

Portland high school embraces innovative host family program to help homeless students

Updated: Aug. 14, 2026, 9:42 a.m.

Published: Aug. 14, 2026, 5:00 a.m.



Roosevelt High School is partnering with nonprofit Second Home to connect homeless teenagers with community-based host homes. Portland Public Schools

By Anusha Fathepure | The Oregonian/OregonLive

An innovative program to support homeless high school students across Oregon is expanding into Portland Public Schools for the first time.

Roosevelt High School is partnering with Beaverton-based nonprofit Second Home to connect homeless students with host families who can offer temporary housing. Since the pilot program launched in March, the nonprofit has placed two Roosevelt students with host families and is preparing to place six others, according to Brittany Piper, Second Home assistant program manager.

Their goal is to provide stability for the students so they can focus on their studies. Not completing high school is the single greatest risk factor associated with experiencing homelessness as a young person, according to a 2019 study. Young people without a high school diploma or GED are 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness than those who complete high school, the study found.

Second Home has been working with schools in Oregon to connect students experiencing homelessness with host homes since 2010. The program places young people, typically ages 16 to 21, with trained and screened families in their community. The nonprofit currently partners with schools in Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas and Lincoln counties.

It is one of 12 organizations across Oregon receiving state funding to help connect unstably housed youth with host homes.

The nonprofit works with a school district's counselor or McKinney-Vento liaison, a district staff member assigned to work with students experiencing homelessness, to identify students in need of housing. It then provides case management and matches students with families willing to host them.

There are currently seven Portland host families working with Second Home, but Piper said the nonprofit is actively trying to grow that number through marketing and incentives. Homeowners who host students via Second Home are eligible for a one-time \$1,000 grant from the city of Portland's home share program.

Piper said the nonprofit hadn't worked in Portland Public Schools before because of capacity limitations. She said fostering successful and stable housing has to be done intentionally and the nonprofit didn't want to take on more work than it felt it could actually support.

"Part of starting small was to make sure that even if funding shifted, we would still be able to continue supporting these schools that we've built relationships with," Piper said.

Roosevelt High School in North Portland has roughly 1,450 students from grades 9 through 12. According to the state Department of Education, 34% of its student population experiences poverty.

The state department does not track how many students are experiencing homelessness at individual schools. However, Oregon has one of the highest concentrations of unsheltered youth and homeless families in the entire country. In the 2024-25 school year, over 21,000 Oregon students experienced homelessness, according to the education department.

What are host homes?

The host home concept itself isn't new, according to Matt Rasmussen, manager of the Department of Human Services' Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program.

"At its core, it's families taking in a young person temporarily," Rasmussen said. "Whether it's somebody that they know, a family member, a friend of their own child — a lot of people and families just have been doing that for ever without a second thought."

Second Home was among the early pioneers of the model in Oregon. Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon launched the program in 2010 to support students experiencing homelessness in the Beaverton School District.

Nearly a decade later, lawmakers authorized the Department of Human Services to award \$3.6 million in two-year grants to support host home programs serving unaccompanied youth. The authorization also brought the programs under Department of Human Services oversight, allowing the agency to administer the grants and set safety standards.

The 12 host home programs across the state serve 19 Oregon counties, Rasmussen said. Through those programs, 209 young people are currently in host homes or are receiving case management and mentorship while waiting for housing availability.

Unlike foster care, host homes are available to students who are not wards of the state. Rasmussen said some young people prefer the model because placements are intentionally made in communities where students already live, allowing them to stay in their schools and near friends.

"Shelters and transitional living programs are site-based primarily, and that's fine. Those are great, but those environments aren't necessarily the best fit for every young person," Rasmussen said. "This offers a little bit of a different service array that some young people might find more accessible and more comfortable."

For students experiencing homelessness, staying in school can be difficult when they don't know where they'll sleep.

Savina Zuniga, who experienced homelessness as a teenager, was connected with Second Home through her school counselor at Beaverton High School.

Zuniga had spent years moving between relatives' and friends' homes before finding more stable housing through Second Home. She said that stability helped her graduate high school a year early.

"I was able to get out of that survival mindset," Zuniga said. "My self-confidence grew so much and I felt empowered because of Second Home's support."

Amy Brownell, Second Home assistant program manager, said the model also gives young people more say in where they live.

Similar to other programs, Second Home follows a multi-step process to settle youth into host homes. Once the program connects a student and an interested host family, they interview each other twice. If the host extends an invitation following the interviews, the young person can still accept or decline. If they decline, the program will attempt to connect them with other possible hosts.

"We want to make sure the students are at the center of it," Brownell said. "... So much control has been taken away from them that anytime we can allow them to have that back and not push our adult agenda on them can help them recover from their trauma."

After the young person moves into a host home, Second Home brings in mediation services to continue transitional and supportive work with the families.

Rasmussen said it's natural for interested host providers to feel nervous, adding that no one is ever fully prepared for what it takes to support an unhoused youth. Rasmussen cited his own experience informally hosting a young woman a few years ago.

"I've been working in youth homelessness for a decade. I learned very quickly that there was still a lot that I didn't know," Rasmussen said.

But what he did know was how important it was to support and bring stability to a young person to help them thrive.

Rasmussen said there are many ways community members can support homeless youth, including mentorship, school transportation and even housing while a host family is out of town.

"We don't want to pigeonhole ourselves into your only option for support is being a host family because that is a big undertaking," Rasmussen said. "There's other ways to be involved."

Looming cuts to homeless youth services

Brownell said nonprofit programs like Second Home are becoming increasingly important as the federal government continues to cut support for homeless youth services.

The Trump administration's 2027 budget seeks to eliminate all dedicated funding for the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, a decades-old federal law that includes legal protections and grants to help schools cover the costs of educating students experiencing homelessness. The Trump administration first attempted to eliminate the \$129 million program last year. But lawmakers ultimately preserved it in the final federal appropriations package.

In an effort to combat some of the impacts of possible cuts, Oregon codified protections for homeless students into state law this past spring. The law guarantees immediate school enrollment to homeless students even if they lack birth certificates or previous school records and provides them with transportation to school and access to support services.