



# Too busy to help

California created liaisons for homeless students—and set them up to fail

BY MARGHERITA BEALE

**Brett Sawyer wears at least two hats at American River College.**

Not only is he the community college's student life supervisor, but two years ago Sawyer was asked to serve as the homeless youth liaison. It's a role he takes seriously, but one that doesn't come with additional time or resources to help the high number of students who lack a stable living situation.

"It's just hard with the other responsibilities that we all have," Sawyer said. "But we ultimately, we want to serve our students, so you pretty much stop what you're doing and help that student the best you can."

Sawyer isn't alone.

In April, the California Youth Homeless Project and the ACLU Foundation of California released two surveys of the state's public K-12 schools and community colleges that found that homeless liaisons "are not given the capacity, funding, training, and other resources to do their jobs effectively."

According to the survey, 82% of liaisons said the type of support they were least able to provide was the thing their students needed most—housing.

In California, about 20% of all community college students experienced homelessness in the last year, while 60% reported being "housing insecure" in the previous year, according to a survey of 40,000 students at 57 community colleges from nonprofit group The Hope Center.

In 2016, then-Gov. Jerry Brown approved Assembly Bill 801, also known as the Success for Homeless Youth in Higher Education Act, which required community colleges and the California State University system to identify liaisons to support homeless students and former foster youth.

But ineffective outreach, a lack of resources and the fact that liaisons often juggle multiple roles have exacerbated the challenges of reaching California's most vulnerable students.

In his two years as homeless liaison, Sawyer says the group he supervises totaled

between 40 and 50 homeless students. It's difficult to know how many found housing because, while some students keep in touch, others virtually disappear, Sawyer said.

Shahera Hyatt, director of the California Youth Homeless Project, said she and her family experienced homelessness throughout her school career, extending into her own time at American River College.

There was no homeless liaison then, and resources for students facing homelessness were scarce or insufficiently promoted, she said.

Hyatt says the landscape has improved quite a bit since then, but homeless liaisons still face a host of other issues, primarily stemming from a lack of funding for a part-time position.

"Many of the people that are doing this work on our colleges are working two or three jobs," Hyatt said. "Over 60% reported spending only zero to five hours a week doing that job. When you look at how many homeless students there are, you know they could not possibly be doing their job as effectively as they would like to."

Though the state requires colleges to identify homeless liaisons, it does not allocate funding to hire them, so most campuses assign liaison duties to employees with existing workloads.

Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness, said one way to help overworked homeless liaisons would be if the state provided funding, which was the survey's chief recommendation.

"Ideally, we would increase the funding pretty dramatically for homeless liaisons and have that be a dedicated position," Erlenbusch said. "Not one person wearing three hats."

Sawyer favors a similar solution.

"I hope some funding can go toward either more resources for homelessness or eventually hiring someone who has that as part of their main job duties," he said. □

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**Brett Sawyer**  
homeless youth liaison,  
American River College