

Council Corner: Poverty simulation illuminates struggle

By Greg Lemhouse

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We all see it. All of us know people that live with it every day, but not all of us have experienced what it is like to be in poverty. Despite that fact, we support programs and give to causes that help. Elected leaders pass laws and fund programs to help. We do these things because we truly want to help those who are struggling with poverty, but are we really helping?

This Thursday, Sept. 22, Southern Oregon Goodwill will be facilitating a poverty simulation that will be held at the Temple Emek Shalom and hosted by the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission as part of the 11 days of peace and supports the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's first goal, to "End poverty in all its forms everywhere."

The exercise will involve leaders of the nonprofit, human services and educational organizations that work with individuals who experience poverty. The goal of the event is to bring to light the struggles that people who live in poverty deal with as they attempt to navigate a system that has been set up to help them.

What most participants find is that the systems and programs we put in place (with the best of intentions) to help those most in need often are counterproductive and self-defeating as they place participants in a position to make very difficult decisions over making use of one form of assistance, only to lose another as a result.

This can simply be a case of the offices that provide services being far enough away from each other that just making the trip from one office to another becomes prohibitive when a participant has to keep their temporary job or pick up their child from day care.

It could also mean that a school may suspend a student that repeatedly misses class, without knowing that the student is required to stay home from school to watch their younger sibling while Mom is at work, because a bus does not stop near her work, which would let her pick up her youngest child from day care. Tough choices are made every day by those in poverty.

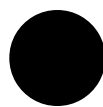
The point is that often there is more to the story than a person simply being “lazy” or not willing to participate in programs or take advantage of services available to them. At times, our best intentions place the very people we are trying to help in positions where they must make very difficult decisions, not just to keep all the balls in the air, but to simply let as few drop as possible. For those who live in poverty, it is truly a daily battle, and in some cases those who are trying to help are actually complicating matters even further.

The hope is that through this poverty simulation, leaders who participate learn valuable lessons about how well-intended programs and services can actually fail to help the people they are intended to help. If as leaders we do not take the time to ensure that we are coordinating effectively with each other and understand clearly the impact our programs and efforts have on the daily lives of people utilizing them, we can end up doing more harm than good.

It is one thing to have empathy, it is another to take action. But that action must be thoughtful, meaningful and positive. In the battle against poverty, good intentions don’t put food on the table, pay the electricity bill or land a job.

As leaders, we must be willing to forgo patting ourselves on the back for funding or creating a program that is intended to help and instead focus on the hard work of collaboration and coordination that must take place to ensure that our efforts result in truly helping those in need and are sustainable for the long run.

— *Greg Lemhouse is a member of the Ashland City Council.*



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