

SETTING THE STAGE FOR SUSTAINABILITY



Fern Tiger Associates | 201 Clay Street, Suite 290 | Oakland, California 94607 | 510.208.7700

CHILDREN'S NETWORK OF SOLANO COUNTY

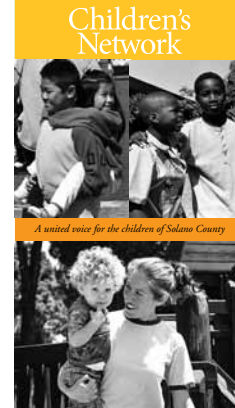
The fortunes of Solano County seem to rise and fall with the economy of the San Francisco Bay Area. A largely rural county with interspersed urban areas — including Vallejo, Fairfield, and Vacaville — Solano residents can commute to San Francisco, the East Bay, and Sacramento. It is attractive to a diverse population of skilled and professional workers with families because they can find more affordable housing here than in other parts of the Bay Area. The county has a higher population of families with children under the age of 18 than most other counties in the Bay Area. But many of those families rely on child care and other services — and far too many of these children live in poverty. During periods of economic growth, the county's housing, employment opportunities, and population have expanded significantly, only to contract during leaner times.

Children's Network of Solano County was founded in 1982 to advocate for a wide range of quality children's services and to foster collaboration among multiple partner agencies in Solano County. From the start, the organization served a dual role that was complex and often misunderstood — acting as an independent watchdog of county funding and support for children's services, while at the same time serving as staff liaison to legally-mandated county committees, including the

PROJECT DATE: 2002, 2010, 2012

SECTOR: *Children and Family Services*

FTA SKILLS AND SERVICES:
Strategic planning; institutional visioning; communications, outreach, and marketing; design and materials development; leadership planning and transition



CHILDREN'S NETWORK OF SOLANO COUNTY promotes programs that support families. The Network provides research, training, and grants administration while advocating for government policies that benefit children.

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Local Child Care Planning Council, Family Resource Center Network, the Child Abuse Prevention Council, and what came to be known as the Children's Alliance (a standing council appointed by the Board of Supervisors).

At the time of its 20th anniversary in 2002, the Network realized that its communications strategy, outreach materials, and visibility did not reflect the professional caliber of its policy and on-the-ground work. The Network turned to Fern Tiger Associates (FTA) to assess the organization's programs, existing outreach efforts, and community perceptions of its work.

FTA conducted a thorough assessment of the agency, which included more than 30 interviews with key internal and external stakeholders; a review of agency programs, history, budgets, and outreach materials; and first-hand observations of Network meetings and events. Among the core findings presented to the Board was that the Network was well-known and respected among knowledgeable County stakeholders and viewed as fulfilling an important role advocating for children. However it was not well-understood by wider audiences. The Network had failed to fully leverage its work and successes for strategic outreach. Existing organizational materials lacked a unified look and did not reflect either the professionalism of the programs or the benefits of the integration of the various programs. They failed to capture the role of the Network as a "weaver" of critical organizations and professionals working on behalf of children and families in Solano County.

Because the Children's Network of Solano County grew over time to administer several different programs, while building a strong advocacy role, it had always been difficult to describe. Following a comprehensive organizational assessment and a review of existing agency materials, FTA determined one of the things that the organization needed was a print piece that could show all of the parts at the same time. Thus FTA conceived and designed an accordion-style piece which enabled a reader or viewer to learn about all of the Network's parts at one time and to understand the organization as a whole.

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FTA made a series of recommendations to guide the Network to broaden relationships with community stakeholders and partners; to identify important audiences; and to clarify agency messages. In addition, FTA created effective outreach strategies and developed a suite of newly-designed marketing materials, which included a fresh organizational identity and tagline; a fold-out agency brochure and other companion pieces with engaging documentary photographs of local children and families; a concept and format for regular newsletters; comprehensive design guidelines; and recommendations for a new website.

Following the success of the initial project, Children's Network approached FTA for two additional projects in the ensuing years. In 2009, the Network aimed to boost the visibility and effectiveness of its Children's Trust Fund (CTF). CTF was created through county legislation and provides approximately \$100,000 in annual funding for child abuse prevention in the county. Funding sources for CTF include a portion of fees from the issuance of county birth certificates; fees from specialty vehicle license plates; interest income; and private donations, primarily through a flyer inserted into residents' property tax bills and mailed to more than 132,000 homeowners.

In years past, the tax bill insert yielded very few donations, but the Network believed that with better visibility and a more professional approach, these private donations could increase. FTA proceeded to assess community support for the Trust, which included a



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review of existing materials and positioning of CTF; an analysis of a sampling of private donors; and discussions with county staff to understand important administrative issues related to the Trust. FTA then developed an extensive visibility plan to encourage residents to help prevent child abuse through support of the Trust. FTA redesigned the property tax insert to create an informative piece with helpful data – yet all within very strict guidelines, such as no color printing, no photographs, and very tight size restrictions. The number of donations increased.

Most recently, in 2012, the Network again sought FTA's expertise to advise on organizational restructuring in light of changes in government funding. FTA's deep knowledge of the history and programs of the organization – combined with an analytical review of current county trends (demographic, economic, and political) and an updated round of stakeholder interviews – resulted in a series of transition options for the board to consider as they made important decisions for the future of the Network.



