

CITY AND STATE

New Hope For Foster Children

FOR THE FIRST TIME, AN EVENT BRINGS TOGETHER SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE OR ON PROBATION

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They are born into homes they did not choose and grow up subjected to conditions they cannot control. They jump from home to home without the security of a family and on occasion are jailed for a time in the prime of their adolescence. These are children and youth who live in foster homes who, to get ahead, require additional help and society's full attention.

To support them with this objective, the L.A. County Resource Fair was organized yesterday by the Education Coordinating Council (ECC). The goal of the event was to bring together agencies that provide services for the development of children and youth who are in foster care or on probation.

Information about early childhood education, after-school programs, extra-curricular activities, job referrals and assistance in completing school applications or finding a mentor or tutor were some of the resources available to youth at the location.

Ben was one of them. At 14, Ben looks small for his age. There are small scars on his head in places where there is no hair. He speaks in a soft voice and is easily distracted, especially when he is told that he can choose a gift from a game wheel. He chooses a small flashlight.

Ben came to this fair with a group from a transitional residence where he lives. They were taken to the fair to apply for their birth certificates and social security numbers, a service also provided at the event.

According to state reports, almost 70% of prisoners detained in California prisons were in a foster home. In the county of Los Angeles, three thousand children enter the

(foster care) system each month. Jenny Serrano well understands why this happens. At 31, Jenny functions as the transition coordinator for the Chief Executive of Los Angeles County. Her job is to help youth who are leaving foster homes successfully transition into independent living.

"Unfortunately, this statistic does not surprise me", she says, referring to the percentage of prisoners who come out of the (foster care) system. "Any person starting a new life always has a security net in his/her parents or family: they help pay the rent, or for their studies or to buy a first car; they help select a college or apply for an official document."

"This doesn't occur with the young people coming out of foster care," she adds. "This is difficult if you are not prepared to go out on your own... This happened to me: I switched schools all the time because I lived with one family, then another and another; sometimes together with my brother, sometimes separately. Finally, I realized that I had to do things for myself."

Jose Huizar, Councilmember for District 14 and president of the ECC, confirms that for these young people, the current system can be "like a puzzle in which the pieces don't always fit together. Here we help them create an education security net so that all the programs and organizations serving these youth are aware of their special education needs," he said.

More information on programs to volunteer as a mentor to a minor or to become foster parents is available by calling the ECC: (213) 974-5967 or CASA: (323) 526-6666.



How to reverse a negative trend, a path leading to failure? By giving youth information and attention, say activists and professionals.



Preschool education; extra-curricular activities; job referrals; college search, are some of the activities at the fair.

Photos: Aurelie Ventura/La Opinión