



mercyHOUSING

CALIFORNIA NEWS

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LETTER FROM PRESIDENT DOUG SHOEMAKER



Over the years, kids and families have been at the center of our work at Mercy Housing. From farmworker housing on the Central Coast to dense urban communities

like the Tenderloin in San Francisco and Koreatown in Los Angeles, we have been committed to developing and managing communities that respond to the needs of parents and children.

While we have expanded our focus in recent years to include supportive housing for single adults and veterans, more than half of our current development work and half of our existing portfolio is comprised of family housing. This means that on any given night, there are 5,139 children living in Mercy Housing California (MHC) properties.

Our commitment to creating space for families begins in the site selection process and continues with the design of kid and parent friendly spaces. Once the buildings are in operation, many of our family buildings have dedicated after-school programming using evidence-based curriculum called KidzLit and KidzScience to ensure

that after-school and summertime programming is both fun and impactful.

As the article about Oxnard highlights, the results have been life changing for many families and youth. While these success stories are amazing, we believe more services are still needed. This is why we are doubling down on the resources and support that help parents and young people to thrive, including:

- Renewed focus on early childhood education, which is proven to be among the most important services for interrupting intergenerational poverty
- A new emphasis on youth leadership development, particularly in public housing communities such as Sunnydale and Marina Vista/Alder Grove
- Expansion of after-school programming for grammar and middle school youth

I am very excited with the direction our work is headed and I hope the articles and photos that follow fill you with a sense of possibility and determination to make a difference for the next generation of Californians.

Thanks again for your support,

Doug Shoemaker
President, Mercy Housing California



Sunnydale Youth Leadership Team on a visit to the Google Campus in San Francisco.

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An Important First Step

Research has shown that children who have access to educational support before the age of five perform better academically, socially, and emotionally in elementary school and are more successful as adults. Despite this knowledge, we know that not every parent is able to access these resources, often due to lack of information, money, or access to quality services.

As we look to increase the impact of our work, Mercy Housing is pushing to connect every family of preschool-aged kids to these resources. For newborns, this means partnering with home visitation programs.

Children who have access to educational support before the age of five perform better academically, socially, and emotionally

Home visitation programs are an early-intervention strategy to support those who might



Grandmother and baby at Sunnydale Neighborhood Meeting

not have an adequate support system to help with vital tasks. Visiting nurses advise parents on healthy eating during pregnancy, self-care after childbirth, newborn care, infant sleep schedules, and handling tantrums. Other programs help new parents acquire proactive parenting skills.

For toddlers and pre-school aged kids, we will be working with families to identify quality early childhood education programs in their community and help parents overcome any potential

barriers to enrollment.

Taking a more systemic approach to this work is new territory for us, so we will be piloting this program in a handful of locations in 2019. As these choices are immensely personal, we will start by engaging residents in focus groups to better understand their goals and views. Based on this initial research, our resident services staff will then work to match eligible families with the appropriate resources in their local community. ♦

Encouraging Growth

When the school day is over, kids across our country experience radically different lives. Some children get to recharge with a snack, play a sport, and do homework at a school-based program or under the watchful eye of a family member. Other kids don't have these options because their families lack food security, their parents or caregivers work late, or they live in communities without safe places for youth to go.

In California, over 30 Mercy Housing communities have out-of-school time programs that provide needed structure, support and safety for young residents when they come home from school. Crossroad Gardens in Sacramento typifies our approach, in which Mercy Housing staff and volunteers provide support and activities that many young residents would not otherwise be able to access. Children engage in a regular activities including circle time where kids share the highlights of their day. A healthy snack is provided, along with 45-60 minutes of academic tutoring followed by a fun activity. Thanks to a federally funded work-study program, students from Sacramento State University provide tutoring at Crossroad Gardens after school, which youth find especially helpful in tackling the trickier parts of their homework assignments.

A few years ago, Mercy Housing initiated an ongoing effort to tangibly improve the out-of-school-time experience for children. We introduced new tools for staff to better assess, plan, and ultimately improve youth programming. This process included a range of



After-school program at Crossroad Garden in Sacramento

improvements from expanding the curriculum to creating more reading-friendly nooks for children. Since the fall of 2016, attendance in the program has increased 33%, a strong indicator that the changes are working. At Mercy Housing, we recognize that community and home are about so much more than families having a roof over their heads. Home is also a place where children are heard, feel safe, and are encouraged to grow. ♦



Angela with her two children sit outside of Casa San Juan

GROWING UP IN MERCY HOUSING

Over 20 years ago, Mercy Housing built Casa San Juan and Villa Madera in Oxnard, California for agricultural workers employed by local farms. Raising kids in affordable homes has provided families and kids with dramatically different opportunities than their parents.

Angela was nine years-old when she moved into Casa San Juan with her parents and two brothers. She and her brothers attended the after-school program in Casa San Juan's community center which provided help with homework and a safe space to

play with other kids. When she aged out of the after-school program, Angela enlisted as a volunteer at the same community center. Inspired by the mission of Mercy Housing to serve her community, Angela earned a college degree in social work. She now works for First 5, a nonprofit educational program for underserved children. She lives in a nearby neighborhood with her kids and comes to Casa San Juan almost every day to visit her mom who babysits the grandkids while

Angela is at work. When they reach school age, Angela's children will go to the same

Inspired by the mission of Mercy Housing to serve her community, Angela earned a college degree in social work.

after-school program that she attended as a child.

Roberta and her husband moved into Villa Madera

fourteen years ago with their three young children. From the very beginning, Roberta attended classes at Villa Madera's community center on parenting, healthy cooking, and money management. When her kids were in elementary school, they participated in Mercy Housing's after-school and summer programs. Roberta's two daughters are now away attending college. Roberto, the youngest, lives at home and is doing well in high school.

Yajaira moved to Casa San Juan three years ago with her family when she was still in



Yajaira teaching afterschool at Casa San Juan

high school. Now she attends a local university and is getting a teaching degree. Yajaira works as a tutor at Casa San Juan with a partner organization called Project Understanding, building on established relationships and

trust of neighbors.

Stories like these are just a few of the many examples of families whose lives were changed by living in Mercy Housing properties. ♥



Building Bridges Between Home and School

Since 2015, Mercy Housing California (MHC) has been engaged in a unique partnership with Leataata Floyd Elementary School (LFE) just south of Downtown Sacramento. MHC runs a school-based Student and Family Community Center that straddles the worlds of home and school in order to address the unmet needs of students and their families living in the public housing communities of Marina Vista and Alder Grove.

Mercy Housing first connected with the staff of LFE as part of a community planning effort for the revitalization in the Marina Vista-Alder Grove and the surrounding Land Park neighborhood. During the process, the LFE administration and the Mercy Housing Team shared resources and expertise and identified a strategy to help LFE become a neighborhood hub – offering quality education, enrichment, and services to children, teens, and families within the school’s neighborhood.

The onsite Mercy Housing team provides healthcare navigation, mental health support, and youth empowerment programs as well as partnering with various community-based organizations to bolster programs and services

offered on campus. Working on campus allows Mercy staff to connect with students and families in a familiar environment while providing needed services that can extend beyond the traditional hours and scope of the school system.

During the fall of 2017, Mercy Housing launched the Mercy Academic Achievement Program (MAAP), a middle school program intended to increase higher education opportunities for young people living in Marina Vista and Alder Grove. The MAAP program is the only teen program in the area. We started our program with five students. However, after a year and a half of programming, MAAP provides academic support to 32 middle school students each day.

Mercy Housing’s work with LFE has been possible thanks to funding from many organizations including the Kaiser Foundation, Mercy Foundation, The California Endowment, Keller Williams and Bayside Church. Their support and volunteer work have funded curriculum development, teacher salaries, travel expenses, field trips, and classroom supplies for the Summer Breakaway Academy which helps reduce summer learning loss. ♥

TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

A Culture of Awareness and Sensitivity

The Leataata Floyd Student and Family Community Center uses Trauma Informed Care – an approach that emphasizes sensitivity to a person’s past trauma and coping mechanisms – to address social, physical, and behavioral needs in the community. The program engages students of Leataata Floyd Elementary (LFE), teenage youth from Marina Vista-Alder Grove public housing, their families, and residents of the surrounding neighborhood. As part of the partnership with LFE, Mercy Housing and school staff help students and their families become more resilient, heal from trauma, and develop tools for managing their physical and mental health.

Building positive relationships is essential for growth, development, and learning.

Through Mercy Housing’s intensive work with families at LFE, we found that students’ behavioral health and academic challenges are directly related

to their exposure to adverse childhood experiences and daily stressors of violence and concentrated poverty.

The complex challenges faced by young people living in public or assisted housing communities greatly impact their educational achievement and can impact their life trajectory. Therefore, it is imperative that housing providers and educators utilize trauma-informed practices that consider the emotional needs of young residents and avoid re-traumatization which ‘traditional’ practices may ignore or exacerbate.

Our trauma informed strategy includes consistent professional development and coaching that focuses on youth mental health first aid and trauma-informed practices. These trainings provide the tools needed to identify a young person that is impacted by childhood trauma and may need mental health support. Once students are identified as needing additional support, they are referred to



the school social worker or Mercy Housing. Then, our multi-disciplinary team which includes a resident services manager, healthcare navigator, school-based social worker, parent-liaison, school nurse, and youth engagement specialist work together to develop a holistic care plan that meets the various needs of the child and diminishes the barriers to learning.

Most importantly, our team is committed to cultivating safe and trusting relationships with students and families. Building positive relationships is essential for growth, development, and learning. It is a key factor in student resilience and is one of the few things that has the potential to create a buffer against the impact of adversity and trauma. ♥

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Young Leaders

Volunteers are a central part of community life in Mercy Housing properties, helping tutor children, managing weekly food pantries, and assisting with social events, such as holiday parties. Interestingly, some of our most loyal volunteers are young residents who live in the communities that they serve.

FLOR

Flor is a high school sophomore who volunteers for the food pantry at Villa Madera, where she is also a resident. On Thursdays after school, she meets Mercy Housing staff in the community center where they sort groceries into boxes for over 40 families who rely on the weekly pantry. Flor also volunteers in the neighborhood, preparing and serving meals through the culinary arts program at her high school. Flor first discovered her love of healthy cooking while attending the after-school program at Villa Madera which frequently included cooking classes.

SAMANTHA

Samantha is a junior in high school and a member of the Visitacion Valley Youth Leadership Group. She volunteers in the community center at Britton Court Apartments, helping with the food pantry and tutoring children in the after-school program.

SABRINA

Sabrina has volunteered for the past two summers at Heritage Homes tutoring young residents and providing digital literacy support for older residents who need help using computers in the community room.

JESSICA

When Jessica was in high school, she volunteered at Carter Terrace, helping senior residents with IT questions. Now she works at <dev/mission>, a company in San Francisco that connects women and people of color to tech jobs. 💙

MEET KELAIJA

Pursuing Her Dreams

For the past four years, Kelaija has been an active member of Project Voice, a program led by Ashlei Hurst for youth living in Marina Vista public housing. Last summer, Ashlei, the Associate Director of Resident Services for Mercy Housing California, accompanied Kelaija on a trip to Louisiana to tour college campuses. While there, they met with Professor Amick at the University of Holy Cross (UHC), a small Catholic school in New Orleans. As a result of this meeting, Kelaija was offered a Heart and Mind Scholarship which supports students of color who live in low-income neighborhoods. The scholarship includes free tuition for four years, wrap-around services and mental health support, as well as academic mentorship. With this support, Kelaija has been able to attend UHC.

The Leataata Floyd and Bayside Church communities helped Ashlei collect donations for Kelaija's school and dorm supplies, and the Sisters of Mercy helped pay for Ashlei's and Kelaija's travel costs.

"Kelaija has overcome so much, and she is one of the many reasons why I love working at Mercy Housing," says Ashlei. "We are giving young people in Marina Vista and Alder Grove the opportunity to heal from trauma, connect to caring adults, and pursue their dreams."

Kelaija is thriving in New Orleans. She earned a 2.8 GPA her first semester in school. She attends counseling on a weekly basis, meets with Ashlei via Skype and a tutor multiple times a week, and sings in a choir. Additionally, she has made friends with students at Xavier University of Louisiana, a nearby historically black college in downtown New Orleans. 💙





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GET INVOLVED

VOLUNTEER WITH MERCY HOUSING CALIFORNIA

Whether you are interested in an ongoing individual commitment or a one-time group volunteer project, sharing your gifts and talents can make a difference for residents! ♥

INDIVIDUAL VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

We have a variety of openings for ongoing, regular volunteer commitments. For example, an after-school tutor at our family properties helps our staff engage with more youth, and Art Therapy Instructors at our supportive or senior properties help individuals express themselves and connect with their community. ♥

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