Heather Sleuter, executive director of the Yolo Crisis Nursery for nine years, takes satisfaction in helping restore parents’ hope for the future. In addition to provide free emergency childcare, the nursery provides extensive services for parents to resolve their difficulties.

Photo credit: Jennifer Ditty

Director nominated for statewide leadership award

By Karen Adams
Member, Yolo Crisis Nursery Board of Directors
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What do the National Guard and the Yolo Crisis Nursery have in common?

Both have well-trained individuals ready to respond to emergencies, of course. Now they are linked in another way as well.

“We’ve entered a partnership with the California National Guard to provide emergency care for the children of Guard members,” says Heather Sleuter, executive director of the Yolo Crisis Nursery. “Deployments can come quickly, with little time to make childcare arrangements. As always, we want to be sure young children remain in safe hands at all times.”

Sleuter contacted local Guard leaders as part of her ongoing outreach on the Nursery’s behalf. In her 10 years with the Nursery, she’s made it her mission to make sure Yolo County parents know the nursery is available to them free of charge, at any hour of the day or night, and for any reason, if there is a young child (birth through age 5) who needs care.

“Heather’s new partnership with the Guard is one of many reasons we just nominated her for a prestigious James Irvine Foundation 2017 Leadership Award,” says J.D. Denton, president of the nursery board. The awards recognize and support California leaders who are advancing innovative and effective solutions to significant state issues.

“Heather consistently goes above and beyond the job requirements, creating a program that could become a model across California,” Denton says.
In nominating her for the award, Denton described how Sleuter successfully led the nursery through a critical period – the transition from oversight by EMQ Families First to becoming a new independent nonprofit, Yolo Crisis Nursery Inc.

“Next month, we’ll finish our first full fiscal year of independent operation,” Denton says. “Most people don’t realize what a Herculean effort it took on the part of many, but particularly by Heather. There were huge tasks such as obtaining all new licensing and the required re-training of staff. But there have also been myriad smaller challenges, like operating a business without a credit card, for which we are too new to qualify.”

Keeping the doors open and the books in the black are all well and good. But perhaps the most important indicator of Sleuter’s leadership is the decrease of substantiated cases of child abuse cases among Yolo County children ages 5 and under. There were 273 cases in 2005, just before Heather joined the nursery; in 2014 there were 173, a 37 percent drop.

How does the nursery prevent abuse? By being available to families when parental stress soars. In cases of child abuse, parents are the perpetrators 85 percent of the time. The nursery provides a safe place for the kids while staff works with the parents in resolving the crisis situation.

“There’s no doubt that under Heather leadership, the Yolo Crisis Nursery has been key to continuing the downward trend of substantiated abuse in the county,” Denton says. “Preventing abuse is so important on so many levels.

“Research tells us that in addition to physical injuries, kids who are abused or neglected, including those who witness domestic violence, are more likely to experience cognitive, emotional, and behavioral problems, such as difficulty in school, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, delinquency and early sexual activity.

“In addition, child maltreatment can disrupt brain and physical development, particularly when experienced in early childhood, increasing the risk of physical and mental health problems,” Denton says. “Children who are abused or neglected are also more likely to repeat the cycle of violence by entering into violent relationships as teens and adults or by abusing their own children.”

Sleuter takes pride in the nursery’s work with children and families. “Parents arrive here with such looks of despair and hopelessness. Just reaching out for help can be so difficult and can seem overwhelming,” she says.

“But as we work with them, whether it’s in finding housing, a job, or whatever is is, they gain hope. They can see a future for themselves and their children. They don’t become unpleasant statistics. Families stay together and thrive. The nursery is a treasure for Yolo County.”

As the director of one of only four crisis nurseries in California, Sleuter recognizes her unique position in providing critical human services.
Says Denton: “Heather is keenly interested and available to assist other communities in replicating the Yolo Crisis Nursery model, using early intervention in keeping children safe from child abuse and neglect and keeping children and families together, healthy and whole. We are one fortunate community to have her here.”

The Irvine Foundation’s 2017 leadership awards will be announced early next year.

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On Thursday, the Yolo Crisis Nursery won the annual Tahtimihin “Star” Award for excellence in community service from the Yocha Dehe Winton Nation Community Fund. Sleuter accepted the surprise honor at eighth annual Partners in Philanthropy luncheon, thanking the community fund for the recognition and for its 2015-16 grant of $25,000 grant in support of the nursery’s child abuse prevention efforts. Since 2000, the Community Fund has provided more than $23 million in philanthropic funding to 347 diverse organizations in the region.

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The 2016 Big Day of Giving is a wrap, and some thank-you’s are in order. First up is Davisville Management Co., which offered to match $10,000 in “BIG Day” giving dollar-for-dollar up to $10,000. Despite technology glitches in the online giving platform, our community gave $20,005 to the nursery. With Davisville’s match, our grand total stands at $30,005.

We are deeply grateful for a community that supported us to that extent, even when it wasn’t at all clear where or how to give. We thank the Davis Enterprise for publicizing the event, our staff and Friends of the Yolo Crisis Nursery support group for their leadership, and the individuals who gave $25 to $1,000 to advance the Nursery’s mission of preventing child abuse and neglect in Yolo County.

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If you weren’t able to attend the May 14 showing of the mini-documentary “Hunger at Home,” made by Davis 13-year-old Marley Kubby Adler, you still have a chance. Marley is using the film as a means to continue raising funds for the four nonprofits that appear in the film, with one being the Crisis Nursery. The others are Yolo Food Bank, Davis Community Meals, and Student Nutrition Services at the school district.

After you make a donation at https://www.crowdrise.com/hunger-at-home1, you’ll receive a link to view the 22-minute film online. At the May 14 viewing at the Varsity, Marley raised $2,000 in donations at the door. She hopes to raise another $2,000, so that she can give each nonprofit $1,000, according to her mother, Raychel Kubby Adler.
Marley created the film as a project for her Bat Mitzvah, and she takes you on a journey to learn about hunger in our town, particularly among children. The results may surprise you. The film is well worth the effort to see it. Thank you, Marley.

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