

# **Solving Our Problems Together**

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We believe at Community Development Initiatives that vigorous public discussion of community problems is a key path to progress. That is why we are enthusiastic about today's opportunity to launch a new column for the Standard Times with a focus on stimulating thought and discussion about the social problems facing San Angelo and the Concho Valley. Pathways to Progress will follow a general format. The column will identify a critical problem, provide basic facts, and introduce options or pathways to move toward solutions.

The problems Pathways deals with will often draw from those that seem most intractable to many citizens. They will often concern the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the youth, the unemployed, and the minority members of the community. Many people count these as stubborn and unsolvable problems because they believe them to be rooted in the unresponsive or irresponsible behavior of various subcultures that are code-termed as lower class, underclass, disadvantaged, criminal, gang-like, or just plain un-American.

Of course, there are individuals who behave irresponsibly and sometimes they suffer from serious problems like illness, unemployment, inadequate housing, or hunger as a result. Life experience, however, tells most of us – if we think about it – that there is a serious mismatch between irresponsible behavior at the individual level and social problems at the community level. Simply put, there are plenty of individuals behaving irresponsibly who suffer little or nothing of the problems supposedly connected to that behavior. In fact, there seems to be no “subculture” that monopolizes irresponsible conduct, and numerous responsibly behaving persons suffer from illness, unemployment, hunger, and other serious problems. The idea that some subculture -- or set of them -- promotes enough irresponsible behavior to account for serious and prevalent social problems in the community is a bankrupt and sure way to fail at making progress.

What makes sense as a way to approach serious social problems is to acknowledge that institutions allow certain individuals and groups to “fall-through-the-cracks” in various ways as they go about providing services to the community. For example, a government during an economic downturn may seek to avoid raising any revenue while it aggressively reduces expenditures by cutting funds for schools, health and mental health programs, housing assistance, and many other services provided through community institutions. At Community Development Initiatives, we think of those individuals and groups whose legitimate needs will “fall-through-the-cracks” as vulnerable populations. Vulnerable populations are simply those most at risk of exclusion from the system as the community's institutions go about their daily operations. Oftentimes, they are the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the youth, the unemployed, and the minority members of the community.

Some embarrassing facts about our local community that give meaning to the notion of a vulnerable population involve children's nutrition. The 2010 U.S. Census reports that San Angelo is home to more than 93,000 people of whom more than 23 percent are children under

age eighteen. More than 61 percent of San Angelo's public school children are eligible to receive free or reduced school meals, and half of the Tom Green County residents receiving food stamps as of July this year are children. These data points tell us that there are 10,000 or more vulnerable children in the community needing help with food and nutrition.

A grand coalition of more than 60 churches and community-based organizations are aware of these facts. Consequently, the organizations came together to feed children during the summer weeks when school-provided meals are unavailable. Having just completed its second summer of service, the San Angelo/Tom Green County Hunger Initiative organized volunteers to provide more than 26,000 meals to children and their parents or caregivers this past summer, a 65 percent increase in meals compared to the summer of 2010.

The experience of the Hunger Initiative over these past years teaches key lessons about solving serious social problems. One lesson, for example, is the spirit of charity and generosity the Initiative brings to the table. Few communities, no matter how much money they invest, are able to move meaningful on solving serious problems without mobilizing the social capital embedded in the good spirits of the people. This is necessary to get meaningful action off the ground, and the Hunger Initiative with the people of the city and county deserve admiration for bringing the better Angels to the fore.

The Hunger Initiative also demonstrates in a big way that progress toward solving serious social problems are seldom achieved by single programs bottled up in single institutions or agencies. What the Initiative has accomplished required more than the generosity of individual and family volunteers. Indeed, it calls for an array of community organizations representing businesses, churches, government, non-profits, and schools to reach beyond mere cooperation to actual sharing of staff time and talent, facilities, and other valuable resources. The Hunger Initiative teaches that action toward solving our most serious problems demands that institutions and agencies stretch past their immediate daily concerns to form and participate in coalitions that multiply capacities to act on shared community needs and interests.

A final, and most challenging, lesson from the local Hunger Initiative is not what the Initiative has accomplished these past years, magnificent as those achievements are. The lesson's goal, however, is set in the Initiative's acknowledgment that local hunger does not result from a lack of resources. "The issue," they say, "is the distribution system – we need to get the resources we have to those who need them." The adopted long-range goal of the Initiative is "food security" for the community.

The Texas Hunger Initiative – the parent of the local effort based at Baylor University – defines food security as "ensuring that every individual... has access to three healthy meals a day, seven days a week." Clearly, this worthy goal would solve hunger problems and contribute substantially to progress on other community social problems as well. However, it also moves far past stopgap charity campaigns or other temporary aid fixes and speaks to permanent changes in the food production and distribution system of the community and beyond.

So far, the local Hunger Initiative has taken a small step toward system change by nurturing support for the start of a neighborhood garden effort. In the future, we will learn as a community if that approach can grow across the city and county. We will learn much more if the local Initiative can team up with its Texas Hunger Initiative partners to institutionalize change in the

food economy that generates a positive trend in what are now embarrassing facts about hunger in San Angelo, Tom Green County, and in Texas.