

Poor's plight in spotlight at summit

POVERTY: Agencies weigh boosting activism to aid Valley's neediest.

By Susan Abram, Staff Writer

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Struggling to balance a booming demand for services against a funding shortage, officials with San Fernando Valley poverty-assistance agencies said Thursday they need to reorganize and connect with a new generation of social activists.

The discussion was part of the second annual "Mending Poverty" conference, held Thursday at Meet Each Need With Dignity in Pacoima.

Nearly 100 members from various social service agencies — food pantries and providers of mental health, health care and housing programs — focused on how to best advocate for the poor during a state budget crisis and an unsteady economy.

"Our world has been turned upside down," said MEND executive director Marianne Haver Hill.

"We're in a time of tremendous turmoil and yet resources are pulling back, whether (a nonprofit organization) is funded by the government or by private backers."

Some activists suggested taking a cue from "Millennials" — the generation of young people that use social networking sites like Twitter to Facebook - to raise awareness of social issues.

Social activism, some said, can be possible only if the poor aren't seen as "they" or "other people," but as part of the whole community.

And that's happening more often as the population that defines itself as "middle class" become part of food pantry lines.

In Los Angeles County, the number of unemployed has doubled in the last year, from 282,000 to 534,400.

This week, the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank reported that within the first four months of this year, it provided food to an average of 231,359 people a month, a 31 percent increase over a year ago.

The food bank distributes supplies to 544 charitable agencies throughout the county and now ships 1 million pounds of food per week to keep up with the growing demand. The parts of the county experiencing the greatest demand include the Antelope and San Gabriel valleys, South Los Angeles and downtown Los Angeles.

But the San Fernando Valley isn't often associated with poverty, and that is a misperception that can hurt the area and its residents, said City Councilman Richard Alarcon, who helped lead a panel discussion.

He pointed to the inability of the Children's Museum to open in Hansen Dam as an example of how the Valley has lost its philanthropic connections — which has had a ripple effect on nonprofits that help the poor.

In earlier days, corporations would have stepped in with large contributions, Alarcon said. But no more.

"Right now, funding at all levels is a challenge," Alarcon said. "But in the Valley, where foreclosure rates are the highest in the region, I'm hearing that more people are one, two, three paychecks away from being homeless."