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The Changing Face of People In Need of Affordable Housing

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When we look at the most vulnerable in our county—those experiencing or on the verge of homelessness—assumptions are often made as to how they got there, and what they must have done wrong to no longer have a roof over their heads.

Homelessness has been a prevalent issue in our county for some time. However, since the start of the pandemic, a growing population of people who previously never experienced this type of hardship were suddenly finding themselves on the brink of homelessness—families.

Already living paycheck to paycheck, many of the families we work with lost their jobs, loved ones, their homes and apartments within a very short period of time—and they reached out to us for help.

According to 2-1-1's Orange County Annual Trends Report, 35% of call referrals in 2020 were seeking housing—that's nearly 500,000 people.

And of those callers, 98,496 people were provided a housing referral, up from 48,386 in 2014. With data still being compiled since the start of the pandemic, it's safe to say that number has only increased these last few years.

Add in the biggest rent hikes in Southern California in nearly four decades and it's a recipe for an affordable housing disaster, leading to more people, specifically families, experiencing homelessness.

New housing units are being built, with state regulators seeking 183,000 in Orange County within the next seven years.

Even so, rent, let alone homeownership, is out of reach for many families. We're seeing an unprecedented number of families crippled by inflation on rents and appreciation on the record-breaking housing market.

Consumer inflation reached 7.5% in January, the steepest year-over-year increase since 1982. If this trend continues, even more families will struggle to pay their rent, food and utilities, and may have to make the difficult decision between feeding and clothing their children and trading in their brick-and-mortar homes for their vehicles.

For nearly 40 years, Families Forward has diligently worked to secure safe and affordable housing for those most vulnerable. We've had to ratchet up our efforts to help families facing economic hardship due to the pandemic. In 2021, among those we served:

- 448 families remained stably housed with eviction prevention services.
- 220 families experiencing homelessness achieved housing stability.
- 81% of families in rapid re-housing program increased or maintained income.
- 48,172 meals were provided.
- 389 individuals participated in mental health counseling sessions.

13,000 Helped

Partnering with Orange County nonprofits, businesses, cities, landlords, and influential community leaders, Families Forward improves the lives of more than 13,000 people a year.

It has been a true collaborative effort amongst nonprofits, businesses, cities, landlords and influential community leaders. With their help, we're able to deliver on our mission to help struggling families regain self-sufficiency.

Property owners and landlords can benefit by utilizing Housing Vouchers (i.e. Section 8, Emergency Housing Vouchers, VASH, etc), an effective tool to keep families housed through long-term subsidized rent.

There's an unnecessary stigma to accepting tenants with Housing Vouchers—especially when labeled “Section 8 housing vouchers”—as landlords may believe these households will not pay their bills. On the contrary, tenants with Housing Vouchers do all they can to make sure they can keep receiving their vouchers and often become model tenants.



Families Forward client Eliza with her daughter

“When the family is settled in a new home, the family is expected to comply with the lease and the program requirements, pay its share of rent on time, maintain the unit in good condition and notify the PHA (public housing agency) of any changes in income or family composition,” the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development says on its website.

We're in a unique period, though—where the system has been undated with once in a lifetime Emergency Housing Vouchers, yet they cannot be used due to a critical housing shortage.

Partnering

Families Forward has been one of the longest serving organizations in Orange County for families at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Working with our housing partners and landlords, we're able to help families in need and provide safe environments, and secure, affordable housing for parents to raise their children.

We have a robust roster including Irvine Co. Apartment Communities, AvalonBay Communities, Western National Group, C&C Development, AMCAL, Chelsea Investment Co., Shea Apartment Communities and more. Their invaluable resources allow us to serve families in need every day.

With our housing partners we're providing rapid re-housing for our clients, a national initiative to provide housing placement, financial assistance, and support services to help families facing homelessness gain access to housing and build stability.

Landlords find comfort in working alongside us to provide families housing, knowing that they will have long-term, stable tenants with both our financial and programmatic support for these vetted families.

We do it all—from providing a 24-hour phone line dedicated to meeting the immediate needs of landlords, to home inspections, mediation services, and preventative maintenance support.

Families Forward assists families with the application process, financial support, and case management services. We follow up to ensure that the tenant-landlord relationship is working and that lease conditions are being met.

Families Forward has tripled the number of affordable housing units in its portfolio. Through ownership and partnerships with corporate and independent landlords, Families Forward now has access to more than 80 affordable housing units with the goal of acquiring or partnering with 100 total units by 2023.

Families at risk of or experiencing homelessness need the business community's help. To inquire about making a unit or units available for a family, call (949) 358-3116 and one of our housing specialists will be happy to answer any questions you may have about becoming a housing partner. For more information, email housing@families-forward.org.

Editor's Note: Madelynn Hirneise is CEO of Families Forward, an Irvine-based nonprofit organization that reported revenue more than doubled to \$19.1 million in the year ended June 30. The Business Journal's annual report on residential real estate starts on page 21.



Families Forward CEO Hirneise assisting in its on-site food pantry