**Homelessness and Poverty Forum is long on information, but short on answers**

By Dave Glomp

I didn't know what to expect when I attended the Dane County Coalition to Fight Homelessness and End Poverty Forum last Thursday. The forum, which started at 5 PM and ran for three hours at the First United Methodist Church in downtown Madison, drew upwards of 160 people, although that number dwindled to about 80 or so before it concluded.

My impression was that the forum was much more about educating attendees, who may have had little or no knowledge about homelessness and its causes, than it was about presenting solutions.

A wide range of groups and agencies participated in the program, which was divided into two parts. The first, was the presentations by four of the sponsoring groups: Steve Schooler, of Porchlight, "7 Myths of Homelessness;" Megan Stratton of Interfaith Hospitality Network, "Family Homelessness Issues;" Gayle Ihlenfeld of the YWCA, "Plan to End Homelessness;" Nan Cnare of the United Way of Dane County, "Housing First Model;" and finally Operation Welcome Home proposals.

Did I learn anything new or worth repeating, well, "yes" and "no". I think the presentation by Steve Schooler of Porchlight, one of the many shelters represented in the coalition, was the most enlightening in terms of explaining the reasons why homelessness exists today. Apparently, starting back in 1955, there was a movement that argued it would be much better for all concerned if non-violent mentally ill persons were released into a residential setting rather than remaining incarcerated in institutions.

The idea picked up strength over time, and it was thought that there would be a great savings by mainstreaming these people into society. The only problem was that when the biggest influx of mentally ill patients was released in the 1970's and 1980's the savings from closing government mental hospitals were not reallocated for residential treatment.

 It seems as though they were simply released into society with nothing more than a bus ticket and directions to the nearest welfare office. Today, it is estimated that 40% to 50% of the overall homeless population suffers from some form of mental illness. The three most prevalent forms are schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, and clinical depression. War veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are a newer group. Schooler said that the majority of persons with these conditions are not generally violent.

The next largest population group comprising the homeless is people suffering from drug or alcohol dependence.

The point was made repeatedly that the biggest cause of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing in Madison and Dane County. The definition of "affordable housing" is paying no more than 30% of one's total income for housing. Madison simply doesn't have enough housing that falls into that category even for single people, and the problem is only compounded for entire families.

Some of the myths of homelessness are:
- There were no homeless people 20 years ago.
- Homeless people deserve to be homeless.
- Homeless people are panhandlers.
- Homeless people won't work.

Schooler said all these are myths sustained by inaccurate media coverage.

Several groups outlined their plans for eliminating homelessness, but said they lack the funding to achieve their goals. They also blamed the lack of treatment facilities for homeless people who are mentally ill or who abuse drugs or alcohol.

The United Way's Nan Cnare said that the first thing needed to fight homelessness is housing, which she described as a human need and not a not a want. The goal, she said, is to end homelessness, not manage it! But she gave few details or how much it would cost.

There was even a presentation by a group of former homeless individuals who are trying to help the homeless men living in Brittingham Park. The group is called "Operation Welcome Home".

One of these speakers described homelessness as a state of mind, as well as a reality. His point was that even people with a roof over their head can feel they are not at home and are still homeless. My thought was he said that you had to treat the issues of mental illness or substance abuse that followed them even after they found shelter.

It was interesting that mayoral assistant Joel Plant said that homelessness problems are not as rampant as the media portrays them to be. He went on to say that mischaracterization is the biggest problem he deals with everyday in regard to the homeless: When something bad happens with a homeless person all homeless people are labeled for that one incident.

Plant said that we should focus on bad behavior rather than the fact that someone is homeless. When asked what the mayor could support in the way of homelessness initiatives aside from police enforcement, Plant said that police response is only one answer, not a solution.

He went on to say that homelessness should not be a police issue, and that the police should only get involved when criminal behavior occurs. He said that both the mayor and the police believe that prioritizing funds to address homelessness and poverty will help address behavioral problems and curtail crime.

Lyn Greene, of Dane County Human Services, said that the main issues causing homelessness are drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, and poverty. She says that poverty is on the rise in

Dane county, and it will increase homelessness. She stated that 55% of the entire county budget is dedicated to Human Services programs including homelessness.

Police Captain Mary Schauf, who oversees downtown police coverage, said that she and her district officers are trying to break the myths about homelessness. She wants people to stop labeling others. She would rather use behavioral analysis to look at problems downtown. She said that we must break the stigma attached to homelessness. She said that one such example is that not all homeless people are panhandling, but many believe otherwise.

Pat Mooney, a former Madison school district director for homeless programs, provided truly eye-opening facts regarding the number of homeless children in the Madison schools. He said that there were 650 homeless kids in the Madison Schools and 750 in Dane County. He went on to say that three years ago there were 5,000 homeless kids in Wisconsin schools; now the number is 8,000 statewide.

During the question and answer period, it was asked whether or not Madison had a Cadillac homeless program, which serves to attract the homeless from outside the state. It was stated that 50%-60% of those being served were residents of Madison for four or more years. It was also stated that Madison is known as a compassionate community and provides help for those down on their luck.

We apparently look like a better place to find services than elsewhere in Wisconsin and beyond. Some of the homeless, it was pointed out, come from Milwaukee, Chicago, and other places not considered safe to raise a family.

Where are the solutions you might ask? As I said at the start of this post, I heard very few if any solutions and only a few suggestions. One of the problems I have with meetings like this is that there are many fine platitudes, but little of substance is offered to end homelessness and poverty!

With the myriad of causes for homelessness, shouldn't the first order of business be the proper screening of all persons in the homeless category?

Separating those with mental problems from those with substance-abuse problems, and those who are just down on their luck seems like common sense to me. Also, shouldn't we look at those who are homeless by choice and have refused help of any kind and thus have adopted homelessness as a lifestyle?

If we do that first, then we can get help to those who need help the most.

If we get a handle on how many people are in each category and why, then we will know the kind of resources we need and can calculate the cost of treatment. If indeed 40% to 50% of the homeless suffers from mental illness then shouldn't 40% to 50% of the total money appropriated be for mental health services?

I get the impression that the multitude of groups addressing the problems of homelessness are full of good intentions, but are not funded or focused on real specific problems. The question should be asked of them before further funding: What has been your success rate?

There should be enough resources -- including treatment facilities and funding-- to address each of the myriad of causes of homelessness. Until that happens success in ending poverty will escape us.

Who is the best equipped to put together a consolidated approach? I only know that government is not the answer. Government can be a part but not the controlling entity. I would like to see the private sector address the problem of homelessness.

I am encouraged that many of the members of the coalition who put together the forum are from the private sector, and many are from faith-based organizations. It is going to take a great deal of faith and hard work to get the job done, as well as a willingness for the groups to look critically at themselves and to re-invent themselves if needed.

Am I simply tilting at windmills or is there a possibility that such a solution can be found? I believe that anything is possible if everyone really wants to eradicate homelessness and poverty! What are your thoughts?