San Antonio Express-News (TX)

November 16, 2015

OPINION COLUMNIST : Programs for boys, men take funding hits

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Patricia Castillo and Ramon Vasquez, two of the city's best-known social service nonprofit executives, know they're unlikely to get a call from Washington asking how their programs are doing since late October, when D.C. decided not to fund them anymore.

Washington's decisions on such matters usually are final, and Castillo, who heads the PEACE Initiative, and Vasquez, of the San Antonio Fatherhood Campaign, haven't been waiting by the phone.

Castillo jumped into action, putting on a successful fundraiser a few weeks ago. Vasquez had to let two people go and cut back on three contract workers. Two volunteers have shown up, thankfully, to help answer phones.

Castillo and Vasquez have spent a lot of nights wondering how to fill the holes in their budgets. For the PEACE Initiative, it was $95,000 that it relied on annually for about a decade. For the American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, which operates the Fatherhood Campaign, it was $175,000 to $200,000 annually over the same period.

The good news is neither is giving up on providing services to boys and men, of which there's already too little in San Antonio. A lot of public money goes to juvenile detention and incarceration - but prevention, not so much, they say.

Their programs have focused on parenting education, group and individual counseling, mentoring and providing culturally relevant curricula and job assistance. Altogether, they've helped keep San Antonians safer, children especially, and helped men develop better relationships, especially with their children.

The difficulties facing their target populations are staggering. Data compiled from clients of the Fatherhood Campaign, for example, show that 69 percent were abused as children, 64 percent were behind on child-support payments and 61 percent had been previously incarcerated. Half of them were looking for a job; 47 percent had medical needs. In the most stunning of statistics, 76 percent reported having a psychological disorder.

Castillo says the 30 or so people in San Antonio who are doing this kind of work - which could easily keep 1,000 people busy, she says - know all too well that it's a vicious cycle. Children who don't live with fathers are two to three times more likely to be poor, abuse drugs, have educational or behavioral problems and engage in criminal behavior than those who live with both parents.

Conversely, children who have a loving relationship with their fathers are more likely to do well in school, show “pro-social behaviors” and avoid high-risk ones and criminal activity.

Funding for Castillo and Vasquez's programs had been part of a $999,000 grant that went to the Austin-based Southwest Key Program; the interfaith Chrysalis Ministries, formerly known as Bexar County Detention Ministries; and the Avenida Guadalupe Association, which provided workforce development.

Vasquez says the budget hit has given the Fatherhood Campaign an opportunity.

“It's forcing us to rethink the campaign, to look at data,” he says. But he's worried that “if we don't get back in business - in full operation - these men are going to go back to jail.”

The Fatherhood Campaign had 811 clients this year, Vasquez said, and spent $250 per client.

“It costs $30,000 to go back to jail,” he added.
“The federal government has been supporting us for 10 years,” Vasquez said. “We've never gone after additional funding because we have been so entrenched in the work. Now we have a chance to look beyond, to study the issues more.”

“It's not hopeless,” he said, adding that there's also hope in the city's establishment of a Commission on the Status of Fatherhood. “That will be part of the equation.”

Castillo also is hopeful about a major shift in the work. Compared to when she began doing domestic violence prevention work 35 years ago, more men are involved, more faith communities are involved, and so is the corporate community and the educational system, she said.

“To me, it's very significant to see that recognition from the other professionals and disciplines around us,” she said. “It's a sign of progress.”

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