

Sparky Harlan: White House awards 'Champions of Change' honor to San Jose director of programs for homeless and troubled teens

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Sparky Harlan, who has devoted 29 years to running a program for homeless teenagers in Santa Clara County, was named a national "Champion of Change" Thursday by the White House. During a ceremony in Washington, D.C., Harlan described the problem of youth homelessness as "generational," because many of the young people in Silicon Valley who are living on the streets or couch surfing are the children of homeless families.

"If I've got a homeless child, and the parents are homeless, there's drug addiction going on, and maybe one parent's in jail," Harlan said during a panel discussion moderated by Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Shaun Donovan, "I need to work with that family in order to reunite that child with them. What we're finding after 30 years of working with homeless youth is that the best outcome oftentimes is keeping that family together."

As CEO of the Bill Wilson Center in Santa Clara since 1983, Harlan has developed several innovative shelters and treatment programs for homeless and troubled teens. She recently recruited a host of other nonprofit, community and corporate leaders to pledge an end to youth and family homelessness in the county by 2020.

Harlan is one of 13 Americans this year to win the Champions award, given by the White House Office of Public Engagement to community leaders and homeless advocates who serve vulnerable children, youth and families.

The ceremony is posted on YouTube at "Champion of Change: Homeless Youth." For a full list of award winners, go to http://www.usich.gov/champions_of_change.

Bruce Newman contributed to this story. Contact Joe Rodriguez at 408-920-5767.