**Best of Category Winners**

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Compiled by Vanessa Lester, Research Intern

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**Children and Youth Best Practices**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kids &amp; Infants Seated Safely Program</td>
<td>Maricopa County, AZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Theft Protection and Prevention for Foster Children</td>
<td>Los Angeles County, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition Against Sexual Exploitation</td>
<td>San Bernardino County, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARMC/CFS Shadow Event</td>
<td>San Bernardino County, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Youth and Family Guide to College and Beyond</td>
<td>San Bernardino County, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Connect</td>
<td>San Diego County, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully Busters</td>
<td>Hillsborough County, FL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement Through Adventure: The McClintock Club</td>
<td>Mecklenburg County, NC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pool Pals</td>
<td>Mecklenburg County, NC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police, Educators and Kids (P.E.A.K.)</td>
<td>Henrico County, VA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABOUT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation’s 3,068 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public’s understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org.
KISS establishes educational methods to inform parents and caretakers of child safety but also involve local agencies and community organizations to administer child seat safety training. This is done by certifying their staff, providing assistance to organizations to create their own educational courses, performing site visits and connecting the newly trained to the safety professionals.

The Kids & Infants Seated Safely Program developed a website, www.kisscarseats.org, from the Maricopa County webpage to give patrons easy access to services provided by the program. This includes training dates, registration forms and flyers plus several links to technical support for child care restraint devices. E-mail lists have been established to keep all participants up-to-date on programming and help with marketing, referrals, recruiting technicians and networking amongst safety professionals.

The KISS program has run for 18 months and within that time span, 1,000 car seats have been distributed to families or agencies, 1,500 caregivers were given direct services and, through the National Highway Traffic Safety Association, 128 people have received certification as child passenger safety technicians. The annual report confirmed 100% of participants were given the information they needed about how to install car seats and how to put a child into the car seat. Kids & Infants Seated Safely program has had great success in educating about child safety and continues to recruit more technicians while maintaining existing numbers.

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Identity Theft can cause difficulties in a victim’s life and require hours to be resolved. An individuals’ credit provides clearance for major necessities in adulthood such as renting an apartment and making large purchases. Foster care children who fall victim to identity theft face the same constraints as adults whose identities are stolen, setting them up for failure as they enter the real world. Los Angeles County, CA has tackled this issue by creating the Identity Theft Protection and Prevention for Foster Children program. Teaming up with the County of Los Angeles Department of Consumer Affairs, Department of Children and Family Services and the three major credit reporting agencies (Experian, TransUnion and Equifax), the program handles credit issues prior to children exiting the foster care system by running their credit and looking for negative items. The County and the State also work to get credit agencies to place a freeze on the accounts of foster care children until the age of 18.

Adults are allowed to submit information to receive their credit reports for free, but this is not the same process for young adults. The County established requirements that accomplish the duties of this Identity Theft Protection program for minors. Coupled with the, California Office of Privacy Protection, a unique system was developed to assist the county in communicating information about foster care children to credit bureaus.

Privacy and information security are key aspects of this program to protect the confidentiality of the foster care children involved. The involved agencies were allowed to collaborate to perform the tasks needed for the Identity Theft Protection and Prevention program by the order of the local Superior Court. A secure website was developed in order for Los Angeles County to submit data. The database was used to find those credit reports that showed negative records so that they could be cleaned up.

The collaborative effort was needed in more than just the technological side of the program. Children and Family Services provided staff for data submission, to develop protocols for the website and submitting the information. The Department of Consumer Affairs took on the role of assigning a full time investigator along with a supervisor to assist in the program. Duties of solving identity theft cases were shared amongst the Department of Consumer Affairs and the Office of Privacy Protection.

After one year, the Identity Theft and Prevention for Foster Children program has checked the credit history of 2,110 foster children finding 80 children with inaccuracies on their reports. These 80 foster kids had more than 230 accounts in their names with an average of over $330,000 for numerous amounts of goods ranging from credit card debt to home mortgages. The Office of Privacy Protection and the Department of Consumer Affairs worked to resolve the false findings and were successful in granting these kids clean slates upon exiting the foster care system.

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The Coalition Against Sexual Exploitation is a symposium fighting for child victims of prostitution, sexual abuse, forced drug and alcohol addiction, rape and other abuses. Increasingly in San Bernardino County communities, young children were seen in popular prostitution areas and were discovered to have been involved in sexual trade. These children were sent to Juvenile Detention centers as criminals but the Coalition Against Sexual Exploitation has identified them as victims, discovering that many of these sexual experiences were clearly coerced.

Director’s of the District Attorney’s Office, the Sheriff’s Department, Probation Children’s Network, Child and Family Services, Public Defenders and the Department of Behavioral Health teamed up to create the Intervention and Assistance task-force consisting of a coordinator, clinical therapist, probation officer and social worker from the Child and Family Services for these children. The program provides public awareness, outreach, education, expansion of services and special trained clinicians to connect to children suffering from sexual exploitation. Objective Arts, software used to keep track of children in the program, also doubles as a strategic tool in eliciting risk, needs and strength information on each participant. This data is collected using the interview tool Child, Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS). Monthly, staff collaborates to identify needed trainings and outreach ideas. In the future, trainings for clinical and mental health professionals will be provided along with school based educational trainings for middle school and high school students who want to get involved in this field.

To the community, the CASE task force supplies an accessible agent available to report suspected at-risk children. CASE also supplies the community with “My Life, My Choice,” a specialty service that trains clinicians in the mental health, probation and child welfare services divisions for this specific realm of sexual exploitation. These groups of trained clinicians have assisted CASE in approaching detention centers where children housed there were arrested for prostitution and found that many children in these centers who were placed there for unrelated charges were also involved in prostitution. The number of victims of this heinous crime was discovered to be more than anticipated.

Along with outreach, CASE plans to use its funding for the next three years to research the best clinical, social, educational and legal strategies for victims of child exploitation. Their goal is to incorporate the new strategies into the program to provide better assistance.

This community wide effort attracted almost 100 participants to the National Human Trafficking Awareness Day and over 300 to the Walk Against Traffick in San Bernardino County. With the Coalition’s mission to recapture victims back into the community and defeat the individuals who exploit these young children, CASE has gained support and continues to make strides towards its goal.

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Growing up in the foster care system can be a difficult process for young adults, especially when the time comes to leave. It has been quoted that 3% of foster youth go to college, 65% of foster youth come out of the foster care system without a place to live, over half are unemployed and the females are four times more likely than the general public to use public assistance. The system not only lacks preparedness for independent life, it also may lack professional training for career building and development of goals for the future. Yet it is vitally important that youth are oriented in this area to support their future success. Foster care children need to develop self-sufficient behavior before embracing the world alone. San Bernardino County took this challenge on by creating the Shadow Event program.

Arrowhead Regional Medical Center and Children and Family Services created the Shadow Event Program to give foster care adolescents an opportunity to receive understanding and knowledge about career development, job expectations and culture to better prepare them for choosing a career. This program focuses attention on 17 ½ year olds to 21 year olds who will be exiting the foster care program within six months to provide them with the necessary steps for professionalism. Each child is assessed to gain an understanding of their educational level and career interest so they can be matched with a professional in their desired field. After scheduling of mentors and accommodations, youth shadow a mentor of their desired field for four hours. This shadowing process allows the foster care children to understand what each position entails, to gain experience in the job setting and also gives them the opportunity to ask questions of professionals in their field.

This effort includes many different factors and requires collaboration by several county departments. Foster care children are referred to the county’s employment support services in order to aid in choosing their career interest. ARMC staff act as mentors throughout the process and go through orientations and debriefing with the students to help guide them in this career building exercise. Students are even taken through a pre-ARMC Shadow Event session to go over basic manners and behaviors in a work environment. Guidance continues through the Shadow Event and after by showing them volunteer options in the medical center. The Aftercare Services Provider continues work with the children on future employment and career goals. The training is meant to provide development and a realistic view of what is to come after these youth age out of the foster care system.

Today, half of the foster care children in the Shadow Event program are currently enrolled in educational programs. Individuals who took advantage of Shadow Event report the affect it has had on helping them grasp a better understanding of professionalism and to develop career goals.

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National statistics show that less than 44% of foster care children are likely to graduate from high school. Studies indicate that only 38% have been able to maintain stable employment for one year. What seems to be the fate of these children is homelessness, incarceration and transience. Some foster care females become pregnant and end up relying heavily on welfare for survival. The source of this downward spiral stems from the lack of educational training at early ages. A positive school experience
enhances a sense of well being, can be a tool for transitioning into adult stages of life, can provide knowledge to help individuals build better economic and self-sufficient futures and can help children get involved in their communities. It has been found that strong academic preparation is the most important factor in postsecondary school success.

The Youth and Family Guide to College and Beyond is a program created by San Bernardino County, CA to assist youth and their caretakers in high school graduation and in their consideration and/or preparation for college. The program provides The Guide to each student to utilize throughout their school career. It consists of lessons for completing academic subjects, timelines for college admissions, website references, resources for children in special needs programs and many other support tools for completing school. The Guide is used specifically to provide information on graduation requirements based on credits and gives information on post-graduate options such as independent study, online courses, programs and entering into the workforce.

The Guide is also used to provide a realistic view of life after foster care and future education. The Anne E. Casey Foundation performed a study that showed only 15% of foster care children enroll in courses that prepare for college. The Guide is used to provide that knowledge and allow students/caregivers to begin thinking about the future. With a likelihood after foster care of homelessness and unemployment, it is important to consider these steps while children are still in high school and still under care. The Guide puts a special emphasis on the importance of post-secondary schooling for future success, especially in career building and living independently. It keeps students thinking about what will be next while they are still finishing up their high school careers.

One key aspect of The Guide is the rule that requires the support and attention of foster care parents, teachers, counselors, mentors, tutors, family members and social workers to put the plan into effect. This process allows each student to continue his education with an entire team of supporters.

The Guide is a support tool that not only lists information on success but provides goals, examples and acknowledgment to prepare foster children in attaining these goals. It encourages a strong support system from mentors and caregivers and helps foster care children transition out of the foster care system with a well-rounded education to help prepare them for adulthood.

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Camp Connect
San Diego County, CA
Population: 2,933,462

Camp Connect is a program focused on keeping foster care children connected to their siblings. By reconnecting brothers and sisters who were separated by the foster care system, San Diego County assists in reducing incarceration and homelessness rates for these kids and promotes self-esteem.

Many different circumstances can contribute to the separation of siblings. Some children require special needs, forcing them to be placed in homes designed for their specific attention. Others are placed into the program later than their siblings. Still, separation from parents and family and being away from their neighborhood and communities is traumatic to children and difficult to overcome. Separating siblings has been documented as one of the most serious problems in the child welfare system by Gordon Johnson, president and CEO of Jane Addams Hull House Association, a social service agency. With this in mind, San Diego County has implemented Camp Connect to keep these siblings together with as much of a normal childhood as possible. The bond created between brothers and sisters in this program becomes stronger than even between siblings growing up in the same household because they rely on each other for guidance and support.
Child Welfare Services, overseer of the Camp Connect program, hosts several fun active events for foster care children to attend and unite with their siblings. These events range from amusement parks to basketball games, all in the spirit of building childhood memories with each other. One of the highlights of Camp Connect is a four-day overnight summer camp. The primary focus of this program is to keep siblings united. In such adverse circumstances as the foster care system, it can be a challenging childhood. By having these events, siblings can spend time together and build a strong bond for the future.

Information about Camp Connect is posted on the County’s updated webpage. Collaborative efforts with Promises2Kids helped establish the site for fundraising efforts, calendars of upcoming events, forms for volunteers and registration of children interested in participation and care givers who have children involved in the program.

Camp Connect has many public and private partners. The Child Abuse and Neglect Vision Council of United Way donates $50,000 for siblings groups, gives mentoring for siblings, supports the camp connection events and assures sustainability of the program. Promise2Kids is the main fiscal and lead agent. Child Welfare Services acts as the recruiter, orienteer and handles measuring outcomes, administration and reporting.

Over 600 children have been served through this program.

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⭐️ BULLY BUSTERS  
Hillsborough County, FL  
Population: 1,132,152

One of the most common but most traumatizing childhood experiences is bullying. Bullying can come in many different forms such as name calling, verbal and mental abuse, physical taunts and sexual battery. For children, bullying can affect self-esteem, psychological thinking and ability to make friends and makes a lasting impression about school in general. In fact, high rates of child suicide have result from some form of bullying. It is a serious issue to address for our children and youth in America.

Bully Busters, an active collaboration of Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office, the County’s Criminal Justice Office and Crime Stoppers of Tampa Bay, is a program dedicated to public awareness about bullying. It includes youth involvement, community education and the encouragement to report bullying behavior. The program supports a zero tolerance attitude and thus includes people of all ages but is aimed towards children aged 8-14. This program is a venue for children to have their voices heard and to put an end to the torment that bullying can cause. Most bullying programs are affiliated with an educational institution but the Bully Busters program is county wide and allows a wide range of kids to participate and have a place to turn when witnessing or experiencing bullying.

Bully Busters is governed by a 13 member board including relevant agencies, parents, caretakers, children and youth groups. The monthly board meetings are designed to create resolution tactics and develop approaches targeting bullying in their communities. The Bully Busters Youth Council (BBYC) is comprised of county youth and is used as an ambassador team in the field to raise awareness. This has led to the Too Good For Drugs and
Violence Walk and Kidfest. With the support of Crime Stoppers, a bullying hotline was established for the program to make it easier to report sightings. Bully Busters has also promoted itself in the community with its logo on local park benches and on television through public service announcements, and with numerous posters and bookmarks.

Hillsborough County developed a webpage for the Bully Busters program to provide information about bullying and its many effects. There is also additional information for adults who face bullying including cyberbullying. Public service announcements are aired by Bright House, a cable program in the County. The program also uses promotional tools for advertising such as flyers supported by Bully Buster Youth Council Meetings. Using these forms of promotion allows all of Hillsborough County to become aware of the program and gives children a source of assistance in this difficult situation.

The local community support and media advertising has made Bully Busters a very successful program. The hotline that is available 24/7 receives reports that are reviewed by sheriff’s offices. It has received tribute on Nickelodeon “Nick News” and has informed youth about an avenue to stop the injustice. This program has given hope to many bullying victims.

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Achievement Through Adventure: The McClintock Club
Mecklenburg County, NC
Population: 796,372

It is no surprise that childhood obesity, diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and lack of connection to nature is on the rise. A large part of this is due to the inactivity of today’s youth. Increased technology and television programming keep children stagnant and sitting the same number of hours that they dedicate to sleep. With this lack of movement and enjoyment of the outdoors, children are beginning to lose connection to the outside world.

Achievement through Adventure: The McClintock Outdoor Club is a program focused on reversing this negative trend in children and youth. The program encompasses a variety of outdoor activities, taking place twice a week for the entire school year, giving students an opportunity to enjoy nature. The main focus of the program is to get children moving in the outdoors while educating them about nature and aiding in building relationships.

This program, averaging a 15 student enrollment, is provided assistance through the Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation facilities. Two and a half hours are available weekly for programming during the school year. The students also go on monthly field trips and engage in programs held in and out of school time.

Programs range in size and detail. The Native Garden program consists of planning and planting a native garden for the school’s landscape. The garden introduces native species and teaches their benefits over wild ones. Many of the plants produced fruit as well. Conserving water is an element of the native garden where students learn to utilize rain for the development of the landscape. BioBlitz, a day and night program held weekly, teaches students about the many different...
organisms around the school by taking an inventory of what was found. This program encourages learning of new topics and also allows students to get a first hand visual understanding of these new creatures. The Prairie Conservation project is a large scale restoration plan. Students took a field trip to the sight three times. They collected seeds from native plants within McDowell’s prairie at the McDowell Nature Preserve, planted the seeds at the preserve’s greenhouse and returned to the sight to plant the developed saplings. Students also embarked on an Interpretive Hiking Trail program that was built outside the school and gave tribute to the leadership and accomplishments of the McClintock Club. Other interesting programs include campfires along with trips to Crowder’s Mountain State Park. The goal of these events is to use nature to educate inner city kids, help students grow an appreciation for their community, break down social barriers amongst students and provide opportunities for active play. All of these programs contain elements of education and outdoor fun.

The outdoor experience is one not soon to be forgotten and Mecklenburg County is helping youth use it as a tool to guide them into the future with diversity and an open outlook on life.

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Pool Pals
Mecklenburg County, NC
Population: 796,372

Mecklenburg County, NC established Pool Pals to create a healthy and fun learning environment for children with disabilities. It can be difficult for disabled children to engage in certain childhood activities. For many disabled children, activities are taught through private lessons at home. Or, alternatively, disabled children involve themselves in groups that tend to modify activities. Pool pals takes the element of group learning and the specific needs of disabled children into consideration by creating a special group learning session just for them. With this program, an environment is created to promote socializing, games and acclimation to water. Including games, songs and visual props, youth are entertained and educated in a friendly setting. The group environment of disabled kids keeps children from needing private lessons and allows them the same great fun with other kids.

Pool Pals sprang from a desire of disabled parents and children to introduce water programs combining education in speech, coordination and balance along with peer relationships, and group interaction while being water based. The main goals of the program focus on building social skills and building comfort in the water. There are two different age groups, 2-5 and 6-9, and activities tailored to these ages. Each session is held on Tuesday and Thursdays for 6 weeks at 30 minutes a session. The hands-on games are used to build peer relationships while focusing on motor skills for throwing, passing, reaching and submerging. These games are useful for working with children suffering from sensory and balance impairments. Special hands-on boards are used for these activities. The boards are used as props with different pictures, letters and numbers and played with during songs and games. Each program is strategically laid out to encompass education and social relationship building along with other important goals.
To focus on building peer relations, each aspect of the activities is done cohesively. From entering the pool together to keeping eye contact, the element of group work is highly encouraged. Pool pals follows the judgments of the Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) to assure each step in the sessions are in line with their goals and are affective. The first session is used as an introduction to the facility, participants, leaders and safety rules of the pool area. The second session is a reintroduction and begins practicing listening skills and water games to get participants accustomed to the pool. Session three consists of peer interaction and listening while in the water. Group games and submerging is the focus of the fifth session and the sixth allows demonstration of skills.

The program’s success has been complimented by the parents of participating students. The progress that was tracked proved an increase in attention, following directions and socializing. Students began with very shy mentalities but opened up to the group and to the water environment. Pool pals has created an environment of learning and fun for children who may not have such an opportunity in a group setting and has helped children grow in education and relationships.

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⭐ POLICE, EDUCATORS AND KIDS (P.E.A.K.) ⭐

Henrico County, VA
Population: 280,581

Henrico County’s PEAK program grew from an increased need of police support in public elementary schools. Scenarios like the 1991 massacre at Columbine sparked an interest in the importance of school security. In the past, the 47 public elementary schools and 4 private elementary schools in Henrico County, VA were assigned 7 police officers. But with increased security threats and a growing county population and school system, the need for more law enforcement became apparent.

PEAK is a collaborative effort between police, school officials and students that tackles the problem of increased security and crime prevention. Education and building positive relationships between students and police is the main goal of the program. It is comprised of 17 comprehensive lesson plans on a wide variety of topics including drug education and good decision making geared to relate to 5th grade students. Educators contribute in this program by providing topic ideas based on scenarios children in their courses may go through at such an age. Law enforcement officers communicate with teachers at the beginning of the school year, discussing current events and trending topics related to difficulties of students. They plan 6 main themes for the school year. Also, a program on strangers is presented to kindergarteners, allowing these young children to build a positive relationship with police officers while learning about stranger danger. The program also works to incorporate visitation to 1st – 4th grade students as well. A culmination ceremony is held at the end of the program.

An important role for PEAK officers throughout the school year is to build a relationship with the students. The program targets 5th grade students and aims to build a positive relationship between law enforcement and kids. With this outreach, students
can view the police as protectors as oppose to being on the opposite end of the law. This is especially true regarding crimes committed in schools in which school police are first on the scene and will be in charge at the incident. The heavy involvement of PEAK law enforcement officers allows students to see their presence and work with them during the year to build bonds and become educated on the role of police officers. Educators play a liaison role to assist officers in building bonds with the students.

Along with education and building relationships between students and law enforcement, PEAK focuses on security. PEAK officers perform routine safety at their elementary schools including safety programs, fire drills and performing duties of crisis plans. Signal Blue, a strategic response used in case of gunmen and active shooting in schools, is a responsibility of PEAK personnel as well. Standard law enforcement and crime prevention is also a component of PEAK officer duties.

The multifaceted Police, Educators and Kids program reaches 51 elementary schools, covering over 22,000 students. Geared towards building positive relationships and protecting the school system, Henrico County has provided a program accomplishing this goal and more. With increased crimes, violence and threats to schools, programs like PEAK provide an avenue of safety.

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