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Strengthen Our Sisters continues with fund-raisers to combat a \$450,000 state aid cut

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The founder of Strengthen Our Sisters says, "We're not about to close ever," even though it means struggling to overcome a roughly \$450,000 cut in state funding.

"We're a dedicated band of warriors. We will never give up," said SOS founder Sandra Ramos, who is determined to reach out to residents and businesses to ease the financial struggle for the seven upper Passaic County shelters in the SOS domain.

"We need the corporate sector to get involved and support programs that help," Ramos said, just like a recent \$2,500 grant from TJ Maxx that aided the shelter.

The first of many fund-raisers, World Peace Begins At Home brought TV celebrities, beauty experts, SOS families and supporters together at Ringwood's Highlands Pool for a

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day of family fun and fashion that generated about \$10,000 for SOS in July.

"Clearly we have \$440,000 we still need to raise to save SOS so we're becoming very creative," said Jacquelyn Aluotto, creator Pick It Up! Pictures. She is donating the proceeds of her documentary "Not In My Backyard," with footage from the SOS shelters, to the cause and looking for other events, like an October haunted house, to raise revenue.

With a new administration in Trenton, Ramos is also hopeful that SOS may be able to get back at least some of the funding, which the state Department of Children and Families (DCF) chopped, deciding that SOS did not provide a true emergency shelter.

The crux of the issue came down to how long SOS residents could stay at the "emergency" shelter, with the state refusing to pay for stays longer than 60 days and SOS stressing that this can amount to cruelty.

"When they have to leave after 60 days, where do they go? Back to their batterer,"

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said Ramos in an interview Wednesday.

"We always have beds available" for emergency use, she said. But when it comes to transitioning women back to independent life, she said, "We don't do it in a cruel way."

Because so many families with children make their way to the SOS shelters, she said it's particularly difficult to impose a 60-day time limit on emergency shelter stays. Often these children need special services, which uprooting them can disturb.

Pushing women out of the shelter too soon, added Aluotto, is "almost like bidding time for the inevitable," because it doesn't break the cycle of abuse. "It's really not helping. It's a recipe for disaster," she said.

The SOS shelter program tries to break this cycle with keys to independence like job training, day care, and personal cars especially for women with families.

But the state cuts are making it more difficult for SOS to provide what it does for families in need not only financially but also due to five staff layoffs.

To give SOS a boost during this trying time, the women's group of Butler United Methodist Church will donate a portion of the

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proceeds of its yard sale on Saturday, Sept. 11 at the church on Bartholdi Avenue. The event, planned to coincide with Butler's town-wide garage/yard sale, will feature household items, toys, clothing and knick knacks.

"Our group does a garage sale every year but this year we decided to have it on the same day as the town sale, to get more exposure and traffic," said Lisa Suter, the group's organizer.

Then in October, SOS is planning several fund-raisers to mark Domestic Violence Awareness Month, including a haunted house.

Other ways to help include:

(1) Supporting the three-month international blog announced by USA Today bestselling author Tara Taylor Quinn, who is blogging to raise awareness and funds for SOS (www.tarataylorquinn.com).

(2) Viewing the documentary "Not In My

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Backyard" by Aluotto at realbeautyrealwoman.com, where donations can be made to SOS as well.

(3) Contributing to SOS through its website at www.strengthenoursisters.org and keeping the generosity going that was inspired by World Peace Begins At Home.

(4) Sending donations to SOS at P.O. Box 1089, Hewitt, N.J. 07421.

(5) Providing a car so SOS can give women keys to independence.

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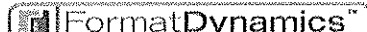


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