

A helping hand before homelessness for South Bay families on the brink

\$3.5 million grant is joint venture of Santa Clara County, San Jose, Google, Sunlight Giving foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

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SAN JOSE — Efforts to keep families in their homes in the notoriously unaffordable South Bay will soon get a \$3.5 million boost through a partnership that's part government, part charity and part Google.

While there are existing services aimed at households living on the verge of homelessness, most of what's done is on an emergency basis, said Michelle Covert, housing and homeless concerns coordinator for Santa Clara County.

"Right now families come to us in need during a one-time crisis," she said. "Maybe someone lost a job, or the wage earner leaves the home or maybe they're sick and they miss work."

They'll get assistance so they don't become homeless, Covert said, but after that "they often go on their way."

She said that the new program — which launches July 1 — is aimed at "creating a more cohesive system." That will include financial assistance to stabilize a situation but go further, with landlord mediation, financial counseling, help with security and utility deposits and other case management services. The goal is to help at least 600 households over the course of the two-year pilot program; there's an assistance cap of \$5,000 each.

It will also analyze results the same way programs currently do for the chronically homeless. That will offer better insight as to who is being served and what is effective.

"There's not much follow-up in most cases to see what's happening six months, 12 months, 24 months later," Covert said. "We want to evaluate the efforts — did we actually truly help keep this family from becoming homeless down the road?"

The grant is a public-private partnership, with Santa Clara County and San Jose each putting up \$750,000. Google is donating \$1 million, and the remaining \$1 million split between the Sunlight Giving foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

Jennifer Loving of Destination: Home, which put together the grant, said wages haven't kept up with rents, meaning "families are more and more squeezed."

"They are more and more desperate to maintain their homes and put food on their tables," she said. "They're already living so precariously."

Poncho Guevara of Sacred Heart Community Service, which is leading the seven organizations involved in the effort, said this kind of funding is something they've been trying to get for years.

"We've been very supportive of the efforts the county has invested in to tackle chronic homelessness and veteran homelessness," he said. "And we've been pushing really hard to make sure families don't get left out of the equation."

Advocates said it's hard to gauge exactly how many families are at risk of becoming homeless at any given time. But the 2015 homeless census found 908 individuals in 266 families — about 14 percent of the county's total homeless population. Nearly 95 percent of the families

found during the 2015 count were staying in county shelters or in transitional housing. Nearly 80 percent of those surveyed were a female-headed household, 63 percent identified as Latino and the list of reasons for why they became homeless was topped by job loss and domestic violence.

The vast majority of the time they're not as visible as chronically homeless individuals; they're not the ones who will be found beneath overpasses, in parks or encampments.

"Parents will do everything they can to avoid experiencing literal homelessness with their kids," Covert said. "They'll double up or triple up. They'll sleep in cars or RVs, or stay in motels."

Google got involved because of the program's "innovative way of thinking about pragmatic solutions to complex problems," said Adrian Schurr, manager of the company's Bay Area Giving division.

"We call Santa Clara County our home," Schurr said, "and we want to help organizations like Destination: Home reach the most vulnerable in our community."

"Once you've lost stability and become homeless, getting out is so much harder," said Jennifer Loving of Destination: Home, which put together the \$3.5 million grant. "If we can mitigate before we get to that point, we can prevent an avalanche of more costly interventions, as well as trauma."

It's particularly tough on kids, Loving said — children will often be forced to switch schools often as they bounce from one temporary home to another.

"I think we're going to learn," Loving said, "that a little bit of money can go a long way toward preventing catastrophe."

Eric Kurhi is a reporter for the Bay Area News Group based at The Mercury News. He covers Santa Clara County government and general assignment duties. An East Bay native, he has been editing and reporting at local newspapers since graduating from San Francisco State University in 1997.