



Homeless Students Take Center Stage

By
Cynthia Mosqueda

Who are “Maria” and “John”? They are my students, and like all others, I care about them deeply. As a counselor, it is my job to do whatever I can to help them succeed. While they certainly don’t lack ambitions or dreams, neither Maria nor John has permanent housing, rendering them part of the growing segment of homeless Californians who take part in our public colleges and universities.

Like so many of their counterparts, Maria and John have been in the shadows for too long. Thankfully, due to the persistence of the Student Senate for California Community Colleges (with help from FACCC among others) and a new found willingness of our state’s legislature, Maria and John may begin to see the light of day.

The federal government applies the term “homeless children and youth” to those without a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This includes, but is not limited to, those who:

- 1) share the housing of others due to economic hardship;
- 2) live in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
- 3) live in emergency or transitional shelters;
- 4) are abandoned in hospitals;
- 5) are awaiting foster care placement;
- 6) have a primary nighttime residence that is not designed for regular sleeping accommodations;
- 7) live in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.

Maria and John, both 18, share the first criterion above. Maria’s father is in prison; her mother is a drug addict. She was staying in her late grandmother’s garage, which is no longer available to her. Friends have offered to take her on a temporary basis, a week or two here, another week there. John’s grandmother also tended for him after his mother passed away. Since his grandmother can no longer

collect on his late mother's military pension, she wants him out.

While there is no reliable calculation of the total number of homeless college students in our state, the California State University system estimates that one in 10 of their students falls into this category. We do not yet have a comparable figure for the California Community Colleges.

Nationally, 58,158 student applicants indicated homelessness on their federal financial aid forms. This figure goes back to the 2012-13 academic year, the most recent to date, which according to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY), reflects an 8% increase from the year before.

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these numbers are likely understated, since some students may reside in a car, or like Maria and John, with a relative or friend. Others simply don't want to admit their own circumstance.

Over the years, I've shared in the frustration of so many faculty colleagues in watching this problem escalate. The all too common societal assumption is that homeless individuals have no bandwidth beyond food and shelter; college is simply beyond reach. We, the faculty, know that is not true, but for the most part, we've been unsuccessful in generating attention to this issue. Enter the Student Senate for California Community Colleges (SSCCC) and their current president, once homeless, Courtney Cooper, who changed that dynamic.

This year, they successfully sponsored AB 1995 (Williams), legislation allowing homeless community college students access to campus shower facilities. A seemingly straightforward concept, AB 1995 was no easy sell. Concerns over liability, cost, and local control permeated the discussions. The SSCCC, and their author, Das Williams (once homeless himself), would not let go. This was their project and they were determined to see it through.

The SSCCC leaders developed AB 1995 after hearing from a homeless student who discussed his plight at a General Assembly. Having experienced significant discrimination in class from both students and faculty (at one point he was asked to leave until he showered) this student conducted an informal survey at his college on how many students had either experienced homelessness or knew of someone who was homeless. Once he realized how significant the issue was on his host campus, he broadened his information gathering to a larger region,

and eventually statewide, before presenting it to the Student Senate.

Accepting this challenge, the SSCCC found that roughly 40 of our colleges had policies preventing students from using the shower facilities unless they were specifically enrolled in a physical education course. They also identified three campuses that went the other way, allowing shower access to homeless students.

In this era where the premium on course and degree completion has become sacrosanct, AB 1995 was promoted as a way to help students succeed. Assemblymember Williams correctly noted that “Students are less likely to attend class when they do not take showers and feel insecure about their physical appearance.” He added that homeless stu-

dents lacking access to shower facilities and other necessities are at an extreme risk of dropping out. According to SSCCC President Courtney Cooper, “AB 1995 shows just how important it is for the student voice to be heard. It’s not just the passage of the bill, but ensuring our students are working together with administrators and faculty on effective and transparent implementation.”

AB 1995 was not the only measure on homeless and impoverished students this year. AB 801 (Bloom), the “Success for Homeless Youth in Higher Education Act,” and AB 1747 (Weber) addressing food insecurity, were both signed into law in September. AB 801 extends priority registration through January 1, 2020 for homeless students in the California Community Colleges and the California State University (while requesting similar action from the University of California). AB 1747 requires public and private colleges and universities in counties that participate in the Restaurant Meals Program to apply to become an approved food vendor for the program. Since food insecurity and homelessness often go hand in hand, both AB 801 and AB 1747 were seen as positive extensions of AB 1995.

It should be mentioned that these measures followed passage of the 2016-17 Budget Act which restored funding for the California Community Colleges CalWORKs program (EOPS had been restored the prior year; DSPS, the year before that). Despite the Governor’s preference for locally funded services over the state categorical programs, the significance of CalWORKs—following the heels of EOPS and DSPS—could not be ignored. While historically not a bipartisan priority, CCC CalWORKs had its champions this year in both Democratic and Republican circles.

In a macro context, the Legislature and Governor are belatedly awakening to a much larger crisis of societal poverty and homelessness. California’s overall homeless population accounted for roughly 20% of that for the country, the most in any state. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, close to 115,000 people in Cal-

ifornia were homeless in 2015. Officially, California had the 17th highest poverty rate in the country from 2013 to 2015, affecting 15% of our population. A more reliable measurement which accounts for regional differences in housing, labor participation, and demographics places our true poverty rate at 20.6%, the highest in the nation.

Beyond community colleges, the Administration and Legislature took laudable steps in the 2016-17 Budget Act to confront homelessness. Funding for the CalWORKs Housing Support Program (HSP) was increased by \$12 million, which should expand efforts to move Californians out of homelessness into stable housing. In addition, the budget provides one-time funding in a number of important areas: \$45 million to help homeless people with disabilities access such benefits as SSI/SSP; \$45 million for emergency shelter grants; and \$10 million to reduce homelessness in families involved with the child welfare system. Even more ambitious, a \$2 billion agreement was reached to build housing for the homeless population facing mental illness.

For me, it’s less about specific bills or budget allocations than how we look upon Maria, John, and the thousands like them. The community colleges exist, in part, to provide a path out of poverty for those choosing higher education. A one-time string of victories for homeless students will help, but must be part of an ongoing conversation and dedication to problem solving. Thankfully, the Chancellor’s Office is working on playing a role in this, examin-

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ing current practices and discussing future recommendations.

Whatever happens in the future may not be quick enough for Maria and John. A one-time ward of the court, Maria is a candidate for public assistance to help stabilize her housing. Despite the possibility of public aid, her situation remains bleak. John has a different story. Having learned to live off of 99-cent meals, he is ready to switch from a community college where he is studying criminal justice, to the military, if he cannot find a place to live. Homelessness will not define him, but it has affected him. That should not be the deciding factor for anyone to enter the military.

My ability to help Maria, John, and others like them is benefited from a fortuitous source, my sister, who earned her Masters of Social Work degree and serves as my inside contact on these issues. It's through this familial line that I'm able to navigate the complex rubric of state and county social services. While I'm fortunate to have a sister who can assist me in my job, that's no substitute for policy. It's time we connect the dots in a better way between our colleges and social services. Understanding the existing support services on campus is challenging enough; cutting through the maze of public assistance requires a different level of expertise.

While I have no particular proposal in mind, I am hearkened by FACCC's cosponsored effort this year to expand mental health services to our students. The model was simple: expand funding for mental health to allow increased access by our students. There was no requirement for districts to hire mental health professionals; they could be contracted by public and private agencies. Having a mental health professional on campus, whether or not the district was the actual employer, would undoubtedly make a huge difference for our students. Although this effort was vetoed, discussions are underway to revive it for next year.

We should consider something similar for social services where a designated social worker could be assigned to a community college, working with

academic counselors, CCC CalWORKs, and other relevant programs. That idea resonates with Rebecca Gonzales, Government Relations and Political Affairs Director for the National Association of Social Workers, California Chapter, and former presenter at FACCC's Advocacy & Policy Conference. "Unfortunately, we are experiencing an increase in homeless students at our public colleges and universities, and we need greater attention and creative problem solving to assist them." She believes that MSW professionals can "provide that bridge between the counties, private agencies, and the colleges in a collaborative approach that would ultimately and substantively help students."

In looking at how far we've come relative to where we still need to go, I'm reminded of Sasha Abramsky's 2013 exposé, "Poverty in America: How the Other Half Still Lives." Abramsky correctly expressed that when we "[t]hink about these problems in isolation . . . they appear overwhelming. [When we t]hink about them as pieces of a whole . . . paradoxically, [they] become more solvable."

On a societal level, Abramsky declared: "Understand homelessness as simply a personal catastrophe and it is difficult, if not impossible, to fathom why so many millions of Americans lack stable housing options; but approach this crisis as the collateral damage caused by unemployment, by the systemic marketing of bad debt, by underinvestment in mental health and foster care systems, by overinvestment in criminal justice systems, and again, new and creative solutions can be generated."

For Maria, John and the thousands like them, AB 1995, AB 801, and AB 1747, and budget restorations of CalWORKs, EOPS, and DSPS, can provide hope that their stories are being heard. Knowing that student and faculty advocates are fighting for them—and winning—should send a clear message that their dignity is our priority and we will not rest until they are served.

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