



Meeting Youth Where They Are How Sacramento's Prevention and Intervention Program Is Changing Lives By Jason Sitar, Deputy Director

In 2024, Sacramento County counted 437 transition-age youth experiencing homelessness on a single night, with 40% completely unsheltered. But that number only captures one moment. It doesn't count the young people doubled up on friends' couches, sleeping in cars, or cycling between unsafe situations. Many are former foster youth, pregnant or parenting teens, LGBTQ+ youth rejected by families, or young people with criminal records that block housing access.

This local crisis reflects a statewide reality: of the 4,000 youth who age out of California's foster care system annually, 31% will experience homelessness. Without intervention, 61% of those homeless former foster youth will face incarceration. Prevention and Intervention programs exist to interrupt this trajectory before it accelerates.

What many people don't realize is that youth homelessness isn't just about individual young people, it's often about young families. Last year, we served 621 individuals across 420 households, with nearly a quarter being households with children. Many of our transition-age youth are parenting infants and toddlers or caring for younger siblings. A 19-year-old experiencing homelessness while pregnant faces dramatically different barriers than a single 18-year-old, yet traditional homeless services often fail to account for these complexities.

For eight years, LSS has operated the Prevention and Intervention (P&I) Program in partnership with Sacramento County. We've learned that when you meet young people exactly where they are—without judgment, without bureaucratic barriers, and with immediate help—transformation becomes possible.

Our approach centers on four critical intervention points. **Prevention** means stopping homelessness before it starts. We provide emergency financial assistance for back rent, utilities, or other costs that threaten housing stability—quickly and without bureaucratic barriers.

Diversion means finding alternatives to the shelter system. Through mediation, family reunification support, or connection to safe housing with relatives or supportive adults, we help young people avoid entering the shelter system entirely.

Intervention means ending homelessness for those already on the streets. We connect youth to emergency shelter, transitional housing, or permanent housing, whichever fits their situation best.

Housing Navigation means helping young people not just to find housing, but keeping it. We work with landlords, help navigate voucher systems, and provide the support that makes the difference between housed and homeless.

LSS brings expertise in rapid rehousing, working with former foster youth, helping homeless college students, and navigating complex housing systems. Our team works from The Creation District, a drop-in center where young people can make art, record music, and connect with peers before they ever have to ask for help with housing. It's a place to belong first, and a place to get help second.

This matters because trust comes before transformation. A young person who's been let down by every system they've encountered doesn't open up to a stranger in an office. But they might open up to someone they've seen at the Creation District, who never pushed, who was just consistently there.

Our team doesn't wait for young people to navigate office hours and intake appointments. We meet them in parking lots, outside tents, at school, wherever they are. When someone calls us about a young person in crisis, we respond within 24 to 72 hours depending on capacity when the call is received.

We don't require drug tests, background checks, and only require proof of income for those exploring independent housing or rental assistance. We don't turn away young people with criminal records, poor credit, or past evictions. We don't separate young parents from their children or demand that a 20-year-old caring for younger siblings choose between housing and keeping their family together. We don't tell LGBTQ+ youth they have to fit into programs that don't affirm their identities.

These aren't just values—they're practice. And they work.

Last year, we served 621 individuals across 420 households, with 100 of those households including children. We helped 169 find housing and prevented 104 from losing the housing they had. Our housing retention rate remains at 98% for youth who complete our program. Sustainability assessments are a major reason why our recidivism rate is so low. We don't just place a youth into housing; we ensure they are placed somewhere they can maintain with the resources and income they have.

What makes the difference? **Speed matters.** When you're homeless at 19, a three-month waitlist might as well be forever. We move fast.

Flexibility matters. Every young person's situation is different. We tailor solutions to fit real lives, not force lives to fit our programs.

Relationships matter. We've spent years building partnerships with landlords who'll take a chance on youth, service providers who specialize in trauma care, and employers who understand that a gap on a resume might mean survival, not laziness.

Expertise matters. Our team knows every housing program, benefit system, and support service in Sacramento County. This expertise turns months of bureaucratic struggle into streamlined pathways to stability.

Support matters. Getting housed is step one. We stick with young people as they learn to be tenants, manage budgets, maintain jobs, and build the skills that lead to lasting stability.

The P&I model works. We've proven it over eight years, with more than 600 lives changed last year alone. But we also know we're just scratching the surface of the need.

Young people shouldn't have to experience even one night on the streets. With the right support at the right time, homelessness can be brief, rare, and one-time. Every young person deserves the chance to focus on their education, career, and future—not on where they'll sleep tonight.

That's the future we're building, one young person at a time.

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