



# The Sacramento Bee

**Gov. Newsom, California's foster kids shouldn't have to rely on luck to get support**

## Opinion

By Manny Pérez *Special to the Sacramento Bee*

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The first night in my own apartment after years of living in foster care, I finally felt like I could breathe. It wasn't anything fancy, but I had my own room and my own things. For a lot of people, this wouldn't be a big deal — just the normal evolution of life. But I grew up around gangs and dealt with personal and familial addiction issues. I wasn't sure I was going to make it this far, much less be on the promising path I'm on, now working and going to school.

I have Rancho San Antonio to thank for helping me get to where I am today. Rancho is a non-profit organization that provides services to foster youth in the Los Angeles area. It was pure luck that brought me there.

I grew up in poverty in East Los Angeles. My mother struggled with addiction. And, as a teen, I also got involved in drugs and gangs. In high school, I ended up on probation. While I desperately wanted to get better, it was incredibly hard when I kept returning to the same environment and facing the same circumstances.

Several stints in juvenile detention and rehab programs failed to help me. It became clear that I needed a different kind of support. Social workers began trying to get me a spot in a facility that treats higher-needs youth, but those spaces were hard to come by.

I ended up in San Jose for a while, at a short-term residential therapeutic program. But the placement wasn't a good fit for me. Fortunately, I was able to get a spot at Rancho,

located in Chatsworth, down in Southern California.

Finally, I found a place where I was able to start dealing with the trauma I experienced while growing up. I had access to the resources and the correct mindset I needed to change my life. And the support didn't end when I turned 18: I'm currently living in an apartment I got through their transitional-aged youth program.

Now, I see it as my responsibility to help those coming after me.

The system is already stretched so thin, which is why it's incredibly upsetting to see several programs for foster youth targeted for elimination in Gov. Gavin Newsom's budget proposal.

These programs cost very little compared to the benefits they deliver to youth who are at extreme risk of falling through the cracks. The Family Urgent Response System is a hotline for youth and foster families to call for support to help keep things together when tensions are high — which is common among people who are dealing with trauma.

Supervised Independent Living Placements work to provide stability to foster youth by helping ensure they have a safe place to live. We know that foster youth are disproportionately more likely to end up homeless compared to the general population. With California trying to reduce homelessness, it doesn't make sense to cut programs working to prevent youth from falling into it.

Beyond just protecting these programs, California needs to invest in every young person who needs the support of a resource family or organization that provides a higher level of care. As the state considers overhauling how it funds foster care, we have an opportunity to make sure we get it right. That means making sure youth have stable placements, quality programs that help them deal with trauma and a good transition into adulthood. In other words, the kind of support I had.

Our foster care system is supposed to serve as a safety net for kids. I couldn't remain in my own home because that's where my problems were stemming from. I needed more stability, structure and support. I was lucky enough to end up at a place where they work to raise additional funding to cover the difference between what it

costs to provide good, solid programming for youth and what the foster care system covers.

But my fate shouldn't have been left up to luck, and neither should the fate of anyone else. Fully-funded and resourced foster care providers should be the norm, not the exception. Non-profit agencies should be able to focus on supporting youth 100% rather than struggling to keep their doors open because of the costs of paying staff, maintaining facilities and providing resources. Resource families should have all the support they need to care for youth who have likely experienced significant trauma.

I don't know what would have happened to me if I hadn't found Rancho San Antonio. Even now, my family still lives in the same neighborhood and must deal with the negative influences and lifestyle that comes with it. But I'm on my way to a great life because of the help I received.