LOCAL NEWS

Project Hope Alliance’s Jennifer Friend knows education can prevent homelessness

Most Influential 2025: Friend wants to break the parent-to-kid cycle of homelessness by helping house-challenged students get diplomas. The nonprofit's graduation rate just hit 95%, which is higher than the county average.

opportunity in and out of the classroom to create a stronger future for themselves. Friend built on a $2.1 million grant from CalOptima in 2024 as the group was selected in Bank of America's Neighborhood Builders program, which includes a $200,000 grant and leadership training for her and Shelby Feliciano-Sabala, the organization's chief partnership officer. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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PUBLISHED: December 21, 2025 at 7:00 AM PST

Like any self-respecting trial lawyer turned nonprofit leader, Jennifer Friend, chief executive of Project Hope Alliance, is better with words than she is with numbers.

But that doesn't stop her from using a few choice numbers to explain how Project Hope Alliance is chipping away at an audacious yet weirdly doable goal: to end multi-generational homelessness.

"Four point five," Friend said emphatically. "That's a pretty serious statistic!"

Technically, it's a ratio, but the idea holds. State and federal data shows that a kid who earns a high school diploma is 4.5 times less likely than a non-degreed kid to struggle with homelessness when they grow up.

Since Project Hope Alliance's day-to-day mission is to help housing-challenged students get that degree, the number – statistic, ratio, whatever – is something of a touchstone. And by helping *lots* of at-risk kids get *lots* of degrees (high school and college), PHA comes closer to meeting its bigger, long-term goal, which is to crack the parent-to-kid cycle of homelessness.

Recently, that cycle has made the sad jump from persistent social ill to full-blown national crisis.

The United States is home to about 775,000 homeless people, which is bigger than the cities of Denver or Washington, D.C. And according to the health research nonprofit KFF, many of those people – 168,000 – were chronically homeless, meaning they'd been without a stable home for a year or more.

Roughly half of them first became homeless before their 25th birthday.

"What we're doing is about generational disruption," Friend said.

"When we see an adult sleeping on the sidewalk, we, as a society, say 'That's not right!' And we go on to build infrastructure and systems to help those people.

"What I am saying is, 'Why don't we stop (that adult) from getting there in the first place?'

"The one way we know how to do that, for sure, is to ensure that kids who are experiencing homelessness graduate from high school."

Which leads Friend to drop another number bomb: 32,000.

She said that's how many K-12 students in Orange County currently struggle with housing. In a county where home prices in 60 ZIP codes average $1 million or more, roughly 1 in 20 students don't have consistent, unfettered access to one of life's basic needs: shelter.

Only a few of those kids sleep in tent encampments or parks or shelters, which might meet the federal definition of "homeless" and qualify them for the slim but real assistance that might come with it.

Instead, the vast majority of shelter-challenged kids in Orange County live in situations that the state and most school districts describe as "housing insecure." That means their families live double- or tripled-up with other families in lower-priced apartments, or in garages, or in friends' living rooms. Or, as Friend herself did for much of her childhood, they live in by-the-week motels, often far from the school where they are enrolled.

For many of those students, the things traditionally associated with education and learning – classwork, homework, after-school activities, music, sports – come second. Instead, they tend to focus on non-academic issues like where and how they're going to sleep, or get to school, or (again, something Friend knows first-hand) how they're going to hide their housing situation from other kids at school.

To change all of that – to push school to the top spot in every student's head – PHA offers open-ended, one-on-one help for kids who are housing insecure and who say they want the help. Tutoring, food, school supplies, clothing, transportation; if a kid needs something to succeed in school, they can get it from PHA. The agency works with kids as young as 5 and will stay with them until they turn 24, long after high school – and often college – is over.

As she explains all this, Friend offers yet another number.

Last year, she said, 95% of the high school seniors helped by PHA graduated with a degree. That was higher than the 77% graduation rate for kids who are shelter-challenged but who didn't get help.

It also outpaced the county's overall graduation rate of 92%.

"It was the first time ever that students experiencing homelessness graduated at a rate on par with housed students," Friend said.

Hitting that number wasn't easy.

PHA case managers work long-term with their students. That can mean years of checking in to see what those kids need at school and, critically, what they need away from it. It can mean years of encouragement or gentle nudging or just listening.

Still, hard doesn't always mean complicated. And when asked how

Growing up

PHA – which was founded in 1989 and originally named Project HOPE School Foundation – hasn't always operated the way it does now. It used to be smaller and more limited, open mostly during school hours and offering food and hygiene products, along with some counseling.

That's the version of PHA that Friend joined in 2012 when she chose to take an 80% paycut to leave her career as a partner at a law firm to become the nonprofit's chief executive.

Over the years, she's changed PHA. Today, the agency has more than 30 employees and interns. In 2024, the nonprofit had revenue (from individual donations, corporate donors and the county's health agency, CalOptima) of slightly more than $3 million and expenses of just under $3 million.

Today, PHA offices are embedded at school campuses throughout the Newport Mesa Unified School District and at five high schools in Huntington Beach and three others in Santa Ana. Each includes a food pantry and offers everything from clothing and hygiene products to school supplies. Case managers who help identify needy kids and work at each office will, if needed, take calls 24/7.

In fiscal 2023, PHA helped 769 students, according to its tax filings, and Friend said over the past year that number was higher.

PHA, under Friend, also taken on a role that's akin to air-traffic control for social services.

If a student's family needs food, PHA will connect them with Second Harvest Food Bank, the Irvine-based nonprofit that distributes nutrition to several hundred local food pantries. If that family faces a housing emergency, PHA works with Families Forward, an Irvine-based nonprofit that can help find shelter or an apartment. And if an older student needs help with a job interview or training, PHA will connect them with nonprofits that specialize in those services, such as Working Wardrobes and Goodwill of Orange County.

Being a judgment-free, go-to source for basic needs has prompted many PHA kids to bring friends who are in similar circumstances. When parents and kids and PHA workers agree, they too can start to get help.

"It's critically important to us to be focused on our youth, and to make it so that the barriers that show up in their lives because of homelessness don't impede or impact their ability to graduate from high school," Friend said.

But, she added, meeting a student's needs goes far deeper than "stuff."

"It's everything from advocacy in the classroom to showing up at their football games to making sure they have a clarinet if they want to play in the marching band," she said.

"And if we get them a clarinet," she added, later. "We might go to the concert to hear them play."

Another change at Project Hope Alliance – and in the schools where PHA operates – is about respect.

Before Friend came aboard, school districts used a blunt question to figure out which students might be struggling with shelter. At the start of each school year, most students were asked: "Are you currently homeless?"

Friend said that question, posed that way, "was kind of loaded."

She also said it wasn't complete.

Students, particularly younger ones, aren't always apprised of their family's actual economic and housing situation. If they woke up with a roof over their head – even if it was their uncle's roof – those kids might not see themselves as homeless.

Now, based on work started by PHA, schools ask students a different set of questions to get a clearer view of who might need help.

"Which housing situation describes your family: Currently living in a home that your family owns or is renting? Currently living in an apartment? Currently staying with one or more families? Currently staying in a motel?"

Friend said the old question – "are you homeless?" – wasn't "asked in very dignity-based way." The new questions, she said, capture the nuance of what can be a humiliating and scary experience.

"Our kids are not their housing status," Friend said. "Our kids are amazing."

During much of the 1980s – when she attended middle- and high school in Huntington Beach – Friend's family spent about eight months a year living in by-the-week motels in Garden Grove, Anaheim and Costa Mesa.

But the experience Friend describes, which she's been public about since she took the job at Project Hope Alliance, didn't match up with what many view as typical of so-called "motel children" of that era.

Both of Friend's parents lived in their tiny, crowded homes. Neither was addicted to anything. Both parents also worked, her father as a tech entrepreneur and her mother as a preschool teacher. Friend said she and her three younger siblings – football-playing brothers who, like Friend, all went on to graduate from college and become economically secure adults – were never left unsupervised or ignored or unloved.

Friend added that much of that is true for many, if not most, PHA families.

"Our parents are working. Most of them two full-time jobs. They are doing everything within their ability to make it so that their kids have a safe place to sleep, whether that's on the floor of someone's house or not, and that they have something to eat.

"But that's another fallacy about what homelessness looks like: that it's a bunch of people who are unemployed," Friend said.

"We have great relationships with the parents of the kids we work with," she added. "They give us permission to help because they want their kids to do well; because they love their children."

Yet, for all that, even if the experience includes love and support, struggling with homelessness can alter the direction of a kid's life.

"I distinctly remember being in the Tropic Motel, in seventh grade, and thinking that I didn't want to grow up to be in a situation where a man's ability or inability to provide for their family was going to impact me," Friend said, explaining how she decided to become a lawyer.

"I figured (being a lawyer) was something I could probably do well. And that lawyers made a lot of money.

"All I knew, for sure, is that I would never allow someone else to dictate how

Friend, now 55 and married and with two college- and high-school-aged children, said she lived a double life as a kid. She was popular and a good student in things like Mock United Nations, but too distracted by insecurity at home to really focus on her studies. She said she also was too ashamed to reveal herself to most of the people she knew.

Even after she'd graduated from UC Irvine and Whittier Law, and was on track to become a partner (at age 38), Friend said she sometimes felt out of place with co-workers who talked about snow skiing or used the word "summer" as a verb.

"I felt like a poser somehow," Friend said.

She's not a poser now, and hasn't been for a long time.

"This isn't a job for me," Friend said. "I believe this is why I exist."