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**SACRAMENTO BUSINESS LEADERS**

# STRIVING FOR PERMANENCY AND EMPOWERMENT OF FAMILIES

Stanford Sierra Youth & Families' mission is to transform lives by nurturing permanent connections and empowering families to solve challenges together, so every child can thrive.

**S**tanford Sierra Youth & Families (SSYAF) was originally founded in 1900 and has remained committed to helping vulnerable children and families since inception. With the merger in 2019, Stanford Youth Solutions and Sierra Forever Families became Stanford Sierra Youth & Families, offering a greater depth of services, staff, resources, and expertise. "We merged to expand our expertise and geographical impact in our common effort to preserve and support families facing challenges," says Laura Heintz, CEO of SSYAF.

Today, the organization serves over 6,000 youth and families annually throughout 17 counties. SSYAF provides behavioral and mental health services, substance use and prevention treatment, family advocacy and support, juvenile justice intervention, mentoring, foster care, adoption services, and pre- and post-adoption support. A recent reaccreditation by the Council on Accreditation as well as measurable success (over 90% of youth have made progress toward their goals) are tangible markers of a match well made.

"The ultimate goal is that every child thrives. How that happens is empowerment, a sense of belonging, and skill building," says Heintz. "Family permanency is woven into all our work."

## DESTINATION FAMILY

The foster and adoption field has evolved over the decades—once focusing more on infant adoption and later evolving into evidence-based mental health services and trauma support for vulnerable youth. SSYAF offers a myriad of programs to support youth on their journey toward healing and permanency.

SSYAF's programs tap into advocates with "lived experiences" and engage youth in planning sessions to create goals for progress. Additionally, the Destination Family model flips the script on serving hard-to-place youth, keeping the mission of permanency in central focus. "Rather than trying to find a youth for a



family, this model finds a family for the youth. We get to know the youth and start with an understanding of what they want," Heintz says.

## EVERYONE CAN HELP

For those interested in fostering but feeling unqualified, Heintz has this message: "Don't rule yourself out. Single parents, young couples, same-sex couples, and empty nesters. You don't have to own a home. There is a critical need for families who can provide the love, safety, and commitment that all youth deserve."

Opportunities in short-term emergency care, mentorship programs, and ambassadorship are less time-consuming options to jump-start involvement. Staff positions are available, too—from internships and social work positions to administration and tech support.

"There's a place for everyone in the communal mission of supporting Sacramento's high-risk youth," says Heintz.



Laura Heintz



## Success Story

By the time she reached fifth grade, Mackenzie (not her real name) had bounced between three different school districts in multiple foster homes. She was struggling socially and academically, expressing her trauma through anger and disengagement.

Through SSYAF, Mackenzie was connected to a Resource (foster/adopt) Family in which the mother had also experienced foster care. The process of acquaintanceship was slow but impactful. "We are intentional about not getting youths' hopes up," says Heintz. "We want to protect them from another loss."

The relationship blossomed, and Mackenzie was officially adopted into her forever home at age 15.



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Looking to get involved? Make a difference in the lives of local youth by fostering/adopting, mentoring, or donating.