$600,000 donation brings help for homeless at Huntington Beach High

By THERESA WALKER | thwalker@scng.com | Orange County Register

PUBLISHED: November 29, 2021 at 7:00 a.m. | UPDATED: November 29, 2021 at 9:33 a.m.
Jennifer Friend, Project Hope Alliance chief executive officer, in Costa Mesa, CA, on Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2021. Project Hope Alliance, a school-based program that works with children who are living in motels, got a $600,000 grant from a private foundation to take its services to Huntington Beach High School, Friend's alma mater. The donor wishes to remain anonymous, but the money will allow Project Hope Alliance to have a case manager on campus to connect with up to 30 homeless students and also do outreach to their siblings in surrounding schools. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Even at a school where the dominant images seem to be of affluence and privilege, Huntington Beach High, homelessness is a real problem.

Though the school includes some of the nation's wealthier ZIP codes, some of Huntington Beach High's 3,000 students live at motels, in trailers parked in a relative's driveway or RV's that settle overnight in a Walmart parking lot. Their families rent space in garages, cram into living rooms or bedrooms in apartments with other families. Some sleep in cars. Some couch surf.

Maria Vega, a guidance specialist at the school, sees what is otherwise hidden. She serves as a liaison to students who fit the official definition of “homeless” and qualify under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act for services intended to help meet their basic needs, including food.
“I talk to those kids. I see those kids,” says Vega, who is going on her seventh year at the school.

“Those are the kids I want to hold and say, ‘How can I help you?’”

This school year, Vega said, Huntington Beach High has identified about 30 McKinney-Vento students, though they believe there are many others who aren’t counted because they hide their circumstances. The official number also fluctuates during the year because students can be forced to move or drop out of school without much notice, outcomes that have become more common because of the upheaval linked to the coronavirus pandemic.

But soon the school will be able to do more for those students.

Under a new partnership, Huntington Beach High will work with Project Hope Alliance, a nonprofit whose school-based programs focus on improving educational outcomes for children from families experiencing homelessness. By tapping into some specific social services and learning support programs, Project Hope Alliance has a track record of helping students who struggle with housing graduate from high school and, often, go to college.

Thanks to a private donation, Project Hope Alliance has $600,000 in seed money to embed a case manager at the school starting next year. That person will work with students and bring resources and services to their parents and siblings — similar to what has been done at schools in the Newport-Mesa Unified School District the past six years and at a Santa Ana grade school campus since March.

Help provided through the program can include anything from food, clothing, school supplies and transportation, to helping parents find work and job training, health care, housing programs, or counseling. Case managers often become long-term mentors to the students.
The Huntington Beach High donor, described as a Christian family-run foundation, wishes to remain anonymous. But that foundation has been a supporter in the past, said Jennifer Friend, chief executive officer for Project Hope Alliance.

“They’ve been watching our work and investing in it.”

**Hidden struggles**

Vega suspects the actual number of students on campus who struggle with housing could be three times the official number, if not more. It’s not just a gut feeling. Prior to COVID-19, Vega was in touch with about 60 homeless students at Huntington Beach High.

Then came months of remote learning, deeper economic hardships, worsening housing situations and, most tragic of all, parents dying.

Vega doesn't know what happened to the students who didn't return to school this year.

“We’re still trying to look for them,” she said.

At the same time, there is a misconception that poverty and homelessness doesn't exist at Huntington Beach High.

“People assume we are in kind of a ritzy area. But we have the same challenges other areas have,” Principal Daniel Morris said, adding that there have always been students on campus who have needed “extra care.” The school has a food pantry and clothing available to them.

“Some of those families, you'd never know that they are dealing with homelessness.”

Friend, a graduate of the school's Class of 1988, knows this only too well. She lived it.
Jennifer Friend, third from left, is shown here in the 1980s when she was active in the Huntington Beach High Model UN program. Friend is chief executive officer of Project Hope Alliance, which works with Orange County students who are experiencing homelessness, like she did in high school. (Photo courtesy of Jennifer Friend)

During her four years at Huntington Beach High, Friend lived in various motel rooms, along with her parents and three younger brothers. Her parents were responsible and hard working, but struggled with housing. The only exception came during Friend's freshman year, when her family lived in a one-bedroom apartment. Friend and her brothers shared the bedroom but, as a teenage girl she wanted some privacy, she turned a closet into her own space.

“I even put up posters in there,” Friend, 51, recalled.

The motels never had closets.
The only person on campus who knew her family’s circumstances was her best friend, then and now, Lisa Riggs. Friend ended up living with the Riggs family for a good part of her senior year at Huntington Beach High. She credits the learning environment at the school, and her participation in its Model United Nations program, for giving her the confidence that she would be OK.

She went on to Golden West College and UC Irvine. She became a civil-litigation attorney. About 10 years ago, for the first time, Friend spoke publicly about her upbringing, to support a public awareness art installation that depicted the kind of motel room where she once lived. In 2013, she left her legal practice to become director of Project Hope Alliance.

Married and a mother of two, Friend has long wanted to bring Project Hope Alliance to Huntington Beach High and its homeless students.

“It’s been on my heart because I’m an Oiler,” she said referring to herself by the school’s nickname. “I wanted to be able to go back to my community and support the kids who are now in the same spot that I was in.”

Seed money

The new money from the foundation will allow Project Hope Alliance to hire three case managers over the next three years to work on site at Huntington Beach High. Principal Morris said that work will begin Jan. 3, after winter break.

“That’s when we’re jumping in full bore,” an eager Morris said.
Several years ago, Morris was introduced to Friend and the work of Project Hope Alliance by his buddy, Sean Boulton, the principal at Newport Harbor High. The idea of bringing the program to Huntington Beach High was planted then, and Morris and Friend kept in touch. But they hadn't spoken since before the start of the pandemic until Friend called in September with news of the private funding.

“If not for the anonymous donor, we would still be dreaming,” Morris said. “We want to give a big ‘Thank You.’”

The Project Hope Alliance office will be in the middle of the busy campus, making it easy for the students to meet with case managers. Project Hope Alliance expects to add a case manager a year to handle up to 30 students each.

The donation calls for money to be issued in annual allocations of $150,000, $200,000 and $250,000 over the next three years. The hope is that at the end of the three years the education data related to the homeless students on campus — including graduation rates — will be so positive and compelling that the school district and city, and possibly school alumni, will take on future funding.

“We've got to rally Oiler nation to rise up and support these kids,” said Friend, who will discuss the program at an upcoming Parent-Teacher Association meeting. Her organization also is providing food and gifts to needy families at the high school for the holidays.

The anonymous donor's philanthropy also is expected to raise awareness about the subset of homeless youth who attend Huntington Beach High and other schools in the mostly affluent region.

“I would ask them to really open up their eyes and look around their community,” Friend said.

“There are a lot of families that work really hard at remaining invisible.”
than Depression:
Learn What Defines
PBA

By PBAInfo.org

Experiencing sudden, frequent, uncontrollable laughing and/or crying episodes? It could be Pseudobulbar Affect...

Join the Conversation

We invite you to use our commenting platform to engage in insightful conversations about issues in our community. Although we do not pre-screen comments, we reserve the right at all times to remove any information or materials that are unlawful, threatening, abusive, libelous, defamatory, obscene, vulgar, pornographic, profane, indecent or otherwise objectionable to us, and to disclose any information necessary to satisfy the law, regulation, or government request. We might permanently block any user who abuses these conditions.

If you see comments that you find offensive, please use the “Flag as Inappropriate” feature by hovering over the right side of the post, and pulling down on the arrow that appears. Or, contact our editors by emailing moderator@scng.com.