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Social service agencies' work in city should be heralded

AS I SEE IT

By David McMahon

The quiet and effective work being done by social service agencies in our city often goes unheralded, but the end results — victory against drug addiction, stronger neighborhoods and recovered people — must be brought to light, and repeatedly, to dispel fear-mongering and an extraordinarily narrow vision of our community.

Worcester became mired in poverty when the manufacturing sector eroded, and as the experts remind us again and again, it is poverty that creates crime and homelessness. Social service agencies arise out of a public demand to manage and tackle the pressing social ills in a poor city overrun with heroin and homelessness. Social service agencies need to do their work in a feasible and cost-effective manner, in the areas of the city most plagued by poverty and disenfranchisement, namely Main South.

Any of the city's providers for the poor can take you on a tour of recovered people, people who are successful. They have shrugged off the shackles of drug addiction and lives mired in the muck of Worcester's lack of opportunity and ambivalence toward hiring people of color. Any of us can show you the small business owner, the homeowner, the computer programmer, the union worker, or the bagger at the supermarket who are living testaments to the power of programs to give a new lease on life to residents of Main South and of the city, who suffer from the medical disease of addiction.

Social service agencies are the sole neighborhood anchors remaining for wrecked and neglected neighborhoods in Main South. Much rhetoric and invective are spilled over these neighborhoods, and even the occasional official designation — "zero-tolerance area" or "arts district." However, on the ground, it is actually the social service agencies that are doing something for the residents of these neighborhoods, under a hail of rhetorical bullets from a cult of urban-utopians.

Social service providers utilize evidence-based methods to end homelessness, help ex-offenders transition in a healthy fashion and assist families and kids in trouble. They rehab abandoned buildings, pay off back taxes on them and create jobs in a vacuum of economic activity in the inner city. They hold crime watches, operate community gardens and summer programs for inner-city kids, conduct cleanups and coordinate with law enforcement to monitor criminal problems in the neighborhoods. They provide great opportunity for inner-city addicts who would otherwise be causing criminal mayhem on the streets. What would the average reader rather see — healthy people in programs or running the streets? We need to saturate problem neighborhoods with programs that work, as the forces of addiction and poverty have made a laughingstock out of failed revitalization schemes for more than 50 years.

Worcester Interfaith led a successful campaign that forced our city to look at how many minorities work in the trades, and as a result, unions have expanded efforts to recruit people of color. As the city embarks on new huge plans to remake downtown and revitalize our urban core, it must take similar consideration and work to hire people from this devastated urban core. One way to end the malaise of poverty, and hence homelessness and crime, is to create new jobs. Interestingly, a report just issued indicates that nonprofits currently are the major engine for economic growth in the commonwealth, including social service providers. Thus, social service providers are a major source of job creation and economic growth in Massachusetts.

People in recovery, who have gone through programs in Worcester or anywhere, and who work the steps know that they need to take action. They know that they once were in the gutter, too, and they should know we need them now. We need all of our supporters and people of good will in the city to call their elected representatives and tell them that they support social service agencies' efforts in Main South to change the lives of those who suffer from addiction.

They need to know that voters highly value social service agencies and the work we do in Main South.

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