

Summary: La Puente programs and Services

La Puente Emergency Shelter

La Puente is the only organization in the 8,000 square mile San Luis Valley that provides emergency shelter services, and each year affords over 10,000 night stays to more than 700 men, women and children. Families, migrant workers, the mentally ill, displaced workers, returning veterans, and others in need are welcome to share nutritious meals, rest in a safe environment, and find help in resolving difficult situations. The shelter resembles a common household in many respects, with laundry facilities, home-style bedrooms, access to phone, and front and back porches for enjoying the outdoors. In the backyard there is a recreation area for guests to stay active. The environment is family-friendly, providing a safe and quiet place to stabilize and rebuild one's life. Shelter residents are immediately engaged in developing a personal plan to transition out of the shelter, and staff work one-on-one to assist residents with their job search, medical and counseling appointments, and entering the wider network of services and support needed for a successful transition.

Domestic Violence Safe House Services

La Puente's facility has a safe and secure area reserved for victims of domestic violence. This Safe House feature is the foundation of a collaboration with Tu Casa, a sister organization serving victims of domestic violence. Tu Casa clients are provided safe haven at La Puente, all the while sharing staff and our secure facility. Our partnership has strengthened our working relationship and better served victims of domestic violence who otherwise were placed in local motels.

Soup Kitchen/Community Meal Program

Each year La Puente serves over 50,000 meals to sheltered families, single guests, and members of the community. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are available 365 days a year, and everyone is welcome to share a nutritious and warming meal. The community meals served at La Puente rely heavily on donations and volunteers, and this fact gives the cuisine a personal touch. There are always different creative volunteers cooking so menus change from day to day.

Adelante Family Self-Sufficiency Program

The Adelante program is a self-sufficiency and transitional living program for homeless families in the San Luis Valley. This two year intensive program supports families as they transition out of homelessness and provides tools to move beyond it. Adelante guides homeless families and their children in gaining the skills, experience and support that will improve their quality of life. There are three main criteria for every family that is accepted into the program. They must be adults 18 years or older, have children under the age of 18 and they must be without a home. Many of the families in Adelante are referred directly from homeless shelters around the area. The Adelante program provides resources such as job training and education to support its clients as they strive towards self-sufficiency. Clients also receive individual and family counseling, parenting classes, life skills classes, financial management, case management and housing through the program.

Children's Program

PALS, (Positive Activities Lift the Spirit) is a licensed facility-based after school, vacation day, and summer program providing a structured, safe environment for select children ages 5 to 10 whose families are navigating through trauma. As a collaboration between La Puente Homeless Services, Alamosa Department of Human Services (DHS), and Alamosa Schools, PALS is uniquely designed to serve children who evidence severe social behavioral challenges and home safety risks.

PALS children are either homeless or Alamosa DHS child welfare referrals, with academic, social and emotional deficits due to physical and/or emotional abuse, neglect, and poverty. PALS curriculum is designed to focus on the child's academic success and their emotional and behavioral growth. Providing academic tutoring, life and social skills coaching, community service, artistic expression, field trips, and experiential opportunities with community partners, PALS empowers each child to cultivate confidence, self-efficacy, positive peer and adult relationships and become rooted in healthy living habits in their larger community. PALS aims to empower the children as agents of change for themselves and the community and to reduce the child maltreatment rate in ***Alamosa County, ranking #3 out of all 64 Colorado counties***

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PALS Program activities include:

- Cooking lessons
 - Art expression
 - Homework /Tutoring assistance
 - Health and First Aid classes
 - Building relationships with big buddies
- Children's library visits
 - Dance instruction
 - Outdoor adventures
 - Field trips

Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley

Providing over 1,000 meals each day, The Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley is comprised of 14 food banks located throughout the valley. With the two poorest counties of Colorado existing in the San Luis Valley, many people depend on the Food Bank Network for assistance. Each year 35,000 emergency food packages are distributed to men, women and children in need. At least 55% of those served are children. Everyone in need is welcome to visit a food bank and receive free groceries. It is as easy as walking in, signing up, and shopping. The Food Bank Network also prides itself on helping each community in the Valley to make good nutritional choices. Good eating habits and a healthy lifestyle improves the well-being of the population in our community.

Valley Educational Garden Initiative (VEGI)

The Valley Educational Garden Initiative is a collaboration between local schools and community members, and they serve to convey knowledge of backyard gardening and healthy eating. There are important connections between growing one's own food, living a healthy lifestyle, making nutritional choices, caring for the environment, and being involved in one's community that become apparent through the work that is completed. Throughout the spring and fall, school teachers are welcome to bring their students into the gardens for the planting and harvesting of snacks, and **during** the summer Garden Camps assemble children for garden work, educational activities, and lots of fun! All who assist in Polston and Boyd Gardens are welcome to take home fresh, organic produce in exchange for their hard work! The Gardens also provide organic produce for local community services, such as The Food Bank Network and La Puente. Our new grow dome, located behind our outreach service center, will be able to grow produce year round. This produce will supply our shelter with much needed healthy food for our daily meals.

Gleaning Project

Gleaning has been a means of providing food for those in need for thousands of years. In some ancient cultures there existed customs in which farmers would not harvest all the way to the edges of their fields so that members of the community who needed food – traditionally widows, travelers, and the disabled – would have something with which to feed themselves and their families. Modern-day gleaning occurs for many of the same reasons; however, often the remaining food is not left intentionally. Due to today's mechanized harvesting methods and standards concerning the appearance of produce, it is estimated that anywhere from 10-20% of the harvest of a field is left to rot. The Food Bank Network's Gleaning Program collects roughly 15 tons of fresh, nutritious (and often organic!) produce to share with neighbors in the San Luis Valley each year.

Groups that participate in the gleaning program experience much more than just the satisfaction of collecting food to help their fellow neighbors. Spending a morning out in the fields provides a glimpse into the working life of a farm laborer. There are opportunities to discuss some of the controversies and struggles that face farmers and their employees - such as working conditions, pay rates, and migrant issues. Gleaning season extends from August to mid-October, and the Gleaning Program relies entirely on the efforts of generous volunteers.

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La Puente Outreach Service Center/Homeless Prevention Program

The Outreach Prevention and Service Center works with our community to help those on the verge of homelessness stay in their homes, and to assist our homeless guests reflect on their own personal pathway out of homelessness. There are many factors that can dramatically push people into homelessness. For example, the rising costs of medication, an outstanding utility bill, unexpected illness or injury, stagnant cost of living coupled with increase in rental costs, and other unforeseen life events that can bring a family to the door steps of Shelter.

Our current economic crisis only enhances these issues and the number of people that are walking through our doors. As one of the coldest and most poverty stricken regions in Colorado, La Puente also provides aid for shut off notices on utility bills due to the inability to pay such high costs during our coldest times of the year. *In 2010, the outreach service center provided over 1,311 households in the San Luis Valley with energy assistance to keep them in their homes.* When one of our staff members meets with a client, we not only discuss the specifics of their utility, rental or other item specific situation, but factors such as budgets and weatherization efforts are also explored to identify methods of prevention.

Health Access Services

La Puente's Health Access Technician navigates homeless and near homeless individuals successfully into health services, in order to address self-identified, unmet health needs. "Taking access to the streets," this initiative has provided successful health outcomes for many who would have otherwise stayed outside of the healthcare system.

La Puente has witnessed the barrier that unmet health needs means to individuals struggling to obtain or maintain employment and stability. For many individuals, lack of health services or the needed benefits to procure health services is a primary barrier to their ability to transition to a place of greater stability in their lives. Applying cultural competency with the marginalized, La Puente's "Health Access Initiative for the Homeless," works with individuals to address the barriers to receiving the health services that are needed to regaining independence and stability in their lives.

La Puente Volunteer Program

La Puente offers three types of volunteer opportunities. Collectively, volunteers through these efforts provide over 72,000 hours of volunteer services each year. This is a Colorado high.

Full Time Volunteers

Each year 21 Volunteers from around the world choose to commit a year of service to the mission of La Puente and assist the impoverished and homeless of the San Luis Valley. Our volunteer program has been the centerpiece of our service delivery system as we have been able to successfully recruit highly motivated and talented people over the years. The cost of each Volunteer is approximately \$9,400 per year and has been taken from general operating funds.

Work Group Service

Each year, over 25 work groups come for a period of 2 -5 days to work with La Puente on special projects and to support everyday activities. These groups come from all across the United States to assist La Puente in providing services that are greatly needed in the San Luis Valley.

- Community Volunteers

Community Volunteers of all ages and abilities volunteer for weekly or monthly intervals at many of the La Puente programs. Altogether, over 450 people give a hand over the course of a year. This includes youth, retired seniors, business leaders, law enforcement, walk-ins, neighbors from near and far, and "graduated" shelter guests.

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La Puente Community Education Program

The goal of the community education program is to educate our community members so that they might be moved to action through compassion. Our educational activities focused on the stories from our shelter guests, the agrarian society in which we live, the statistics concerning poverty and homelessness within our society and hunger and homelessness within our valley. We provide a variety of ways for all ages to get involved and understand the issues. In addition, La Puente works on homeless hunger and poverty issues on the local, state and national level.

Leadership:

Lance Cheslock, director of La Puente Home in Colorado's San Luis Valley, has been working with and advocating for the rural homeless for over 24 years. Nationally, La Puente is one of the oldest and largest comprehensive homeless service providers to be found in any rural community. In addition to his work at La Puente, Lance has been an advocate for the needs of the rural homeless at both the state and national levels, designing and promoting the "Rural Homeless Initiative," that would establish uniquely tailored services and fiscal oversight for rural programs. As a Livingston Fellow, Lance went undercover and stayed at a wide range of homeless shelters across the country as a "homeless" person, in order to learn first-hand the regional differences of rural homelessness, and the struggles of those afflicted.

What is unique and truly excellent about this organization?

- La Puente was the **first rural** shelter established in the Rocky Mountain West (1982)
- The Adelante Family Self-Sufficiency Program was the **first rural** transitional housing program in Colorado (1991)
- Through a unique collaboration, *La Puente is both* homeless shelter and a safe house for victims of domestic violence. This collaboration is unique in Colorado and saves the community from having to support two separate shelter operations.
- La Puente's front-line services are provided by **21 full-time** post-college volunteers. These 21 full-time equivalents provide a year of dedicated service in exchange for room, board, and health insurance.
- La Puente's comprehensive services provide the full continuum of care (prevention, emergency services, transitional services, permanent housing) to the 6 counties of the San Luis Valley. These services are well coordinated with other local programs and are unduplicated.
- La Puente's Service-Learning Project provides hands-on service and education opportunities within La Puente's programs for both youth and adults. The project raises awareness and understanding about the systemic issues that contribute to homelessness, and the power of individuals to effect positive change.
- La Puente Enterprises operates five community businesses which donate all profits to support La Puente services. Through Rainbow's End Community Store in Alamosa and Monte Vista, The Hunt Avenue Boutique, the Sky View Motel, and Milagros Coffee House, "La Puente Enterprises" will provide \$70,000 of earned income to support emergency services and housing. In addition, La Puente Enterprises also provides employment, employment training opportunities, volunteer opportunities, and outreach assistance to the homeless and community members in crisis.

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La Puente provides a full, holistic continuum of homeless services for the 6 county service area of the San Luis Valley, and this broad spectrum of services have a regional impact on emergency, prevention, transitional, and long-term needs of the homeless and hungry. Engaging multiple sectors of the community, La Puente's volunteer opportunities, educational programs and special events provide hundreds of local community members a role in helping the homeless and hungry. The shared responsibility for the valley's homeless and hungry, builds and strengthens the character of our collective community.

At La Puente, the bottom line is that people in crisis are empowered to find stable lives back in the community. Kindness and compassion, combined with effective case management provide guests with pathway out of homelessness. Guests find work, access to educational opportunities, counseling and other resources through our comprehensive networking with Valley service providers. The result is a new-found self worth and restored dignity in the lives of many who had no hope. This is what La Puente is all about!