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Family Promise program takes selective approach to helping the homeless

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer
Posted: 05/30/2011 04:40:50 PM PDT
Updated: 05/31/2011 11:51:03 AM PDT

If it wasn't such a serious topic, you could almost say the Family Promise program of the east San Fernando Valley was taking a boutique approach to the homeless.

Focusing on just three to four families at a time, the program seeks to match appropriate jobs and housing for families in 54 days - nine days faster than the national average.

"We work hard to get them back on their feet," said Jaci White, executive director of the program. "And these are people you wouldn't normally consider homeless. They don't fit the stereotype of what most people expect."

The East Valley Chapter of Family Promises, which is part of a national network of organizations working through interfaith groups to care for the homeless, began operating in July 2010.

"It was not the most ideal time to open in terms of working to get donations," White said, referring to the poor economic climate as the nation was making its slow march out of recession.

"But it was also the time when it was needed the most."

Working with so few families allows Family Promises to provide shelter at its member churches and synagogues at night and day care at its center in Burbank.

On any given night, there are 254,000 men, women and children who are homeless at some point in Los Angeles County, according to estimates from the Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty at the Weingart Center. And about 82,000 of them are living on the streets.

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Councilwoman Jan Perry, whose downtown district houses most of the city's homeless population, said she has noticed that the homeless are growing older and that there are more women and families living on the streets.

"Over the last two years, my observation in doing our monthly outreach at the missions, is that the populations is growing older," Perry said. "It is the loss of a safety net and no family support."

Perry said the value of programs such as Family Promises is the way it can leverage local dollars to provide care that is not in conflict with other programs designed to serve the homeless.

At Family Promises, the hub of the program is at its day center, located in Burbank, where families can get on with the routine of life, doing their laundry, studying and meeting with employment counselors.

White said the program is designed to keep families together to allow them to get through the problems and return to living on their own. They are selected through a referral program, with a requirement they are free from substance abuse and have no domestic violence problems.

"Most shelters segregate families by gender and age," White said. "We want to keep them united."

"Also, we call our families guests and that we are serving as hosts to them for the time they are with us."

Since their inception in July 2010, White said they have helped 14 families, a total of 52 people, get back into permanent housing.

Family Promise also is trying to make people more aware of the problem of homelessness.

Last year, it held a "Cardboard Box City," where people raise money as they would for a walk-a-thon and spend the night in a cardboard box to learn first-hand what it is like to be homeless.

It also has a fundraiser coming up on June 5, called the "Empty Bowl." Hand-crafted ceramic bowls made by potters, arts associations and others are filled with soup from local residents and sold to donors. They take the

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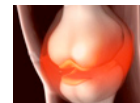
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bowls home with them as a reminder of the event.


The event will be held between 12:30 and 3:30 p.m. at the St. Finbar Community Center, 2110 W. Olive Ave., Burbank.

Family Promise can be contacted at 818-588-6723.

Family Promise works through a support group of 12 host congregations, 11 support congregations and partnerships with 22 other organizations. Families referred to them are generally members of one of those groups who need help.

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