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## Dame la Mano shelters 20 women, 50 children in 1,500-square-foot house

By Stephanie Sanchez / El Paso Times  
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EL PASO -- At 25, Stacy Rogers has lived a life that few can imagine.

Her mother abandoned her and she spent most of her teenage years in a juvenile detention center. Homeless at 17, she had six children but lost custody of them all. She has been in numerous abusive relationships with men.

Trying to escape her past, Rogers hitchhiked from Panama City, Fla., to Las Cruces three years ago. But her life got no better, as the cycle of pregnancy and violence repeated itself.

Rogers said she became involved with a man who drank and used drugs. She said she was living with him, but then ended up on the street when the relationship soured.

Penniless and pregnant, Rogers arrived on the front steps of Dame la Mano, a shelter for pregnant women and single women with children. The family-owned shelter temporarily became her home.

Twenty women and 50 children live in the 1,500-square-foot, two-story house in Segundo Barrio. So crowded is the house that each family sleeps on one bed.

Still, to Rogers, the house was a safe haven after another harrowing experience.

"I don't have family. This is like my family," she said. "I was in a domestic violence situation with the father of my child. He was abusive to me. He kicked me out of the house with no place to go."

Bertha Contreras, 24, said she and her three children have lived at the shelter for about a month. She said she went to the shelter after moving out of her mother's small apartment.

"I went straight to Dame la



Mano. I was really depressed," she said. "My children like it there. We have a home, a bed. We used to sleep on the floor (at her mother's apartment). Now we have somewhere to sleep."

Residents of Dame la Mano can stay for up to two years, but they have to either work or go to school, said Rosa Cabrera, executive director of the shelter. Most women, she said, stay at the house for about six months until they get back on their feet.

At the shelter, the women are given three meals and two snacks daily. They are offered counseling, English classes and classes to prepare them to test for the equivalency of a high school diploma.

The women also learn about different

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financial assistance programs.

Cabrera's mother, Rosa Arellano, opened the shelter in 1997 after volunteering at a center that offered pregnancy testing. She said her mother saw that many women did not have the resources

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they needed and opted for abortions. Arellano wanted to help women and offer them a place to receive guidance through their pregnancies.

Cabrera and her brother, David Arellano, now run the shelter.

Women and children at the shelter have a strict schedule, including chores, fund raising and going to church. The women also have a curfew at 8 p.m.

Some women, who did not want to give their names because they live at the shelter, criticized the rules and the demands placed on them. They said the shelter takes advantage of its residents by asking too much of them through chores and fund raising.

Susan Crews, a lead counselor in the El Paso Independent School District, said she had received complaints from students at Bowie High School who lived at the shelter. The students, she said, told her they were forced to do chores -- even when they were sick -- and they had to make tamales that were sold to raise money.

Crews said she visited the shelter to get an idea of where her students were living. She said she was impressed with the cleanliness of the shelter, especially because of the crowded conditions.

Her view is that Dame la Mano needs to have strict rules to maintain structure. She said she believed the shelter almost has to run like a military installation to keep it livable.

"It has to be almost like the Marine Corps with all the people living there," she said.

David Arellano, co-director of the shelter, said it sometimes must turn away women and their children because of crowding. He said the shelter has 10 emergency mattresses, but that may not be enough when nighttime temperatures dip below freezing.

He said his goal is to expand the shelter into a 16,000-square-foot house with 44 rooms. He envisions a playroom, counseling room, computer room, library and large kitchen.

The new shelter, he said, would cost \$2.5 million. He said about \$50,000 has been raised, and the operation plans to apply for grants.

"We could help close to 200 people in that facility. That's 44 families that we would be able to help," he said.

"Right now there are a high number of homeless families. There are shelters for men, single women but there are really not many shelters for single women with children."

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