

Taking on the Challenge of Homelessness

By Mayor Ben McAdams

Salt Lake County, Utah

In a 1967 speech to a gathering of civil rights leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. asked—and then proceeded to answer—the question: Where do we go from here?

He said: “In spite of a decade of significant progress, the problem is far from solved. The deep rumbling of discontent in our cities is indicative of the fact that the plant of freedom has grown only a bud, and not yet a flower.” He was referring to progress on civil rights. But I feel some of the same sentiment, as I think about our work to reduce and prevent homelessness in our metro area and throughout the state.

Homelessness is a deeply entrenched and complex social challenge. In Utah, ten years of hard work got us to the point where we could say that we had all but resolved the issue of chronic homelessness. That is no small accomplishment and many share credit for the result. But chronic homelessness accounts for only about 10 percent of all homelessness. Today, 40 percent of our total homeless population is families with children.

When we launched the Collective Impact Committee on Homelessness in 2014, Salt Lake County assumed six key responsibilities including: guiding the development of a shared vision and strategy, building public will, advancing policy and mobilizing funding. Have we met those responsibilities? It is still a work in progress but for the most part, I think we have.

First and foremost, we wanted to ensure that everyone was working towards the same outcomes. We started with a deep dive into our homeless services system. Annual direct spending on homelessness in the county tops \$52 million. Salt Lake County distributes the largest portion. We began by mapping the entry points. How do people enter our homeless services system and why? We also studied the different agency roles and responses. One thing stood out: most people weren’t receiving services until they actually arrived at the emergency shelter door. When we saw that, preventing homelessness immediately became a desired outcome. Our committee work was consensus-based and openly discussed, where all points of view were heard. Slowly but surely, we crafted a plan that eventually received unanimous support, uniting behind 14 outcomes, including meeting basic needs of those in crisis and diverting people from emergency shelter whenever possible.

Our citizens are overwhelmingly caring and compassionate. People want to help those who are less fortunate and they don’t like to see people in their community suffer. However, building public will was both helped and hurt by the public safety crisis

that existed in the downtown area near Rio Grande Street, where the homeless shelter is located. The local business community had reached a breaking point, complicated by crime, drugs, and aggressive panhandling in the area. We put together a strategy to tackle public safety that we called “Operation Diversion.” Salt Lake City and Salt Lake County partnered in an effort to target crime, not homelessness. We identified criminals, arrested criminals and, when possible, diverted drug and alcohol abusers from the jail, into treatment facilities. My email box filled up with messages like this, from a mother: “I want to thank you for caring enough to do something about this epidemic. Our 22-year-old adopted son was one of those you arrested. He has been living on the streets which you can imagine, there are not words to express the heart ache this causes me. Please do not release him back onto the streets. I believe he will accept and follow through with treatment.”

Our success with “Operation Diversion” carried over into a partnership with the state, dubbed “Operation Rio Grande”. That effort is designed to maintain safety for all, including the homeless, until the downtown shelter closes in June 2019. At the same time, cities, the county, and the state are preparing to build three smaller homeless resource centers. The goal is to move each individual as quickly as possible out of emergency shelter and into a more stable housing environment, and to also address issues such as addiction or unemployment that may be the underlying cause of the crisis.

We’ll move beyond the large “one-size-fits-all” emergency services model, which by design is unable to offer tailored services to specific groups, such as domestic violence victims or those suffering from mental illnesses. Services must also be geared towards self-sufficiency so people can recover their own lives. The same services must be available to help people avoid a crisis and last resort options.

Through our Collective Impact process, we share goals and are mutually accountable to, and supportive of, each other. We’ve made a strategic choice to think and act differently when it comes to this challenge. We’ve backed up that choice with action. The Utah way is to put aside our differences, focus on the areas where we can agree and then direct our energy across the common ground where the wheels of progress turn more easily.