

Homeless and hopeless in Las Cruces – recipe for disaster

Desperate families need a way out of bleak situations

By **DIANE NILAN**
For the Las Cruces Bulletin

Turn up the heat to scorching and stir in a substantial amount of fear that child welfare authorities will get involved. Sprinkle in the potent sense that you've failed as a parent. Toss in a nomadic dysfunctional lifestyle. Mix in a solid dose of hopelessness. It's a recipe for disaster for the 8,000 Las Cruces families who live in or on the edge of homelessness.

Although many cities this size have emergency shelters for families displaced by hardship, no such haven exists in the Las Cruces area. No shelter for families burnt out, locked out, thrown out, scared out, priced out, turned out.

Well, that's not quite true. A shelter does exist, an adequate facility built a few years ago on the campus of Community of Hope. This family shelter provided what families need – a secure environment and a variety of help to assist families back on their feet. But now the building sits empty.

In the city whose motto is "People helping people," families who become homeless turn to friends, relatives and/or a combination thereof, tossing in the "luxury" of a small motel room if finances allow. Good people offer a heartfelt, but too meager, effort to help these parents and children survive. Despite the fact that everyone deserves to be treated as human beings, that doesn't seem to be enough to offset the daily deterioration of homelessness, especially for Las Cruces families as long as this one family shelter sits shuttered.

Disruptive doesn't begin to describe the effect of this highly mobile experience has on children and teens: nutritionally deficient; environmentally vulnerable; exposed to alcohol, drugs, prostitution, and violence; socially and developmentally challenged; educationally hampered; insecurity destroying the childhood of innocent girls and boys. It's an ugly reality.

I've seen countless families in this situation all across the nation as I traveled back roads, including Las Cruces, filming my documentary, "My Own Four Walls." My 23-plus years working with homeless families did not prepare me for what I saw and heard – the extent of homelessness among our nation's children is far worse than I could have imagined. To sum it up, it's an awful way to see kids live, especially in a country where resources exist

in abundance.

Nationally, up to 10 million women and children comprise the hidden and ignored homeless population, a figure that would tax this country's paltry homeless assistance plan. Most communities need to build a facility to shelter families. But not here.

Las Cruces, a city I've come to appreciate and enjoy, the city whose motto is "People helping People," has a suitable building to shelter homeless families. Plenty of families can use that help.

It seems to me that it's time for the city fathers and mothers to roll up their sleeves and decide how to make

this happen. If nothing else, the rising tide of fiscal doom is uprooting previously secure families, tossing them into the mix of invisible homeless families. Waiting for the right time? Ask the families desperate for a way out of hopelessness and homelessness if they are ready for help.

Diane Nilan is a documentary filmmaker and president and founder of HEAR US Inc., a Naperville, Ill.-based national nonprofit dedicated to "giving voice and visibility to homeless kids and adults." For more information about HEAR US Inc., visit www.hearus.us.

Editors note: Due to a medical emergency during Jay Miller's trip to the Middle East, the "Inside the Capitol" column is temporarily unavailable.