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'Faces of Homelessness' event to promote public awareness

By JOY BLACKBURN

Thursday, November 9th 2006

ST. THOMAS - An event for people who are homeless - and to raise public awareness about their plight - is slated for Sunday afternoon in Market Square.

"We need people to help and we need people to show up to show their support," said Yvonne Washington-Turay, founder of God's House International, which is sponsoring "The Faces of Homelessness St. Thomas USVI."

The event also marks the start of National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week, which runs Sunday through Nov. 18.

The Faces of Homelessness St. Thomas - slated as an opportunity to serve - will offer people who are homeless food and health screenings, including blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol checks, done by University of the Virgin Islands nursing students.

Speakers are scheduled to address the gathering, to discuss addictions and substance abuse among the homeless, as well as programs to help people who are homeless that have worked well in other locales.

Washington-Turay said that in addition to the food being served, goodie bags containing items such as peanuts and granola bars will be distributed, along with hygiene kits that contain soap, washcloths, towels, toothpaste and toothbrushes.

She is trying to obtain a portable shower for the event, she said, noting that the island has no real drop-in houses - places where people who are homeless can pop in, eat, use the toilet and wash up before heading out again.

"They need a place where they can go and get a bite, take a wash and change their clothes," Washington-Turay said.

Although Sunday marks the start of the national awareness week, there was more than one reason the event was scheduled that day.

"On Sunday, no one feeds the homeless around here, and that's why we picked Sunday," Washington-Turay said.

Last year in May, volunteers counted more than 500 homeless people in the territory on a single day. And those who work with the homeless say the problem seems to be growing.

"There are just more and more of them. I get the bird's eye view," said Maria Ferreras, who works on the top floor of the Royal Dane Mall.

Ferreras has for years packed bags of food and other items with her when she goes to work, to hand out to the homeless people who populate the alleys and byways downtown.

"We are in a war zone of people that are in desperate need," Ferreras said, noting that she found it impossible to stand by and do nothing. "It's just so sad. They'll break your heart. I can't take the horror I see. I guess I'm like a street soldier."

To gain a better understanding of what the problems and needs are, about four people from God's House International gathered at Emancipation Garden last month for "One Night Without a Home," Washington-Turay said.

They stayed out until the wee hours, talking with people living on the streets to get a feel for the experience.

"These people are like invisible people," Washington-Turay said. "We were sitting there and people just walked by us. They didn't say anything. They didn't look at us. They just kept going."

The Faces of Homelessness is scheduled from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday at Market Square downtown. For more information or to volunteer, call 998-8935 or 344-5567.

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