One focus will be on the Yolo Children's Movement that will be launched in 2014 through a partnership between First 5 Yolo and the Yolo County Children's Alliance.