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Understanding Need for Non Profits

In 1966 at an appearance before the Brevard County Board of Commissioners, I was asked what changes I would recommend regarding the management of non profits. I told the Commissioners that my first step would be to reduce overhead costs so that more funds could be directed to serving those in need. In an editorial in Florida Today on May 27, 2017, columnist John Bryon said essentially the same thing.

I agree with much of what Mr. Byron said in his column. Support of non profits is shrinking. United Way dollars are declining, and government funding is being cut. Mr. Byron also stated that non profits are not reacting well to change. Again I agree, but with certain qualifiers.

Charity funding is decreasing for three reasons. First, needs assessments are being ignored. The 2014 Senior Needs Assessment conducted by the Helping Seniors Advocacy Council was the first county-wide survey done in Brevard since 1996. The 2014 study showed essentially the same needs as the 1996 survey, with the top two senior concerns being information and financial support.

A second reason for decreased non profit funding is inefficient management. Based on an analysis of 990 IRS tax documents and published annual reports, some county non profits show an overhead rate as high as 30-50%. Mr. Byron talks about challenging existing business models of non profits to increase operational efficiency, and this is needed. For instance, a good business model does not include 90% dependence on government and grant support.

I speak from practical experience having been in this business for 24 years. A non profit budget should have varied revenue sources, and spending should not exceed income. Years ago in a discussion with the director of a major non profit in Brevard, I asked what would happen if they did not get federal funding for a certain program. The answer was, "We just won't do it." In my book that is not a satisfactory answer.

That brings us to the third cause of dwindling non profit support, which is lack of awareness. Donors are often poorly informed about the use to which their support is channeled. They may question operational efficiencies or why a non profit exists. Yes, it has become easy to establish a non profit. The ones that will survive are those that provide viable services and make the public aware of

their capability. Our task is to pinpoint need, determine which non profits can meet that need, and educate the public.

In 1996 the Brevard Commissioners voted to support Community Based Organizations with \$500,000 in annual funding, which was later increased to one million dollars. Recently they voted to phase out these dollars over a five-year period to help fund road repair. Depending on which source you contact, there are about 2,300 funded county jobs. Perhaps a meaningful reduction in county staff could be made to fund the road repairs instead of challenging programs for seniors and other vulnerable populations.

In fact, many of our non profit organizations are vitally needed, so funding should be developed to pay for them. Local leadership starting at the commissioner level needs to be better informed about the actual effects of budget cuts. A five-minute discussion from beleaguered non profits, unsupported by any significant input from Brevard County Housing and Human Services staff, does not constitute meaningful discussion on need.

Helping Seniors exists to inform citizens about available services and connect seniors to needed resources. We do not compete with other non profits or take away funding from anyone. However, with the current state of available funding, more noses will get bloody unless positive actions are taken to work together. Non profit funding, like government funding, should be open and above board. Overhead costs should be kept as low as possible. Cost effectiveness can be achieved but it will require oversight. A good place to start would be the development of an effective Aging Plan for Brevard County.

Joe Steckler is the President of Helping Seniors of Brevard, a non profit organization designed to advocate, educate, and fundraise on behalf of Brevard's senior citizens. Feel free to contact us at: info@helpingseniorsofbrevard.org or calling: 321-473-7770



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