

# High schools reach out to homeless students in Merced area

BY DOANE YAWGER

[dyawger@mercedsunstar.com](mailto:dyawger@mercedsunstar.com) March 24, 2014

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More than 800 students at high schools in Merced, Atwater and Livingston are considered homeless, with some lacking basic necessities.

That's nearly a tenth of the Merced Union High School District's total enrollment. Through a federally-funded program now in its third year, the district tries to help homeless students lead more productive, stable lives.

The McKinney-Vento program gives the district \$66,877, which it uses to help 838 students identified as either homeless or foster youths. Several school officials believe the number of homeless students is much larger, possibly more than 1,000, because some students and their parents are reluctant to seek help.

Norma Cardona, the district's children and youths liaison in the Child Welfare, Attendance and Safety Department, says she loves working with homeless students but acknowledges there are challenges.

"It's very satisfying but it also can be very sad," Cardona said. "I love what I do, helping them. Some students just need an adult they can talk to and connect with."

Cardona said the district needs to apply for a new McKinney-Vento grant next year and is trying to make the program sustainable.

She said there are a number of families that are too embarrassed to come forward to get help. She meets with students who have been kicked out of their homes or left homeless due to some instability, family violence or drug use.

Torrin Johnson, principal of Yosemite High School, said he knows there are more than 1,000 homeless students who need help, and Cardona is the person who offers them a lifeline on behalf of the district.

"Norma Cardona is a saint," Johnson said. "You can always count on her. When a kid comes to us for help we have somebody we can call. It's rough out there."

Cardona said she meets with students and talks about their options. She said many homeless students are unaware they qualify for food stamps or that medical help is available through the Golden Valley Health Centers. These youths also can get counseling services and may qualify for bus passes.

Homeless students are one of society's most vulnerable populations, Cardona said.

Livingston High School Principal Ralph Calderon said the district's program is a hand up, not a handout, stressing that school officials never want to turn away a student who needs help.

"The recent Foster Farms closure has really affected families," Calderon said. "Some live paycheck to paycheck and some aren't able to stay afloat. When you see students' grades dropping, it's a sign that something is wrong. They (students) sometimes don't understand these services are available."

Calderon said it's good to sit across from a student knowing those resources are available.

Merced High School Principal John Olson said it's heart-wrenching and shocking to realize the adversity some students are facing, particularly the high number of them living in poverty. He said he often wishes he had known about a student's situation two years earlier than he usually does.

Olson said Merced High works on building character, and he's proud some of his students are willing to do things for others without being asked, citing leadership students for showing a willingness to help their homeless peers.

Jon Schaefer, Sequoia High School principal, also praised the homeless program and stressed that more students likely would qualify for services if their plights were known.

"Norma is a big part of why it's successful," Schaefer said of Cardona. "She has such positive interaction with students. She's easy to approach for students, and it's always a positive experience."

Cardona said her challenge is getting the word out about homeless services for students and helping them tap into resources they didn't know were available.

More than 200 district employees have been trained on McKinney-Vento procedures and how to approach students who are homeless, she said. Extra effort is taken to keep the identity of homeless students concealed, make them feel comfortable and get them the help they need.

Last semester an anonymous donor, a national nonprofit organization, donated 950 pairs of shoes to needy students. About 500 backpacks containing note paper, binders, mini-notebooks and teen novels also were distributed.

Thanksgiving turkeys and holiday meals were furnished through the efforts of Merced High leadership students and the Feed the Children organization. About 70 winter goody bags, including blankets, beanies, gloves and socks, also were given to needy students.

Cardona said she is hoping to tap into mentoring resources from students at UC Merced and California State University, Stanislaus. She also is hoping that clothing closets for lightly-used clothing can be set up with the help of local businesses.

“McKinney-Vento tries to remove barriers to education,” Cardona said of the program. “We provide assistance with transportation and school supplies. They shouldn’t have to choose between paying PG&E or buying basketball shoes.”

*Sun-Star staff writer Doane Yawger can be reached at (209) 385-2407 or [dyawger@mercedsunstar.com](mailto:dyawger@mercedsunstar.com).*