

# Henry R. Perea: Lighthouse for Children symbolizes new First 5 direction

By Henry R.  
Perea

When I think of First 5 Fresno County, I think of a solid organization with a bold vision. It is a strong, bright light working day in and day out to change the odds for children ages zero to five in Fresno County. The community looks to this organization to set the course for our young children to thrive. By creating an environment that puts first health promotion, early learning and strong families, First 5 is guiding young children toward a bright future.

So it's fitting, after much vision, planning and work, that Friday marks the opening of the Lighthouse for Children. Situated in downtown Fresno, the Lighthouse for Children will serve as a hub of services supporting Fresno County families in their journey to raise healthy, happy children. The services that will be provided in the building will help redirect the course for many.

The grand opening also is symbolic of great progress at our First 5. Armed with a fresh vision, the organization is taking head on the issues facing children. Under Executive Director Emilia Reyes' leadership, our focus is to ensure all kids in Fresno County — from those living in the urban center to those living in the far corners of the county and all of the young children in between — receive the same access to learning opportunities. This goal will be accomplished by focusing more funds into direct services to children. New leadership boldly cut costs on the building while maintaining the integrity of its purpose in the community. In doing so, the organization was able to shift more dollars to much-needed direct services.

Now more than ever, First 5 is intent on creating a continuum of care. Much like the builder laid the foundation for the Lighthouse for Children, First 5 is working with the community to create a child-friendly foundation in Fresno County that makes sure each and every young child receives the opportunities they desperately need.

Most recently, First 5 has taken on important initiatives that will change the odds for young kids in Fresno County.

The Birth to Third Grade initiative is a bold challenge designed to significantly increase the percentage of children reading at grade level by third grade. Research shows those who are not reading at grade level by third grade are at a higher risk of not graduating from high school.

We want so much more for our future generations, which is why First 5 is funding five school districts across Fresno County to develop innovative community school-based programs designed to support children from birth through third grade. This important work already is yielding positive results. School districts are working with community partners and early childhood education providers to coordinate and establish that continuum of care.

Imagine a Fresno County where all children attend preschool and a Fresno County where all parents promote optimal child health and development. Directing funds to the Birth to Third Grade initiative will help us to realize this goal. We are just now finishing year one of implementation.

First 5 is committed to reducing black infant mortality. In 2011 the county's black infant mortality rate was nearly three times the statewide average. First 5 will not sit idly by as more young babies pass away. The organization, working together with Fresno State and other community partners, is collecting important data and maternal narratives to better understand why these innocent babies are leaving us too soon. The information that evolves from this research will spur systemic changes to improve the odds for these babies.

We're also committed to a project that will establish a comprehensive integrated perinatal mental health system of

care in Fresno County. By focusing on maternal mental health, we have yet another inroad into a young child's life. If we can help the mom, we can help her children. And, of course, at First 5 Fresno County helping young children is what we're all about.

These are just a few examples of the great things going on at First 5 Fresno County. I hope you'll agree that we really are a lighthouse. That we really do serve as a beacon of hope for young children and their families in Fresno County.

Please join us at 10:30 a.m. Friday at the Lighthouse for Children, 2405 Tulare St., in downtown Fresno. We as a community have much to celebrate.

Fresno County District 3 Supervisor Henry R. Perea is First 5 Fresno County Commission chairman.