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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

October 21, 2008

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**COUNTY EARNS TWO DISTINGUISHED STATEWIDE AWARDS**

*Human Services Agency Recognized by California State Association of Counties*

**MERCED** – Representatives from the California Association of Counties (CSAC) were on hand today at the Merced County Board of Supervisors meeting to award the Merced County Human Services Agency (HSA) with two CSAC Challenge Awards. The County's All Dads Matter Program was awarded the statewide California Counties Innovation Award, and the High Schooled Assistance Dog Program was awarded a Merit Award for counties with a population of 200,001 to 700,000 residents.

*"We are honored by these awards and want to thank CSAC for this recognition. The Merced County Human Services Agency prides itself on our ability to tackle many of the difficult challenges within our community in innovative and cost effective ways," commented Ana Pagan, Director of the Merced County HSA. "Whether it's our Boot Camp for New Dads program teaching men the importance of their role as fathers, or helping our troubled youth make a positive connection by training an assistance dog, our agency works hard to think outside the box and make a difference in our County."*

The County's All Dads Matter Program incorporates the All Dads Matter Resource Center, Men's Support Group, Boot Camp for New Dads, and the Celebration of Fatherhood event to offer education, support and encouragement to fathers in our community. All Dads Matter is designed to help a father stay engaged in their children's lives, in order to reduce poverty, crime, suicide and child abuse and neglect.

*"The quality of this year's Challenge Award nominees was outstanding, and the difficult selection of winning programs was based on demonstrated leadership, innovation, collaboration, creativity, resourcefulness and effectiveness, as well as the potential for successful elements of the program to be used as a model for other counties," commented Jim Wiltshire, Deputy Director of CSAC. "I want to offer my congratulations to Merced County and its Human Services Agency for receiving two of the CSAC Challenge Awards. We had more than 255 Challenge Award entries from 38 counties, and it is impressive to have a county this size to perform so well against counties from across the state."*

The High Schooled Assistance Dog Program combines troubled youth and young puppies in an effort to teach the young people the importance of empathy, communication and responsibility. Youth are responsible

for training a puppy to be an assistance dog. In addition to the improved outcomes for youth, the program also helps improve the availability of assistance dogs in our community.

For more information regarding the All Dads Matter program, please contact Lamar Henderson at 385-7521. For more information regarding the High Schooled Assistance Dog Program, please call Karen Stum at 385-3000, ext. 5823.

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For more information regarding Merced County, please visit our website at [www.co.merced.ca.us](http://www.co.merced.ca.us)