

February 17, 2009

Local Health

By Terry Burns, UVMC President/CEO

In last month's column, I shared the challenges we're facing nationally, in our State, and here locally with the changing economy. I believe long-term challenges remain, irrespective of what the "Stimulus Bill" eventually contains. Whether the Stimulus contains increased funding for existing programs or new funding for new programs, or Pork, Beef, or Cheese, eventually the current challenges will return—unless we rethink the way we work together.

Along this line, I want to share with you a little more about what is happening with our Mustard Seed coalition and discuss ways that a collaborative approach may be useful to others in our community. For those who haven't read a prior column, the Mustard Seed coalition is a small group of community leaders who came together to discuss how to lessen the local impact of our current State budget crisis for the benefit of our community.

We concluded that we must all win if any of us is going to win. We believe it is destructive to our community when various parties work the political system singularly for their advantage. I've shared previously that if hospitals win and physicians lose, our community loses. If health care wins at the expense of education, our community loses again.

What evolved at Mustard Seed is a process where local leaders from public health, community health, hospitals, public safety, education and businesses take time to learn about each others' organizations: how we work (funding sources and expenditures), what our missions are, and who we serve. We then use that information to identify "overlaps" – a term we're using to define opportunities for consolidation, sharing or elimination.

Right now, we're working to understand how services in a particular area are provided across all of our organizations. We've discovered barriers—real and perceived—to doing the right thing. These are well intended but misused or misconstrued regulations which prevent system redesign. We must find ways to either work within the system or change the system so we can work efficiently and effectively together to care for those with special needs.

Recently, we spent time with city councilman Benj Thomas, discussing our community's youth. It is possible that, from this conversation, a youth-focused Mustard Seed-like group may be created.

A few weeks ago, I met with Freddy Rundlet, Executive Director of Consolidated Tribal Health. Freddy described a Mustard Seed-like project he was part of in Massachusetts. There, many health-connected organizations got together and created a matrix of which populations they served with what services ("overlaps"). They figured out ways to become more efficient and effective! Their success is an example of what we can accomplish here. I'm excited at the prospect of including our Tribal Health partners in the Mustard Seed coalition.

In looking at Mendocino County, I've observed that we have a really strong group of non-profit organizations, many of whom struggle serving various segments of community. I would like to suggest that the type of work we're doing at Mustard Seed could be helpful to our community charities, too.

The overhead costs of silos we've identified in the health care, mental health, public safety and education—just where these four areas intersect—is overwhelming! As I speak with many people involved non-profit charity efforts, they describe virtually the same type of issues we're talking about at our Mustard Seed meetings: overlapping services; common board members; overhead costs for fund raising, computer systems, accounting and administration.

It would be great if a number of our charities would get together and begin a search for opportunities to work together differently. I'm not looking for a giant social reformation. Rather, if charities could reduce costs and thereby increase services by 10, 20 or even 50%, it would benefit all involved. This isn't about winning and losing—it's about organizations with closely aligned purposes using their energies better. With the competition for staff, resources, volunteer time, and money growing more scarce, a Mustard Seed approach may be helpful.

Change starts with leadership where it exists—at the top, middle and bottom of every organization. I know a number of community leaders who would be excited to help in a process like this if charity organizations were interested. Call me at 707.463.7360. I would appreciate speaking in more detail about any opportunity you might sense.