

The Miami Herald

Miamians grapple with poverty

Community leaders announce push for jobs, better salaries

BY ELAINE DE VALLE

edevalle@herald.com

September 25, 2002

Poverty isn't limited to the homeless and destitute. In Miami, recently rated as the poorest city of its size in the country, it often includes working parents, retirees and immigrants who were engineers or accountants in their homelands and can only find work as street vendors in South Florida.

It includes Marta Peña, who used to prepare airline food for Sky Chefs before the post-Sept. 11 travel slump led to her layoff. She now pays her water and electric bills with credit cards and doesn't know how she'll pay those.

"I'm applying everywhere," said Peña, 53, whose unemployment benefits end this week. "I even passed a course as a security guard. But my age is a factor. People don't want to hire older workers."

It includes Ecilda Mercado, 46, of Cutler Ridge. The nursing assistant can find only five hours of work a week. Her husband works day-labor jobs.

And it includes Francisco Mora, 56, who said he has gone a day -- sometimes two -- without eating because there is nothing left after he pays the rent and other bills and puts gas in his car.

While the three of them sought assistance Tuesday at the South Florida Workforce Little Havana One-Stop Career Center, upstairs -- in designer suits and leather shoes -- a coalition of business, community and government leaders announced antipoverty initiatives.

The community leaders promised to find solutions to the area's unprecedented poverty levels in two campaigns aimed at creating jobs, increasing base salaries and educating Miami's poor about benefits and resources they can use.

"Hard-working people are finding it difficult to raise their families and meet basic needs. This is bad for families, bad for business and bad for our community," said Daniella Levine, executive director of the Human Services Coalition of Miami-Dade County.

The Greater Miami Prosperity Campaign, a multiagency effort led by the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, would help eligible families claim the Earned Income Tax Credit, a refundable tax credit that can mean more than \$4,000 a year for a working low-income family.

The IRS estimates that about \$33 million worth of those tax benefits went unclaimed by local residents last year.

Miami Mayor Manny Diaz said those who stand to benefit the most from the tax credit are some of the poorest, blacks and Hispanics in Miami's inner city.

"For areas of the city like Allapattah, West Coconut Grove and East Little Havana, some 3,000 residents fail to collect approximately \$4 million in [tax credit] refunds," Diaz said.

This money not only would help families meet their basic needs, he said, but also would multiply its benefits when spent at community grocery markets, gas stations and other stores.

Other resources, such as the Child Care Tax Credit, food stamps, and KidCare are not being utilized by everyone who is eligible, Diaz said. Through outreach and educational campaigns, the city can make residents aware of such benefits and increase their "financial literacy," he said.

Diaz unveiled several other proposals:

- Establishing a permanent Mayor's Task Force on poverty.
- Giving low-income people an incentive to save by matching savings accounts with \$1 million of taxpayer funds through the YWCA and Catholic Charities.
- Support budding small businesses by underwriting a new microlending effort.

"The city's small investment will help leverage \$1.7 million in private loan capital and provide entrepreneurs much needed access to legal and technical assistance," leading to jobs and stability, Diaz said.

In all, he expects the city will spend about \$2 million to generate nearly twice as much in poverty-reduction initiatives. But any such spending first will have to be approved by the City Commission, which is expected to discuss the proposal Thursday.