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Miami Human Services Coalition fights poverty

By: Laura Morales

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Jan. 29--Over the past 18 months, scandals have kept surfacing, with millions of dollars meant for the poor mismanaged, wasted or stolen.

Many of these folks are all out of trust in their leaders.

Looking for a way to improve quality of life for the poor, the Human Services Coalition, The Women's Fund of Miami-Dade, the United Way and the Alliance for Human Services are teaming up to find speedy and concrete ways to help alleviate poverty.

The groups kicked off their effort, dubbed "Blueprint for Prosperity," with a Jan. 18 powwow at Temple Israel, 137 NE 19th St., on the east edge of Overtown.

Representatives from the South Florida Urban Ministry, Hands on Miami, the Office of the Public Defender, Little Haiti's Sant La Neighborhood Center, Coalition for the Homeless and the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine joined the four conveners.

"We agreed to come up with a plan to create an antipoverty program together, in order to address the high cost of living," said HSC President and CEO Daniella Levine.

Some of the possible solutions discussed included funding programs facilitating access to social services, the pooling of funds to invest in affordable housing and lobbying lawmakers to pass measures that increase services and ease access to them.

The groups plan to meet again within the next two weeks.

The coalition used the 2007 Self-Sufficiency Standard for Florida, a report written by the University of Washington's Center for Women's Welfare, as a point to rally other service groups.

The report, released in November, shows that the minimum hourly wage in Florida -- \$6.79 as of Jan. 1, with \$3.77 for tipped workers -- is not enough to live on without help from social service agencies.

According to the report, a single adult in Miami-Dade would need to make \$11.11 an hour just to cover all the basic expenses. With a baby and a toddler, that jumps to \$22.15.

"The situation is critical," said Mark Buchbinder, of the Alliance for Human Services. "This needs more than just discussion, this needs action today rather than tomorrow."

Meeting attendees suggested ways to bring attention and action to the problem. Levine used as an example a committee recently appointed by the Vermont Legislature to find facts on poverty and report those findings to lawmakers.

Buchbinder said it's more important than ever to pressure legislators. "We're in a budget crisis. Social service needs somehow always fall to the bottom. We have to make sure they're paid more than just lip service."

He also mentioned the need to lobby the business community to fall in line with requirements to pay living wages to laborers working on their contracts with the county and with municipalities.

Levine said that a good "strategic decision" would be to put a special focus on child poverty as a way of moving things forward more quickly. "Children are a unifying factor," she told the group at the meeting.

At the end of the meeting Sophie Brion, director of the Fund's Women's Advocacy Project, asked the people assembled to help their group grow.

"Everyone here should think about who else needs to be in this," Brion said.