



Serving with **Love for All** since 1954

Learning with Love at Catholic Charities

Caritas Center is becoming many things for the people we serve so far. A place to heal. A place to learn. And above all, a place to find home. I want to share with you, our donors, a very special way it is a place for children to grow on that journey.

When a child and their family enter our care, we know they may have experienced any number of traumas. Feeling engaged with school is especially difficult for them, yet without the stability of home and other support, these children are at even greater risk of falling behind. We at Catholic Charities are committed to helping them not only catch up but excel at whatever they hope to achieve.

Instrumental to these interconnected housing, health, and dignity services at Caritas Center are Youth and Family Programs. Designed to serve both children and their parents, our specialized team fills gaps that have been widened by the pain of homelessness.

A mom recently shared with me, "Becoming a parent felt scary to me...and I never expected twins! Even as my kids have grown, every day felt new. Your team showed me that I have what it takes after all. I just needed a push. Thank you for helping me be the mom I always hoped to be."

Now, she and her two little ones have found a home, thanks to your support of these initiatives.

The 2023 Sonoma County Point in Time Count showed that over 90% of sheltered families experiencing homelessness in the county reside at Caritas Center at any given time. This is a most solemn responsibility for us. Your continued investment in Catholic Charities and our network of services can help us end homelessness for these families and more across our community. **Together, we can make a difference.**

In this newsletter, you will read about transformative experiences that have helped young people grow through even the hardest period of their lives. There is a special moment we see when a family can come together to support each other. The light inside of them shines brightly again. Catholic Charities is there when the light returns, and we are there to see it through. Thank you for being a part of this incredible change.



With love for all,

Jennielynn Holmes, CEO

[Click here to make a donation](#)

An Interview with Toni Abraham, Youth and Family Programs Manager



What led you to do this work for kids?

I was blessed to have an incredible mother figure who stepped in during a hard time for me when I was younger. She taught me about what an impact I can have on others' lives and that no matter what, we all have worth. More than ever, she showed me that we're never truly alone and that we have to look out for each other.

This led me to my career serving vulnerable children and youth through daycares, nonprofits, Sonoma County Office of Education, Los Guilicos Juvenile Hall, and now Catholic Charities. She was that one special person who helped me see things differently, and it changed the course of my life.

Not all these kids have had that yet, so we try to expose them to experiences and resources that can change the course of their lives for good. All it takes is one...

What is the goal your team hopes to achieve through Youth and Family Programs?

Catholic Charities provides the full spectrum of services to enrichment resources that support the children and their parents as they navigate the complexities of the education system and a brutal housing market. While it's true that schools are expected to offer resources to children experiencing homelessness, such as those provided in the McKinney-Vento Act, many educators and other school staff aren't always given adequate support to help students. I believe our heroic teachers have the best of intentions for kids, but they can only go so far. That's where we come in. Catholic Charities is a bridge to what is available, both known and unknown to parents. With this extra support for kids, their parents, and their teachers, we can prevent these children from falling through the cracks.

What brings you joy?

When Catholic Charities programs can support a parent when her two children join a soccer team and do not have the right size soccer cleats to play in. How's that? Recently, while riding down the elevator with a family at Caritas Center, a young boy was holding his cleats and dressed in his grass-stained soccer uniform. I asked him if practice was going well and noticed that the cleats were worn and potentially unsafe. This wouldn't do. He deserved better. The older brother asked if we could get a pair for his younger brother, who was not in the elevator, and he gave us his shoe size. To see the joy in the mom's eyes I could feel her relief knowing that her boys would be able to continue playing soccer and that her two boys would enjoy playing on a soccer team. For me, my joy was knowing that she as a mother would have one less thing to worry about and could focus on finding housing.

What's next for Youth and Family Programs?

When the community joined hands to build Caritas Center, we could truly begin to dream bigger. This year, I am seeing those dreams come to life as we prepare our kids for another school year. Our Center is becoming a hub for community engagement and resources for our clients to help them along their journey. Even with this incredible building, we know our kids will still face hurdles embarking on their education without a home. Every day without stable housing could set a child back. While these parents' days are busy with house hunting and other stability services, their kids count on you, me, and all of us at Catholic Charities to help as a guide along the journey.

Donor support sustains us and helps us continue to evolve to face whatever surprises come our way.



Getting Creative with the Children's Museum of Sonoma County

The Children's Museum of Sonoma County's mobile van regularly visits Caritas Center to get creative with families!

Using recycled materials, parents had a chance to make art with their children. What a joy to see moms and dads having a moment of peace to create something special together. Thanks, CMOSC, for supporting our families!



A Downward Trend Giving Cause to Look Up

In recent years, our community has invested in proven solutions to ending homelessness that effectively meet participants' needs. In the preliminary results from the 2023 Point-in-Time Count, we are seeing the results of this bold investment.

Sonoma County saw an overall 22 percent decrease in the area's homeless population last year including a 24 percent decline in those identified as being chronically homeless, according to preliminary results of the 2023 Sonoma County Point-in-Time Count. The 22 percent decrease in homelessness is the largest reduction in eight years since a 27 percent decrease in 2015.

These results are in line with an overall downward trend since 2011. Housing First-focused efforts such as the Family Shelter at Caritas Center, Santa Rosa Safe Parking, Permanent Supportive Housing, and vouchers have continued to play a pivotal role in the decrease throughout Sonoma County.

Discovering New Talents on the way Home

When William and his parents, Sam and Wendy, came to the old Family Support Center in October 2022, they felt like they hit rock bottom. Sam was working full-time as a security guard and Wendy was trying to make ends meet as a part-time housekeeper and a loving mom.

Wendy shared, "As a mom, I wanted an active role in my son's life since my parents weren't there for me. I never imagined this sacrifice could cost us our housing, but it did." The family was evicted from their housing after medical bills and a job loss spiraled out of control. It all became too much, leaving them with only a car to turn to for shelter. Or so they thought.

"To say going to that shelter felt like a disappointment is an understatement, but I couldn't bear the thought of raising my son in our car," told Sam. Their progress was slow at first. The family seldom left their room and missed case management meetings. William wasn't expressing interest in kindergarten. The shelter's environment wasn't meeting their needs.

"It seemed as if they lost hope. We had to urge them to move to the new shelter more than any other family in our care. We saw how sincere their commitment was to William...they didn't want to give up on him, and we weren't giving up on them," Toni Abraham shares.

Then, they had the opportunity to move from the old shelter to Caritas Center.

During the Caritas Center Christmas party, we began to see the cloud lift. William smiled for the first time since we met him. Finally, there was hope again. Filled with a renewed sense of purpose, Sam and Wendy enrolled William in Toni's Youth and Family Programs to help him get excited about school.

William had full access to learning resources and enrichment like sports, painting, and more. With the medical clinic a few steps away from their room, William got his first check-up in over a year. **Good news - he is strong and healthy!** Mom and Dad didn't miss another case management meeting. They came fully prepared each time, taking charge of their housing search. Sam and Wendy had new access to mental health counseling that has already begun to bolster their marriage and their outlook on life.

They went from nothing to being housed in just three short months after moving into Caritas Center. Since finding home, the family has stayed in touch to let us know things are going well. William, with a new-found interest in art, has begun drawing everything he sees!

"Caritas Center is more than just a housing program. It opened our eyes to so much of what we were missing out on. Life dragged us down in a way we never thought possible. That changed at Caritas Center, where we were shown that we could accomplish anything we set our minds to."

-Wendy

*The family's names and likenesses are changed to preserve confidentiality.



Learn the Lingo!

As a supporter of our services, you are already a step ahead of those on the sidelines of addressing homelessness. Brush up on the lingo that is so important to our work...

Two-Gen Model: Traditional investments focusing only on adults or children constrain potential impacts by not engaging with families holistically to support and sustain growth and opportunity. By contrast, the two-generation model addresses the challenge of intergenerational poverty by aligning and coordinating services for children with services for their parents and developing programs that serve both together. This approach considers both in the design and delivery of services to improve economic, educational, health, safety, and other outcomes.

Housing First: Housing First is a homeless assistance approach that prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, thus ending their homelessness so they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life. People need basic necessities like food and a place to live before getting a job, budgeting properly, or fully addressing substance use concerns.

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH):

Permanent supportive housing is an intervention that combines affordable housing assistance with voluntary support services to address the needs of chronically homeless people. The services are designed to build independent living and tenancy skills while connecting people to community-based health care, treatment and employment services.



Always Listening, Always Learning

For Marcie Dahlen, it wasn't a newspaper ad or an article that led her to volunteer at Catholic Charities. Like many of our dedicated supporters, the Spirit seemed to lead her to address a need she felt in her heart. Given her history serving communities across the United States, this is no surprise. She is always listening.

From the Department of Child Welfare in West Virginia to working in adoptions and foster care for the Children's Home Society in California, Marcie has a lifelong professional commitment to helping vulnerable children. A highly trained social worker, she has connected with many people facing great challenges. She recognizes their resilience and greets them with the highest compassion.

Marcie and her husband Bernie moved to Sonoma County just over five years ago, where she became involved with Catholic Charities right away. "We came here to be near our beautiful grandchildren, but no matter where I live, I want to immerse myself in the community. I found that opportunity with Catholic Charities."

In her free time between gathering with the local Emmaus Faith Community and advocating for social justice, Marcie supports Catholic Charities' Youth and Family Programs as well as food distributions at The Palms Inn. Marcie has been through several chapters of Catholic Charities' history - the aftermath of the devastating 2017 Tubbs Fire, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and now the opening of Caritas Center. Seeing the families connect in a new way at the shelter is an inspiration.



"This new building has reminded me that we're always learning, not only the staff and the volunteers, but the families too. It has been amazing to see moms and dads learning from other parents in this space where they finally have the room to breathe amidst the terrible trauma they're working through."

Marcie shares, "We all have a responsibility to search for the truth and say it. Catholic Charities is really about feeding, educating, and opportunity for children and for people who have not had that opportunity. For me personally? Volunteering is a win-win to be able to do what I have always found most meaningful - I love kids and I love feeding people...and if you love people, you're truly feeding them."

From all of us at Catholic Charities, thank you, Marcie, for sharing your heart and talents with the people we serve. It's the unwavering sense of hope surrounding you that makes the difference so many are seeking.



Welcome Home!

Petaluma Citizenship Class Students strike a pose with their certificates. That smile comes from a deep love of this country and excitement for opportunities now available to them through citizenship!

Leave your Legacy

Planned giving can benefit you, your family, and your community! As you've known for years, Catholic Charities is a vital safety net for our whole community. Perhaps you value this so much that you've already thought about leaving us something in your will to help benefit future generations.

You can help us make the best use of your gift by giving us time to plan for it. Maybe we can even show you ways to make your bequest or other legacy gift even more valuable.

Bequests are vital for the longevity of our work and our ability to step up when we are needed.

Call Catholic Charities' Development Office for a confidential conversation with a knowledgeable staff member. To reach our team, please call (707) 284-3845 or scan the QR code!



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