



MEDIA RELEASE

Put Children First

Salinas, CA
February 4, 2019

In the midst of the nation's political fights over border security and a chaotic asylum and immigration situation that dominates the headlines, children are suffering. Felipe Alonzo-Gomez, an 8-year-old boy from Guatemala died in U.S. custody early Christmas Day 2018, not long after the death of Jakelin Caal Maquin, a 7-year-old Guatemalan girl seeking asylum with her father. We read these stories with horror, knowing that countless thousands of children of asylum-seeking parents from Central America are now being warehoused in detention centers around our nation, the same kind of "emergency shelters" that our own community's foster children experience when they are taken away from their parents.

Our hearts go out to these vulnerable migrant children caught in terrible circumstances beyond their control. Whatever one's political beliefs, it is impossible not to want to help all innocent children. How can we protect them and keep them safe? What lifelong impacts will occur if they remain in limbo, in this kind of impersonal custody in detention centers? How can we provide them the stability that all children need and deserve? How can we move them out of institutional detention camps and into a family setting again?

This is the same dilemma California faces in terms of the 77,000 children who are in our state's foster care system each year. Unlike the asylum-seeking families and their children put in custody by the U.S. government, these children in foster care are there because they have suffered severe abuse or neglect by their own parents/family.

Nearly half of these children are under the age of five. The effects of extreme early-life trauma are significant. Infants and toddlers are the fastest growing age group coming into foster care in California. It's not just the defenselessness of these young ones that is so poignant, but the hidden and potential lifelong impact of mistreatment at such an early age. Environment is critical for infants. Besides needing supportive physical contact and caring stimulation, they are sensitive to conflict in the home such as arguing, shouting, and angry physical contact—sometimes directed at them. This exposure causes babies to have elevated levels of cortisol, which can lead to diminished cognitive, motor, and language functioning as well as major behavioral consequences later on.

This is the crisis that we in Monterey County face every day: how to keep foster children of all ages safe, provide them the support and advocacy they need, and give them the opportunity to thrive. We must put every child's well-being first and foremost, just as we would our own.

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Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) of Monterey County are community volunteers who do just that. After being carefully trained by CASA of Monterey County, CASA volunteers work one-on-one with kids who have been placed in foster care. They become the lifeline, the beacon, and the anchor for abused, neglected boys and girls, and they help find them safe, permanent homes.

CASA volunteers are doing heroic work. Become a CASA yourself — visit www.casaofmonterey.org and find out how. There is no special requirement—only the desire to help a child. You will have a chance to change a young life for the better, working one-on-one to give a boy or girl at least one caring, consistent adult who will help ensure the child receives the special services s/he needs.

All children need our care, our concern, and our protection. But we have a chance to impact the life of a neglected child in our own community a child who needs nothing more than a “voice,” a friend and mentor, a CASA—to help navigate the difficult foster care bureaucracy and to help them find the loving “forever family” that every child deserves. Put children first. Contact CASA today to see how you can help our most vulnerable children.

CONTACT: Kathryn Pernet – Recruitment/Marketing Manager
PHONE: 831.455.6800 x 31
EMAIL: Kathryn@casaofmonterey.org

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For Immediate Release