

Higgins honored for aiding women

By Jim Walsh

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Mesa City Council member Dina Higgins had a dream and didn't let the recession and the resulting strain on social services derail it.

In return for her efforts, Higgins received the Spirit in Social Ministry Award from Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest before Monday's City Council meeting.

Higgins convened a prayer breakfast at which a group of Southeast Valley clergy suggested that Mesa launch a program to help homeless women. A year ago, Mesa's I-Help program started by offering emergency shelter two nights a week. Two women showed up to sleep on cots at the East Valley Bible Church in Gilbert.

But a year later, the program is serving an average of 13 women per night, seven nights a week, with 11 churches participating on a rotation. The program served 70 women during the first year of its existence, said Traci Gruenberger, vice



**Dina
Higgins**

president of program development and operations for Lutheran Social Services.

"The I-Help program would not be in Mesa and we wouldn't have the privilege of serving these ladies without Dina," Gruenberger said.

Higgins said Mesa should be giving Lutheran Social Services an award, rather than the other way around.

"They took the ball and ran with it. I was the cheerleader and the connector," Higgins said. "It was a big honor."

Higgins, who represents northeast Mesa, said she is thrilled by the program's progress.

Other than heading a faith-based breakfast with religious leaders, Higgins arranged for Gruenberger to receive aid from Tempe's larger and more established I-Help. She also assisted in a DVD that was used to recruit churches.