



2023 Healthy Living Conference – City of Hope

Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services

Fostering Optimism: Housing Units for Homeless College Students

Morgan Paden, Development Director, Grants

ABSTRACT

The overarching goal of the [Fostering Optimist: Housing Units for College Students Experiencing Homelessness Program](#) is to provide comfortable and supportive transitional housing for community college students who are homeless or at-risk of being homeless.

INTRODUCTION

In partnership with the Los Angeles Community College District, Optimist provides housing at our Highland Park Campus to create a supportive environment for high-risk community college students, including former foster youth. In addition to providing housing for these students, Optimist has the existing infrastructure for a holistic approach to provide these youth with mental health services, career and educational advocacy, mentors, food services, and recreational activities. This funding has supported housing, school supplies, and materials to assist residents.

CONCLUSION

- In 2022, LACCD and OYHFS entered an agreement to provide housing to 13 unhoused community college students
- The available rooms filled quickly and there remains a waitlist with 30+ applicants hoping for housing.
- Approximately 50% of the LACCD students who sought housing were also former foster youth and many have requested supportive services such as therapy and educational support which Optimist provides onsite.

THE CHALLENGE

In Los Angeles County, 35-60% of youth aging out of foster care have no safe, affordable housing available. In 2020, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) reported the number of homeless youth in Los Angeles County increased more than 18.5% over the previous year. Homeless youth with a history of foster care report an average duration of 36.6 months, which designates them as chronically homeless.

For youth transitioning out of the fractured foster care system, successful educational attainment is key to self-sufficiency in adulthood. However, foster youth have significantly worse educational outcomes. Only 65% of youth in foster care complete high school or earn a GED by age 21, and less than 11% go on to earn a college degree.

Many community college students in the U.S. are experiencing homelessness. Youth, desperate for an education, are living in their cars at night as they attend class during the day. This is even truer for former foster youth who have few family supports to rely on. Optimist aims to remove barriers to student success and create stability for students who are at risk of homelessness.

“Our view is that foster youth are not defined by what has happened to them; they are only limited by access to supports and resources to achieve their dreams.”

Dr. Todd Sosna, Chief Executive Officer, Optimist Youth Homes & Family Services

Stated vs Actual Outcomes



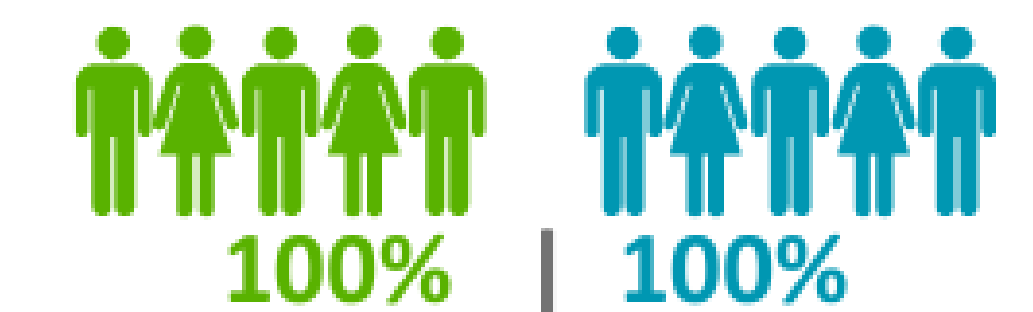
Students receiving mental health services will show improved emotional wellness



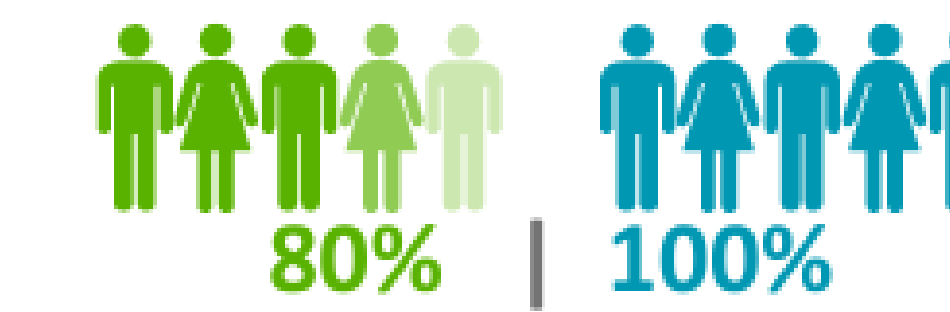
Students will maintain good standing at their college



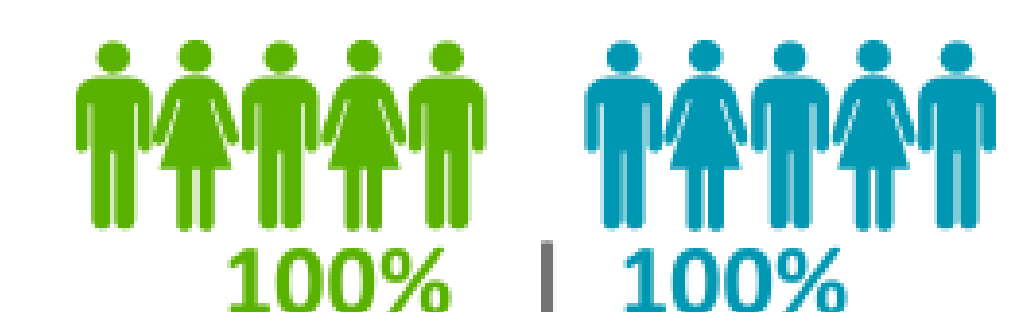
Students will have positive social support systems



Students will meet with an advisor to discuss career and employment plans



Students will reenroll for the following semester



Students will be offered mental health support

Resident Stories



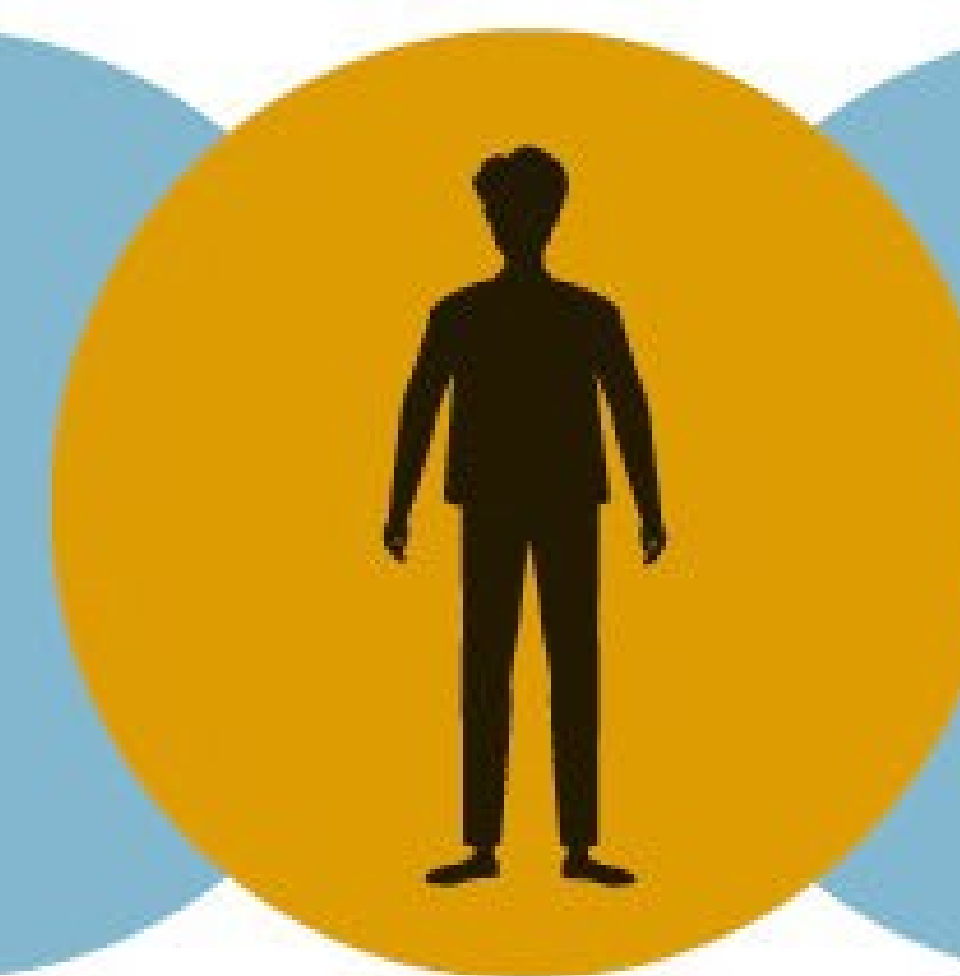
STUDENT A

After completing core coursework at LACCD, she was accepted to USC. Optimist staff helped her find new affordable housing close to USC's campus.



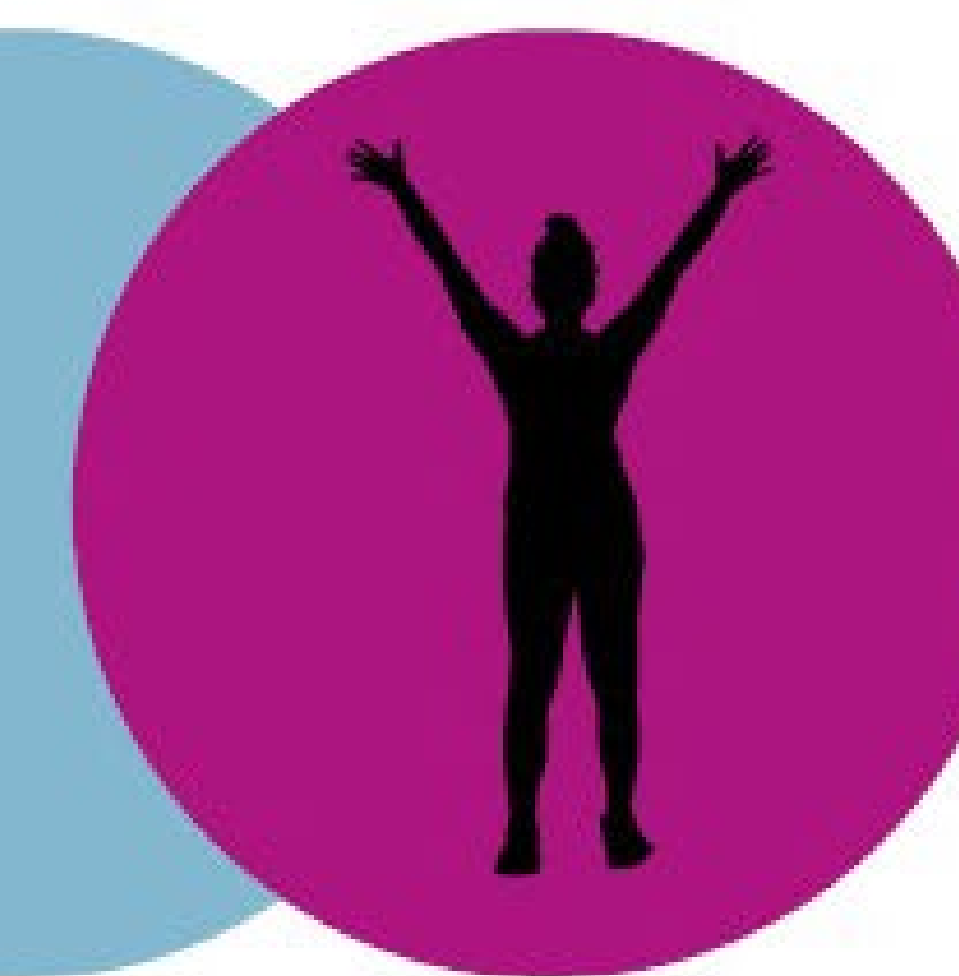
STUDENT B

Optimist supported her during her pregnancy and the birth of her child. She and her infant still live in Optimist housing. This has allowed her to continue her schooling while being a new mom.



STUDENT C

He found therapy helpful but could not continue treatment due to the hurdles of couch surfing and school. Now that he has secured housing and counseling is onsite, he goes to therapy again and reports that his mental health has improved.



STUDENT D

She plays on the basketball team at Pierce College and will enroll in a nursing program at a four-year University this fall.



Meet Carolina:

A previously unhoused [Mother and College Student](#). Now an Optimist Resident

“I had an apartment with roommates, but it became so expensive that **I found myself living in my car**. My daughter went to live with her father because I did not want her to see me like this. I would visit her and pretend like everything was ok, but really **it was a bad situation**.”

“When I scheduled a tour, I was greeted by their staff. Everyone was so nice, welcoming, and supportive. I told them I had a support animal and a child. While **other places would have turned me away** at that point, Optimist made extra accommodations to make sure we were all safe, off the streets, and in a comfortable apartment that I'm proud to call home. **We love living here!**”