

La Puente's Rural Outreach Initiative

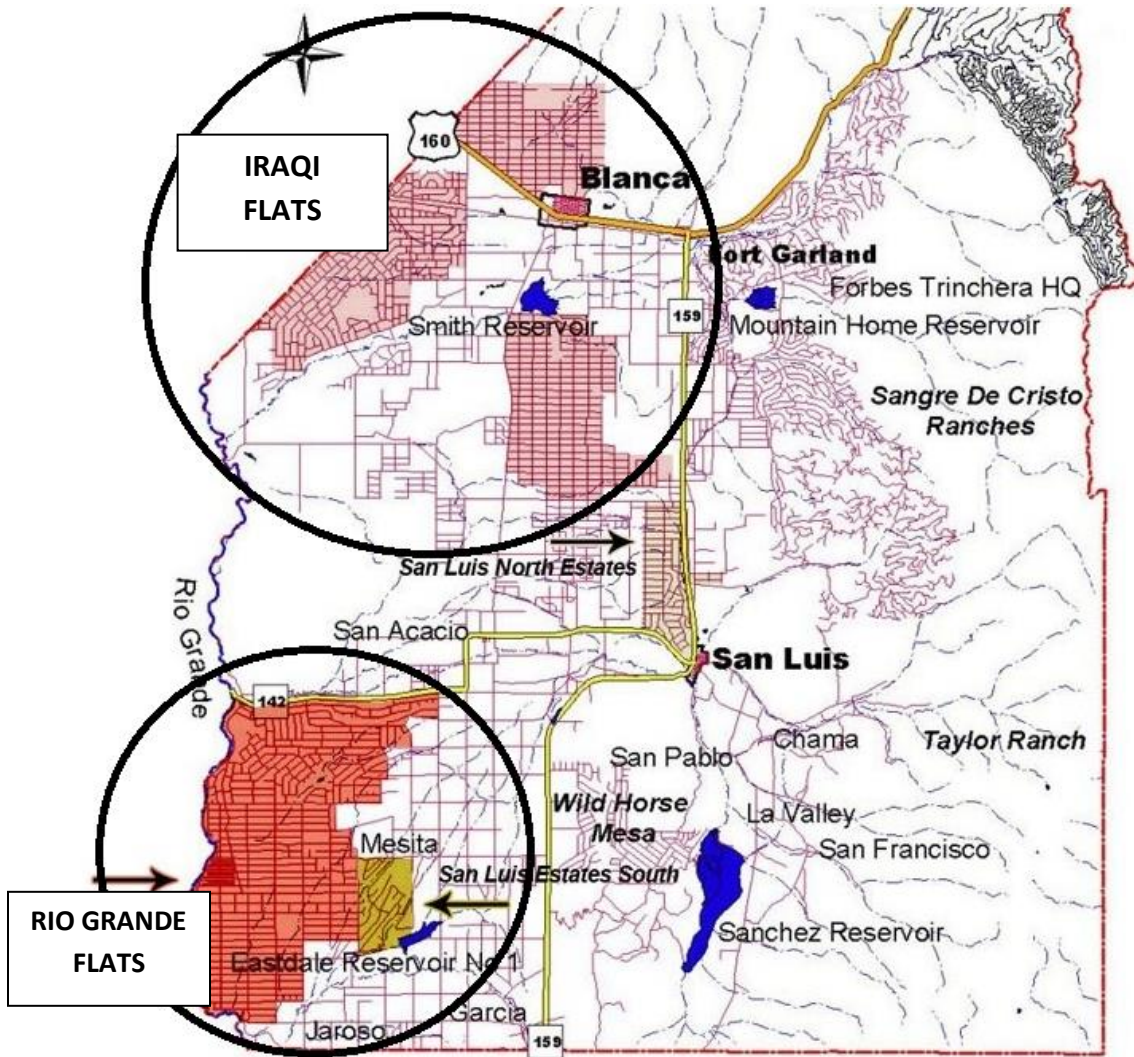


Matt Little, Rural Outreach Field Staff



Robert delivers Christmas gifts to a family with a newborn. Establishing relationships is the first stage in creating the safety net.

The purpose of La Puente's Rural Outreach Initiative is to expand the regional safety net of services for marginalized individuals and families living in the "flats," in order to give consideration to health, safety, and general well-being, while respecting the choices that residents have made in the establishment of their lifestyle.



Current Service area for the Rural Outreach Initiative: Rio Grande Flats and the Iraqi Flats.



Hundreds of miles of unimproved roads crisscross the landscape of the “flats.” Thousands of acres were sub-divided into small parcels by opportunistic land developers, then sold, often sight unseen. Over the past 4 decades, hundreds of individuals and families have attempted to jump-start their lives anew here, spending out their savings in exchange for the pride of land ownership.



There are an estimated 250 “provisional” homes throughout the flats. Most of these “homes” have no running water or electricity. Those that occupy these provisional dwellings own their land and do their best to prepare for hardship. When their water freezes, or they are out firewood or fuel, or the roads are impassable, these individuals’ and family’s lives become precarious, given that they have no access to services. We are beginning our work to provide basic assistance, and educate each household to know how and where they can seek assistance.



Most households preferred not to have their photos taken.

Individuals and families cobble together anything they can find to establish their homes. They carry a lot of pride in their independent lifestyle, yet their lives can be thrown into crisis at the turn of the weather, vandalism of their property, health crises, or running out of basic provisions. Here is a sample of the wide variety of dwellings:



First-time onlookers render harsh judgment in consideration of the “choice” individuals and families have made to live in such a primitive manner. For many of the residents in the flats, owning a piece of land can bring a deep sense of pride, stability, and opportunity. They feel a greater sense of control over their destiny, in contrast with the codes and structural barriers of city living. Residents have a strong sense of independence, and want freedom from the pressures of society and the materialistic culture of our day. They often are self-isolating, and are seeking a private, quiet existence. Their choice to live and venture a life in the flats is a form of self-determination for their own lives. The harsh side of the isolation and the severe elements of nature can become insurmountable obstacles to their choice to live in the flats. Many leave after their attempt to survive falters, others make due with the severity, and others find themselves trapped in a cage of crises, with no resources or knowledge of how to get help. Creating a safety net is the imperative of La Puente’s Rural Outreach Initiative.



Note the tarp use for a roof ^ and the stove pipe.



All of these homes on this page have one thing in common: they use firewood as their heat source in winter months. Temperatures drop to 20 degrees below zero for much of December and January, so running out of firewood can be life-threatening. Often families do not have an adequate stock-pile to make it through the valley's harsh winter.





There are many families living in the flats. Parents work to give their children a “homesteading” learning environment, and children must take part in all the work needed to keep the household functional. Children struggle with regular attendance in school, and having their basic needs met.

Households are small and many household goods are stored outside in the elements. Trash disposal and management of human waste is a problem. Dogs are needed for security, but fenced-in yards are an extravagant expense.



Families find both freedom and struggle with the isolation. The small homes are cluttered with life's necessities.



Water is precious and is hard to come by, with many families dependent on neighbors with a truck to haul water in. Water must be stored inside during the freezing temperatures of winter. Notice the gallon jugs of water.



The family in this dwelling built their home gradually over many years and have lived over 20 years in the flats. Their son was successful in school, and attended Adams State University. Only a few families are battle-hardened enough to make it through the years.



This home was constructed over the years by a war veteran, who says that he no longer can engage in society and wants to live out his life in peaceful isolation.

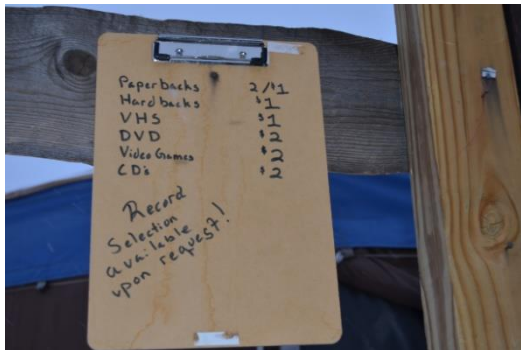
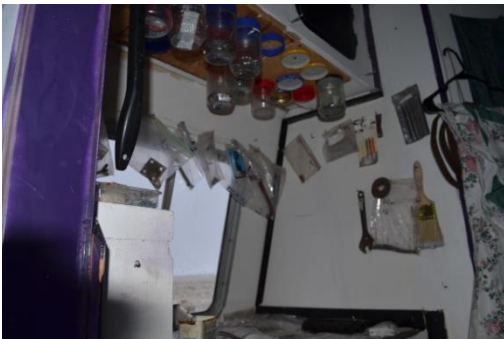
The flats of the Valley have become the home for many of our war veterans. Suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome from the trauma they experience in various wars, most veterans in the flats want to live quietly, far away from society. Many of them live off a small disability check and work to meet their basic needs.



Though this dwelling is not fully enclosed, a war veteran lives here and made it through most of the winter, building fires to stay warm. He was forced to live at the shelter during the colder months. He has dreams of completing this "home," and quietly living out his life.



Families can be very enterprising. This household started a small thrift store as a source of income, salvaging items from dumpsters and throw-away stuff from Rainbow's End. Unfortunately county officials closed down the operation



because the family did not have the proper permits.



La Puente and the communities of the valley flats thank you for helping us to begin to address tremendous human need, and to start the work of building a safety net, household by household, and community by community.

Thank you!