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ESSAY

# Beyond the 100-day challenge

Finding housing for 200 homeless youth is only the first step

BY SHELLY HUBERTUS

**Sacramento's 100-Day Challenge to Tackle Youth Homelessness** came to life when we were selected as one of five communities nationwide to participate in this project, which encourages intensive collaboration and tight deadlines to force innovation and move the needle on youth homelessness.

Led by the “boots on the ground” service workers who witness the impact homelessness has on youth, our team set a wildly ambitious goal: House 200 youth in 100 days, with 20 percent of them pregnant or parents and 65 percent experiencing mental health symptoms.

From day one, Sacramento's team began making incredible strides toward our goals.

We called the 700 youths on our waiting list to begin building a meaningful list of youths experiencing homelessness. Agencies are sharing information to ensure that when beds become available, we are able to reach a qualified youth immediately.

We created an accurate system of counting the youth we house. As Sacramento County Supervisor Phil Serna recently noted, Sacramento's homeless system is like a corporation that uses different accounting systems for each product. We don't know how we're doing because various agencies don't exchange data. Once we were able to develop a way to share data confidentially, we were surprised to see how rapidly we moved toward a list of 200 youths.

We collaborated to connect youth to permanent supportive housing options that have traditionally been accessed by adults. When providers are at the same table, we are better able to supplement each other's efforts.

These are only some of the victories and lessons we've gleaned, and we're still going. As of Tuesday—day 78 of the challenge—we had reached our goal and found housing for 200 young people.

But this challenge is not solely about counting better. It's about *doing* better. We haven't added a single bed for homeless youths, and recently learned we lost funding for 30 units for households headed by youth, which are currently housing 50 youth and children. Most urgently, we've lost some of the few beds we have for young parents, even though a study estimated that 44 percent of young women experiencing homelessness are parents.

A 2018 study by Chapin Hall tells us that every additional day of waiting for housing is associated with a 2 percent decrease in a youth's likelihood of staying in stable housing. Unfortunately, because the “most vulnerable” get priority, that damage is needed in order for youth to qualify for many existing housing options.

How do you become vulnerable? Be assaulted. Be sick. Be defeated. Be homeless for 12 months. Be reliant on drugs to endure the nights. Be forced to exchange sex for a night inside. Housing instability doesn't qualify you for housing, you need trauma first.

The team calls upon city, county and system leaders to commit to funding programs that fit the developmental needs of youth. Let's invest in our youth and design programs that create lasting change. We invite you to meet with our team and listen.

Half of chronically homeless adults had their first experience of homelessness as youths. What if we had done something on day one?

Shelly Hubertus is a prevention and intervention coordinator and a team leader for Sacramento's 100-Day Challenge to Tackle Youth Homelessness.

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