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# Homeless Prenatal Program Changes Lives

By Paula Eve Aspin

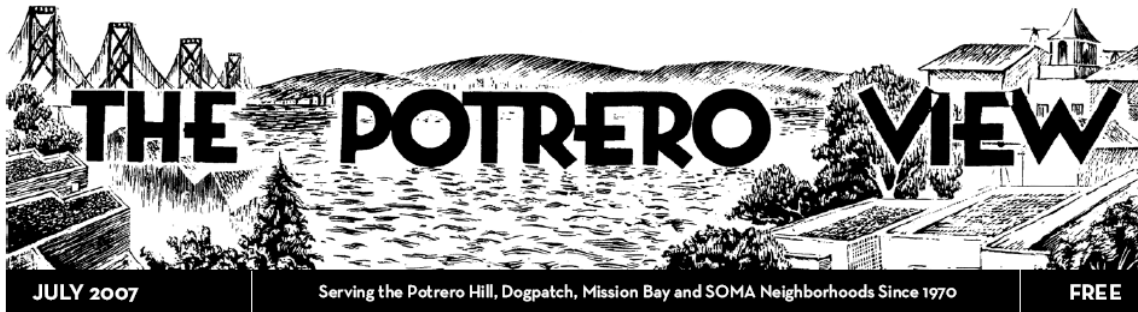
Situated at the super-sunny intersection of 18th Street and Potrero Avenue, the Homeless Prenatal Program (HPP) is a thriving nonprofit that addresses the pre- and post-natal needs of thousands of San Francisco families. According to Martha Ryan, who founded the program 18 years ago with a grant from the San Francisco Foundation and now serves as its executive director, "The HPP works with families to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty. Seizing the motivating opportunity created by pregnancy and parenthood, HPP joins with families to help them recognize their strengths and trusts in their capacity to transform their lives."

In its first year HPP provided 72 pregnant women with care; this year up to 2,000 people will be served. HPP provides a variety of services to needy families, including substance abuse and prenatal programs that help create healthy births and stable families: 97 percent of the mothers who participate in HPP get or stay free of substance abuse and give birth to healthy weight babies. The nonprofit also provides housing assistance, placing more than 250 families in permanent homes each year. And case managers are available to help with immigration issues as they arise. More than half of the program's staff are former homeless mothers.

HPP helps homeless and low-  
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Photo by Paula Eve Aspin



income families learn to fight for their rights by providing training about issues that effect them, including housing and welfare. Mental health services are offered through Spanish- and English-language support groups, and classes provide instruction in English, computer software, yoga, art, and prenatal skills.

The Community Health Worker training program offers a one year paid internship that prepares women to move from welfare to work. Participants start by volunteering with the organization and working a set number of hours within a year, after which they have the opportunity to gain office and receptionist skills, computer literacy, and job search practice.

Community Health Workers are the first faces clients see when they visit HPP. With their newly learned skills, the interns offer a trustworthy welcome as they share their experiences and the impact HPP has had on their lives. As a result of this 12-month program, women who start as clients work their way up to becoming mentors for others.

HPP's onsite drop-in Childcare Center enables parents to meet privately with a counselor, or attend a class or support group, knowing that their children are in a safe and nurturing environment. Center staff watch the children with an eye towards identifying developmental issues, and consult

with case managers about children whose parents would benefit from understanding their child's expected growth and development patterns.

During a typical HPP day there's an ebb and flow of children and adults attending various appointments and workshops, in an atmosphere that appears as warm and cheery as the sunny climate outside. Visiting children often wander over to an enticing rack of 'dress-up' clothes and play until they join the Center, where the real fun begins. Toys, games, and story-telling are contained in a lovely play space. HPP clients and staff are continually engaging with each other openly and warmly; to a casual eye it looks like a model community.

Two years ago Martha Ryan was presented with the Isabel Allende Foundation's Espiritu Award, which recognizes organizations that help women achieve social and economic justice. However, despite its successes, HPP is always seeking volunteers and donations. Especially welcome are such practical items as used clothing, books, formula, diaper bags, toiletries, child car seats, and slings.

*San Francisco Homeless Prenatal Program*  
2500 18th Street  
546.6756  
[www.homelessprenatal.org](http://www.homelessprenatal.org)