

COMMENTARY

Moeller and Balch: Help us aid the have-nots

Dick Moeller and David Balch, UNITED WAY CAPITAL AREA



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There is a gap in Central Texas.

On one side of the gap: Those who are getting ahead, building a bigger and better life for themselves every day, seizing the opportunities presented to them, building their personal version of the American Dream.

On the other side: Those with almost no opportunities. Those who want to build a safe, enriching life for themselves but are stymied by circumstance.

Having been closely attached to United Way for many years, we've been privy to some startling data about the widening gap — between the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the healthy and the ill, etc. Some examples:

- Almost one in five families with children in Travis County live below the federal poverty line.
- Only two-thirds of income-eligible children are enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).
- 170,000 people in the Austin metropolitan area cannot qualify for GED or job-training programs because of poor literacy.

We cannot "social service" our way out of these problems. We have to approach them in a new way, which is why United Way Capital Area is changing how it works to improve Central Texas. From now on, United Way Capital Area will engage more of the community around critical social issues. We will focus on creating lasting change in the region. We will identify the causes of strife, unrealized potential and suffering. Then we're going to do something about it.

After hundreds of conversations with thousands of Central Texans, along with exhaustive research conducted by the Ray Marshall Center at the University of Texas, United Way Capital Area has decided to focus initially on three key objectives:

- Providing opportunities for children to succeed in school.
- Helping people lead healthier lives.
- Giving families the knowledge and tools to become financially stable.

We know that these three issues aren't the only issues. They are, however, root causes of many other problems. If the

population is healthy, educated and financially stable, the stress on other social services down the line should plummet. We also will track and measure our success. In a year — two years, a decade, a generation — we'll be able to ask, "Are people healthier? Are they more successful? Are they more secure financially? And how do we know?"

Consider this: Some states plan how many prisons they will need to build in the future based on current third-graders' reading levels.

So then why are third-graders' reading levels low? Maybe it's because some of them come to school hungry most days. And perhaps they're hungry because their parents have barely any money to spend on food. And perhaps their parents are struggling financially because nobody has given them the tools to get a better education, find a higher-paying job, balance a checkbook, get their full tax refund and so on. And perhaps some of those parents didn't have access to proper prenatal health care. And so on.

We must make certain that everyone has educational opportunities. We must help people lead healthy lives so that they can learn and work productively. And we must make sure they have the information and tools to maintain financial stability.

Though there is a great deal of momentum around this change, United Way Capital Area can't do it alone.

So consider this a call to action. If you're an active and engaged citizen, thank you; keep it up. If you've been meaning to lend a hand to a particular issue, volunteer your time today. (United Way's volunteer program, HandsOnCentralTexas.org, is a great place to find opportunities.) If you've been a bit disconnected, it's never too late to start raising your voice. If Central Texas is going to be a beacon of hope, it's going to take all of us, offering whatever resources we can.

The good news? This is Central Texas. This is a region built on big ideas, aggressive moves and compassion for our neighbors. And it's a region that's changing: a diverse and booming population, along with a growing strain on existing services.

It's time we closed the gap. It's time we provided opportunities for people to stop merely surviving and to start thriving. It's time for us to create a shared vision for what our neighborhoods, our cities, our state can look like in five, 10, 50 years.

Central Texas is changing, and we're changing with it. We hope you'll join us.

Moeller is chairman and Balch is president of United Way Capital Area.

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