

Episode 14: Addressing homelessness among transition age (18-24) youth

Welcome to Dwellings, a podcast from the City of San José Housing Department, where we talk with experts about ending homelessness, building affordable housing, and exploring housing policies at the city and state level. I'm your host Jeff Scott. On today's episode, I'm joined by Sparky Harlan, a nationally recognized leader in youth services and CEO of Bill Wilson Center, to talk about addressing homelessness among transition age youth.

00;00;31;29 - 00;00;45;23

Jeff Scott: We are here today with Sparky Harlan from the Bill Wilson Center. She's kind enough to join us to talk about homelessness as it pertains to use in young adults in the San Jose area. So welcome, Sparky. Thank you for joining us.

00;00;46;12 - 00;00;47;28

Sparky Harlan: Thank you for having me here.

00;00;48;11 - 00;00;59;24

Jeff: If you don't mind, let's start off by telling our audience a little bit about what you do and where you work. You are the head of an organization called the Bill Wilson Center. Can you tell us what the Bill Wilson Center's mission is?

00;01;01;10 - 00;01;44;08

Sparky: Yes, Bill Wilson Center in 2023. We'll be celebrating 50-year anniversary working with youth and young adults and actually families also. Our mission is in Santa Clara is to support and strengthen the community by serving youth and families through counseling, housing, education and advocacy. But our real focus these days is really trying to end youth and family homelessness as we know it here in the Valley. And some people will say well, how are you ever going to end homelessness? But we just say we're working toward that goes.

00;01;45;09 - 00;01;51;05

Jeff: Great, and so your roles are, you are the executive director or the CEO.

00;01;52;03 - 00;02;19;12

Sparky: I'm the CEO and it's almost 40 years as CEO so I pretty much have been here to see the transitions over those years. When I started in 1983. We were serving 10 people and today we're housing nearly 1000 young people and families every single night here in Silicon Valley. So definitely have grown.

00;02;20;00 - 00;02;31;24

Jeff: That's pretty amazing growth and congratulations to the entire organization on the upcoming 50th anniversary. That's great. Can you tell us a little bit about some of the supportive services you offer to the people that you're housing?

00;02;33;08 - 00;05;12;29

Sparky: Yes. And what we say is we do the whole continuum from prevention services and trying to keep people out of homelessness all the way to permanent supportive housing. So we do everything from emergency shelter for minors ages 12 through 17. In Santa Clara, we have a 20 bed shelter, and we also have transitional housing, which tends to be short term, up to two years of housing for youth and young adults. If I can define what that is, oftentimes you'll hear the term transition age youth, what transition age use is, we usually use youth and young adults now and youth are ages 12 through 17. Young adults are usually described as ages 18 to 25. It's sort of that early time period where young people are still developing and moving toward independent adulthood. That doesn't always happen. At age 25, I have a 27 year old. He's still making that transition. I think we often, through the pandemic, saw people staying home or returning home. So often we're now setting up to age 30. You may be needing support of besides transitional housing, we help people with rental assistance to stay in their home, especially through the pandemic. A lot of our families, we are providing help with rent payments, but we also help with affordable housing and permanent housing. And that can include something that's called rapid rehousing. That's kind of a HUD term. I don't tend to say rapid rehousing because a lot of our younger young people haven't been housed before, so they're not being rehoused there. It's rapid housing in a sense. So we're helping them get into housing in the apartments first and providing rental support. But while they're in there, we really focus on all of the skills needed to become independent. So we'll do everything from teaching you how to pay rent, all those things you have to do as an adult, open a bank account. How do you budget for things? Getting your educational needs met and helping with employment, everything you need to transition or be successful in adulthood.

00;05;13;12 - 00;05;38;25

Jeff: Wow, sounds like you have a pretty broad portfolio in terms of the aspects of life that you're helping the youth and young adult with. You mentioned a moment ago, rental assistance for some of the families especially during the pandemic, that were really struggling to pay rent. In terms of ongoing or longer term help, do that the people that you place do they oftentimes qualify for subsidies like vouchers or not so much.

00;05;39;25 - 00;07;27;24

Sparky: Sometimes so often what you know, they're waiting lists for vouchers, and there are waitlists for portable housing, oftentimes for years, when we're doing short term housing from a year two up to

three years, especially for some young people coming out of foster care will usually immediately try to put them on a waitlist for affordable housing, and even vouchers so that if something comes up, they're usually income eligible, we can place them into that immediately and not wait we don't wait to the end of their program with us before we get them into permanent housing. The other thing we do, Jeff is we also when we place them in transitional housing, we often place them or what we call a program transition in place. So we might most of our young people are only going to be able to share do shared housing. That's the realities of what it costs to live here. So we'll try to find a shared housing situation where they may be paying \$1,000 a month for shared housing. And then we know that as we're paying that rental subsidy and we start decreasing it, we do that as they get employment, so they're able to afford the place once we end the rental subsidy. So we often call that transition in place. We're putting a young person in a housing situation we know they can afford on their own with you know, jobs that they can start out with so often jobs that are paying what is a living wage here which in this valley now is roughly \$23 An hour \$22 An hour.

00;07;28;28 - 00;07;51;27

Jeff: So just to be clear, when you talk about these short term rentals and and you start off by helping them pay most of their rent. Do you kind of over that year a couple of years, do you kind of step down subsidies and maybe you're paying close to 100% at first and maybe it goes down to 90% 80%, et cetera until finally the the individuals is paying almost all of it on their own.

00;07;52;18 - 00;09;18;20

Sparky: That's how the program started initially and we have many different versions of the subsidies during COVID, we tended to pay more of the rent longer term. I think it's almost the program's you'll hear people talk before pandemic and after. I mean, it's kind of a different reality. We don't know what's going to be needed going forward, but yes, we tend to pay for the subsidies 100% For a period and then we start stepping it down as they get employment because obviously it doesn't help to have them pay for a portion of it if they don't have the income. So another model we have for the younger population aged 18 and 19 is we own these houses, and what we'll do in those programs, is that we will charge them a portion of the rent, maybe it's \$50 or \$100. And we put that into a savings account. Where it's teaching them how to pay rent, but they get the money back when they move out. So we've had young people save up to \$10,000 with us that we get my check when they move out. And they can use that to pay first and last month's rent purchase a car whatever they now learn to pay rent and they've also saved money that we've returned back to them.

00;09;29;12 - 00;09;58;12

Jeff: Well, that's really exciting. I'm sure for some of these young adults to get a check for several thousand is a godsend for many of them. That's that's a really neat concept.

00;09;29;12 - 00;09;58;12

Sparky: And they're learning to pay rent. And we're also trying to teach them how to save, which is not an easy thing, I think, in this valley. And for many people to talk about things as a savings account and putting money away, but we also are trying to teach those good habits. They then see how it grow. Suddenly, by putting a little bit into an account, they're getting the money back.

00;09;58;12 - 00;10;27;06

Jeff: But I think financial literacy is an often overlooked aspect of growing up, and I think that's great. So you mentioned I think you mentioned a few minutes ago to one of your responses. You you mentioned the foster care system. And that leads me to my next question, and that is, what are some of the major factors that are feeding into youth and young adult homelessness? What are some of the avenues that someone might go down that they find themselves homeless?

00;10;28;11 - 00;13;17;21

Sparky: There's a couple of factors, and it's not just one. A lot of it We're starting to see new trends of intergenerational homelessness. So we're seeing homeless youth coming from homeless families. That is been fairly new. I would say the last 5 to 10 years. We're seeing an increase of that. So we'll see homeless teenagers in particular coming to our minor shelter because their families homeless and either they don't want to go to the homeless shelter with their family or the family often may push out the oldest kid, which may be a teenager, and they end up in our shelter. Now, our minor shelter's focus is really family reunification. We want to get kids back home, and this is one of the reasons we started housing families and serving families, because in order to get a teenager reunited with the family, we had to find a whole family housing. So you end up having to expand services. You're doing to be able to meet your goal of getting young people back home. So that's one of the factors we saw. Of course, other factors is foster care and the instability of the family, too. It can often be substance abuse by the family or some other factor where the young person was removed or reported to child Protective services. So kids are in and out of foster care and there's age 18, they end up homeless. That's often what happened with the instability in the family or aging out of foster care. But the difference today is if you age out of foster care at 18, you're now eligible for up to six years worth of housing. That's just changed. So when people say young people age out of foster care and they instantly have no place to go, that's not true in California any more. But what is true if they don't age out of the system at 18, let's say they went back home at 15, they often end up homeless at age 18 because the family's not stable anymore than they were before. So often maybe they can stay until 18 and then they're homeless and they're not eligible for that six years of housing. So that's a huge gap in our system and that's often who we see homeless. The other factors coming out of the juvenile justice system, if you have a criminal background and just like adults, it's hard to find employment and housing at times. So that's a major factor affecting homelessness for youth.

00;13;19;11 - 00;13;41;24

Jeff: And so for some of the the people that you work with that are kind of right on the cusp of youth and young adulthood. So they're in that 17, 18 range. Are you able to spend much time you have the resources to help them with maybe job training, job skills training, job placement assistance. Are you able to do that sort of work with them?

00;13;42;20 - 00;15;16;18

Sparky: Well, Jeff, that's when we look to our collaborators and other people in the community. We don't need to do it all. So trying to do an employment program in addition to our other services. And of course what I forgot to say is many of these young people also have mental health issues and substance abuse issues themselves to. So that's our focus oftentimes. And we can get young people job ready, but if they need the training and additional support, we often go to other providers like job training in the community that help do that job placement and support instead of us doing that. And we stick to what we know best. Mental health behavior, health and living skills. 20 years ago, when we looked at our homeless youth and their education needs that young adults, we often said, Well, we want to get them at least have a GED or a high school diploma. We raised our standards a lot higher now, where we're getting a large percent into college, but often they don't make it through college. They drop out and now we're trying to get them to graduate. So we really are focusing, especially in Silicon Valley, to not only have that work experience, but get you into college with either Pell grants, scholarships or part time and support young people. So that kind of graduating.

00;15;18;03 - 00;15;35;04

Jeff: For kids who you're able to or the youth and young adults who you're able to get into college. Do you oftentimes try to steer them through the community college route for the first couple of years just because of the cost savings? Or are these kids trying to go to a four year school right out of the gate?

00;15;35;28 - 00;16;58;27

Sparky: Well, it's interesting because, you know, there are the two options. What they have found, at least for the youth aging out of foster care, their success in graduating starting at a four year college. Their graduation rates are higher than starting at two years and then transferring to a four year. We don't really know why that is yet. There is some there are changes that occur, and so anybody coming out of foster care now has free education meaning there's no tuition at the State College or community college. So those are some of the things I think it really depends on the young person, what route they feel capable of handling. It's not all size fits. I mean, one school, but I do think most of our young people do start in community college. I think it's more supportive of dealing with low income students. I must say, having worked with the state university system here locally and the community colleges, the community colleges, no matter what they ages, they really support low income students, I think more than the state university still, just by design.

00;16;59;00 - 00;17;20;28

Jeff: So based on your many years of experience at the Wilson Center, working with youth who are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, what have you found to be a few of the strategies, a few of the approaches that are particularly effective in helping people either avoid falling into homelessness or helping them get out and stay out of homelessness?

00;17;22;05 - 00;19;03;14

Sparky: Well, I think the one of the key points is for youth and young adults, family is really important. It's interesting because I recently read a report that said, oh, talked about like ten young people and they said three went to permanent housing and three went home and so many failed. They didn't consider young people going back to their families is going back to permanent housing or being a good thing. It's interesting because really what we see, if you look at our own young people, my son's living with his dad. 27, often young adults do live with their families and we actually see it as a real success if there's been problems in the family and we can help reunite even young adults with their families, that gives them a safety net for better success. So what we have seen is the importance of family, even if it's trying to make sure we teach young people how to navigate a less than stellar family. You're going back to families are not perfect. But if we can help young people negotiate with their family, you know you're going to pay so much rent to your mom. You know you're going to we're going to make sure you're not fighting. We're going to mediate or whatever it takes to help them to get back home with the family. That's highly it's going to help our young people not be homeless in the long term because they need a support system.

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Jeff: In your role at Bill Wilson, do you do much advocating for certain legislation or policy changes? Is that something that kind of falls under your umbrella?

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Sparky: We do, actually. Advocacy is part of our mission statement. We often say if we can fix something one on one with a young person because basically a policy's getting in the way, then we try to change the system. So, for example, what happened recently, Jeff, through John Burton Advocates For You. They're an advocacy organization. They basically advocated for additional year for youth aging out of foster care. So instead of two years of housing, they got three years of housing because it was taking three years to be really successful and making that transition. So that's one area that was a help. There's some other technical stuff like they ended group Homes for Youth in foster Care. We were technically licensed as a group home, so we had to help create a new license that was a long name, which is Youth Homelessness Prevention Centers, where we were short term, a 90 day program that was helping triaged young people and get them home so we wouldn't be shut down. I mean, we were looking at no options to function because we had a group license. So we had to advocate for this new license for homeless and runaway programs throughout the state of California. So that's another piece of advocacy

we've done. So we tend and I'm always trying to shut down juvenile hall. That's my big one. I think, know I'll be retiring in March 2023, and the one thing I have left undone in my 40 years is still trying to shut down juvenile hall. It's gone from a population of 300 to just 50. And what we always say is there's not a kid in juvenile hall we will not take in to help transition successfully. We don't just advocate to shut down a jail, a juvenile jail. We say we'll also take those young people and successfully transition up to the community. So that's probably one of my major goals out there that we've been working on.

00;21;36;22 - 00;21;56;16

Jeff: That was a perfect segue way because I was just about to ask you if there are other policies or legislation that is going to top of mind for you that you would like to see enacted. That has not been so. I'll just say this. In addition to shutting down juvenile hall, are there other policies or pieces of legislation that you would like to see enacted?

00;21;57;24 - 00;23;19;17

Sparky: Well, one of the issues we're always sort of negotiating around are what's the definition of homelessness? There's it's HUD says you're not homeless unless you're literally homeless on the street. That's the priority. Yet the Department of Education and all these other departments seem homelessness. See, homelessness is also doubled or tripled up. Or basically if that couch you're slept sleeping on is not actually your mailing address. So you could be, you know, kicked out the door at any time. But HUD doesn't see that as homeless. They see that as housed. So often, HUD's priority ends up being single older adults who are chronically homeless, if not for youth and families who are often not on the street homeless but doubled and tripled up into homes. So we keep trying to fight this definition so that you get more access to HUD money, and it's not a lower priority. So I've been working on that for years and years too. But you know, it's inch by inch. And so we have made some segway into this area, but it's not as much as we would like to see it.

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Jeff: Just out of curiosity, my own curiosity. If someone is living in a shelter, a short term shelter, like a congregate shelter, does HUD considered that person to be homeless, or are they considered to be not homeless?

00;23;32;18 - 00;25;30;13

Sparky: They're not homeless, but jail was considered housed and now I think they might have changed some of that to somebody coming out of jail wasn't a priority because they had been housed for 30 days or 90 days. So there are all these definitions that needed to be changed. There's a lot of push pull among the youth providers versus because HUD was really designed for affordable housing for really families and adults, not youth. So there is funding called the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. We're still waiting to try to get reauthorized. That's under HHS. They also do foster care so they know young

people, Their definitions are much different than HUD, which really is an adult system that started serving youth. And of course, all of us youth providers, we went to HUD because HUD has 100 times more money than HHS for this population. So we all started applying for and HUD's kind of like, Whoa, wait a second, you don't really fit into what we do, but we had to make it work. So HUD is slowly changing. This community was successful in getting a huge grant that's called the Youth Homelessness Prevention. Youth Homelessness Demonstration grant is what they got. And that's 5 million a year for this community to do additional services to youth. And all the funding. Where the priorities go is led by a youth advisory board youth with lived experience. So that's been something different for this community to have a youth advisory board really leading the effort to plan and spend that money.

00;25;30;28 - 00;25;48;05

Jeff: When you receive funding when you talk about government funding for Bill Wilson, in the form of grants or other payments, does that come to you directly from HUD does it come through Santa Clara County, the City of San Jose, is it some sort of combination of all the above?

00;25;49;01 - 00;27;06;04

Sparky: It's all the above. We get some direct HUD money, Health and Human Services. We also get state money, county money City money. It's we're really I think we have 100 different sources funding us, which means 100 different regulations. And all of them define homelessness, different even the age of what they defined as young adults sums up to age 24, sums up to age 26. Some goes down lower, and then length of stay that somebody will allow us 30 days, somebody else 60. You know, you can only serve under 21 age. And so we actually with our thousand housing units, we have to hire what we call an housing expediter just to look at all our rules and regulations on those thousand beds and make sure when we're placing somebody into a bed, we're not crossing up what the regulations that we need to do with them. It's it's not easy. A lot of bureaucracy to house people and using these funding sources.

00;27;07;00 - 00;27;23;03

Jeff: So is there something about youth and young adult homelessness that you would like the public at large to know that perhaps they don't know? Maybe some missed misconception about youth homelessness that you would just like to share with our audience?

00;27;24;16 - 00;29;25;01

Sparky: I do think the issue young people are hopeful. I mean, they, most young people don't call themselves homeless even when they are. So when you look at young people on the street, you can't say and point, that person's homeless because they look like any other young person. So there's always this misconception around young people. Even on our Point In Time count, we are numbers dropped in January by a huge percentage, and that's mainly because it's hard to find you. They're not living in encampments, so you can't just say, Oh, it's all these young people out there living in tents and not

working. They're really invisible and trying to find their way in the world. That being said, fentanyl has really impacted young people also. Five years ago, we never would see any of our young people really die from drug overdoses. In the last couple of years. I've seen five people die of fentanyl overdoses, and that's the part that's sad. But the other side of it is young people are really wanting to be successful and work and get an education. And so they're not just sitting around in somebody's family basement playing video games. They really are a hopeful, as they say, young people are our future. I think, you know, looking at COVID and how it's impacted young people and not allowed them to be out and meet people, we have to also understand they need our help. So I would say to adults to really support youth and young people, to help with this transition now after COVID, because they really want to make a difference and get a job and be successful.

00;29;25;09 - 00;29;54;04

Jeff: And this may seem like an obvious question, but I'd love to hear from you. So the youth that's helping the 12 to 17 group that you mentioned at the top of the discussion. Is it common for them to try to hide the fact that they're homeless? Maybe they go to a high school and they do everything they can to try to cover up the fact they're homeless or their friends or their schoolmates don't realize that. Is that is that a common phenomenon?

00;29;54;22 - 00;32;02;23

Sparky: Yeah, it's common for young people, teenagers, to hide their homelessness. Case in point was we did a survey to certain high schools to identify who was homeless, and we asked people to identify if they knew other classmates who were homeless. And Bellarmine, who was the first school that agreed to do the survey with their population because they really believed they weren't going to see any homelessness in their population. And when we did the survey, they have the same number of views couch surfing and homeless, 12% as many of the other high schools. And they were surprised. But what was happening at Bellarmine for example, is families would move out of the area and the kid would stay with a friends here to continue to go to school. And then after the kid, you know, a year two couldn't stay anymore at that one person's house, but they wanted to try to stay in school. They'd just be hopping from home to home to home. And often even we have one of my board, my board president at Bill Wilson Center said he didn't realize that his daughter's best friend was homeless. He just thought she was staying at their house all the time. And he finally I always say, ask the question, if you have your kid's friend, stay every single night at your house, just sit down and ask what was what's going on? Because young people will talk to you. And often you don't even realize the reason they're at your house every night is they're pretty much homeless and they can't go home. So, yes, it's invisible to many people. And we often are afraid to talk to our teenagers friends because we think we're interfering. And I'm saying, you're not interfering. You're showing support to them. So sit down and chat and say, Hey, what's going on? We love having you here, but it seems like you're here a lot and find out.

00;32;03;00 - 00;32;23;27

Jeff: That's a fascinating anecdote. I'm sure that has probably happened many, many times, more times than people realize. So, Sparky, if there is if there are people out there listening now who want to get involved, who want to do something to help the cause of trying to end youth homelessness, do you have any words of advice or recommendations on how they might be able to to get started in helping out?

00;32;24;09 - 00;33;25;27

Sparky: Well, of course, one way people can help out is to volunteer at the Wilson Center. We have a lot of volunteer activities here. They can go to our website, which is BillWilsonCenter.org. Pretty easy. So that's one way to help out with different activities. The other way, I would say, is to also look at different efforts happening around trying to build housing and support efforts to have housing for homeless individuals and families. You know, this is real pushback now, not in my neighborhood or this is the wrong place. We really have to broaden what we think about in supporting efforts to build housing, affordable housing and housing for homeless individuals. So I would say look around your community and help where you can to encourage more housing. Besides volunteering for Bill Wilson Center.

00;33;26;02 - 00;33;32;17

Jeff: Sparky, this has been a fascinating conversation. Thank you for sharing your insights and your years of experience. I really appreciate your time today.

00;33;33;09 - 00;33;46;01

Sparky: Yeah, well, I'd be I'll be retiring and I think instead of a party, we're probably gonna do one last March on juvenile hall and talk about shutting it down. So maybe you'll come out and join us.

00;33;46;12 - 00;33;50;03

Jeff: Something to look forward to in March of 2023, I guess.

00;33;50;17 - 00;33;52;21

Sparky: Yes. So thank you

00;33;53;23 - 00;34;48;19

Jeff: Thanks again, Sparky, for joining me on today's episode. To learn more about the Bill Wilson Center, please visit BillWilsonCenter.org. Thanks for listening to Dwellings, the City of San José Housing Department podcast. Our theme music is "Speed City," composed and performed by Ettaine Charles. Thanks to San José Jazz for letting us use your music. If you like the show, please subscribe and share

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