

## Housing is key to move Californians from welfare to work

By Frank Mecca and John Bauters – Special to the Bee

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After suffering through unthinkable abuse for over a decade, Michelle gathered the strength to leave her husband and seek a better life for her three children. But what came next was a series of humbling experiences she never imagined. Without family or friends to rely on, she and her children ended up homeless, living in a tent and cooking meals out of her car.

She ensured her children attended school before heading back to their tent each night. She tirelessly applied for jobs and looked for a place to rent. But employers rarely hire people without an address – and landlords won't rent to people without any income.

Desperate, Michelle (whose full name isn't being used to protect her identity) turned to the Yolo County Department of Employment and Social Services. There, she received services that helped resolve her family's crisis. With job-seeking skills and a polished résumé, counseling to address the trauma she'd survived and reliable care for her children after school, Michelle landed a position at the local library, her wages subsidized through a partnership between the county and employer.

They'd come a long way, but Michelle and her children were still struggling to escape homelessness. An innovative program created last year enabled Yolo County to help with that, too. Thanks to the CalWORKs Housing Support Program, her family lives in an apartment where she cooks meals, helps her children with homework and sleeps safely each night. With the stability of a roof over her head, Michelle is building that better life.

For many struggling families, the high cost of housing is the most crushing barrier they face. A recent Legislative Analyst's Office report found the poorest 25 percent of households spend a whopping 67 percent of their income on housing. Low-income families are also contending with growing inequality and stagnant wages. Together, this has led to a poverty and homelessness epidemic and a public health crisis for a generation of children.

Research shows children who grow up poor are more likely to struggle in school, suffer poorer health and have meager earnings as adults. California has the nation's highest child poverty rate, with one in four children in poverty. Statewide, a staggering 8,400 children and their parents apply for temporary homelessness assistance each month.

Legislators are working to fill these gaps.

This session, lawmakers introduced bills that would raise the minimum wage, increase affordable housing, create a state earned income tax credit, increase CalWORKs grants and repeal exclusionary policies that deny basic aid to poor children.

These policies should be enacted, and the Housing Support Program should be expanded to meet demand, amid the growing recognition that homelessness undermines the goals of CalWORKs.

CalWORKs, created in 1997 with bipartisan support, has two goals – keeping children out of poverty and helping parents find and keep jobs. Policymakers never anticipated the housing crisis that has left California with the highest number of chronically homeless families in the nation. The Housing Support Program recognizes that the best welfare-to-work services will often fail if families don't have a place to sleep at night.

The program draws on a nationally recognized, cost-effective housing model. County human service departments are partnering with local housing authorities and nonprofit organizations that have the experience to quickly place homeless CalWORKs families in permanent housing and give them the support they need to keep it. The assistance includes landlord negotiation, move-in assistance, rental subsidies, financial counseling, credit repair and intensive case management.

The program is off to a strong start, expected to help 6,900 children in 20 counties this year. However, this represents a fraction of the need. If more funding is made available, children throughout the state will benefit.

Expanding the meaningful investment that changed the lives of Michelle and her children will help counties and their partners do the same for thousands more – all of whom deserve a safe place to sleep each night.

*Frank Mecca is executive director of the County Welfare Directors Association of California. John Bauters is policy director of Housing California.*