

Economic burden weighs heavily on area nonprofits

By MIKE HENDRICKS

The Kansas City Star

I see where our hedge fund friends are back at it, grasping millions out of thin air.

May was one of their best months ever.

Elsewhere in business news, the stock markets are on the rise. Hopes for recovery have speculators driving up the price of gasoline — and everything else.

I almost hate to spoil the party. But let us remember that things are plenty lousy out there. Millions of Americans continue to suffer and sacrifice. Indeed, even in that pocket of plenty, Johnson County, social-service agencies are struggling to keep up with growing needs.

“Every agency has funding challenges,” said Karen Wulfkuhle, who heads the umbrella group United Community Services of Johnson County.

At Wulfkuhle’s invitation, I sat in Tuesday on her organization’s eighth annual “human services summit” to get an update on how bad things are.

Enrollments for food stamps are up 25 percent from a year ago, she told an audience made up of government and agency officials. Requests for assistance from Catholic Charities, up by a like percentage.

True, the jobless rate is normally a couple of points lower in JoCo than other metro counties. Yet, because of its large population, Johnson County is home to one-fourth of area residents who’ve been put out of a job.

Naturally, that has put a strain on nonprofit and governmental agencies. Summit participants reported what they’re seeing on Post-It notes that they slapped on one wall of an Overland Park ballroom.

“Significant increase in clients reporting stress caused by economic issues,” a Johnson County Mental Health staffer wrote.

Someone from the Olathe housing board noted a growing number of out-of-work professionals seeking help for the first time.

“Increase in health-related issues,” noted an El Centro staffer, “high bills, no insurance, don’t know where to turn.”

And how are agencies meeting increased demand?

A brief report from the Family Conservancy was typical:

“Have reduced staff, cross trained, restructure, contract out — do more with less.”

It’s not going to get any easier anytime soon.

Yet experts in a panel discussion agreed that hard times could produce side benefits.

One, by promoting more cooperation among social-service agencies that, during good times, jealously defend their turf while competing for tax dollars.

And two, the downturn has made a lot of us more aware of the safety net that’s available across the metro area.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity to create even more awareness,” said Brent Stewart, president and CEO of United Way of Greater Kansas City.

Yes, and the sooner that opportunity is over, the better.

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Leaders attend Human Service Summit



News

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Ed O'Malley

Ed O'Malley returned to Johnson County recently to offer lessons on community leadership.

The former state representative from Roeland Park resigned his legislative seat two and a half years ago to become the first president and CEO of the Kansas Leadership Center in Wichita. Some of the lessons he has learned from his relatively new role were conveyed in his keynote address at the annual Human Service Summit hosted by UCS of Johnson County on June 9 at the Ritz Charles Conference Center in Overland Park.

The sessions were attended by more than 125 representatives of governmental, nonprofit and for-profit community organizations that make up the area's human services infrastructure.

"The Human Service Summit enables community leaders to gather together and discuss effective approaches to prepare for and meet the community's most critical needs," **Karen Wulfkuhle**, UCS executive director, said.

Toward that end, O'Malley related thoughts and advice about how those running the various groups should view their roles as leaders and achieve better results.

Several key lessons from his experience and findings were related as ways to accomplish that.

One step, he said, is to realize that results are the key measure of one's effectiveness as a leader. As simple or obvious as that might sound, O'Malley said he has found that community group leaders too often mistakenly believe

they are succeeding because they dedicate a lot of time and effort.

"We sleep well at night because we are engaged in a purposeful cause and have worked very hard on it," he said.

That, however, does not count for much if progress is lacking.

"Leadership is the ability to mobilize people to make progress on difficult issues," he said.

He also told those at the summit that they should view leadership as an activity, and that the key activity was "mobilizing people to difficult work."

Those at the gathering also were advised to consider altering their approach as they encounter different challenges.

"The old approach might not work. You've been successful, so when you face a new problem you tend to be confident in going back to the same way you have done things in the past," he said.

Those involved in community undertakings also need to realize that they do not have the built-in leadership advantages that exist in a business.

"You have to be mindful of the challenges of civic leadership. It is much more difficult than in business or even within your own organization," O'Malley said.

"In the business world, you have an authority structure to grease the wheels a little bit," O'Malley said.

That kind of structure does not exist when human service organizations are trying to provide community leadership, he has found.

When the leadership center first began its work, O'Malley said, the immediate challenge was to determine what the agency should do and how it should do it.

"The key question is, of all the things we could do to cultivate civic leadership to create healthier communities what should we do. We were haunted by that question and in many ways we still are," he said.

Before establishing plans and programs, O'Malley said, staff members traveled the state to talk to residents about concerns and to "identify what was happening in the civic culture of our state."

There were a few common observations and findings.

"One of the first things we heard was that people don't feel enough progress is being made on the issues they care most about," O'Malley said.

At that time, some of the most commonly mentioned issues of concern were education, health, immigration, the economy and the environment.

The next task was determining how those kinds of community concerns could be addressed effectively. O'Malley said such issues pose one particular challenge.

"The things people care most about tend to be polarizing and not conducive to solving in conventional ways. They

tend to not lead to cooperation," he said.

The usual avenue for approaching issues is through meetings of public governing bodies, but something else is needed, he said.

"It's a problem that at every civic meeting we would see the same community faces," O'Malley said. Community groups need to find ways to engage "the unusual voices as well as the usual voices."

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