

Alex Gonzales' daughter has been in Big Brothers Big Sisters for the last five years, and by his account, the program has greatly benefited her.

"It's a very good program. It influences my daughter quite a bit. Her 'big' is a big part of her life. My daughter looks up to her," the Las Vegas resident said.

Big Brothers Big Sisters, which has an office in Las Vegas, is the nation's largest mentoring organization for children 6 through 18. The group says there's proof that it helps youths become productive citizens.

Now, the local office, which serves San Miguel and Mora counties, has a waiting list of 18 boys who need "bigs," the term for adult mentors. Typically, Big Brothers Big Sisters has a harder time finding mentors for boys than it does for girls, said Maggie Romigh, who is the local community coordinator.

Now, the program has more than 30 matches in the community. During the school year, that number is above 40, Romigh said.

Volunteers can either have school-based matches, which means they'll visit their "littles" during lunch at schools, or community-based matches, which means they'll spend two to three hours twice a month with the littles.

Recently, Romigh approached the City Council to consider a program in which city employees could choose to take one hour of paid leave per week to spend with "littles." City officials said they would consider such a proposal.

The local chapter is approaching other government entities about the same idea.

According to Big Brothers Big Sisters, children in the program are 46 percent less likely to begin using drugs, 27 percent less likely to start using alcohol and 52 percent less likely to skip school. And they are more able to get along with their families, the program maintains.

Felicia Martinez, who works in the local Big Brothers office, said background checks of adult mentors are conducted, and the program matches bigs and littles by finding out their similar interests and preferences.

"I do monthly contacts to see that they're going fine," she said. "Bigs and littles can become like family."

Thomas Carrillo's three daughters are in the program, but his son is one of those on the waiting list.

"The program has been good for my daughters. The people are really nice to them," he said.