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Hope for the homeless in the SCV

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Posted: September 7, 2009 9:50 p.m.

Updated: September 8, 2009 4:55 a.m.

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Several months ago, Valencia United Methodist Church ministry volunteer Larry Comp and Temple Beth Ami's Rabbi Mark Blazer shared a discussion at a local Starbucks Coffee.

Their conversation did not turn to a debate between Christianity and Judaism. It didn't even focus on religious differences.

Rather, the two men of faith discussed homelessness in the Santa Clarita Valley and how diverse local congregations can come together to alleviate it.

"This is a unique opportunity for us to bring together people of different faith backgrounds in the SCV, but who all have a love

and compassion for helping people," said Terry Comp, a volunteer for Valencia United Methodist.

Comp was referring to the Interfaith Hospitality Network, a partnership of congregations within a community helping children and their families who are facing homelessness.

More than 150 hospitality networks have been initiated nationwide by an organization named Family Promise, which aims to help homeless and low-income Americans achieve sustainable independence.

Thus far, Valencia United Methodist, Temple Beth Ami and North Oaks Church of Christ have committed to partnering together as host sites for a local Interfaith Hospitality Network.

"Our goal is to get 12 to 13 congregations to commit to being these host congregations for a week at a time to provide housing on their campus for (homeless) families," Larry Comp said.

Homelessness in the SCV

Several local congregations, including Valencia United Methodist, first found out about Family Promise when an organization representative arrived in the Santa Clarita Valley to speak with clergy members.

Family Promise's current success rates reveal that 77 percent of families seen in the Interfaith Hospitality Networks are successfully placed in apartments, homes or transitional homes. A family's average stay in the program in 2008 was 58.3 days.

The focus is in helping children and their families who are facing homelessness.

The William S. Hart Union High School district alone served more than 850 homeless students in grades seven through 12 in the 2008-09 school year, district spokeswoman Pat Willett said recently.

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The district counted 675 homeless students the year before.

"To think that we have that many (homeless) families right here in our community and we're not doing anything about it - I can't fathom that," Terry Comp said.

Last winter, 21 families, 33 adults and 43 children sought shelter at the Santa Clarita Valley Emergency Winter Shelter, according to an earlier report from executive director Tim Davis.

Plenty of need

"I think a lot of times in Santa Clarita, we get the understanding there are no people of need in our own backyard, but there really are," Comp said. "That's what we want to tackle."

The Interfaith Hospitality Network in the SCV would work closely with Davis.

Davis said this type of action to combat homelessness from local congregations, in conjunction with the homeless shelter, has been growing for years.

"Last winter we were open 105 nights. We served breakfast, lunch and dinner every night - 14,000 and some meals were served - all those meals were served by a church and community organization of some type," he said.

A program like Interfaith Hospitality Network would be essential in the Santa Clarita Valley because the homeless shelter currently operates only 105 nights every year, Davis said.

"So when we're not in business, where do they go?" he said.

Davis is confident the program "will happen," but there's no doubt challenges must be addressed.

"Every year you're going to have to raise a budget, and they're already working on that," he said. "You have to figure out how to get money and pay for drives and social workers."

And then there is the immediate task of finding nine other congregations to jump on board, along with a necessary abundance of volunteers.

But judging by the goodness he's seen in local community members, Davis is confident those involved will succeed.

"They're going to rise to the occasion and I just have full faith they'll come together," he said.

Keeping it local

"The idea of the program is that you're helped in your own local community by people who care," said Terry Comp. "It's leveraging available resources and we'll be connecting families with these resources."

Those resources could include the Santa Clarita Community Development Corporation, city programs, the Santa Clarita Child and Family Center and more.

Each congregation that signs up hosts three or four families for a week at a time - which translates to about four times a year - and provides meals and support.

"In the morning, adults are provided with transportation to the 'day center,'" Terry Comp said. "The children are provided with transportation to their local school."

The day center, the hub of the program, is a place where the director of the program works directly with homeless families on an intensive plan to move them toward self-sufficiency.

The day center would provide rooms for phone and computer use for job searching, credit counseling, resume writing or whatever else is needed, Comp said.

"It's not the kind of thing where you're just making sure they have a place to stay and warm food," Terry Comp said. "You're helping them to solve the underlying problem that created homelessness so it doesn't become a recurring theme in their life."

Congregations without their own facility but that want to help can become support sites, providing needs such as financial and volunteer support for the program.

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"Obviously this program is too small to cure the problem, but we can help one family at a time and that's better than what we're doing right now," said Pastor Ray Davis of North Oaks Church of Christ, one of the committed host sites.

No choice in the matter

Most networks require 12 to 18 months to recruit sites, gather funding, support and resources, Larry Comp said. But the interest generated by diverse congregations around the SCV in only four to five months has been remarkable, he said.

"There's an enthusiasm in those who've responded so far - there's this great feeling of 'Yeah, count me in,'" he said.

"We're seeing just some really positive things about human nature."

Responding to and helping the homeless is not a choice - it's an obligation, said Blazer of Temple Beth Ami.

"In Chapter 15 of Isaiah, there's a line there that says what God wants us to do is share your bed with the hungry and take the wretched poor into your home," he said.

"When you see the naked, clothe them and do not ignore your own neighbors. This is what we've been told for thousands of years."

The next meeting for the Interfaith Hospitality Network of SCV is at 6:30 p.m. Sept. 21, at Valencia United Methodist Church.

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