



Volunteers of America

helping the homeless find their way back

It's a group of people large enough to fill a high-rise office building or a college basketball stadium right here in Sacramento. Problem is, you won't find them on the job or cheering on their favorite team; they're too busy worrying about staying warm, finding food or just plain staying safe.

They are the homeless in Sacramento and recent county estimates suggest they are nearly 3,000 strong. No longer are they the nameless few. In today's economy, many homeless are families -- people many of us might have known as co-workers, parents and children who regularly attended school and played soccer on Saturdays.

Thankfully, [Volunteers of America Greater Sacramento and Northern Nevada](#) provides an important safety net for thousands of these people each day, providing some 40 different programs that offer everything from job assistance and transitional housing for families to a warm bed and a meal for the night for a tired and hungry individual.

"We've seen a big shift in the people who are coming to us for help," says Christie Holderegger, VOA Sacramento's Vice President and Chief Development Officer. "We're seeing a lot of families where both parents have lost their jobs, run through their savings and have no other options. The good news is that we've been able to help hundreds of people like that in the last year alone."

How?: The Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing program for starters. Initiated in October 2009 in collaboration with the Salvation Army and Lutheran Social Services, with support from Sacramento Region Community Foundation, VOA stabilizes at-risk families by paying their rent for few months and providing case management so they can gain employment find appropriate housing and stay off the street.

"We have a very high success rate and we're finding it's much more cost effective to prevent families from becoming homeless in the first place with programs like these," Holderegger says. "There are some incredible success stories. Like one family from Oroville who was a picture of middle-class success -- a four-bedroom home, go-carts for their five kids and a late-model Ford Expedition. That is, until both the husband and wife lost their jobs.

"They wound up living in their car because they had no place else to go," Holderegger says. "I remember the mother telling me she'd look at her young children in the back seat of their car and wonder if her kids were dreaming of a nice, warm bed and a place to call home."

Fortunately, with help from VOA, the family averted further disaster, found an apartment and within a few months, both parents were able to find jobs. But the HPRP program is only one of the many efforts led by VOA in Sacramento. This non-profit, faith-based organization provides emergency shelter, transitional housing an permanent supportive housing to some 1,500 people every night, in addition to housing young-adult foster children needing help in learning to become independent, as well as a housing program for abused and neglected senior citizens.

Though VOA gets some basic government funding, Holderegger says the need far outstretches these dollars and notes that her organization relies on donations from the private sector, such as those from the United Way.

"The United Way has been critical for us," she says. "Much of the funding we get from other sources must be spent on a specific program or need and United Way's funding is unrestricted. That helps us fill in the gaps. For example, the Sacramento Senior Safe House gets no government funding at all, so we have to raise those dollars from private sources. The United Way is a huge part of our success."

Written by Jim Caster who serves on the Marketing & Communications Committee for United Way California Capital Region.

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