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2 of 3 struggling to survive in capital of glitz, glamour

Poverty a reality for most in county

By Susan Abram
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PACOIMA — Hollywood may be known as home to the rich and famous, but two out of three people in Los Angeles County struggle to get by, and their ranks are swelling.

"We're the entertainment capital of the world, but we're also the capital of the working poor," said Kafi Blumenfield, president of the Los-Angeles based Liberty Hill Foundation.

Blumenfield joined more than 150 community leaders, social-service providers and policymakers Wednesday in a daylong, first-of-its-kind brainstorming conference on poverty in the San Fernando Valley.

"Two out of three people don't have enough to meet their basic needs," said Blumenfield, whose organization helps secure grants for social services.

The goal of Wednesday's gathering was to help agencies make maximum use of resources and find better ways to help the working poor, people on fixed incomes and the homeless.

"I think there is a perception in Los Angeles that the Valley is middle class and well off, but there are pockets of poverty," said Marianne Haver Hill, executive director for Meet Each Need With Dignity. MEND, the largest anti-poverty agency in the Valley, hosted the conference.

"We're seeing a mix of people," Hill said. "We're seeing people who have lost jobs, those on fixed incomes, and some who pay rent but are suddenly homeless because their own landlords are losing the property because of the mortgage crisis.

"We're seeing people who are shell-shocked, because they have never had to ask for food before," Hill said.

Hill said MEND distributes 40 percent more food boxes from its Pacoima center than it did a year ago, and its list of people newly in need of food is up by 83 percent.

In Los Angeles County, costs have increased by 15 percent for food, 12 percent for child care, and 31 percent for health care in the past five years, according to data provided by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development.

A one-adult family with two children one a preschooler and one in school requires at least \$45,000 a year to meet all basic needs, according to the organization's data.

City officials approved a plan last month to look at causes and potential solutions to poverty in Los Angeles.

The goal is to develop a full-scale action proposal.

"The myth is that people in poverty remain poor, but for many, it's temporary," said Los Angeles City Councilman Richard Alarcón. "The myth about poverty is if you have a job, you are not poor."

Alarcón, who chaired a similar panel when he was a state senator, created the ad hoc Committee on Poverty, which will lead in drafting the proposal.

He and others said they hope the panel will be able to develop a master plan on a variety of issues. The conference helps to expose those needs, he and others said.

"I think it's important to have this event because it gives us a chance to come and think together about poverty and to brainstorm," said Thomas Backer, executive director for Valley Nonprofit Resources.

His organization, launched last year, aims to link 4,000 nonprofit agencies to share resources and information.

But even social-service agencies themselves are affected by the soaring costs of gas and food, the slump in the housing market and government budget deficits.

Many continue to look for ways to stretch donated dollars as their client base increases and buying power diminishes.

There was advice at the conference on how agencies can get local and federal grants and how the poor can use free legal services to get health care. Those who were once poor are more likely to volunteer for others in hard times, many said.

"We're all undergoing several challenges in that we all have to cut back," said Maggie Cervantes, executive director for New Economics for Women, a nonprofit organization formed 20 years ago by a group of Latinas who wanted to work with single-parent families in need of affordable housing.

In 2005, the organization opened Tierra del Sol, an apartment complex and elementary charter school in Canoga Park.

"We were considering a four-day workweek, so that our own employees could cut back on gas," Cervantes said. "We all are having to try to find ways to cut back at a time when we still have to provide services."