



La Fondita de Jesús, Agents of Social Change

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This leading organization has been serving the homeless for 35 years. It is celebrating its 35th anniversary during a pandemic, while still navigating the troubled waters of Hurricane María's aftermath. Both events have transformed the profile of the homeless and broadened the action framework of La Fondita.

"Nowadays you see people on the streets who you would have never imagined. There are people who have lost their homes as a result of losing their jobs due to the pandemic, and you increasingly see more and more older adults on the streets. María generated that profile change and the pandemic continues to accentuate it," explains Edwin Otero, Director of Development and External Resources at La Fondita de Jesús.

The profile of people living on the streets has traditionally been linked to mental health issues and problematic drug use. Today, he says, there are many older adults who have been abandoned in a vulnerable state and do not have a reliable support system to stay in their homes. "We are also seeing an increase in LGBTQ+ youth, whose families have abandoned them, and college students without resources." In addition, there are young people from foster homes who, upon coming of

age, do not have the life skills to support themselves and there is no discharge plan to enable their transition. Something quite similar is also happening with people who are released from prison.

Much More than a Plate of Food

"La Fondita means much more than a plate of food for the homeless. We provide them with comprehensive services towards community reintegration," explains Otero. These include: showers, laundry, food, medical care, and permanent housing services.

The latter services are critical, but demand far exceeds the availability of units and funds. "We work with HUD funds to address the chronic homelessness that affects people with disabling physical and mental conditions. But that doesn't cover this entire new population. Now we are working with a rapid relocation program for this other population, but there are not enough units and the process takes time," he stresses.

"María, the earthquakes, and the pandemic have shown how precarious security is and how, in a matter of hours, you can become homeless," he says.

Advocacy, the Cornerstone of the Organization

"We were the first to care for the homeless and became their voice. For many years, they were invisible to society and their rights as citizens went unrecognized," he asserts. In the struggle for the recognition of their rights, they actively advocated for the enactment of the 2007 Homeless Bill of Rights.

Today that advocacy initiative continues with its Social Justice Program, which offers support for homeless people to exercise their right to vote while creating awareness of the needs and rights of this population among public and private organizations.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

As in most of the third sector, the pandemic has meant a change in La Fondita's operations and a realignment of resources, but it has not affected its determination. "Since the beginning of quarantine—without knowing if we were exempt or not—we continued offering our services. That was non-negotiable; we provide essential services for the homeless and the vulnerable," he explains. However, the pandemic has disrupted its volunteer program, which is mostly comprised of older adults, and has required the recruitment of private resources for COVID-19 testing for the team and the population served.

Moreover, they have also paused the education and development programs which are designed to facilitate the community reintegration of this population. Despite these challenges, he is pleased that his safety protocols have been effective and have allowed both his team and the people who daily seek services to remain healthy.

"La Fondita is among the longest-serving organizations in Puerto Rico. The work they do for the homeless is invaluable. At Triple-S Foundation, we are honored to be able to support them, particularly in their fight against the food insecurity experienced by the homeless population," said Ivelisse M. Fernández, executive director of the Triple-S Foundation.

For Otero, the pandemic and economic crisis have made them even more aware of the need to raise funds to respond more quickly to the needs of this growing population. La Fondita's other two focus areas are the continuous improvement of the services provided to vulnerable populations, such as older adults, and to attract new volunteers to join the organization, a driving force that has always been part of its service formula.