

Jennifer Friend: Project Hope Secures \$2.1M Grant

Aims to Transform Support for Unhoused Youth

■ By KAITLIN AQUINO

COSTA MESA — **Project Hope Alliance** is well on its way to reaching all unhoused students in Orange County.

The nonprofit in June received a \$2.1 million grant from **CalOptima**, the Orange-based public agency responsible for providing health insurance to California residents.

The “systems change” grant enables Project Hope to scale its model of support for unhoused youth by partnering with OC school districts and the **OC Department of Education (OCDE)**.

Costa Mesa’s Project Hope aims to use the funding to transform how students experiencing homelessness are identified and supported through school staff training.

“This is the first time CalOptima has ever given a ‘systems change’ grant,” Project Hope CEO **Jennifer Friend** told the Business Journal.

Friend last year was honored at the Business Journal’s **Innovator of the Year Awards** for her work quintupling Project Hope’s reach and growing the nonprofit’s funding 40% to \$2.8 million.

“There are a lot of organizations that applied for the grant that are dramatically larger than we are,” Friend said. “But CalOptima saw our vision to rise up and meet the needs of children experiencing homelessness.”

Today, there are over 23,000 students experiencing homelessness in OC, according to Project Hope.

The issue of youth homelessness is a personal one for Friend, whose family struggled to find a permanent roof over their heads while she lived in Huntington Beach.

High School

When Friend grew up, her family hopped around motels, sometimes relying on the kindness of close relatives and friends for a place to stay.

Her situation is common for many families in OC. Motels along Costa Mesa’s Harbor



Boulevard and Buena Park’s Beach Boulevard are filled with families who use them as de facto housing, she said.

Friend’s experience has shaped the way Project Hope supports children experiencing homelessness. The nonprofit’s growth has primarily been driven by her method of integrating the nonprofit’s services on school campuses.

“We don’t have signage,” Friend told the Business Journal in a prior interview. “Our offices don’t say anything about homelessness, so kids don’t have to feel ashamed or worried that they’re going to be discovered.”

The nonprofit’s systems change initiative, enabled by the CalOptima grant, is also guided by the same dignity for unhoused students.

“Currently, most registration forms by school districts ask ‘are you currently experiencing homelessness’ to identify” unhoused students, Friend said. “A family faced with just that question may be reticent to answer because they’re scared of social

services being called. They’re not sleeping on the street, but they don’t have a permanent home, or they’re ashamed.”

In collaboration with OCDE, Project Hope is changing the form’s question to ask recipients to check off which situation applies to them. The provided options will include “living in a home, living in a motel, living in a shelter and living with two or three other families.”

“That will give us a more accurate number of how many students are experiencing homelessness,” Friend said.

The form adjustment is one of many steps Project Hope is taking to reach more unhoused children. The nonprofit is also gearing up to train school administrators, nurses, faculty and security to help identify unhoused students and to direct them to resources.

“We will never stop doing our programmatic work, but our ability to also elevate this to a systems change level—which I believe can be replicated nationally—will help a much larger percentage of students experiencing homelessness,” Friend said. ■