

Action in the face of significant community challenges must be rooted in inclusive and community-wide dialogue. Beginning two years ago, those of us who serve on the Madison Equal Opportunities Commission (MEOC) began hearing compelling testimony from Madison neighbors who have been most adversely affected by the downturn in the economy. As we've listened, we've deepened in our understandings of the daily challenges facing folks living under the stresses that come with unemployment and homelessness.

However, we haven't stopped there. We've recognized that if community-based solutions are to be forthcoming, we need to hear from everyone in our community, including local business leaders. It's wrong to frame this as a divisive issue, and everyone needs to have a place at the table. At the MEOC, we believe that this is the basis for the spirit of "beloved community" that Dr. King long ago envisioned, upon which our commission was founded 50 years ago, with enduring significance for today.

We are humbled by the fact that, as an equal opportunities commission—charged primarily with the duties of countering discrimination based in housing, employment or public accommodations—we have neither the authority nor the resources to get at the root causes of unemployment and homelessness by ourselves. We can't provide shelter or build affordable housing, or find someone a job. Those are tasks that lie with other governmental bodies, and other important players in the nonprofit and private sectors.

Our mission involves countering arbitrary and discriminatory practices. Sometimes that involves drafting clarifying legislation that strengthens the ability of Madison citizens to be treated fairly and equitably.

More often than not, however, the solutions don't lie with new legislation, but by simply being a force for public education and dialogue on the road to joint action as a community. We don't pretend to have all of the solutions, and so we've reached out to the leadership of groups like Downtown Madison, Inc. and the Chamber of Commerce, inviting them into our meetings. These dialogues have been invaluable.

For those in the business community who are concerned that the MEOC's efforts to play a constructive role in countering the effects of homelessness will produce unnecessary new legislation, or other adverse effects, please know that we hear you, and are proceeding thoughtfully with your concerns in mind. There's no one right way to do this, and we welcome your input.

What we can't do is to meet the concerns of our neighbors with silence. MEOC has an important role to play in the area of community education, and in encouraging joint community action on common problems, when they fall into the realm of equal opportunity. One neighbor's challenge is a challenge to us all. Working together, we believe that we can find ways to embrace the strengths that each of us brings to this

challenge, acting in the spirit of beloved community that's at the core of our community's values.