

DAILY REPUBLIC

First 5 celebrates its 15th anniversary



BabyFirst Solano caseworker Sandy Alvarez, left, has helped Leticia Ruiz get her diploma, a job and enroll at Solano Community College after the birth of her 2½-year-old daughter, Giselle. (Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic)

By **Barry Eberling**

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FAIRFIELD — Leticia Ruiz is trying to get ahead in the world in part because of Giselle, her 2½-year-old daughter.

Three years ago, Ruiz was a pregnant 15-year-old with an uncertain future. The BabyFirst Solano program that gets financial support from First 5 Solano helped make a difference.

With the help of caseworker Sandy Lisa Alvarez, Ruiz got a diploma from a charter, online school. She has a job at a local fast-food restaurant. She is enrolling at Solano Community College and hopes to become a nurse.

Giselle is motivating her.

“She’s the world to me,” Ruiz said. “I love her. She’s the one making me move forward, so she can have a better life.”

It's one example of work done by First 5 Solano. California's First 5 movement is celebrating its 15th anniversary this month.

The local First 5 Solano Children and Families Commission controls several millions of dollars a year. Its mission is to spend the money in ways that help children age 5 and younger and their families.

After 15 years on the road, First 5 in Solano County and across the state has a track record that can be held up for judgement. Money has gone to such undertakings as prenatal care, kindergarten preparation for low-income children and centers that direct needy families to health and social services programs.

"That investment to early childhood has proven to be a great support to families throughout California," said Solano County Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Linda Seifert, who sits on the local First 5 commission.

She made her remarks Nov. 5 when the county Board of Supervisors honored First 5.

But First 5 faces challenges. Its economic engine is a state tobacco tax. Fewer people are buying tobacco products today than 15 years ago and the amount of money coming in to First 5 Solano has dropped substantially.

The next 15 years look to be leaner than the first 15 years.

"I think the commission is very wise," First 5 Solano Executive Director Christina Arrostuto said. "We're looking to do what we can now with the kids who are in front of us. And we're looking at what we can do for the future, when, frankly, we won't be as strong."

The beginning

First 5 began in November 1998, when state voters passed Proposition 10.

The measure established a 50-cent tax on tobacco products to be spent on early childhood development programs and anti-smoking programs, with money going into the California Children and Families First Program. It created a state commission and called for the creation of county commissions to develop plans and programs.

Twenty percent of the tobacco tax money goes to the statewide First 5 program. Eighty percent goes to the various county programs.

The name "First 5" isn't mentioned in the proposition. That came later. But the proposition provided the money and set the goals of the First 5 movement.

"It has been determined that a child's first three years are the most critical in brain development, yet these crucial years have inadvertently been neglected," the proposition states.

There is a "compelling need" to make early childhood development programs available for the prenatal stage through age 5, it said.

Voters in November 1998 weighed arguments for and against Proposition 10.

Proposition 10 would make money available for such services as child immunizations, child care, infant nutrition services and health and social services, supporters said. It would double the money available for an anti-smoking mass media campaign.

Rob Reiner, who won fame by co-starring on the “All In the Family” television show in the 1970s and by directing such movies as “When Harry Met Sally,” served as chairman of the Proposition 10 effort.

Opponents said Proposition 10 would create a new bureaucracy of commissions. It would direct millions of dollars of tax money to these commissions, granting authority to bureaucrats and political appointees to spend it.

California voters passed Proposition 10, but narrowly, 50.5 percent to 49.5 percent. Solano County voters favored it, 55 percent to 45 percent.

Solano County had to establish a Children’s and Families Commission to get its share of state tax money, which topped \$5 million annually for the county those first few years. The Board of Supervisors did so on June 8, 1999.

The commission had some rocky goings initially. A 2002 Solano County audit of First 5 Solano found a variety of financial problems. The commission handed out grant money to recipients that failed to submit documents as agreed to under contract. It failed to regularly balance its accounts or keep track of petty cash.

Such problems appear to be in the past. An independent auditor recently looked at the First 5 Solano finances for the annual audit that must be submitted to the state. For the eighth consecutive year, the auditor found nothing amiss in the way that the commission handles and reports on its money.

Leaner future

First 5 Solano for the fiscal year that ended June 30 had \$4.3 million in revenues, with about \$3.7 million coming from the state tobacco tax. That compares to the more than \$5 million that First 5 Solano once received.

It spent \$1.3 million on such general expenses as employee salaries and program evaluation costs. It spent \$4.1 million on grants, for a grand total of \$5.5 million in expenses.

It can handle the deficit spending because it has more than \$11 million in savings. That compares to \$19 million in 2009.

First 5 Solano saved money for the days when the tobacco tax would dwindle. Now both the annual revenues and savings are dwindling.

“The commission has had the burden and the blessing of making these really difficult decisions,” Arrostuto said. “Even if it was \$6 million a year (in tax money), it’s not enough money to fix anything. It’s always had to be strategic about how to empty those funds.”

One strategy First 5 Solano employs is to try to “leverage” its grants by having recipients use the money as matching funds to seek still more grants. More than 85 percent of First 5 Solano grant recipients did so in 2012-13, according to the commission.

As a result, \$3.4 million in First 5 Solano dollars brought an additional \$4.8 million to Solano County.

First 5 Solano has also launched its First 5 Futures initiative to seek grant money itself, from state and federal government and private foundations. First 5 Solano is also working with the local business community. It recently raised \$13,000 to help send local children to a summer pre-kindergarten academy.

In December, First 5 Solano will look at updating its long-term financial plan. It last did so in 2008.

But if First 5 Solano has less money to spend, it is hardly fading away. The tobacco tax money will continue coming to the local commission, unless voters statewide were to repeal Proposition 10.

“There will always be a First 5,” Arrostuto said.

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Barbara Mejia learns her letters while in a child care program in the Fairfield-Suisun School District's Healthy Start Family Resource Center while her mother learned English in the next room in a parent education program partially funded by First 5 Solano grants. First 5 Solano is celebrating 15 years of helping fund programs for children and families. (Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic file 2009)