

OUR VIEW

The private answer to homeless problem

Forum explored an alternative to local government-led effort

The Herald-Tribune Hot Topics Forum this week was framed around this question: Could Sarasota County's public and private sectors learn from Tallahassee and its efforts to curb adult homelessness?

Short answer: Yes.

Forum panelists included three leaders of the Kearney Center — a private-sector initiative that provides temporary shelter, services and links to housing — and two representatives of Tallahassee government. Their discussions were informed and informative, and well received by a capacity audience in the Selby Auditorium on the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee campus. (The event can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSnVH3UDB_U. The forum will also be broadcast on Manatee Educational Television. Go to metvweb.com for times and channels.)

Based on the audience's reactions, and some comments from Sarasota County officials and local philanthropic leaders who met with the center's leaders, some lessons have already been learned.

Perhaps the most important: There is an alternative to the government-led effort that was unsuccessfully attempted in Sarasota County.

The Kearney Center was conceived and largely funded by the private sector; its greatest benefactor has been Richard Kearney, a Tallahassee resident who has used his wealth and community connections to prevent homelessness and mitigate its impacts.

Kearney's intellect, presence, compassion, passion and financial commitment are such that many people who heard him speak during the forum are asking: Who is our Richard Kearney? (Or who are our Richard Kearneys?)

Sarasota County has the private-sector wealth to fund a program of this magnitude. But Kearney did more than write checks: He provided leadership and attended countless meetings as part of a process that developed and implemented plans, sought community buy-in and made adjustments in response to lessons learned

in Tallahassee.

Kearney noted in the forum that he and his associates did not visit Sarasota County to serve as consultants or offer a model for replication. Their purpose, he said, was to share experiences and serve as a resource — if the local private sector considers whether to attempt to create a comprehensive, seamless system that seeks to provide homeless adults with immediate aid and housing as quickly as possible.

The context of that offer leads us, for the moment, to focus on one of the many useful points made by the panelists: The early discussions and meetings should be devoted to whether the creation and funding of a shelter-to-services-to-housing system is a good idea that the private sector is willing to initiate and lead — with governments as partners. Panelist Gil Ziffer, a Tallahassee city commissioner who supports the center, urged communities to agree to concepts and plans before considering the location of facilities. Good advice.

These are among the a number of other valuable takeaways:

- Private-sector funding and support from institutions and individuals in the community made it easier for elected officials to embrace the plan and contribute public funds. In short, it was something the community wanted, not a project that government was foisting upon the community.

- The Kearney Center is a physically attractive complex on a spacious site in Tallahassee, but away from its downtown. The campus-like setting enabled two valuable developments to occur: 1. The center attracted some 40 nonprofit and government agencies to provide services at the site, which encourages collaboration, offers convenience to the adults in need of services and reduces the need for homeless people to go from one location to another. 2. The consolidations led to the closing of facilities that were inadequate and were contributing to complaints from residential neighborhoods and businesses.

Challenges remain in Tallahassee. There is no panacea. But the Kearney Center experience shows that, if there is a will, there is a way to strive for progress.