

Mary's Pizza Shack, a family-owned Italian restaurant with 9 locations throughout Sonoma County, has been an incredible partner to HomeFirst and has supported our organization in a myriad of ways. The small chain serves a monthly meal at Labath Landing, our emergency interim housing site in Rohnert Park, and has provided paid employment training to one of our program participants through the Transitional Work Experience Program (TWEX), a program offered by Sonoma County Job Link.

Jonnie and Chase, owners at Mary's Pizza Shack, have always paid attention to homelessness. They previously lived in San Francisco and Portland, cities where the rates of homelessness are high, and in 2016, at their former restaurant in Santa Rosa, Jonnie and Chase hired 4 employees who were unhoused. For these business owners, there is no stigma attached to homelessness - they understand that it can happen to anyone, and have seen firsthand that your housing status does not dictate your value as an employee.

When Jonnie and Chase purchased the Rohnert Park location of Mary's Pizza Shack from Chase's parents in 2023, they knew that they wanted to invest in their unhoused neighbors around the restaurant. Mary's Pizza Shack is located near to the Roberts Lake Park and Ride, the site of a large homeless camp that, in 2022, was designated by the city of Rohnert Park as a Safe Sleeping Site.

In an attempt to help the unhoused community, Jonnie and Chase reached out to housing service providers in the area to see what they could do. They connected with HomeFirst and began providing monthly meals to Labath Landing, our emergency interim housing site. Additionally, they discovered Sonoma County Job Link and TWEX, the program that has enabled them to provide paid employment training to three unhoused people over the last five months, one of which was a HomeFirst program participant.

To learn more about Sonoma County Job Link, HomeFirst spoke with Chris Willover, the organization's Business Services Coordinator. Chris shared that TWEX, in combination with the Sonoma County Job Link's Homeless Employment Program - a program which expidites the TWEX registration process for eligible individuals - is what makes it possible for employers like Mary's Pizza Shack to hire job seekers that are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. TWEX is a 2 to 4 month program where Sonoma County Job Link will reimburse a participating employer for 100% of a new hire's wages. The employer, of course, is matched with this employee by Sonoma County Job Link. As Chris pointed out, TWEX provides a win-win for all parties. Employees are able to develop their job readiness and technical skills, while employers are reimbursed for the extraordinary cost of onboarding and training a new employee.

HomeFirst is thrilled to see that there are businesses in the community, like Mary's Pizza Shack, that are committed to helping those who are often overlooked. Furthermore, we love that government agencies like the Sonoma County Job Link make it possible for local businesses to provide effective assistance. If you are a business in Sonoma County that feels inspired by Mary's Pizza Shack and would like to learn more about the TWEX program, please contact the Sonoma County Job Link at joblink@schsd.org or (707) 565-5550.