

Beginning two years ago, those of us who serve on the Madison Equal Opportunities Commission began hearing compelling testimony from Madison neighbors who have been most adversely affected by the downturn in the economy, including individuals and families who've lost their jobs and/or their homes. As we've listened, we've begun to shake off many of the pre-conceptions we may have had, and deepened in our understandings of the daily challenges facing folks living under the stresses that come with unemployment and homelessness.

Solutions won't come simply. And there are lessons to be learned in places like Dallas and Portland that have found ways to address these challenges in meaningful ways that draw on all aspects of both the public and private sectors. Framing this as a divisive issue between advocates for the poor and local business is a short-sighted and simplistic way of looking at this challenge; in fact, these are the folks who must come together if we're to going to make progress. The more we examine this issue, the clearer it becomes that any solutions must come from the entire community, bringing everyone to a common table. Such is the nature of the "beloved community" that Dr. King long ago envisioned, and upon which our commission was founded 50 years ago, with enduring significance today.

The stories that have been presented to us have been hard to hear, and are made even more compelling by the fact that they're happening right here in Madison. By and large, these stories have been told to us by proud people who are simply trying to do what's necessary to survive. All of these stories elicit our compassion and understanding, but the stories of how lack of income and an adequate place to live are adversely affecting hundreds of Madison children present an urgent call to action that simply can't be ignored.

At the same time, at the MEOC, we are humbled by the fact that, as an equal opportunities commission, we have neither the authority nor the resources to get at the root causes of unemployment and homelessness ourselves. Those are tasks that lie with other governmental bodies, and other important players in the private sector. As we've watched those efforts proceed in other venues, we're both impressed by our community's resolve, and also discouraged by what seems like the arbitrariness of the obstacles that stand in the way of solutions.

One of those arbitrary obstacles is the outdated yet widespread practice of some employers to exclude from consideration the applications of people who are currently unemployed. That flew in the face of current economic realities, and it eliminated the opportunity for individuals with decades of valuable experience to continue their inestimable contributions to our community. And so, after much research, consultation, and deliberation, we sent a proposal to the Madison Common Council that became law on December 6<sup>th</sup>, making the status of "unemployment" a protected class.

For some months to come, much of our attention will now be focused on the challenge of homelessness, and we've already begun a process that is bringing people from all sectors of the community to the table, including people who are homeless and their advocates, alongside members of the business and housing provider communities.

For people who are homeless, we've learned that there are similarly arbitrary barriers facing them as connected to those experiencing joblessness, and we're convinced that many of these barriers are rooted in the same kinds of prejudices and misconceptions that accompany discrimination based on race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and other currently recognized protected class categories. As we've listened to the testimony of our neighbors, it's hard to deny that stigma and pre-judgement are not a daily reality for many folks who are homeless. And the fact of these prejudicial attitudes sometimes overlap with the three areas in the MEOC seeks to prevent arbitrary discrimination: public accommodations, employment, and housing.

People who are homeless and their advocates first approached us during a controversy about the disposal by the police of the possessions of people camped out near the Capitol Square. We were presented with the question: would someone who rents or owns a home be treated similarly, having their possessions taken away, with no notice and no due process option for remedying any underlying concern? The answer was no.

In a city still struggling to provide public restrooms for people, another issue that arose was whether a restaurant or other shop or other public accommodations could let most people use their restrooms, while prohibiting someone who appeared to be homeless. And if the only reason someone is turned down is linked to their status of homelessness, is that, in fact, discrimination?

If someone is otherwise able to do their job, is a status of homelessness a legitimate reason for being turned down for employment?

Then there are the Catch-22's that people who are temporarily homeless encounter in their search for permanent housing. Just as someone who's seeking a job is inhibited by a current status of unemployment, it seems to be a given that someone who's seeking a decent affordable place to live is inhibited in many significant ways by their current status of homelessness, as they seek to make application for a home. Are there commonsensical ways that these problems can be addressed?

We don't pretend to have all of the answers. However, as members of the citizen-led Madison Equal Opportunities Commission, we do believe that we have an important role to play in advancing the dialogue around possible solutions. We're committed to continuing to pursue what we believe has been a thoughtful, thorough,

and inclusive process. By way of example: in the last month alone, that's included hearing from both advocates for homeless children in the Madison schools, and a very helpful and compassionate dialogue with Downtown Madison, Inc. Executive Director Susan Schmitz.

In addition to passing and enforcing civil right legislation, MEOC also 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.

And in addition to the status of "homelessness," there are a disproportionate number of people who are members of other protected classes who are homeless, based on their racial or cultural background, or disability, for example. And so this is clearly an area where the MEOC belongs.

For those in the business community or elsewhere who are concerned that this process will produce unnecessary new legislation, or other adverse effects, please know that we share those concerns. Our solution is to invite you into our dialogue in months to come, to express your concerns, and to join in common cause in countering homelessness wherever possible. There's no one right way to do this, and we welcome your input.

Working together, there's much we can do build a community where fundamental problems like homelessness and unemployment give way to the more engaging challenges of building a Madison community where a high quality of life is an equal opportunity for all of our citizens. That's what a beloved community is all about.