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Group Speaks for Homeless

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Fifteen minutes in the 10-degree cold Thursday morning was about all the homeless advocates could stand as they gathered outside the Roundhouse: a reminder to the community that most of the homeless have to survive the frigid temperatures full time.

The kind of exposure the advocates were looking for was a different kind. "We're trying to get homelessness and the lack of affordable housing on the Legislative agenda," said Bud Ryan, a photographer who serves on the board of St. Elizabeth's Shelter.

At a podium set up outside for the occasion, state Sen. Jerry Ortiz y Pino, D-Albuquerque, told the group that "for too long we've treated homelessness as a personal failing."

Ortiz y Pino said he wants the Legislature to look at housing as a strategy to end homelessness. "Let's provide it as a boost for them," he said, "not something they have to earn." He added that he hopes the advocates can get "money and a change in attitude" this legislative session.

Sue Campbell, who was formerly homeless and is now a case manager at the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope in Las Cruces, said it was the help she received at Community of Hope that turned her life around. The community is an alliance of agencies providing care for the homeless, from a shelter and soup kitchen to health care and day care for children.

"Because I got clean clothes and was able to shower," said Campbell, "I realized, 'I'm going to try one more time.'"

After becoming a volunteer at the shelter, Campbell said, the staff gave her a "little tiny trailer" to live in. She stopped drinking and went back to school, eventually becoming a case manager: "Every human needs a roof."

Campbell said she became homeless when she was laid off from her job in California's Silicon Valley after 35 years. "I had a nervous breakdown and even ended up in jail," she said. "But some old lady in a wildlife refuge told me to come to Las Cruces, New Mexico, and I've been blessed ever since."

The advocates, members of the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness, are

lobbying legislators to support their four priorities this session:

- To create a Housing First Task Force, through a Senate memorial, that would develop a workable alliance among the Departments of Human Services, Health, Education and Corrections for finding affordable housing.

- To secure \$15 million in new funding for the New Mexico Housing Trust Fund.

The New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority, which administers the fund, has already awarded about \$12 million of fund appropriations, leveraging more than \$163 million in other housing funding and will create 960 housing unit throughout the state. But more is needed, say the advocates.

- Increase funding for the Human Services Department's new supportive housing program by \$1 million.

Supportive housing is a model that consists of creating affordable housing plus supportive services. Of the funds requested, \$300,000 will be used to provide vouchers for people with serious mental illness and for homeless youth.

- Increase funding by \$760,000 for supportive housing for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Advocates say the Children Youth and Families Department will be seeking these funds. Of the \$760,000, some \$610,000 would be for a Transitional Living program to provide youth with education, employment and housing services; \$150,000 would be for a permanent supportive housing pilot project in Albuquerque for youth.

Research shows that former foster youth are at high risk of becoming homeless as adults; supportive housing helps prevent that.