

Empowering Tribal Communities through State-Funded Housing Support: The Pala Band of Mission Indians Home Safe Program

In the spring of 2025, Change Well Project hosted regional convenings with California counties and tribal communities across Southern California—exploring the ways CDSS-funded rehousing programs are supporting individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Through individual interviews, program leaders and partners shared reflections and insights on what it takes to deepen program outcomes despite funding challenges, high housing costs, and a lack of affordable housing.

In mountainous northern San Diego County, members of the Pala Band of Mission Indians maintain closely-knit, culturally vibrant communities that celebrate their Indigenous heritage. Yet the trauma caused by colonization and historical injustice—including their removal from their ancestral homelands in 1903—continues to resonate in daily life. Like many Indigenous people in California, the Pala Band faces significant systemic economic inequalities and infrastructure challenges, including a severe lack of safe, affordable housing.

The Pala Band created the Pala Housing Resource Center (PHRC)—a groundbreaking model project approved by HUD that expands access to resources, training, and intertribal coordination throughout Indian Country. To address the challenges at the State level, PHRC has been instrumental in helping California legislators and policymakers understand the need to open State housing funding to tribal nations and agencies by providing input and testimony at hearings for policy change. PCRH joined forces with California Coalition for Rural Housing, RCAC Northern Circle Indian Housing Authority, including a few other Tribes to create the Tribal Housing Action Task Force (known as THAT committee) utilizing the expertise of Tribal Housing Directors, Tribal Leaders and Advocates to address the unique needs of tribal communities, while recognizing Tribal Nations as Sovereign Governments. Those efforts have resulted in 2 bills that have been signed into law; SB 1187 and AB 1878.

Today, the Pala Band's Home Safe Program, funded through the California Department of Social Services, is demonstrating the power of State-tribal partnerships that honor tribal sovereignty.

The flexibility in Home Safe program guidelines has empowered the Pala Housing Resource Center to shape its program around community needs and realities.

State-based social service programs with rigid restrictions often fail to provide effective relief for tribal communities.

“After historically being excluded, Tribes were finally included in State-based funds set aside for housing in tribal communities. While intentions were great, many of these programs simply don’t work for tribes—they were not created with tribes in mind and did not seek consultation or tribal input for what our communities really need,” said Annalee Trujillo, Executive Director of PHRC. This means critical funding is left on the table—and tribal communities remain disadvantaged and disproportionately served.

Thankfully, Home Safe has provided PHRC’s team with the flexibility to adapt its program to align with the needs of community members.

“We know best what the needs are here on our reservation,” said Annalee. “We know our community members, their history and stories, and what support will make a difference in their lives. And Home Safe funding has allowed us to provide that support.”

Through Home Safe, Pala Housing Resource Center hired an adult advocate who connects individually with tribal elders to offer specific support.

In an extremely close-knit community, trust and connection is crucial in delivering social services. PHRC’s adult advocate works on the ground in the community to develop relationships with existing and potential program participants to better understand their needs.

Using that model, says Annalee, has allowed PHRC’s team to channel resources effectively, providing essential support to those who have never had access.

“When it comes to government, you have to earn the trust of many of our community members, and especially elders,” she explains. “By visiting elders in person, our advocate is able to build a connection before getting into what their housing needs might be. I think that initial visit is incredibly significant. That connection and trust allows our elders to share where they are vulnerable, so that we can respond to their needs.”

Home Safe is helping Pala elders to remain in their homes—to stay connected to both community and culture.

According to Annalee, tribal elders hold a deep sense of belonging to reservation lands but have often been forced to leave the reservation to access services or adequate housing. With embedded flexibility in Home Safe’s model, PHRC has been able to help tribal members to adapt their homes on the reservation so that they can remain in their community. Being able to keep them safely housed while staying connected to their cultural identities is a significant support to their physical and emotional wellbeing.

“Through Home Safe funding, we’ve been able to help some of our elders install handicap-accessible bathrooms, or other housing repairs and modifications, which allowed them to remain at home. For example, we had one dependent tribal adult who was being cared for by her mother. When her mother passed away, she was forced to go into a rehabilitation facility and became extremely depressed. She no longer wanted to take part in activities or move around in any way,” said Annalee.

“But thankfully, we were able to help in making her bathroom door wide enough to fit her wheelchair, and she was able to stay at home where she was comfortable and felt safe. Those are the kinds of things Home Safe allows us to do—to really support community members where they are. It’s made such a major difference for our elders, who are the carriers of our customs and traditions. Caring for our elders is a priority for us—and Home Safe has provided the resources to make it possible.”