

SAN FRANCISCO

Burton opens doors for homeless children

[John Wildermuth, Chronicle Political Writer](#)

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Former state Sen. John Burton may be retired, but his Rolodex isn't.

Almost since the day he was termed out of office in 2004, the Democrat has been on the phone with friends, politicians and would-be donors, raising money for his John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes and boosting the visibility of the problems facing homeless children.

"When I knew I was going out the door, I wanted to do something new," Burton said in an interview at the Delancey Street Foundation's Crossroads Cafe on San Francisco's Embarcadero. "Now this is what I'm doing. I probably spend about 50 percent of my time on this."

Since the foundation opened, it's contributed \$1 million to \$1.5 million a year to groups caring for children who need shelter and foster children who find themselves turned out of the system the day they become 18.

The foundation, on the Web at www.johnburtonfoundation.org, works with nonprofit groups that provide services across the state.

It doesn't take a lot of money to make a difference, said Martha Ryan, who runs the New Beginnings program, sponsored by San Francisco General Hospital, St. Luke's Hospital and San Francisco's Child Welfare Department.

The program works with pregnant drug addicts and other very high-risk mothers in an effort to provide them with prenatal care so they can deliver healthier babies and keep the children out of the foster care system.

"We can do a ton with the \$50,000 the Burton Foundation gives us," Ryan said. "We've been very fortunate to have their help."

The 74-year-old Burton dismisses his individual efforts as the work of a lifelong "do-gooder," but he is passionate about the needs his foundation seeks to fill.

"We're doing stuff the government should do," he said. "All of those years (in the Legislature) when I could really have been doing something, I was never aware of how (messed up) the foster care program was."

The fervor and intensity that drove Burton during more than 30 years in public office has transferred into his charity work. It's often a new experience for people more accustomed to the slower pace of traditional nonprofits, he admitted.

"My strength is being able to get to the point," he said. "Too often people get caught up in talking to I don't know who and taking forever to get something done. I know enough people to be able to bypass that stage and talk to someone so that I can either get it done or find out right away it can't be done."

Being on a first-name basis with many of the movers and shakers in California and across the nation also makes a difference, Burton said.

"I'm lucky that there are some wealthy people who like me, like what I'm doing, and know I'm not going to piss their money away," he said.

Honorary board members of his group include actors Tom Arnold, Warren Beatty, Annette Bening and Clint Eastwood, along with Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca and Anaheim's Republican mayor and former state lawmaker, Curt Pringle.

Burton opened his foundation with only an administrative assistant on the payroll. He's since added an expert on the foster care system and a couple other specialists to the staff, but he wants to keep the operation lean.

"My theory is to keep the (financial) nut down," he said. "I'm not raising this money to build something for me."

But while the money always matters, it's Burton's lobbying that has had the greatest impact on the foundation's goals. He's talking with Sen. Barbara Boxer, who worked as an aide in Burton's Marin County congressional office in the 1970s, to allow people to stay in the foster care system until they are 21. Burton and the foundation also are pushing to persuade the Census Bureau to individually count the children in the foster care system in the 2010 census.

Last year, Burton said, "I went in to see (Gov.) Arnold (Schwarzenegger), looking for more money for foster children. He put \$50 million into the (November 2006) housing bond for emancipated foster kids."

To the surprise of no one who worked with him in Sacramento or Washington, Burton isn't satisfied with what his foundation has been able to do. Term limits took him out of public life before he was ready to go, and he's still wistful for the direct influence -- and financial clout -- a powerful politician can have on the issues he believes are important.

"I'm not happy with the amount of money we're raising, although everyone else in the joint says it's fabulous," Burton said. "In the past, when times were good, (the Legislature) could have put up \$50 million and been done" with the foster care problems.

The foundation is starting a scholarship fund to help children emancipated from foster care continue their education, and Burton is on the lookout for other places he can find support for homeless youths.

"All I can do is follow my brother's theory," Burton said of the deceased Rep. Phil Burton. "Do as much as you can for as many people as you can, and then start over."

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