

Date of Hearing: March 20, 2024

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Christopher M. Ward, Chair

AB 2007 (Boerner) – As Introduced January 31, 2024

SUBJECT: Homeless youth: transitional housing

SUMMARY: Requires, to the extent that funding is made available, the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) to establish the Unicorn Homes Transitional Housing for Homeless LGBTQ+ Youth Program (the program) as a five-year pilot program. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires the program to be administered by a local community-based organization that provide a majority of services to the LGBTQ+ community in up to five counties.
- 2) Requires the program to meet the following requirements:
 - a) Fund the community-based organizations providing emergency transitional housing for LGBTQ+ youth between 18 and 24 years of age experiencing homelessness due to family rejection, with the ultimate goal of reunification with the youth's family when possible;
 - b) Place eligible youths with volunteer host families. Requires any individual in the host family who is 18 years of age or older and with whom the youth would be living to meet all of the following criteria pursuant to the results of a background check conducted via Live Scan:
 - i) Has not been convicted of driving under the influence within the past 10 years;
 - ii) Has not been convicted of a crime for which registration is required pursuant to Section 290 of the Penal Code;
 - iii) Has not been convicted of domestic violence, child abuse, or human trafficking; and
 - iv) Has not been convicted of a violent felony as defined in subdivision (c) of Section 667.5 of the Penal Code.
 - c) Place eligible youths with families who are able to provide crisis intervention with a trauma-informed approach to their care.
 - d) Comply with the core components of Housing First.
- 3) Provides that a "trauma-informed approach" includes all of the following:
 - a) Ensuring the physical and emotional safety of the youth by understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of trauma;

- b) Preventing retraumatization to ensure that the youths feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe in their placement with a host family;
 - c) Demonstrating trustworthiness and transparency when making decisions with the aim to build and maintain trust between the host family and the youth placed in their care;
 - d) Leveling power differences for shared decisionmaking by ensuring that those impacted by decisions have a voice in the decisionmaking process; and
 - e) Empowering the youths to build on their strengths and identify strategies that will help them heal from trauma.
- 4) Requires each community-based organization that receives funding to prepare an annual report, to be submitted to the Legislature by December 31, 2026, and December 31, 2027, with the final report due on or before June 30, 2028, with the following information:
- a) The number of times the community-based organization was contacted by an LGBTQ+ youth potentially eligible for the program created by this bill;
 - b) How many of those initial contacts became participants in the program;
 - c) How many of those initial contacts became repeat contacts;
 - d) How many of those initial contacts were referred to other resources and services; and
 - e) How many of those initial contacts left the program for permanent housing.
- 5) Includes a sunset date of January 1, 2029.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Directs HCD, subject to an appropriation in the annual budget, to provide funding to counties for child welfare agencies to help young adults who are 18 to 24 secure and maintain housing, with priority given to youth who were part of the foster care system or probation systems. (Health and Safety Code (HSC) Section 50807)
- 2) Requires the Transitional Housing Program-Plus to provide transitional housing services to eligible former foster youth who have exited from the foster care system on or after their 18th birthday. Requires service providers to be paid a monthly rate that is 70% of the average foster care expenditures for foster youth 16 to 18 years of age, inclusive, in group home care in the county in which the program operates. (Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) Section 11403.3)
- 3) Defines “Housing First” as the evidence-based model that uses housing as a tool, rather than a reward for recovery. It connects homeless people to housing as quickly as possible and does not make housing contingent on participation in services. Housing First includes time-limited rental or services assistance, so long as the housing and service provider assists the recipient in accessing permanent housing and in securing longer-term rental assistance, income assistance, or employment. (WIC 8255)

- 4) Defines “Core Components of Housing First” to mean all of the following:
- a) Tenant screening and selection practices that promote accepting applicants regardless of their sobriety or use of substances, completion of treatment, or participation in services;
 - b) Applicants are not rejected on the basis of poor credit or financial history, poor or lack of rental history, criminal convictions unrelated to tenancy, or behaviors that indicate a lack of “housing readiness;”
 - c) Acceptance of referrals directly from shelters, street outreach, drop-in centers, and other parts of crisis response systems frequented by vulnerable people experiencing homelessness;
 - d) Supportive services that emphasize engagement and problem-solving over therapeutic goals and service plans that are highly tenant-driven without predetermined goals;
 - e) Participation in services or program compliance is not a condition of permanent housing tenancy;
 - f) Tenants have a lease and all the rights and responsibilities of tenancy, as outlined in the Civil Code, Health and Safety Code, and Government codes;
 - g) The use of alcohol or drugs in and of itself, without other lease violations, is not grounds for eviction;
 - h) In communities with coordinated assessment with entry systems, incentives for funding promote tenant selection plans for supportive housing that prioritize eligible tenants based on criteria other than “first-come-first-serve,” including, but not limited to, the duration or frequency of homelessness, vulnerability to early mortality, or high utilization of crisis services. Prioritization may include triage tools, developed through local data, to identify high-cost, high-need homeless residents;
 - i) Case managers and service coordinators who are trained in and actively employ evidence-based practices;
 - j) Services are informed by a harm-reduction philosophy that recognizes drug and alcohol use and addiction as part of tenants’ lives, where tenants are engaged in non-judgmental communication regarding drug and alcohol use, and where tenants are offered education regarding how to avoid risky behaviors and engage in safer practices, as well as participating in evidence-based treatment if the tenant so chooses; and
 - k) The project and specific apartment may include special features that accommodate disabilities, reduce harm, and promote health and community and independence among tenants. (WIC 8255)

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown.

COMMENTS:

Author's Statement: According to the author, "Stable and affirming housing plays an important role in the safety of all youth, especially youth identifying as LGBTQ+ who may not feel supported in their self-identity. AB 2007 creates the Unicorn Homes Transitional Housing for Homeless LGBTQ+ Youth Program pilot project in up to five counties which would help identify, screen, and train LGBTQ+ affirming households who are willing to host LGBTQ+ identifying youth who are experiencing homelessness due to family rejection with a safe place to stay. The bill promotes housing stability and a positive support system that helps transition LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness to permanent housing either as independent adults, or by reuniting with their family."

Youth Homelessness in California: In 2022, there were approximately 9,046 unaccompanied youth between the ages of 18 and 24 experiencing homelessness in California. Studies show that unaccompanied youth living on the streets are more likely to suffer from violence; victimization, such as commercial sexual exploitation; engage in risky behaviors, such as survival sex to find shelter or food; use illegal substances; and are more likely to suffer from poorer health outcomes later in life as a result of trauma and toxic stress. California is home to the largest population of foster youth in the nation, serving nearly 60,000 children and youth. Each year, nearly 3,500 of these youth "age out" of the foster care system, meaning they must leave the foster care system because they were never adopted and are too old to stay in care. Unfortunately, many of these youth remain unstably housed or become homeless after exiting the foster care system.

Existing Programs to Address Youth Homelessness: The state offers several programs targeted specifically at youth between the ages of 18 and 25 who may be housing insecure or at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

THP-Plus Housing Program (THP-Plus): California provides transitional housing, up to 24 months, to former foster youth who age out of the system through THP-Plus and specialized federal Housing Choice Vouchers. THP-Plus provides transitional housing for former foster youth, those who exited foster care (including those supervised by probation) between the ages of 18 and 24. THP-Plus programs are certified by the county social services agency. Youth can live in apartments, single-family dwellings, condominiums, college dormitories, and host family models (living with people you know).

Housing Navigators Program (HNP): The 2019-20 budget appropriated \$5 million to HCD to create HNP to provide grants to counties to support housing navigators to help youth up to 25 years of age and including former foster youth secure and maintain housing, with priority given to young adults in the foster care system. HNP funds housing navigators for county child welfare agencies. The role of a housing navigator is to act as a housing specialist to assist young adults with their pursuits of locating available housing.

Homeless Housing, Assistance, and Prevention Program (HHAP): Provides funding to big cities, counties and Continuums of Care to address the immediate unsheltered homelessness population. The Homeless Emergency Aid Program (HEAP) and subsequently HHAP requires applicants to use a percent of their allocation to assist homeless youth. A total of \$276 million from both programs is required to be used by local jurisdictions to address youth homelessness. The John Burton Foundation analyzed the impact these funds had regionally on the reducing the number of homelessness youth by comparing the 2020 point-in-time-count (PIT) to the 2022 PIT. They found a 21% reduction in homelessness among

unaccompanied youth. California's decrease in youth homelessness is 2.6 times greater than the reduction in all other states – all other states decreased by 8%.

Unicorn Homes Transitional Housing for Homeless LGBTQ+ Youth Program: This bill would create a pilot program in up to five counties to fund community-based organizations providing emergency transitional housing for LGBTQ+ youth between 18 and 24 years of age, experiencing homelessness due to family rejection, with the ultimate goal of reunification with the youth's family when possible. Funds would be used to place youth with host families. Families would be required provide crisis intervention with a trauma-informed approach to their care of youth living with them. Community-based organizations that receive funding would be required to provide a report to the legislature on program outcomes.

Housing First: Decades of research demonstrate that evidence-based approaches like supportive housing – affordable housing coupled with wrap-around services – resolves homelessness for most individuals. In addition, the state has a policy of Housing First, which is an approach that prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, thus ending their homelessness and serving as a platform from which they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life. Over more than a decade, dozens of studies conducted across the country demonstrate that the costs of delivering supportive housing using a Housing First model are offset in large part by reductions in the use of crisis services, including shelters, jails, ambulances, and hospitals. Many state and local programs effectively utilize these evidence-based approaches to address homelessness, however, the number of people falling into homelessness continues to overwhelm the response system and surpasses the affordable housing stock in many communities. These factors lead to persistently high rates of homelessness despite recent state and local investments. Other strategies, such as rental assistance and help with identifying and securing housing (housing navigation) can also help with those individuals who need prevention tools to avoid homelessness.

Despite the overwhelming data and evidence that Housing First works to end homelessness, there is a growing national movement to roll back Housing First policies. This short-sighted and misleading push fails to recognize that Housing First is not the root cause of continued increases in homelessness; rather, it is the lack of affordable housing for lower income households. The federal government recently reasserted its commitment to Housing First in “All In: the Federal Strategic Plan to End Homelessness” and emphasized the need to focus on data-driven solutions like permanent housing linked to wrap-around services that end homelessness.

In 2018, the state required that all programs that serve people experiencing homelessness comply with Housing First. Any new program, including the one created by this bill, is required to comply with Housing First.

Arguments in Support: According to Equality California, a co-sponsor of this bill, “addressing the housing crisis is a key priority for the state, but there are currently no state housing programs targeted directly at LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. AB 2007 will establish the Unicorn Homes pilot program as an alternative to the traditional group home setting by placing eligible youth with LGBTQ+ affirming volunteer host homes, with the ultimate goal of the program being reunification with the youth's family when possible.”

Arguments in Opposition: None on file.

Related Legislation:

AB 589 (Boerner) of 2023 was identical to this bill. It would have required, to the extent that funding is made available, the HCD to establish the Unicorn Homes Transitional Housing for Homeless LGBTQ+ Youth Program as a five-year pilot program. This bill was vetoed by the Governor, with the following message:

I am returning Assembly Bill 589 without my signature.

This bill, until January 1, 2027 and upon appropriation by the Legislature, would require the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) to establish the Unicorn Homes Transitional Housing for Homeless LGBTQ+ Youth Program (Unicorn Program) as a pilot to be administered by local community-based organizations in Sacramento and San Diego Counties.

While I appreciate the author's commitment to providing housing for homeless LGBTQ+ youth, AB 589 creates an unfunded grant program that must be considered in the annual budget in the context of all state funding priorities.

In partnership with the Legislature, we enacted a budget that closed a shortfall of more than \$30 billion through balanced solutions that avoided deep program cuts and protected education, health care, climate, public safety, and social service programs that are relied on by millions of Californians. This year, however, the Legislature sent me bills outside of this budget process that, if all enacted, would add nearly \$19 billion of unaccounted costs in the budget, of which \$11 billion would be ongoing.

With our state facing continuing economic risk and revenue uncertainty, it is important to remain disciplined when considering bills with significant fiscal implications, such as this measure.

For this reason, I cannot sign this bill.

Double-Referred: This bill was also referred to the Assembly Committee on Human Services where it will be heard should it pass out of this committee.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

Equality California (Co-sponsor)
American Atheists
California Legislative LGBTQ Caucus
California LGBTQ Health and Human Services Network
Center for Immigrant Protection
Children's Hospital Los Angeles
GLIDE
LGBTQ+ Collaborative
Los Angeles LGBT Center
National Harm Reduction Coalition
Our Family Coalition

Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California
Sacramento LGBT Community Center
The LGBTQ Community Center of the Desert
The San Diego LGBT Community Center
The Source LGBT+ Center
TransFamily Support Services
Transgender Resource, Advocacy & Network Service
TransYouth Liberation

Opposition

None on file.

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