

# Services can be delivered better at the local level

By William C. Kashatus

In 1892, William Raws, an evangelical Christian with a strong commitment to temperance reform, established the Whosoever Gospel Mission in an abandoned tavern on Germantown Avenue. It must have been a humbling experience — Raws had spent many an evening getting drunk in that bar before his conversion.

The mission quickly became an active and integrated part of life in Germantown. It was embraced, rather than ignored, by its relatively affluent neighbors who were impressed by its efforts to empower those who genuinely sought to help themselves instead of relying on the continued charity of others.

Self-discipline and personal responsibility were cultivated in the homeless and needy through Bible study and a productive work program that included caning chairs, shoe repair, broom making and rug weaving. By the 1930s, the mission was on the cutting edge of social service, a model for other industrial missions that were being established across the nation.

Today, the Whosoever Gospel Mission continues to serve the Germantown community as a homeless shelter, drug-and-alcohol recovery center and community resource network for job readiness and vocational training. Having already served well over 500,000 homeless men since its founding, the mission offers proof that established community associations and religiously affiliated organizations can often provide more effective social service than the federal welfare system.

Robert L. Woodson, president for the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise in Washington, D.C., believes that many of the regulations within the federal welfare system "actually function as disincentives" when it comes to cultivating the values of "work, savings and self-sufficiency." In so doing, they only serve to produce "a steady client base for what has become a literal 'poverty industry.'"

Woodson estimates that of the more than \$3 trillion that has been spent by the federal government on anti-poverty programs, only 30 cents

of each dollar has made it into the hands of the poor while 70 cents of each dollar has been absorbed by those who "serve" the poor. No wonder there has been a reluctance to reform the current welfare system — to do so would come at the expense of the bureaucrats who operate it. The problems go beyond financial stagnation, too.

Many of the social service programs that are currently subsidized by the federal government tend to provide little more than damage control. They address the effects of poverty instead of the sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness that are at the root of the problem. Thus, their long-term effectiveness is questionable, at best.

Meaningful welfare reform must proceed principally on the local level — in the neighborhood associations, self-help centers and church organizations that have traditionally existed within low-income communities. These are the institutions that have managed to make a constructive difference in the lives of the poor, giving them hope and a sense of self-esteem.

Often they are operated by the most inspired and altruistic reformers, those who have a firsthand knowledge of the problems of their community as well as of the resources at their disposal to address those problems. Because they have a personal stake in the outcome, local agencies are more determined to cultivate a sense of personal responsibility in the lives of those who seek help.

To be sure, the federal government can play an important role in addressing the needs of the poor. But it must seek to go beyond the current concept of "charity," which only serves to promote dependency and demean the poor. Instead, the objective should be to cultivate a sense of self-esteem and personal accountability so that the poor can help themselves. Empowering local civic and religious leaders to strengthen their communities may prove to be the most cost-effective and meaningful solution to the problem.

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