

Family resource centers face looming funding cuts

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They begin lining up along a chain-link fence at the old Bryte Elementary School in West Sacramento by 8 a.m. every Friday.

Parents and grandparents, infants in strollers, as many as 100 families who come each week to receive fresh fruits and vegetables, bread and other food from the Yolo Family Resource Center located here. The distribution doesn't start until 10:30, but many regularly arrive hours earlier to wait.

This part of town is a food desert, notes Katie Villegas, executive director of the Yolo County Children's Alliance, which operates the center here. That means what little fresh food that can be found nearby is at convenience stores that charge exorbitant prices. And in a community like Bryte, with a high poverty rate, that increases the risk of hunger.

So residents come to the resource center weekly — residents like Valentina Volchanskiy, who has been coming here for four years.

"I am so thankful for everything," she said through a resource center interpreter on a recent Friday. "I don't know how we could survive without it."

Her family would certainly have days with no food on the table, she said. But with the vegetables she receives here, Volchanskiy makes soup that goes a long way toward stretching the food budget until the next Friday rolls around.

That's just the start of what the family resource center has done for Volchanskiy's family. There have been donations of clothes and shoes, bicycles and strollers, even a car seat and diapers. Staffers also have helped with the language barriers that arise along the way for the Russian-speaking Volchanskiy — like when her son's CalFresh benefits were suddenly denied. With a couple of phone calls, a staffer at the resource center was able to resume the benefits and provide a grocery voucher to tide the family over in the meantime.

There is no more basic a need than food, and a desire for fresh produce is something low-income families all over Yolo County cited when First 5 Yolo conducted a needs assessment several years ago to determine how best to serve families of young children.

The assessment also showed a desire for parent education and financial literacy classes, developmental screenings for young children, access to health care and opportunities for young children to engage in early learning activities.

That needs assessment prompted First 5 Yolo to begin directing funding toward family resource centers like the one in West Sacramento where families could access all of those services. And in the past four years, they have.

During the 2013-14 fiscal year, the West Sacramento center alone provided food distributions to 416 families; enrolled or re-enrolled more than 300 residents in health insurance and more than 130 residents in CalFresh; assisted 207 families with tax returns that brought nearly \$400,000 back into the community; offered Playschool Experience preschool classes three times a week; and provided 1,676 resource referrals for everything from housing and child care to immigration and job assistance.

Those services were duplicated all over Yolo County in resource centers from Woodland to Davis, Winters to Knights Landing.

Six months into the current fiscal year, those centers have combined to enroll or re-enroll 558 people in health insurance programs like Medi-Cal or Covered California and 227 in the CalFresh program.

Budget crunch

But much of that could come to an end in the next fiscal year, as First 5 Yolo grapples with a significantly reduced budget. Having made a decision to spend down the commission's reserves in order to funnel funds into the family resource centers, the commission now faces depleted reserves, declining tobacco tax revenue — the main source of funding for First 5 commissions statewide since the passage of Proposition 10 back in 1998 — and a 50-percent budget reduction.

"Everything's at risk," Villegas said.

At the West Sacramento family resource center, she said, "the Playschool class may not get funded. The food distribution would go."

And that would just be the beginning.

The Yolo County Children's Alliance receives 60 percent of its funding from First 5 Yolo for programs that range from child health to preschool to child welfare, Villegas said.

The alliance's nationally accredited child abuse prevention program, Step by Step, which provides in-home visits to families at high risk of abuse or neglect, faces a significant funding cut. Last year, 76 individuals participated in the program. Next year, there likely will be room for fewer.

West Sacramento families, meanwhile, fear the loss of programs at the Bryte campus, a former elementary school that now houses the Northern California Construction and Training program as well as the Family Resource Center.

Deborah Smith first came here to enroll her family in CalFresh. Now her son Michael attends the Playschool program housed in a classroom behind the Children's Alliance's room.

Here, children between the ages of 2 and 4 learn everything from early socialization skills to their letters and numbers while their parents, who are required to stay, pick up parenting skills.

"It's a great program," Smith said, adding that the other option for low-income families when it comes to preschool — Head Start — "has a huge waiting list in Yolo County, and there's nothing else."

Were the program to cease due to lack of funding, "it would be terrible," Smith said.

Lorena Fregosos agreed.

Her son, Joey, 3, needed help focusing, she said.

"He's very active and hyper," Fregosos said. "But here he's learning to control it, to sit through storytime and follow instructions. The socialization has helped his language development, too."

There is even more going on under the guidance of Playschool teacher Nancy Ledesma. Developmental screenings happen here, also funded by First 5 Yolo, and parents are connected to other services.

Challenges ahead

The same is happening at the family resource center in Clarksburg — also operated by the Children's Alliance — as well as resource centers in Davis, Woodland and Knights Landing that are overseen by Bob Ekstrom.

Ekstrom said he expects reductions in services in all three cities, though the situation is not as dire as it is in West Sacramento and Clarksburg because the Davis, Woodland and Knights Landing centers receive a smaller percentage of funding from First 5 Yolo — about 20 percent of the centers' total budgets.

The looming cuts “will be a challenge,” Ekstrom said, “but a lot of programs will keep going.”

It is possible, though, that some staff would have to be laid off and hours reduced.

“I’m hoping not to,” Ekstrom said, adding that he’s working on grants to bring in additional funds and “constantly looking at how we can partner with others.”

Currently, Davis has two centers — one on the campus of Montgomery Elementary School, the other on the corner of Fifth and D streets, adjacent to the Davis Community Church — and both have benefited from the partnerships created in their locations, with the school district and the church.

Both also have made good use of promotoras, primarily women who have come to the centers for services and then were trained to assist the families coming after them.

Ekstrom believes the centers have shown their clear value to the community over the past three years.

“People have recognized the importance of resource centers and are saying, ‘We’ve had this for three years, we don’t want to lose it,’ ” noted Ekstrom. “To me, the resource centers are one of the best values in the community. We touch so many families.

“Just in Woodland we tracked 400 to 600 a month coming in the door (last year). We did 641 tax returns in Davis, Woodland and Knights Landing, bringing in more than \$1 million.”

Ekstrom praised First 5 Yolo for making all of that possible, saying, “The money they gave us really allowed us to sustain programs, to enhance programs and to build programs for young families.”

However, he said, the commission also was very clear that this was three-year funding “that wasn’t going to last forever.”

“I knew this was coming,” he said.

Searching for funds

Now he hopes funding can be found elsewhere — a challenge, he said, in that Yolo County doesn’t have many options for large corporate donations like Sacramento and other more urban areas. Locally, he said, there is really only the Yoche Dehe tribe making sizable donations to nonprofits.

He also fears “that we haven’t done a really good job of letting the public know how they benefit from services.”

Assisting low-income families with their tax returns, for instance, brought more than \$2 million into the county last year. After-school programs, meanwhile, improve the whole community.

Now, perhaps, people are taking notice.

“The reduction in funds has really focused leaders on critical services we provide ... and that they need us to sustain,” Ekstrom said.

Supervisor Jim Provenza, who recently took over as chair of the First 5 Yolo Commission, agrees.

Following a tour of the West Sacramento resource center earlier this month, he said the commission would be re-evaluating a funding framework put together late last year in order to determine “how to support core services like these.”

As he spoke, clients of those services passed by. Mothers and children leaving the Playschool class, families carrying bags of produce and bread they'd just picked up in the food distribution line, most heading by foot back into the neighborhood around Bryte.

These are the families that live in this neighborhood, Villegas noted.

“And this is where we need to be.”