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Struggling Passaic County women's shelter reaches out for more private funding

Saturday, August 21, 2010

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The Record
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Strengthen Our Sisters, the Passaic County-based shelter program for homeless and abused women and their children, is turning to private fund-raising as it copes with losing a \$450,000 state service contract.

"We're not about to close, ever; we're a dedicated band of warriors. We will never give up," said SOS founder Sandra Ramos, who is appealing to residents and businesses to provide financial aid for the seven upper Passaic County shelters her non-profit operates.

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

SOS lost out on continuing a state Department of Children and Families contract



when the state deemed it could not meet the requirement of providing 24/7 emergency shelter services. The DCF was concerned that victims of domestic violence who needed immediate shelter would find the SOS facilities at capacity because they were serving "women whose issue is homelessness."

The DCF said it would only pay for 60 days of emergency housing and SOS would have to pick up costs beyond that. But Ramos said most victims don't complete the path to independence so quickly, even with career training and other programs SOS offers.

Since then, SOS's plight has attracted at least modest support from diverse sources.

The first of many fund-raisers, World Peace Begins At Home, last month brought TV celebrities, beauty experts, SOS families and supporters together at Ringwood's Highlands Pool, generating about \$10,000.

"Clearly we have \$440,000 we still need to raise to save SOS so we're becoming very

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creative," said Jacquelyn Aluotto, creator of Pick It Up! Pictures. She is donating proceeds of her documentary "Not In My Backyard," with footage from the SOS shelters, to the cause and looking for other events to raise revenue.

With a new administration in Trenton, Ramos also hopes SOS can retrieve at least some of the lost funding. It has had to lay off five staff members.

The SOS shelter program tries to offer clients keys to independence such as job training, day care, and personal cars, especially for women with families. The crux of the issue with the state was how long SOS residents could stay at the "emergency" shelter, with SOS arguing against the practicality of the 60-day funding deadline.

"When they have to leave after 60 days, where do they go? Back to their batterer," Ramos said this week. "We always have beds available" for emergency use, she added. But when it comes to women's transition 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 such a time limit on emergency shelter stays. Often


children need extended special services.

More financial help is coming on Sept. 11 when the women's group of Butler United Methodist Church will donate part of the proceeds of its yard sale at the church on Bartholdi Avenue. The event is planned to coincide with Butler's townwide garage/yard sale.

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

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