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First 5 celebrates its first 15



Kermith Walters, chair of Siskiyou First 5, and attendees applaud the hard work of First 5 and the Family Resource Centers.

Daily News Photo/Kevin Dickinson

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Yreka

First 5 Siskiyou celebrated 15 years of supporting local parents and children ages birth-5 on Monday at the Yreka Family Resource Center.

Event patrons came from across Siskiyou County and the state included Sheriff Jon Lopey; supervisors Marcia Armstrong, Grace Bennett and Brandon Criss; and Camille Maben, First 5 executive director of California.

"(First 5) provides every child the opportunity he or she deserves: in healthy lives, in healthy homes and in healthy schools," said Karen Pautz, executive director of Siskiyou First 5.

First 5 receives its funding from the Children and Families First Act, voted into law in 1998 under Prop 10. The amendment added a 50-cent tax on cigarette sales.

According to Pautz, the law ensures that counties receive 80 percent of the tax funding with only 20 percent going to the state.

Maben, formally of Dunsmuir, told the event-goers, "At the state level, as we go forward and do our work together – and I promise you we will work together – there will always be a consideration in how things will work in a rural community."

Maben said that the challenges of coordinating such services in a state as large, diverse and environmentally distinct as California was a bit like "turning an elephant in a bathtub," but added the goal was to "set the standards high, so all the children, no matter where they grow up, have the same opportunities."

The focus of First 5, for Pautz and Maben, centers on community.

As Pautz told the Daily News, the Siskiyou First 5 commissioners within each of the 10 primary communities put their efforts in "community-based investments" that mold themselves to each area's specific needs.

"(First 5) creates jobs in the community, community-level programs and services and puts cash into the community," Pautz said.

Pautz continued: "It's Happy Camp people providing services to Happy Camp; it's Tulelake people providing services to Tulelake, safely and without judgement."

Karen Derry, executive director of the Happy Camp FRC said she enjoys watching the children she's worked with the last 15 years return to help at the resource center.

"We have lots of kids who love to read now," Derry said.

Ken Reuze, who in 2011 personally put in 7,000 hours of volunteer work, said, "It's handy for me. I enjoy helping the kids and meeting new people."

15 Years of Support

"It's for any child birth-5 years old in Siskiyou County and his or her parents," Pautz said, adding the services are not limited to any particular socio-economic class.

First 5 provides many programs and services to Siskiyou County, all furthering the health and education of local families.

Helping children get a leg up in their education is paramount for the organization.

"Since 2002, First 5 Siskiyou has participated in the Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Educational Standards program, as such more than 200 participants have increased their education, knowledge, skills and abilities related to quality early childhood programs," as stated in a recent press release.

First 5 Siskiyou also donates 8,000 to 10,000 books annually to advance early literacy.

Improving child health is another priority.

The program has funded a \$10,000 initiative to encourage oral health and dental screenings. Since 2008, 1,165 children have received services, as stated in the release.

Michelle Harris, nutrition education specialist at CSU, Chico, said First 5 and the FRCs "help spread the nutritionalist message throughout the county and state."

She pointed out their promotion of Harvest of the Month, which highlights a different fruit or vegetable every month.

First 5 also funds the FRCs, supporting not only children's education but parents' as well.

Pautz noted that parenting is like any other skill – whether it's cooking or playing tennis – in that it's about building skills and developing knowledge on the subject.

She added the classes at the FRCs help provide parents both, and she is "confident that more children will have nurturing and caring parents" as a result of these classes.

"It's about helping good parents become better parents," she said.

The Next 15

When asked what the next 15 years would bring, Kermith Walters, chair of Siskiyou First 5, stated, "The goal is to sustain what we've done in the first 15 years."

He said efforts will be centered on maintaining the quality of programs such as the early literacy program and resource center classes.

He also hopes to see First 5 expanding into other areas to support local families.

"How are we going to fund those programs we need in our rural communities?" Walters asked those gathered, prompting the question that will fuel these efforts.

For Pautz, foremost will be seeking out more resources and investments in early childhood development programs and education support.

She added she would like to see increased education on the importance of healthy people in children's lives and a nurturing of community-based programs and services with diversified funding.

"Our budgets are reflections of our values," Pautz said. "The success of our community can be seen in its children.

As Maben concluded in her speech, "I always come back to the fact that this is the right investment."