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An Open Letter Addressing Homelessness in Our Community

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ADDRESSED TO:

All Santa Clara University Students, Faculty, and Staff



An Open Letter Addressing Homelessness in Our Community

January 2025

To all Santa Clara University Students, Faculty, and Staff,

We write to address a critical issue that impacts our community and deserves our immediate attention: the plight of students and community members who are unhoused. Despite SCU’s reputation as a wealthy Jesuit institution in Silicon Valley, **more than 24% of students at Santa Clara University experience housing insecurity**. Homelessness and housing insecurity are often misunderstood, stigmatized, and overlooked, yet they affect a significant number of people, including members of our own SCU family. **We urge this University—students, faculty, and staff—to take a compassionate, proactive stance to both support individuals experiencing housing insecurity and challenge the stigma surrounding homelessness.**

Financial barriers and Santa Clara’s high cost of living force some students to move multiple times a year or risk homelessness. These challenges disproportionately affect students from marginalized backgrounds, including first-generation college students and those from lower-income households. This reality reflects a broader crisis across higher education, where the basic need for housing has become increasingly urgent, demanding support and systemic change.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines homelessness as an “individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” such as those living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or places not meant for habitation. To be clear, **being unhoused or homeless¹ does not always mean living on the streets**; it encompasses a range of unstable living conditions, such as couch-surfing, living in vehicles, or staying in temporary shelters. Housing insecurity “encompasses several dimensions of housing challenges college students may experience including affordability, physical safety, quality of shelter, instability, crowding, as well as loss of housing.” The stereotypical images of an individual facing housing insecurity narrow the scope of those who are struggling to meet their basic needs. Recognizing the diversity of these experiences is essential for building a supportive community and fostering understanding.

California alone encompasses 47% (67,510 persons) of the United States’s chronically unhoused population—without accounting for the tendency to undercount homeless individuals in censuses. This is the largest annual increase ever recorded, highlighting the need for comprehensive, community-based solutions. We are witnessing a broader crisis across California higher education with 8% of University of

¹ There are multiple terms to describe being homeless such as unhoused or houseless. We use these interchangeably throughout this letter. We primarily address this issue as “homelessness” because of the condition’s legal definition.

California students, 11% of California State University students, and 22% of California Community College students report being homeless.

Locally, the circumstances are no less urgent. San Jose has the **fourth-highest houseless population per capita** in the United States. The number of new households experiencing homelessness in Santa Clara County has been rising, **with a 24% increase from 2022 to 2023**, totaling approximately 4,300 new households. That increase has come with a rise in extreme weather-related deaths for homeless people in Santa Clara County, linked to an **aging homeless population—42 individuals between 2021 and 2023**.

Meanwhile, **state** and **local** policies have further antagonized and persecuted unhoused individuals. Such policies are “**ineffective, expensive, and non-strategic**,” displacing thousands, increasing their risk of harm, and failing to address the root causes of California’s homelessness crisis. Combined with rising rents and local housing shortages, these measures place additional strain on resources and intensify the challenges faced by the Bay Area communities. Addressing this issue is critical to fostering a more equitable and thriving community.

The stigma around unhoused individuals often stems from the false belief that their circumstances are an active choice or a direct result of actions that they have complete control over. **This misconception leads to dehumanization, creating barriers to empathy, assistance, and systemic change.** Such attitudes directly harm those who are already vulnerable and have fallen prey to homelessness, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and despair.

A tragic example of the real consequences of this stigma is the recent **loss of a 14-year-old boy** in the Santa Clara community. He took his own life after being bullied for living at the **Bill Wilson Center**, a local shelter supporting unhoused youth. This heartbreaking loss reminds us that stigma has profound and tangible consequences. If you are able, **please support his family’s GoFundMe to help honor his memory and assist with their needs.**

Santa Clara University’s **Unhoused Initiative (UI)** works to reduce stigma and bias toward individuals experiencing homelessness through educational events, research, resource sharing, and community building. Currently implementing an anti-stigma campaign, the UI aims to minimize the stigma surrounding homelessness and foster a culture of care on campus. The UI is an incredible on-campus resource for learning about the causes of homelessness, volunteering to help, and advocating for change. Stay informed about their work by following their **updates**, attending their events, and exploring opportunities to get involved. Feel empowered to reach out to the UI with any questions or comments at **unhousedinitiative@scu.edu**.

We must consider and confront how stigma and structural inequities impact our peers’ well-being. **We cannot condone a campus culture that shames those seeking help.** True community means standing together during difficult times and ensuring everyone has the support they need.

Santa Clara University offers various resources for those in need through its Basic Needs Initiative, which is housed in the Office of Student Life (OSL). The Office of Student Life provides resources for various issues, including **food insecurity**, **housing insecurity & utility assistance**, **technology access**, **transportation support**, and **state and federal need applications**. You can find the OSL in Benson Memorial

Center, Room 205, or explore their Basic Needs Program [online](#). You can also fill out this intake [form](#) to register for resources. Local organizations also provide critical support. [The Bill Wilson Center](#), located in Santa Clara, offers temporary housing, counseling, and job assistance for youth experiencing homelessness. For those affected by broader housing crises in the region, the [Sacred Heart Community Service](#) in San Jose provides emergency housing support, food distribution, and rental assistance programs. Another valuable resource is [HomeFirst Services](#), which operates shelters, transitional housing, and support programs for individuals and families facing homelessness throughout Santa Clara County.

If you'd like to support our unhoused community, consider volunteering with or otherwise supporting the following organizations on campus and in the wider Silicon Valley area:

- [Neighborhood Perspectives \(NP\) at the Santa Clara Community Action Program \(SCCAP\)](#) - the NP department at SCU's own SCCAP offers five programs that allow you to give back to the unhoused community in the Santa Clara area by volunteering with shelters, food banks, and more. *SCCAP provides transportation to weekly volunteering sessions for its programs.* Check out their website or contact sccap@scu.edu for more information.
- [Mobile Homeless Services by WeHope](#) - Mobile Homeless Services supports the unhoused in the Santa Clara and San Jose areas “through initiatives that include access to free showers [[Dignity on Wheels](#)], laundry, safe parking for vehicle dwellers, virtual medical assessments, and comprehensive case management to assist in securing permanent housing.” You can find more information on volunteering with WeHope [here](#).
- [Bill Wilson Center \(BWC\)](#) - BWC is a local non-profit that provides “housing, mental health care, supportive services and advocacy... to nearly 5,000 [people] in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties.” Though its programs have reached more than [109,000](#) individuals in crisis, the center also outlines how to advocate for funding and legislation supporting unhoused individuals on the local, state, and federal levels. See its website for more information on its specific initiatives. BWC is located at [3490 The Alameda, Santa Clara](#) (0.2 miles from campus).
- [Sleeping Bags for the Homeless at Silicon Valley \(SB4THSV\)](#) - Sleeping Bags is “an all-volunteer, nonprofit effort” in the Santa Clara area. They meet biweekly, gathering donations to “collect and distribute sleeping bags, blankets, tents, tarps, water and other supplies to the homeless in Silicon Valley.”
- [ASG's Service Drive with Sacred Heart Community Service](#) - ASG is hosting a service drive until February 28. We are accepting packaged food items, gently used or new blankets & linens, unopened hygiene items, diapers & unopened infant formula, new socks and underwear for all ages, and gently used or new sleeping bags. You can find bins to drop donations in Benson's basement or on the ground level. Find more details about Sacred Heart Community Service [here](#).

We urge the Santa Clara University community to go forth with empathy and compassion for all individuals. It is imperative that **we center every person's dignity and humanity in everything we do.**

With care,

Sarah El Qadah
Chief of Staff
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Tiago Moreno
First-Year Senator
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Taara Khan
Sophomore Senator
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Imaan Qureshi
Senior Senator
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Grace Davis
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So endorsed by the following individuals, representative of their relevant parties,



Marlene Bennett, Project Director, on behalf of
The Unhoused Initiative at Santa Clara University

Dr. Christopher Bacon, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Environmental Studies and Sciences, coordinator for SCU's student food security and basic needs annual survey

Isabella Burleigh and Sydney Shelby on behalf of
The Santa Clara Community Action Program (SCCAP) at Santa Clara University