Battered Families Services thriving once again

These words from the opening of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, aptly express the situation at Battered Family Services of Gallup, which, despite rumors of shutting down, facing opposition from past employees, and antagonizing criticism from other media outlets, is holding its own .

BFS is open. It responds to a pressing need.

. Three law enforcement agencies – the Gallup Police Department, the McKinley County Sheriff's Office and the New Mexico State Police in Gallup - documented 717 domestic violence incidents in 2018. (This doesn't include any numbers from the Navajo Nation or Zuni Police.) The 717 reported incidents represent nearly two reported incidents of domestic violence each day of the year.

. Battered Family Services of Gallup Statewide, law enforcement agencies reported 45% of domestic violence incidents in 2018 involved injury to the victim.

. In McKinley County, law enforcement agencies reported a higher injury rate of 54%.

When she came aboard at Battered Family Services in April 2019, Emily Ellison discovered the non-profits' coffers had dwindled from $77,022.33 to $0.34. This amount was documented in a financial statement dated Feb. 23 - March 29, 2019 provided by Edward Jones.

Ellison described it as a "beautiful disaster." "The situation at the time was a lot of stress making payroll, looking for where they were going to get the funds to make the payroll, because we couldn't default on that," she said. "Basically, I search[ed] everything out as best as I possibly could, and the alternative was to be completely transparent with our funders and that's exactly what we did."

According to Ellison, funders gave BFS advance funding totaling well over $35K to make the payroll and cover outstanding payments. The current balance shown in the statement dated Feb. 1 - Feb. 28, 2020, stands at $16,363.14.

Ellison has been working on rebuilding BFS investment accounts, including a $90,000 allocation from Rep. Patty Lundstrom, D - McKinley, San Juan, Dist. 4 City Councilor Fran Palochak, and the Northwest Council of Governments.

BFS continues to receive grants from the Victims of Crime Act. This year that grant amounted to $116,000 for people in domestic violence situations. Services include informing and helping eligible crime victims with the New Mexico's Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification Services. VINE accesses information about particular offenders using the phone, internet or email. It tracks particular state and/or county inmates in reference to: release, transfer, or escape from participating agencies.

Other services are available through the New Mexico State Automated Victim Information Notification System, which provides information to crime victims and any interested members of the public with case status and hearing notifications on criminal court cases in the State of New Mexico. The SAVIN service is free of charge.

Washington Federal Bank announced a $5K grant would be given to BFS to help the shelter gain better data. My Sister's Place is a shelter where victims along with their children are placed to help them get their lives in order by establishing goals, finding employment, counseling, getting medical check-ups, and parenting classes. Currently, BFS has 14 employees helping out with different aspects of this process.

In addition to that is provided at the shelter, Ellison says BFS offers community services such as free therapy, basic legal services – all aspects of custody issues and their Batterer Intervention Program.

Michael Williams, who coordinates BIP, says it's all a collaboration of working with other entities to do what is best for the community.

The New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence points out, "Violence increases when there is a lack of criminal justice system coordination and limited accountability for offenders. Programs serving offenders report fewer court referrals to treatment and little or no monitoring for offender compliance with court orders, including orders to attend a domestic violence offender treatment program."

Williams wants to change that by rigorously working with local law agencies.

“We’re trying to rebuild an efficient BIP program for male domestic violence offenders. We are working with Magistrate Court, Law Offices of Public Defenders, and other entities,” he said.

In cases where victims drop charges against their offenders, prosecutors’ hands are tied.

Wayne Wilcken, licensed therapist of BFS, says when a victim is traumatized and rational thinking is displaced, the person is often afraid to proceed any further. Wilcken says the services offered at BFS are vital to helping victims overcome their situations.

“I think it’s vital because a traumatized mind can’t sit and reflect on things. You’re full of trauma all the time. It’s vital, because we save lives and besides saving lives it’s a good idea to de-traumatize them, help them to want to live.”

Despite all that, BFS faces daily challenges like the current condition of the BFS building which requires replacement of the roof. Robert Griego, Board Member of BFS says the organization has made tremendous leaps and overcome many hurdles.

Griego said that although BFS hasn’t had a steady cash flow in a long time, he is amazed at how things have progressed to where it’s at now. He thanks the community, organizations, and especially Ellison.

Monica Trujillo, President of Ladies of Charity of Gallup, who often comes in to volunteer by sorting through donated clothes, praised BFS for the work they do.

“This is a great organization, because those people who have been battered really feel the worth of this place. They gain back their self-esteem, regain back (to) who they are and their identity,” she said.

The charity recently gave BFS $250 after a fundraiser.

“BFS really needs it. They have a good mission to help the women, men, and families. Most of us have families. So we know the importance of family and being together and caring for [one] another.”

For more information: batteredfamilies.com or (505) 722-7483.

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