

If you are interested in submitting an article for upcoming newsletters, or have suggestions on improving the newsletter, contact Emily Stewart at [stewart@kerndhs.com](mailto:stewart@kerndhs.com) or (661) 873-2303 or Melissa Soin at: (661) 873-2382 or email [soinm@kerndhs.com](mailto:soinm@kerndhs.com).

## Ombudsman Corner

As we enter into 2024, I would like to wish you a Happy New Year! May it be full of adventure and growth. I'd also like to take a moment to welcome all new caregivers and provide everyone with a recap about the services offered through the Kern County Department of Human Services, Ombudsman's Office. As the agency's Ombudsman, my role is to assist in the resolution of complaints and concerns that arise. As Ombudsman, my objective is to:

- Serve as an impartial and confidential resource
- Listen to your concerns
- Document your complaints/concerns
- Gather all relevant information regarding the matter
- Remain neutral and objective and keeps information confidential
- Formulate possible resolutions
- Make recommendations to the Department of Human Services

### Who Qualifies For This Resource?

Any foster child/youth, resource parent, relative caretaker, adoptive parent, or non-relative legal guardian receiving services from Child Protective Services.

### Is there a cost?

No, these services are complimentary.

Please do not hesitate to contact me as I'm interested in listening to your ideas of how to improve the services provided to the families and children in Kern County. Thank you for your dedication and love towards the children placed in your homes.

Wishing you and your family a happy new year filled with hope, health, and happiness – with a generous sprinkle of fun!

*Happy New Year*

Monique Hawkins, Ombudsman

## YES Conference 2024

The Annual "YES!" Youth Empowering Success Conference was created to mentor and empower other foster youth. This annual event brings together foster youth, schools, their caregivers, and community agencies to address the barriers foster youth experience and create solutions. An interactive exploration day will be held for the youth and adult supporters with breakout sessions and resources that focus on promoting student's ac-



ademic success and resiliency, both during and after care. Resource parents are encouraged to attend and will receive training credit.

The 9th Annual YES! Conference is scheduled for Friday April 5, 2024 at Bakersfield College from 9:30AM to 2:30PM.

Be on the lookout for the registration link coming soon!

# Melissa's Message

## Comfort Calls

When a child is separated from their birth parent and placed in the care of a resource parent, it can be very overwhelming, difficult and scary for everyone involved. For the child, it is a fear of being in a stranger's home or in a home that isn't their own. For the birth parent, it's not knowing where their child is and how they are doing.

For the resource parent, it is being unsure how to comfort the child and lessen the trauma that they have already experienced. This is why Comfort Calls were established.

A Comfort Call is a telephone call between the birth parent and the children to maintain and build the bond and it is also to establish a relationship between the caregiver and the birth parent.

This call should take place soon after the foster child is put into a resource parent's care to help the child and birth parent reconnect and find comfort in talking with each other.

Per the Welfare and Institutions Code §308, a social worker is required to provide the birth parent with a contact number of where their child is placed. As this is a law that the agency must follow, Comfort Calls were



established to set up that initial contact with proper guidelines for all to follow.

The primary social worker should discuss with both caregiver and birth parent the plan and purpose of these calls.

Working out a schedule of when the calls should take place and the duration of the calls will be dependent on the schedule of the caregiver and youth's everyday routine in the caregiver's home. Should a caregiver not want their personal phone number given out, there are other options to provide

the birth parent. For instance, setting up a Google Voice number is a great and free option. All that is needed is to have a google account, download the Google Voice app and follow the instructions to obtain the Google Voice number.

A Comfort Call is not a visit, rather it is a way to stay connected and build relationships. As a resource parent, you are co-parenting with the child's birth parent and it is important that there is a partnership to reach the goal of reunification.

Foster youth will have far more success in a caregiver's home if they can see that their resource parent and birth parent are working together for their best interest.

## FURS is Here to Help



Are you sometimes in need of after-hours support when caring for foster youth? Do you not know whom to call in the late hours of the night when faced with a difficult situation? The Family Urgent Response System (FURS) is here to help! FURS is an inclusive statewide, regional and county system that provides collaborative and timely state level phone-based response and county level in-person/mobile response in times of emergency for resource parents and current and former foster youth. The goal of this system is to maintain stability in placements and assist in keeping the relationship between caregiver and youth intact. FURS offers a toll-free hotline that is available twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. Supportive counselors trained in conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques operate the hotline.

Should callers feel the need for in-person support, the hotline can connect them to a local dispatch team to further access their needs. FURS is not an emergency hotline and should callers be in a life-threatening situation, they should call 911 or local law enforcement.

For more information about FURS, please visit <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/cdss-programs/foster-care/furs>. To get connected to a FURS support person, call or text 1-833-939-FURS

# Human Trafficking Awareness

By Dr. Angela Look

What is the one thing we cannot imagine life without? Look around you and see what seems to always be in your hand or by your side.

Our phones or computers. I am old enough that I can still remember life without a cell phone, but my children cannot. For a teenager, the most devastating thing you can do is take their phone away, or at least that is how they make it seem.

While phones and technology have opened up opportunities to our youth that past generations never had, it has also opened up extreme dangers.

Phones, computers and social media have all contributed significantly to the exploitation and/or trafficking of our children.

Recent research found that 87% of teenagers go to sleep with their phones. If that is the case, what could be taking place on their phones, from the comfort of their own beds and in their pajamas, at 2am, without a parent even realizing it? It is scary to think!

Numerous articles have recently been written about “sextortion.” Children, sometimes very young, send provocative or nude pictures/videos to someone they think is their boyfriend or girlfriend, only to discover later that is not the case. They are then blackmailed and forced to send more pictures due to threats. Tragically, many have committed suicide thinking it was their only way to end the cycle.

There are also monetized sites on social media platforms, such as OnlyFans, which incentivizes youth to post

sexualized content of themselves. Our youth do not realize the danger they place themselves in and the psychological harm that will come due to these choices; after all, they are children.

Our children also do not realize there are 750,000 predators online at any moment!

While playing a video game or posting pictures on social media, when someone begins a conversation with them, our children often trust that person is who they claim to be.

When they later turn out to be an adult man who wants to cause them harm, our children are often completely unaware until it is too late.

The United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking found, “the victimization of youth...takes place across every virtual platform, including all major social media, messaging applications, gaming platforms and chat rooms.”

Stranger Danger is no longer the message we need to convey to our children. Instead, we need to have conversations with them about social media and safety, utilize parental controls and limitations with their phones/technology, be present and ask about whom they are talking to online, etc.

As Opal Singleton states, “We are playing roulette with this generation as day after day, new apps, technologies, video games, live streaming, etc., are introduced without instructions or warning on how they could be used to violate a young person.” The National Center for Missing and Exploited



Children reported 32 million reports of child exploitation in 2022! Last year, in Kern County alone, we investigated over 150 reports of children being exploited and/or trafficked; those are OUR children! We need to do better!

Take the time to have the difficult, but calm, conversations about what a child is looking at online and who they are talking to. Discuss how they can recognize an unsafe situation and who/what they can do if they are unsure.

The use of parental controls and guidelines in your home as to phone/internet/video games can also be helpful.

There are many good resources available, specifically those from Shared Hope International.

We need to be more aware, we need to ask more questions and we need to get more involved; our children's lives depend on it!

# Self-Care for Resource Parents

Being a resource parent can be a rewarding experience, but it can also be challenging and stressful. It is important for resource parents to take care of themselves so that they can provide the best possible care for their foster children.

With the New Year in tow, now is the time to set goals and healthy routines that set you up for a successful year ahead!

Self-care serves two major purposes; first, it allows us to re-fuel and re-charge in order to give 100% to those we care most about.

Lastly, it demonstrates to those who look up to us, the importance of taking care of oneself and how the benefits effect every part of our life. Here are some self-care tips that resource parents can incorporate into their daily routine

**1. Take a Family Walk:** A family walk is a great opportunity to bond with your foster



youth, as well as get in your daily exercise.

**2. Cook Healthy Meals:** Self-care does not just need to be about lighting candles and running a bubble bath. Cooking healthy meals for you and your family can provide needed nutrition and a great bonding experience if your family enjoys cooking together.

**3. Create a Good Sleep Routine:** Getting enough sleep is essential for your physical and mental health. The lack of good sleep significantly effects the hours that we are awake and, therefore, has a snowball effect on

the events of your day. With a good bedtime routine for you and your family, everyone can wake up on the right side of the bed!

**4. Talk about Your Feelings:** When stress hits, it's important to talk about it with a trusted person. Whether that is a close friend, family member, therapist or church member, caregivers should have a supportive circle to embrace them.

**5. Reach Out for Help:** Seeking advice or help is important for resource parents because of the challenges that they face when caring for foster youth. Situations may arise that are new and daunting, so it is important that resource parents contact the foster youth's social worker or other members of the child's team. This is the very reason that a team is created.

Remember that taking care of yourself is not selfish. It is essential for your well-being and the well-being of the foster youth in your care.

## Unusual Incident Reports

Unusual Incident Report forms are a required form given to all resource parents when a foster youth is placed in the home. This form provides the caregiver with a method of documenting any incidents that the foster youth was involved in that caused any sort of injury to the child and/or were out of the ordinary.

The importance of submitting this form cannot be stressed enough as it maintains the level of communication needed between caregivers and agency staff when caring for foster youth. Documenting

incidents, no matter how big or small, can provide caregivers with a peace of mind that they are giving the best possible care to the foster youth in their homes.

The report needs to be provided to the RFA social worker and to the placement social worker by telephone, e-mail, or fax within 24 hours or by the next business day following the event.

Please refer to the Written Directives 11-06(b) for specific information that is required to be reported. Some examples

of when to fill out an unusual incident report are:

- The child scrapes his/her knees from falling while playing
- The child is scratched, bit, pinched or kicked by another child
- The child is bruised on the shins from being kicked while playing
- When a child runs away

To obtain an Unusual Incident Report form, please contact the child's primary social worker or your assigned resource family approval social worker.

**KERN**  
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