



Levin delivers federal grant relief for Ruth Ellis Center

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By Jessica Carraras

DETROIT - On Tuesday, the Ruth Ellis Center for LGBT youth celebrated a belated Christmas present: A \$366,600 federal grant, punctuated by a visit to the center by Michigan's U.S. Senator Carl Levin.

Levin, along with U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, supported the grant going to the center after being influenced by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which has worked with local LGBT groups to obtain funding at the federal level.

The Ruth Ellis Center is one of four residential centers in the country dedicated solely to helping LGBT youth. They offer long- and short-term shelter, meals, clothing, and shower and laundry facilities. They also work to educate youth on independent living, self-esteem, safe sex and illegal drug use.

"This is pretty huge for us because we have lost three out of four of our federal grants," the center's Executive Director, Grace McClelland, said of the grant. "This year would be very difficult if we didn't get this earmark."

Last month, the center faced an 80 percent cut in their federal funding, which covered nearly half of their budget costs. Expecting to lose the rest in the near future, McClelland and the center rushed to adjust without losing staff or the ability to support LGBT youth. This including converting five of the beds in their emergency shelter plan to those reserved for state-placed youth.

The grant received by the federal government came as a huge relief for the center, which has a 2008 budget of \$1.5 million. McClelland noted, however, that the grant makes up less than a third of their total money needed, making community support extremely important. "We still need community help in a big way," she said.

The money from the grant will be used to fund their street outreach program, through which volunteers visit youth on the streets armed with blankets, coats, food and even advice. Other uses will include paying off the mortgage and renovation debt for the drop-in center, as well as funding a computer lab in the center. The computers, said McClelland, will be crucial in furthering their job training and substance abuse education programs, both of which require youth to use computers to complete them.

Sen. Levin expressed his support for the work done at the center and their upcoming endeavors during his visit Tuesday. "You're making a real contribution to our nation," he said.

Of his support for the grant, he called it "a very American thing to do."

"This is in the best interest of our country," he added.

Work toward obtaining this funding began three years ago with the help of NGLTF, who contacted Senators Levin and Stabenow asking for support in Washington D.C. Levin, in particular, gave the movement the crucial support it needed to become a reality. "You have no idea how hard he fights for us," said Matt Foreman, executive director of NGLTF, of Levin's support for the rights of the LGBT community. "It takes an act of courage for people in D.C. to stand for us."

For government officials who weren't as supportive, NGLTF set out to put faces to the problem by sending youth from the Ruth Ellis Center to Washington to lobby for the grant by using a powerful tool: Their own stories of shame, homelessness, abuse and the help and love they found at the center. "There's no stronger argument than a personal story," Foreman said.

During Sen. Levin's visit, youth and young adults shared more personal stories with him. "They never turned their back on me," a teary-eyed young woman, Nina Johnson, said of the workers at the center. Johnson, 23, who has been coming to the center for seven years, first ventured through the doors of the drop-in center for social reasons, but reached out to them for help four years ago after hitting rock bottom. The mother of two children, Johnson's daughter was taken away from her after she turned to prostitution to support herself after being kicked out of her mother's home. Her son was also taken away.

Instead of giving up, she turned to the Ruth Ellis Center, which helped her get her life back together and raised her self-esteem. Currently, they are working to help her get her children back. Johnson, along with others, expressed her gratitude to Levin. "If it wasn't for contributions like that (the grant), people like me would have no chance," she said.

"It's not our money, it's your money," Levin said in response to the thankfulness of the workers and youth at the center. "Keep doing what you're doing. That's all the thanks we need." Many noted that they felt the spirit of Ruth Ellis, the center's namesake, alive and well on Tuesday. Ellis, a tireless supporter of both the LGBT community and any youth in need, was said to accept everyone, regardless of who they were. "I knew her," said Kofi Adoma, who co-founded the center and now serves on the board. "Ruth Ellis would be blown away by this."