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---Daily Herald---05/13/2019

U-46 program aims to help homeless

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy

Editor's note: Suburban Education Lab is an occasional series focusing on innovative programs at suburban schools, often tackling common, universal problems students face.



Blanca Pascual-Gomez, 30, center, has been receiving rental assistance through the HOPE Fair Housing Center program that is helping Elgin Area School District U-46 homeless students and their families get stabilized. HOPE and U-46's Project Access partnered to provide up to two years of rent assistance and wraparound services for the families. *Brian Hill | Staff Photographer*

Getting the kids out of bed and ready for school -- a familiar morning struggle for most moms -- was exceptionally stressful for Blanca Pascual-Gomez.

For nearly a year, Pascual-Gomez was homeless, living with her three young children in a shelter.

She would wake the children -- 10, 8 and 6 years old -- around 5 a.m. to vacate the Downers Grove shelter where the family had taken refuge and prepare for a more than 20-mile trek to Elgin Area School District U-46 schools.

Marital problems and a divorce had led to the family losing their Hanover Park home. The children went from having their own bedroom, beds and toys to sleeping in one room with their mother. They went from home-cooked Mexican meals to eating unfamiliar foods with strangers while learning how to deal with a variety of personalities at the shelter.

It took an emotional and psychological toll and began affecting the children's schoolwork, says Pascual-Gomez, 30.

But with the help of a new program offered by Wheaton-based [HOPE Fair Housing Center](#), the family is on a path to self-sufficiency and renting a three-bedroom home in South Elgin.

"I am not driving, waking up really early to get them to school," said Pascual-Gomez speaking through a Spanish language interpreter. "They are sleeping the hours that they need to sleep. It helps them be better at school. (Now) they love waking up for school."

Five U-46 homeless families are receiving rental assistance as part of the pilot program, the goal of which is to restore a sense of stability and help homeless families get back on their feet.

Just knowing where their next meal is coming from and where they will sleep at night "means so much for a child, for their learning and well-being," said Patty Briones, U-46 homeless liaison and bilingual coordinator for [Project Access](#).

The program provides wraparound services, including transportation, tutoring and personal care items, for homeless students and their families.

"Now (Pascual-Gomez) is in a situation where she believes she can move on in life and be able to provide for her children," Briones said. "Her self-esteem has gone up. It's because of the stability she was able to offer (her kids) and take that fear away that there is no roof over their heads. Considering everything that they have gone through, they are doing really well in school."



Blanca Pascual-Gomez, 30, center, speaks with Patricia Briones, left, and Maggie Schroeder, homeless liaisons with Elgin Area School District U-46's Project Access at the district headquarters in Elgin. Wheaton-based nonprofit HOPE Fair Housing Center is helping U-46 homeless students and their families get back on their feet through the program. *Brian Hill | Staff Photographer*

Giving hope

HOPE funded the pilot program through a portion of a \$1.4 million settlement from banking giant Wells Fargo stemming from a complaint about potentially discriminatory marketing practices and maintenance of foreclosed properties.

The nonprofit picked U-46 due to its large homeless population -- nearly 1,000 students at the state's second-largest school district. It spent \$111,000 on rental assistance for the five families selected from a pool of applicants.

Program participants received two years of rental assistance -- the first year's rent was absorbed entirely by HOPE. Costs were split 50-50 the second year.

Meanwhile, U-46 saved on transportation costs for those homeless students, which the district subsidizes to keep students at their home schools as required by federal and state law.

One family became self-sufficient after the first year in the program. Three other families are in their second year and the fifth is in its first year.

Those families have increased incomes, improved health, socialization and school attendance, and enough money saved to cushion against future emergencies, HOPE Executive Director Anne Houghtaling said.

"It's a small investment for such a big payoff and reaffirms the importance of housing to so many of life's outcomes," Houghtaling said. "It was a great partnership. It's so cost effective and the outcomes are so good that we want to seek different funding sources to maintain the program. With appropriate philanthropic and corporate investment, we could end homelessness for families in U-46."

The agency is seeking grants from foundations and corporate sponsors to expand the program within U-46 and at other suburban school districts with large homeless populations.

As for Pascual, she is graduating in July after two years with the program and is confident she can support herself and her children.

She has been saving money from working at an ice cream shop and expects a steady income from child-support payments.

She now is looking into buying an affordable two-bedroom house in South Elgin or renewing her rental lease for another year.

"Yes, we can," she said emphatically.

- Share ideas of innovative educational programs at suburban schools and colleges by email to mkrishnamurthy@dailyherald.com.

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From the community: Creekside Elementary School

McTeacher's Night at the Elgin McDonald's

By: Julie Travers

Creekside School in Elgin held their second McTeacher's Night Fundraiser at the Elgin McDonald's on Larkin.

A McTeacher's Night is organized to help raise money for local schools by having teachers work at McDonald's and then giving a percentage of the night's sales back to the local school.

On Wednesday, May 1st, the restaurant was taken over by teachers excited to serve freshly prepared meals to students and their families. Principal Pollack worked hard all night alongside the Creekside teachers. Teachers also handed out orders, cleaned tables, served drinks, and even dressed up in an apple pie costume. Teachers Sawyer, Zabran, and Mr. Weber dressed in the Pie outfit and what a blast they had mingling with all families and taking pictures. Teacher Castelon, Mr. Weber and PTO representative Lia Weber all sold the pies and had a great time seeing all their school families. The funds earned from the Pie sales and dinners will go directly to the school PTO fund to support the students.

A special thank you goes to Creekside parent Lia Weber, who organized the event as well as everyone who worked and attended. The Elgin McDonald's General Manager, Ron, is honored to help with the fundraising efforts for all the Elgin schools he works with.

The event was hosted by the Bear Family Restaurants and Owner-Operator, David Bear. Like us on Facebook and visit our Bear Website.

For more information about events provided by the Elgin McDonalds contact Community Relations Director Julie Travers at julie.travers@comcast.net