

Committee gauges needs of community

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The value of collaboration cannot be underestimated; neither can the potential obstacles to collaboration be discounted. Our individual "world views" color the way we spend our days, exert our energy, prioritize our time and fiscal resources.

The United Way of Grundy County was founded in a spirit of collaboration, bringing together our community to leverage funds to the very best end for our neighbors. We are blessed with strong social service agencies in both Grundy and Will counties. However, as our counties grow and needs change, the left hand and the right hand not only need to know what the other is doing, but not falter from occasionally actually "holding hands."

Grundy County Healthy Community steering committee was formed about a year and a half ago to survey the needs of our county and subsequently rally stakeholders and residents in efforts to address those needs. Members of the steering committee include local business and government leaders and social service representatives. We all come to the table with our individual priorities--seniors, children, business, education--so arriving at the "top" needs is a tricky proposition.

On Jan. 23, the Healthy Community steering committee held the first workshop to tackle the results of the needs assessment. Herald News reporter Christina Chapman did a marvelous job capturing the day (see her summary from Jan. 26). Flip charts were flipping, white boards were filled, ideas were flying. It was invigorating. It was also difficult.

It is difficult to determine where to start, how to put a dent in needs that are almost inherent and ingrained in our community: early childhood services/child care, alcohol and substance abuse; domestic violence; transportation; youth recreation; and finally, creating awareness about existing programs already in place.

Yet positive outcomes--short and long-term outcomes--bubbled up from the exercise. We came to together, perhaps disparate in our world views but connected by our desire for a healthier community. Ownership (in the good sense: accountability and follow-up) of issues was established. Peer organizations learned from each other about potential areas of commonality and, yes, collaboration.

Interestingly, one of the results from the needs assessment survey, which was sent to 4,000 people with a 10 percent return response rate, indicated that 59 percent of the respondents felt property taxes are too high. At the workshop we discussed that conundrum: that taxes may seem high if one is not aware of tax-funded programs, like many of the social service and transportation services that make our county a great place to live.

While not all of us may use tax-funded social service agencies, all residents benefit from their missions and their good work; that is, we may not be direct recipients of their services but we derive direct benefits from a healthier, safer community. Addressing that learning curve may drive future initiatives and programming.

I have to say, a hearty "right and left hands together" BRAVO for the collaborative work of the Grundy County Healthy Community initiative.

For more information on the Grundy County needs assessment or the United Way of Grundy County, call 815-942-4430.

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