

THE UNION

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Other Voices

Holly Hermansen December 16, 2013

First 5 Nevada County: 15 years of investing in children

Fifteen years ago, voters approved Proposition 10, the California Children and Families Act, forming a “children and families commission” in every California county to manage the investment of tobacco tax revenues “for the purposes of promoting, supporting and improving the early development of children from the prenatal stage to five years of age.”

The Nevada County Board of Supervisors established the Nevada County First 5 Commission Dec. 15 — a mere six weeks after the legislation passed. They knew a good thing when they saw it!

The statewide program is now known as “First 5,” in reference to the tremendous importance of the first five years of a child’s life, when 90 percent of brain development occurs. The value of investment in these early childhood years has been well documented for individuals as well as for society in the form of better health outcomes, higher economic productivity and reduced spending on foster care, special education and crime.

Professor James Heckman won the Nobel Prize with his research showing a return on investment of \$7 for every \$1 spent on young children. All across California, First 5 commissions are working to make community-changing investments in support of the optimal development of all children.

Prop 10 established three statewide priorities: children’s health, school readiness and family support. But the law also prioritized local control, authorizing each county commission to determine the particular needs of the young children in their own community as well as the best way to help meet those needs.

First 5 Nevada County’s achievements have been realized through our partnerships with dozens of grantees across the county who have delivered services to thousands of children and families in the last fifteen years. First 5 Nevada County has directed its portion of the Prop 10 tax revenues for a wide variety of programs over the years, including:

- Family resource centers – supporting the development of four family resource centers throughout the county, which provide a “first stop” for families to find the resources and supports they need to raise their children, from play groups to parenting classes to GED assistance to health insurance enrollment to help with emergency needs.

- Home visiting – providing intensive, in-home supports for parents facing obstacles.
- Behavioral health access – training local behavioral health experts in the development and treatment of young children and their families; providing access to treatment for young children who are uninsured or underinsured.
- Quality child care – helping local child care centers and family child care homes grow through self- and peer-study on the dimensions of quality care.
- Dental care – providing funding for dental care, which bridged a time period when there was no children’s dental clinic that accepted children covered by MediCal; providing funding to purchase a full-service dental van that can travel to schools and preschools to provide on-site screenings and treatments.
- Step Up to Kindergarten – funding free, three-week kindergarten preparation classes for children without preschool experience or those who need an “extra boost” to be ready.
- School readiness programs – offering year-round programs to help children and their families become ready for school and prepared for success in kindergarten and beyond.

First 5 Nevada County has also supported collaboratives where family service agencies meet monthly in both western and eastern Nevada County to examine needs, gaps and overlaps; to learn from one another; and to streamline the system of care. As many local leaders responded when asked to reflect on the difference First 5 has made locally, the First 5 Commission has helped to coordinate services to families and has been a catalyst for cross-agency collaboration. Laura Harter, executive director of Child Advocates of Nevada County, noted that she believes “First 5 has helped foster and facilitate the wonderful collaborative spirit we have in Nevada County.”

First 5 Nevada County has invested more than \$10 million in our infants, toddlers and preschoolers over the last 15 years — and in the systems that serve them. And as the voters mandated, all expenditures are for supplemental programs for children and families, accessing monies that would not have otherwise been available and funding programs and services unavailable from any other source. This unprecedented investment in California’s youngest children — and in its future — has made First 5 the most significant and effective funder of early childhood development programs in the state.

Since 1998, First 5 Nevada County has been honored to partner with the county of Nevada, multiple schools, child care providers, nonprofit service providers and local businesses to serve and support the young children of Nevada County. As tobacco tax revenues decline, they will be increasingly working on outreach and advocacy, strengthening community partnerships and supporting the capacity of community organizations to serve the children and families of Nevada County.

With one in five Nevada County children living in poverty, there is still much work to do. First 5 looks forward to working with the community over the next 15 years to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive — and to enter school ready to learn!

Holly Hermansen, Nevada County Superintendent of Schools, is the Chair of the First 5 Nevada County Commission. For more information, visit <http://first5nevco.org> and join us on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/first5nevco>. For information about the first 15 years of First 5 commissions across the state, visit first5association.org/15years/