This housing program keeps California college students off the streets and in the classroom

They’re getting help from a 4-year-old effort to boost graduation rates with rent subsidies and life skills training.

Cal State Long Beach student Presley Wilson, 39, at a Long Beach Airbnb where she stayed while waiting for a new apartment. Wilson was saved from homelessness by a California program designed to keep college students off the streets and in the classroom. (Photo by William Liang, Contributing Photographer)

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Presley Wilson's priorities shifted from college to finding a new home after she got booted from her studio apartment in the middle of her first semester at Cal State Long Beach.

Homelessness loomed for the transfer student when her financial aid package arrived too late to keep her from falling behind on her rent.

Then, three weeks before she had to leave her apartment, a university case worker located a slot in a state-funded program designed to get students out of homelessness and back on track to earning a degree.

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With money for the deposit on a new apartment, plus a $500-a-month subsidy for the next year, the sociology major now can focus once again on pursuing a career as a public policy researcher.

"It's a massive reduction in stress," said Wilson, 39. "Just the ability to focus on taking the next steps towards a career that I can do. ... Getting the degree opens up more avenues."

The path through college often is filled with pitfalls, triumphs, struggles and many, many sleepless nights.

But for some, the challenge of passing a midterm or completing a paper is compounded by the need to find a safe place to sleep at night.

Data shows at least 8% of public university students experienced homelessness at some point each year, sleeping in their cars or in shelters, couch surfing at friends' homes or living in unsafe or unstable conditions. At community colleges, 24% of students experienced homelessness.

For the past decade, universities and community groups have taken steps to address student homelessness.

And state lawmakers added their support, appropriating $148 million over the past five years for "rapid rehousing," a program designed to keep students off the streets and in the classroom.

"The state had recognized that ... in terms of the jobs that are going to be available in the next 10-20 years, we needed more college graduates," said Debbie Raucher, interim director of John Burton Advocates for Youth, which sponsored the legislation behind the rapid rehousing program.

"In order to do that, we had to address the non-academic challenges that students were facing."

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The rapid rehousing program that rescued Presley Wilson from homelessness provides rent subsidies along with a wide variety of "wrap-around" services — from financial literacy and life skills training to academic counseling and mental health support.

"We actually have to invest the resources such that the students who are experiencing the greatest needs do have the support that they need to be successful," Raucher said.

'A Hyundai is not a home'

Louis Tse spent two years living in his car while pursing a doctorate in engineering at UCLA. Not because he couldn't afford to pay rent on an apartment. But because he wanted to save up his rent money to start a homeless shelter for college students.

The Bruin Shelter opened in Santa Monica in 2016, operating until recently when it had to shut down to hunt for a new site.

But the program served as a model for the Trojan Shelter, now housing four students in a converted church rectory in Koreatown; and the Aggie House, a student-run shelter at UC Davis. The three shelters, which aren't part of the rapid rehousing program, are examples of how others responded to student homelessness.

"I would see students who were sleeping in classrooms or conference rooms. These aren't places where you sleep. It's clearly a last resort," Tse said. "I just sort of sat with that for a couple months and decided that I had to do something about it, and that's how Bruin Shelter got started."

Many of the homeless students Tse saw coming through the Bruin Shelter didn't have a network of family or friends, he said. Sometimes they came from the foster care system. Some were undocumented. Many were gay, lesbian or trans students who had been disowned by their family. Data show that homeless students are disproportionality from minority backgrounds.

"Residents are looking for people that they can rely on, whether that's their peers, their fellow students or mentors," said Tse. "We try to surround them with the social capital that they weren't privileged to have up to that point."

The two years he spent in his car weren't easy, Tse said.

"One thing that's always stayed with me is the last thing that I would see before going to sleep, and the first thing I would see when I'd wake up in the morning is the roof of my car. And that always kind of centered my purpose," he said. "A Hyundai is not a home. People need a home to do homework. Like, it's literally in the word."

Intensive services

Under the rapid rehousing program, colleges and universities partner with homeless service providers already operating in their community.

A portion of the money pays university staff who refer students to the partner agencies and continue to oversee their progress. The partner agencies help students find housing and provide rent subsidies and additional support.

Wrap-around services keep students housed and on track by providing life skills training, mental health services and academic support. Career centers help students find jobs. Gradually, the case workers guide the students to self-sufficiency.

"It's not like, now you're in housing and you're all done, you're all fixed," said Cal State Long Beach Professor Rashida Crutchfield, who co-authored the state's first study documenting on-campus hunger and homelessness. "Getting someone into housing is a first, critically important step. And then, … you support the student in maintaining that housing while they're going to school."

The students who use rapid housing usually have significant challenges, added Danielle Munoz, director of the Basic Needs program at Cal State Long Beach.

"They may not be able to work for, like, a year. Or there's a lot of chaos," she said. "There's behavioral challenges. There's a lot of students who actually have so much trauma, they really struggle with the roommates.

"The rapid rehousing agency helps the student rehabilitate, because there's a reason they went homeless, and it's not that fast to fix. Sometimes it's rehabilitating their trauma so they can have roommates. A lot of them have learned helplessness, so they're just scared and don't think they can do it. So, we take a lot of time with our students."

Thousands housed

High rent is the key reason why students end up on the streets, program administrators say.

In the 18 years since today's college freshmen were born, Southern California's average apartment rent has increased between $675 to $1,100 a month, CoStar figures show.

And students often pay a "rent premium" for apartments close to campus.

"Oh, my gosh, you should see what they charge our students," Munoz said. Rents for apartments near her campus easily range from $1,500 to $2,000 a month.

Cal State Long Beach student Presley Wilson, 39, at the Long Beach Airbnb on Monday, Dec. 16, 2024, where she lived temporarily after losing her apartment. A state homeless prevention program paid the deposit for a new apartment and will provide a $500-a-month subsidy for the next year so she can focus on her studies. (Photo by William Liang, Contributing Photographer)

"Every year, the apartments get outrageously expensive," added Emmett Liljegren, a USC senior and president of the Trojan Shelter, the student-run homeless shelter in Koreatown. "I have a job. My parents help me. If I didn't have that support and couldn't work as much as I do, I don't know how you would afford to live here."

Yet, the state's rapid rehousing program already has kept thousands of students housed.

The University of California, which has programs on all 10 of its campuses, reported 4,706 students received housing assistance through its rapid rehousing program in the 2022-23 academic year, the latest year tallied.

Numbers from the CSU system show about 500 students have been enrolled in rapid rehousing during the first three years at eight campuses, including four in Southern California.

More than 3,500 students at 14 community colleges also received some kind of support during the first three years, state figures show. Thirteen more community colleges joined the program in the 2023-24 academic year.

Crutchfield, the professor who documented student homelessness eight years ago, is working on a new study due out this winter assessing rapid rehousing's effectiveness. Preliminary results show that three-fourths of rapid rehousing recipients managed to stay in college, with many earning diplomas.

But helping homeless students comes with a high price tag.

"You can be paying $2,000 a month to subsidize a student, times 12 months, times 50 to 60 students," said Munoz, the Cal State Long Beach Basic Needs director. "It adds up super fast."

"The point of this program," said Raucher, "is to actually address the needs of students who are literally homeless and need a much more intensive form of support in order for them to be successful in college."

A decent life

Tse tells of a Santa Monica College student who moved into the Bruin Shelter so her younger sister could stay with their parents after her family got evicted from their home.

“We provided her a safe place to live, food to eat, and a community of friendly faces. Her GPA skyrocketed, she graduated from community college with honors, and she ended up being accepted into UCLA,” Tse said.

After earning her bachelor’s, she went to work for the university and now heads a program supporting disadvantaged students.

Another student moved into the Trojan Shelter after living in her car for about nine months. She finished her degree and is now in law school, Tse said.

“You put someone who has the potential in an environment where they can grow and they can thrive, they can start to pay it forward in a million ways,” said Tse.

Cal State Long Beach student Presley Wilson, 39, with her son, Raiden, 9, and their dog, Jackson, in their new apartment on Dec. 21, 2024. Wilson was saved from homelessness by a California program designed to keep college students off the streets and in the classroom. “It’s a massive reduction in stress,” Wilson said of her new home north of downtown Long Beach. “Just (to have) the ability to focus on a career I actually have a passion for, and one that can actually provide a decent life for my son and I.” (Photo courtesy of Presley Wilson)

Wilson, the Long Beach State sociology major, moved into her new two-bedroom apartment on Saturday, Dec. 21, along with her 9-year-old son, Raiden, and their dog, Jackson.

Had she ended up on the street, she would have lost custody of her son.

A bout of flu coupled with the chaos of losing her old apartment forced Wilson to take incompletes for all her classes. Now that she has a new home, she’ll be able to do the make-up work and take her last two finals over the winter break.

A wide network of services kept Wilson from ending up on the streets.

The university’s Basic Needs office paid for one night in a hotel after she moved out of her apartment. House of Haven, a youth homeless prevention service, paid for eight nights in an Airbnb until her new apartment was ready.

Lutheran Social Services of Southern California paid the $1,995 deposit on her new apartment and will provide a $500-a-month subsidy for the next year.

Wilson said money from financial aid and welfare will cover the rest of her rent. If she’s careful, she should have enough to take over the full rent by next December.

Over the past 20 years, Wilson has attended three different community colleges, worked as a brand educator for beauty product firms, was a live-in nanny, a party photo-booth operator and a ride-share driver. On top of that, she’s had a life-long struggle with Ehlers-Donolos Syndrome, a debilitating genetic disorder that affects the body’s connective tissue.

But for the next year, she can concentrate on her studies as a full-time student. Now a junior, she hopes to graduate by the spring of 2026, then go on to earn a master’s in public policy.

Living with a genetic disorder inspired her passion to become a disability advocate, she said.

Ultimately, she hopes to work as a researcher focusing on disability policies — and to “provide a decent life for my son and I.”

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