

Homelessness collaboration has potential

OUR VIEW

The new collaboration aimed at addressing homelessness in Eau Claire is welcome. Whether it will prove effective is the question.

David Minor, the president and CEO of the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce, knows this is going to be a serious challenge. He has previously spoken about the difficulties past efforts ran into and the fact that, in many cases, overlapping responsibilities, turf wars and the lack of a body tasked with just keeping everyone moving in the same direction doomed them.

What's different this time? There are a couple things. The chamber's role as a participant that doesn't directly offer services or programs for homeless individuals is significant. There's less chance that it acts to protect its specific efforts, which groups that do provide services might be tempted to do.

Organizers also pointed to the inclusion of people who have experience actually being homeless. That's more important than people might think. When you're analyzing a situation from the outside, you have to go on what you think you know. There will be blind spots. When you've been in that situation you know exactly which cracks people can fall through and probably have a fair idea of how to correct those deficiencies.

Bringing in an outside advisor for Wednesday's meeting was also a smart move. James Mathy has had some success in his efforts in Milwaukee. We hope those involved can replicate some of his approaches.

Still, there is no guarantee of significant improvement. There are, as everyone acknowledges, numerous factors that play into why people are homeless. Some are solvable with the assistance of outside groups. Others aren't.

Then there's the simple reality that this is a really, really tough problem to take on. Few cities have had undeniable success and we're not aware of any that have entirely solved the issue. The odds and experiences say Eau Claire won't, either.

The timing here, though, is one of the reasons we're cautiously optimistic. We doubt this really could have come together a year ago. Why? Last December, HSHS hospitals in the area were still open.

The leadership role the chamber took in responding to the closures of the hospitals in Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls, as well as the Prevea clinics, taught lessons. It built ties between groups that might not have had them before. The fact the region mitigated as much of the damage as it did in such a short time was remarkable.

More than that, it raised the chamber's credibility in the community in ways people hadn't thought about before. When most people think about a local chamber of commerce, they think of an organization that is by and for the business community. That's about it. Thinking of the chamber as a community leader in itself, an organization that can bring together different groups to resolve issues, isn't nearly as common.

But that's just what the chamber did. That experience sets up this new initiative and confers a level of weight to the chamber's role as problem solver than it likely had before.

We don't expect much to change in the near term. For the next several months we're likely to see this collaboration learn and begin to plant seeds for future actions. That's a smart approach since a quick, high-profile attempt and failure would inflict serious damage.

Informed, deliberate approaches are much more likely to pay off, so that's what we expect to see take shape. And it will take time for any initiatives to go from planning to implementation.

But we see this as having as good a chance as anything we've seen recently at making real progress. And that's reason for hope.

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