

More women homeless, say non-profits

Forum explores new ways to help

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A recent spike of 16 percent in the population of homeless women sent non-profits like La Fondita de Jesús into thinking mode. The result was seen at a recent forum designed to collect data and establish innovative approaches to aide this growing population.

"We lacked official statistics," said Geraldine Bayrón Rivera, director of services for La Fondita, which serves the homeless. "Individuals and entities had statistics in their reports but it was difficult to obtain them in a united way."

In an interview with the Daily Sun, the coordinator of the forum, "The Current Profile of Homeless Women: a Challenge to Services and Strategies," explained the why of the meeting.

"We needed to unite our statistics and experiences to find out why the numbers were rising so steadily and fast. The forum allows us to take on the issue from the same spot."

Some 25 attendees from the private and public sector at all levels, focused on what had to be done for the homeless. Representatives from federal, state, and municipal levels, homeless-focused non-profits, universities and homeless women contributed. The assembly also evaluated the most common reasons why women are homeless, including sexual orientation, chronic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, unemployment or economic hardship and difficulties supporting their family, unexpected pregnancies and domestic violence.

La Fondita reported having an increase of 69 percent in the number of women it sheltered last year. While there were only nine homeless women between in 2008 and 2009, there were 138 between 2010 and 2011. Oth-



Director of services for La Fondita, Geraldine Bayrón Rivera, speaks at a meeting.

Courtesy

er statistics were presented by the Homeless Management Information System, managed by the San Juan Coalition for Homeless People.

"This coming together gave us the chance to sit with delegates from the Women's Advocate Office and address our situation," said Bayrón Rivera. "This will allow us to improve our service. For example, prostitutes can be reached on a deeper lever if we offer them a place to rest. Once they are rested they are more willing to learn other skills."

Socorro Rivera Rosa, executive director of

La Fondita, said 7 percent of the women served have university degrees and 52 percent have completed high school.

It was noted that some organizations or municipalities offer services for women, but amend them over to reach men instead. This revelation caused Bayrón Rivera to respond that "programs should not give up on women just because they are different. On the contrary, we have to be innovative toward women's differences."

One immediate result of the activity was the commitment to a meeting with the House

Women's Caucus by Rep. Carmen Yulín Cruz, who attended on the group's behalf.

"At the meeting, we will review pending bills and ensure that established efforts get repeated," said Bayrón Rivera. "We will offer our input and observe that if the bill focused a certain way, it would be a more effective law."

"We cannot continue moving forward if women are going to be ignored," she said. "The real importance of this forum is to work together on such a large job. We need reinforcements to break the silence."