

Homeless get help, one family at a time

Churches, synagogues, mosques organize to adopt needy L.A. households

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As a pastor in the wealthiest county in the nation, Mark Brewer imagines a world where the great faiths help get the booming population of homeless families off the streets.

That's why he helped found Imagine LA, which is bringing together houses of worship in Los Angeles County to help the poor and homeless.

The program's goal is to mobilize the faith community to sponsor and mentor homeless families, helping them get into long-term housing, become self-sufficient and see that their children thrive.

With 8,000 houses of worship - and 8,000 families experiencing homelessness in the nation's homeless capital - the pastor of Bel Air Presbyterian Church imagines a day when no child sleeps on the dangerous streets.

"The churches and synagogues are realizing we really do have common-table issues," said Brewer, who founded the program and is pastor of the church overlooking the San Fernando Valley that President Reagan attended regularly. "And we agree that the purpose of our faiths is to love God and to love others, and there is no easier person to love than a child without a home."

The growing number of churches, synagogues and mosques participating in Imagine LA comes amid a movement in the faith community nationwide to do more to help make a "love-spreading difference" amid an economic tsunami that has left many people without jobs or homes.

During a recent luncheon sponsored by the Board of Rabbis of Southern California and Fuller Theological Seminary, rabbis, pastors, priests and professors talked about ways the faith community could come together to care for those marginalized by society.

"Both the Jewish tradition and the Christian tradition believe that the community has to come together to the aid of the vulnerable," said Rabbi Elliott Dorff, a speaker at the luncheon and the rector and distinguished professor in philosophy at the American Jewish University.

The effort comes as a growing number of families - including formerly middle-class ones - are becoming homeless as hundreds of thousands of people lose their jobs and homes. Joining the nation's 2.5 million homeless people, an extra 1.5 million will become homeless over the next two years, the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates.

In Los Angeles County, more than 73,000 people are homeless on any given night, including more than 16,000 adults and children in families.

Before the 1970s and '80s, the homeless population primarily consisted of single men with access to shelters, experts say. Far fewer people were forced to live on the streets than today. But welfare cuts, the emptying of mental health facilities and a shift to a service economy with lower wages resulted in a dramatic increase in homelessness. Homeless families with women and children are now the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population.

Making the problem worse, rising family homelessness comes as the county and state governments are making large cuts in health, welfare and programs for the homeless.

County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who met with Brewer nearly two years ago when the pastor was launching Imagine LA, said the government can use all the help it can get to address "one of the most shameful moral problems" in society.

"These religious leaders who are coming together over this have the potential to create a real revolution in the county, not just for the homeless, but for other pressing social problems we have as well," said Yaroslavsky, who participated in a recent garden fundraiser for Imagine LA attended by an assortment of rabbis, pastors, professors, politicians, businessmen, journalists and others.

So far, more than a half-dozen churches and synagogues are participating, but Imagine LA officials hope the number of sponsorships will grow to more than 100 by 2011.

"No good human being wants to see children on the streets," said Greg Waybright, pastor of Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena where Sunday attendance ranges from 4,000 to 5,000.

"There are certain things that draw us together as humans and this is one of them. We know this is an evil and a wrong in society and I think what the political leaders are saying is right on target."

The program, which initially began on the Westside, is now growing into the San Fernando Valley, Pasadena and Hollywood and Mid-City area.

"The issue of homelessness and especially family homelessness is touching so many people's lives," said Jill Govan Bauman, executive director of Imagine LA.

"With statistics showing 80 percent of the population is only two paychecks away from homelessness, I think what's happening is people really want to be part of the solution - not another Band-Aid, soup kitchen, clothing drive or food bank, but how can they help a family get back on their feet and stay on their feet."

At the 1,150-family Temple Judea, which has campuses in Tarzana and West Hills, Rabbi Dan Moskovitz said the Imagine LA program is a "terrific idea" and his congregation plans to look into sponsoring a homeless family.

"We tend to think of the homeless as those on the fringes of society - those with substance abuse problems and mental illnesses - but that is not the homeless we are seeing today," Moskovitz said.

"Our support system is so overtaxed that people are leaning more and more on nonprofits and houses of worship to be that safety net."

Jim Tolle, pastor of the 25,000-member The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, said he's interested in participating in the program and is meeting with Brewer to get more information. Tolle said the community of faith really does have the answers to society's needs and "you'd have to be a real hard-hearted person" not to respond to a call to help families experiencing homelessness in these difficult times.

"When you get right down to it, government can't solve what is a fundamental spiritual issue," Tolle said. "People, by nature, are spiritual beings and the ultimate solution is always a spiritual solution - a heart caring for another heart."

To start the program, a house of worship provides a team of volunteers to help a family for up to two years. The houses of worship are asked to raise \$1,000 to \$5,000 depending on ability.

The money is used to help the family secure an apartment and help the parents get the education or training they need to get a job and become self-sufficient.

Program workers ensure the family gets all the government benefits they qualify for. The team of volunteers help the family find an apartment and then solicit donations to furnish the home. The trained volunteers then help the family follow its living plan, stay on budget, provide transportation, child care and mentoring.

"To me it sounds fantastic," said Rabbi Joshua Hoffman at the 1,700-family Valley Beth Shalom in Encino.

"Sometimes addressing the needs of the poor in our community seems overwhelming when you talk about the enormity of the problem we face. But to handle those problems and address those issues it takes working with one family at a time."