



A PLACE FOR ME



THERE ARE
400 YOUTH AND
YOUNG ADULTS
WITHOUT A HOME
IN SACRAMENTO.
WE CAN MAKE IT
ZERO.
HERE'S HOW.

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*Kamani Bennett,
21, says she wishes
she had a place to
sleep at night.*
**PHOTO BY CHARLES
GUNN**



WHAT IF SHE WERE YOUR CHILD?

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Challenging our views on youth homelessness

In a midtown Sacramento living room, a few millennials are huddled around a tablet watching “The Walking Dead.” Another is watching a basketball game, some are texting and others are talking about their holiday plans. This could be a group of young folks in any house, except these kids happen to be homeless.

It’s the day before Thanksgiving, and Niki Jones is reminding the youth at Wind Youth Services Drop-In Center that the space where they come to relax, access services and enjoy a hot meal will be closed for the next two days. Wind is one of only a few Sacramento organizations with the sole mission of working with homeless youth. Its drop-in center opens its doors

to young people seeking respite seven days a week, excluding holidays.

Jones, a street outreach worker at Wind, hands out gloves, socks, scarves and tarps — essentials that will help get them through the next two days. Jones says socks are a huge need — a basic item that, without organizations like Wind, Sacramento’s homeless youth would possibly go without.

“[We’re] closed the next two days, and there’s supposed to be some weather,” Jones says, encouraging them to take what they need to keep warm over Thanksgiving. It’s a need other Sacramento youth wouldn’t be facing that holiday.

**"Never once in my whole career,
in the hundreds of youth I
have worked with, have I ever
thought, 'That kid screwed up.'
In fact, it's just the opposite."**

BRIDGET ALEXANDER
Executive director, Tubman House

Many of us pass young, homeless people in Sacramento every day, as we go into the grocery store or head to work. But do we see them? See them for who they really are? Do we see troubled kids whose poor decisions led to life on the streets? Or do we see young people with promise, whose lives have been impacted by factors beyond their control?

People who work with these kids say society needs to change its perception of youth experiencing homelessness. But can individual acts of caring and understanding make up for the institutional failures that push children and young adults to the streets? Empathy is necessary, but may not be sufficient, as the solutions will be as complex as the reasons they are without a home in the first place. But if everyone begins to view homeless youth as not so different from their own children, that would be an important first step. After all, these kids are part of our community's fabric and its future.

BEING YOUNG IS HARDER WHEN HOMELESS

Growing up is a challenge for everyone. Young people have to deal with the stresses of learning to make good decisions, navigating relationships and planning their futures. When going through a hard time, many young people have the privilege of relying on friends and family for guidance and support.

For many youth experiencing homelessness in Sacramento, that is not an option, says Bridget Alexander, the executive director of Tubman House, a transitional living program for homeless youth and their families.

"Kids that don't have access to those kinds of safety nets end up going to some agency, [and] getting viewed as this super irresponsible kid,"

she says. "They get branded, and it becomes a detriment as they go along."

Kamani Bennett, who has been homeless since age 17, says people don't understand that she and her boyfriend, Kenneth, simply long for a safe place to sleep.

"We're homeless because we have to be, not because we want to be," she says. "If I had a place to sleep, even just a room, everything would be easier."

Homeless youth also feel the disparity between how society values their lives and the lives of their housed counterparts. Young, housed people are encouraged to pursue the American Dream. They are told the sky is the limit if they work hard enough. Homeless youth get a different message. They are told to be responsible and find a job — any job — and are discouraged from attending college or starting a family.

"There's this stereotype that if you're homeless you shouldn't have goals because you need to focus on what's going on right now, and the only thing you can do is get a low-paying job that's not going to support you," says 18-year-old Keara Logan, a Tubman House resident who became homeless at 16. "I don't think that our future should be so downplayed."

Since moving into Tubman House in spring 2015 with her family, Logan has graduated high school, completed her first semester of college and found her infant son a good pediatrician. The heart and drive she puts behind all of her efforts is only one example of how, despite discouraging messages and society's stigmatization, many of our city's homeless youth maintain hope as they work toward a brighter future.

"Never once in my whole career, in the hundreds of youth I have worked with, have I ever thought, 'That kid screwed up.' In fact, it's just the opposite," Alexander says.

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ENDING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN SACRAMENTO

A look at the numbers

400
homeless youth
live in
Sacramento.

Experts estimate that
number may be
closer to

600
due to the fact that it's
hard to count youth
who couch surf or are
in unsafe situations.

12 shelter beds in
Sacramento are
specifically for
homeless youth.

200 young people
experiencing
homelessness seek
services at Wind Youth
Services each month.

90 transitional-aged
youth are on a
3-6 month waiting list
for shelter.

27 youth are on a waiting
list for Tubman House's
18-month program.

**We know the need.
Now we need the resources.**

More shelter beds
+
Affordable apartments
+
Supportive housing

= 0 homeless youth living
on Sacramento streets

2020 is the year the City
of Sacramento
and HUD would
like to end youth
homelessness.

Christa Canady, 21, wants to go back to college when her housing and finances are stable.

PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES



“Everyone’s just trying to get by, in a way, and some of them live outside.”

CHRISTA CANADY
Wind Youth Services client

EDUCATION IS A BRIDGE OUT OF POVERTY

School has always been important to Christa Canady, and that hasn’t changed since she’s been on the streets. She shares a goal with many others her age: to complete college.

“I’m gonna go back when I’m ready and financially stable and can just kill it and get it done in the best way,” the 21-year-old says. “I love school. That’s what I do, that’s what I’m good at.”

As a student at Luther Burbank High School just a few years ago, Canady was motivated, working part-time to save money for college. Her parents encouraged her to stay in school, but could not offer much in the way of financial support when she got into Humboldt State University.

“They have four other kids, you know, so ... I was my backbone,” she says.

She worked at the mall to support herself while she pursued a film major and English writing minor, and planned to get an on-campus job as

well so she could afford the apartment she shared with a few friends. Like many college students, juggling work and school was a struggle. After only one semester, she was faced with a difficult decision.

“It became a choice — like, do I want to go to school? Do I want to go to work?” she remembers. Because she had bills to pay, she didn’t have much of a choice at all. She quit school.

Soon after, she lost her job and could not afford to pay rent, so she moved out and bounced around living with family members until she eventually settled back in Sacramento. In April 2015, she spent her first night outside in Sacramento. She usually sleeps by the river with her partner, Red, and their dog.

Homelessness has a devastating impact on educational opportunities, making it that much more difficult to break the poverty cycle. According to the Institute for Children and Poverty, homeless children are nine times more likely to repeat a grade, four times more likely to drop out of school, and three times more likely to be placed in special education programs.

While Canady knows education can be a bridge out of poverty, her day-to-day focus is on meeting basic needs. The connections she has made at Wind have made life a little easier and contributed to her sense of well-being.

“Here, we stick together,” Canady says, while having a snack at the Wind Youth Services Drop-in Center. “All these people in this room — this is a safety net for everyone.”

FACING DISCRIMINATION: LGBTQ YOUTH ARE VULNERABLE

Miller Figueroa has found his place, and a happier life, within that safety net. He knew he was gay since he was in elementary school, but growing up he learned quickly not to mention his sexuality in front of his mother. He remembers how hard it was to come out to her.

“I was not allowed to talk about it at all,” recalls Figueroa, 19. “I cried and cried.”

He is not alone. Jesse Archer, Youth Program Coordinator at the Sacramento LGBT Community Center, says youth are often kicked out of their homes because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and some young people decide to leave rather than live in the closet. Archer says the center serves around 200 youth clients each week and estimates that around a quarter of them are experiencing homelessness.

While the general youth population is only 10 percent LGBTQ, 40 percent of homeless youth

are LGBTQ, according to a survey conducted by the Williams Institute. Family conflict is certainly not the only factor; poverty and employment discrimination also play roles.

"Finding employment can be difficult," Archer says, especially for transgender youth. "They're often stuck in low-wage, minimum-wage jobs, and that creates a really difficult situation."

He says raising the minimum wage would make it easier for LGBTQ youth to support themselves and stay off the street. He adds that he would like to see California laws that protect people from discrimination in the workplace implemented nationally.

In school, LGBTQ youth often face bullying and harassment, and the negative reaction to their identity does not go away when they become homeless. LGBTQ youth face institutional biases that can place a heavy burden on them. Archer says depres-

sion, anxiety and internalized homophobia or transphobia is a common problem. Figueroa's upbringing illustrates how institutions — in this case, religion — can hinder the development of a positive self-image for young LGBTQ people. His mother was raised in a church that believed being gay was wrong.

"If it was even mentioned, [my mom] would become upset," Figueroa says.

Since he found out about Wind Youth Services and the Sacramento LGBT Community Center, things have begun to look up for Figueroa. They have helped him find happiness and pride in who he is, as well as permanent housing.

"They've provided me a loving environment where I can say I like men and not feel judged," he says. "I'm completely happy now and a completely different person than I was a few months ago."

"I'm completely happy now and a completely different person than I was a few months ago."

MILLER FIGUEROA

*Wind Youth Services and
Sacramento LGBT Community Center client*



Miller Figueroa, 19, wasn't accepted in his home due to his sexual orientation. After living on the streets, he's recently found stable housing.

PHOTO BY CHARLES GUNN

A PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION: CRIMINALIZING HOMELESSNESS

When Kamani Bennett and her boyfriend sleep on the street at night, one of the most troubling things is how they are treated by police. On one occasion, an officer was particularly cruel.

"He said, 'What's up with you homeless people?'" she recalls. "He asked us, 'Why don't you get a job like the rest of us?' I hate it when people say things like 'you homeless people,' like we're different from them."

Shahera Hyatt, director of California Homeless Youth Project, says she would like to see law enforcement act as a resource for the homeless population, so that homeless youth might feel safe approaching a police officer for help.

"Homeless youth are more often the victims of crime rather than the perpetrators," Hyatt says. "That should be understood and seen by law enforcement."

Sacramento and cities nationwide, however, have taken a more aggressive approach, passing laws that punish people for having no place to rest their head at night. In 2010, Sacramento passed an anti-camping law that prohibits sleeping outdoors, resting in public parks and possessing camping paraphernalia. Homeless individuals and their advocates have largely opposed these laws, saying they are unconstitutional and discriminatory.

"Criminalization does not address homelessness, it actually exacerbates homelessness, and it is inhumane and costly," Hyatt says.

Many others agree. In a report released in February 2015, the UC Berkeley School of Law Policy Advocacy Clinic stated several cities — Sacramento included — have enacted laws that push out and fail to serve "some of California's most vulnerable residents." In August 2015, the Department of Justice argued that laws criminalizing sleeping in public violate homeless individuals' constitutional rights under the Eighth Amendment. Rather than punishing homeless people who may have limited access to over-burdened shelters, the Department of Justice says cities should offer more services and help people into permanent housing.

The wheels of change may be turning too slowly. Homeless youth in Sacramento feel the impact of these laws and negative police attitudes. Canady says she is often disappointed with the way police respond to homeless youth and wants them to show greater empathy when working with her peers.

"I wish that they would come out here and talk to these kids the way they would talk to their own teenagers," she says. "Everyone's just trying to get by, in a way, and some of them live outside."

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HOUSING THE HOMELESS

Sacramento's need for affordable housing

Perhaps one of the most obvious institutional problems related to homelessness is a lack of affordable housing.

"We have seen a disinvestment in affordable housing over several decades and that has had a tremendous impact on homelessness in our communities," explains Shahera Hyatt, director of California Homeless Youth Project.

Sacramento's Mixed-Income Housing Ordinance requires developers to dedicate 15 percent of new development to low- and very-low income units. However, developers can easily buy their way out of this requirement with a \$2.58-per-square-foot fee. Those fees, which some argue aren't high enough, go into the city's affordable housing trust fund.

Darryl Rutherford, executive director of the Sacramento Housing Alliance, says his organization would like the city to make more of an effort to provide affordable housing. He says the city could enact an entertainment tax on things like sports tickets, or explore more innovative models of emergency housing, like providing a safe ground for homeless camps or utilizing the "tiny house" movement. Ultimately, permanent affordable units will help keep people housed. More housing options will keep families, and children, off the streets.

"We need to see more funding put into the affordable housing trust fund so more homes can actually be developed to meet the needs of the lower-income population," he says. "That's really what it's going to take."

"I was prepared to have my son, but I wasn't prepared to have him in the environment that I did."

KEARA LOGAN

Tubman House client

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THE CHALLENGE IN ACCESSING SERVICES

For young people on the streets, accessing essential services can be a struggle. The widespread value of individualism coupled with reduced funding for social services has exacerbated the problem of insufficient help for homeless youth. They often face long wait times for general and mental health services, housing support, shelter space and more.

"We tried to get into a shelter, but most of them are full and you have to get on the waiting list," says Bennett, adding that transportation is an issue. "We don't have the bus money to get to the shelters to see if they have the room."

Adequate mental health services are also needed nationwide, and increased government funding for mental health therapies, group counseling and peer support would help many homeless youth. However, Hyatt emphasizes that "having a mental health diagnosis when you are really low income often means being treated by the criminal justice system as opposed to the mental health system." There are few preventive care options, and mental health problems can become very serious before a homeless youth gains access to any supportive services.

By expanding mental health services for homeless youth and creating programs that cater to LGBTQ youth and youth with a history of trauma, we can help homeless youth manage their mental wellness before problems are aggravated by a stressful life in the streets.

BUILDING A STRONG FAMILY, IN SPITE OF CHALLENGES

Like any good parent, Keara Logan wants the best for her 19-month-old son, Douglas. She reads to him often, teaches him both Spanish and English vocabulary, and takes pride in how smart, polite, and joyful he is. And while every new parent has ups and downs, Logan's road to a happy, healthy family has been especially hard.

When Logan was 16, her mother was laid off from her nursing job, so she, her siblings and the extended family they took in were kicked out of their apartment and homeless for the first time. She was seven months pregnant.

"It was really scary," she recalls. "I was prepared to have my son, but I wasn't prepared to have him in the environment that I did."

They bounced around from town to town, staying in motels, occasionally with friends, and were eventually living out of her mother's car. They sometimes spent the night at 24-hour Safeway supermarkets, where they would purchase something

Keara Logan was homeless and pregnant at age 16, but she hasn't given up her dreams for the future.

PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES



cheap every few hours to buy time with a roof over their heads.

Logan gave birth to her son on May 2, 2014, with her now-husband, Doug, and her mother by her side. What should be a heartwarming moment in a new parent's life was devastating for her. Because she was homeless, child welfare workers were quick to warn the new mother that her child could be taken away.

"Everybody treated me like I knew less than nothing," she remembers. "I'm young, I started too early, but that doesn't make me stupid," she sighs, adding, "and that doesn't make me unsafe."

Having spent two years in CPS custody as a child, Logan knew that the threat of losing her son was very real. It terrified her, and made her feel like a bad mother — a feeling that persists today, no matter how far she's come.

She does not let that stop her from pursuing her goals, and Tubman House has helped eliminate the barriers on her path. Since Tubman House offers free childcare to residents, Logan is able to attend college. She is practicing self-care through counseling. She's going to school to be a pediatric RN, and will have earned three associate degrees by the semester after she plans to leave Tubman House. But above all, Logan wants to be a good parent. She wants her son to be happy, healthy, and compassionate, and to know where he came from.

"I want him to have whatever future makes him happy," she says, "and also know that we got to where we were because somebody else helped us. So that means that he should go out and show somebody else a helping hand."

OVERCOMING THE TRAUMA OF THE STREETS

The transition between child and adult is already tough, but being on the streets makes it even harder.

Some of the stories Jones has heard from youth on the streets are unimaginable to people who have not been in that situation. Earlier in 2015, Jones received a text from a young woman who was the victim of a violent crime on the streets.

The text read: “I was raped on the streets and I called the police and they never came. Can you believe that? They never came.”

When youth have experienced trauma, the pains they have suffered are often exacerbated on the streets. They receive little protection from the police force and other institutions from further traumas.

The dangers of victimization can be even greater for homeless youth in the LGBTQ community. Once on the streets, LGBTQ youth are victimized at a greater rate than their heterosexual peers. They are 7.4 times more likely to experience acts of sexual violence than heterosexual homeless youth, and they commit suicide at higher rates (62 percent) than heterosexual homeless youth (29 percent). Transgender youth are often forced to classify themselves as a gender they do not identify with, putting them at risk for physical harm in shelters.

Youth on the streets find different ways of coping with their harsh reality. Nineteen-year-old Dani Griffith, a Wind client, says when she was on the streets she smoked marijuana to cope. She says she saw other homeless people on harder drugs, which she avoided.

She also suffers from anxiety, but in recent months has been linked up with services through Wind that are helping her make progress.

INTERVENTIONS THAT COME FROM THE HEART

Anne Salvatori, a street outreach worker with Wind, approaches her job from a place of understanding. When she was homeless as a young adult, she lost friends and her family did not know how to help.

“I can go to work every day and know what it’s like,” Salvatori says. “I get it. ... Society is cruel and you don’t have anybody to turn to. It’s such a challenge.”

The empathy Salvatori has is common among those who provide services to homeless youth. It is a labor of love, and it is never easy, as handling crises is ingrained in their work.

“That’s something that we end up encountering quite a lot, is just despair, hopelessness,” Jones says. “There are people in crisis at least once a day.”

Many service providers utilize trauma-informed

care to effectively help homeless youth. Rather than take a one-size-fits-all approach, trauma-informed care takes an individual’s unique and often traumatic backgrounds to heart. Under this model, service organizations provide a safe, supportive environment that emphasizes both structure and flexibility. They know that each individual’s circumstances differ from the next, and want to offer whatever it takes to help that individual.

“They are given a place and a setting where they have a sense of power and control, and a sense of empowerment,” says Dr. Greg Kim-Ju, psychology professor at California State University, Sacramento. “It’s more comprehensive, looking at the biological, physical, social — looking at all these factors to try to help the individual.”

This approach is an effective tool that serves many, but for some, it is not enough for them to overcome the institutional barriers they face, and the struggles of life on the streets.

As Jones moves along West Sacramento’s River Walk Park, she talks about the young people they’ve lost over the past year. In May 2015, a young man died in a Midtown alley — on H and 25th streets. They held a memorial service for him at the drop-in center. Driving past an empty lot that used to be a bridge to housing program motel before being torn down, she says they lost someone there, too. He was a young man who hanged himself.

“He was 22,” she says. “He was a writer, and a game maker, and tree climber.”

Like many homeless youth, he was a young man who could have had a future if given the chance. Jones believes that if more people saw these young people as part of our society, our entire community would be stronger.

“If we can understand that and begin to treat people as if they’re a valuable part of our community, then we would have a whole different world,” she says. □

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NIKI JONES

*Street outreach worker,
Wind Youth Services*

Niki Jones listens to a client at Wind Youth Services. Jones, a street outreach worker, says she wishes the community would see the value in our homeless youth.

PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES



WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP HOMELESS YOUTH



PHOTO BY
ANNE STOKES

Produced with funding from Sierra Health Foundation in partnership with Wind Youth Services, Tubman House, Sacramento LGBT Community Center, California Youth Homeless Project and N&R Publications.

There is no quick fix that will solve the complex issues surrounding homeless youth. Food and clothing donations are important, but can't solve the societal problems that drive homelessness. The most important thing is to view these young people as part of our community and treat them with humanity.

BE MINDFUL

- Rethink your **biases**.
- **Do not ignore** homeless youth, or just walk by. Say hello.
- Imagine they are a **member of your family**.

BE SUPPORTIVE

- **Support political candidates** who take a real stand against poverty.
- **Offer assistance** to organizations that provide services to homeless youth day in and day out.
- **Reach out to a youth** on your block, in your school or at your church who needs a connection. Stand by that youth as they navigate toward adulthood.
- **Offer your professional services**, such as web design, car repair or landscaping, to a homeless youth agency to help stretch its budget.
- Business owners: **Offer a struggling youth a job or internship**.

BE ENGAGED

- Follow the progress of the **Homeless Bill of Rights** at nationalhomeless.org/campaigns/bill-of-right/
- **Talk to your elected officials, city officials and police** about the housing and safety needs of homeless youth.
- **Visit cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov** for greater understanding of policy changes that could end homelessness.
- **Join advocates** on the forefront of policy issues.
- **Lead a movement** at your workplace, church or social group and partner with agencies to expand housing options.