

Gates Sr. needs your help to end homelessness

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The News Tribune

02.09.08

Bill Gates Sr. recapped the work of the Sound Families Initiative, and 800 professionals at the National Conference on Ending Family Homelessness gave him a standing ovation.

It wasn't because the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation spent \$40 million on the seven-year program, which ended last year. It wasn't because it added 1,445 housing units with services for homeless people in Pierce, King and Snohomish counties. It wasn't because 1,500 families, including 2,700 children, moved out of homelessness through the program.

It was because Sound Families tied the money to a model of collaboration and accountability, then looked critically at the results.

It defined the nature of the challenge.

"Homelessness is not really the problem we need to end," Gates told the group Thursday in Seattle. "I know that sounds pretty bizarre, especially since I am talking to the National Association to End Homelessness. But we think it is a crucial insight. Homelessness is a symptom. Homelessness is part of a massive, ever-changing constellation of problems. In short, people become homeless for a reason – usually more than one reason."

That, he said, demands resources.

"The first thing we need to do is get more money into the system," Gates said. "We need more affordable housing, more resources to help people increase their income. We also need more resources for services like drug treatment programs, domestic violence counseling, child care and job training. If we expect to give people the help they deserve, we have to be willing to pay for it."

All of the Gates' money wouldn't do the job, or sustain it.

The public has to make the money a priority, and the agencies that spend it have to do so wisely. That will take cooperation that most communities haven't yet achieved.

"As we fight like hell for funding, we also need to look in the mirror," Gates told the crowd.

Amen, said three advocates who met Gates for an interview after his speech.

The Gates Foundation had offered me the opportunity to interview Gates, but I thought you would benefit if we could include some of the people most familiar with the work being done to end homelessness.

Ellie Ottey of Pierce County Housing Authority, Mike Fait of Tacoma Housing Authority and Walter Zisette, who guided two Intercommunity Housing developments in Tacoma, were delighted to have the chance. David Bley, director of the Gates Foundation's Pacific Northwest Initiative, joined us.

"We're making little steps," Ottey said. "We're learning to work together, but it's a slow slog."

Cooperation between cities, state agencies, nonprofits and county government is a work in progress. This is no place for turf concerns, the three agreed. It's no place for programs that have not demonstrated success.

"You need to know what worked and what didn't," Bley said. "What elements are missing? How do you mix and match resources?"

"We need to create an Office of Homelessness, where all the partners come together, that coordinates this," Fait said. "We need to look at who gets the money."

Agencies vetting grant requests would check with that office to verify an applicant's effectiveness. Think of the savings in that alone.

The office could lobby for affordable housing and living wage jobs, part of any community effort to end homelessness, Zisette said. It could centralize resources, from rental assistance to car repairs, to keep families from tumbling into homelessness. The cost of that runs around \$2,100 per family. That's thousands less than it costs to get a family back into housing.

Gates brought the conversation back to the consumers. Would such an office make it easier for families to get help?

He does not think of "the homeless." It's too easy to marginalize "the homeless."

He thinks of a mom fleeing with her son while her husband threw bricks.

He met her and counts her as a friend. He's working for her.

Give the man a hand.