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CATALYST FOR CHANGE; CIVIC, BUSINESS LEADERS NEED TO SPUR NONPROFITS TO POOL RESOURCES

Michael Durkin

I often talk about engaging nonprofits in "unnatural acts." A reality exists in our local community and our state: There is an overload of nonprofits, many of whom are too small to have the impact that their worthy missions call for. More and more nonprofits are competing for limited resources. I believe it's time for business and civic leaders to lead in the charitable community, not only as board members and good stewards of some of these 15,746 nonprofits, but as conduits for challenging nonprofits to look at the whole picture.

One area where leadership and challenge is required is in helping the nonprofit sector engage in "unnatural acts" - things such as mergers, collaborations and strategic partnerships. In the majority of nonprofits, these things won't happen on their own. Civic leadership needs to be a catalyst.

In our community, we already have some great examples: Urban Peak and The Spot consummated their relationship and are now leading in finding unique solutions and new ways of doing the best things for kids in the inner city.

Nigel Alexander, owner of Multi Link, with support from Inflow and others, has offered Colorado Community Voice Mail and is creating voice mail boxes for homeless individuals and families. This will be a lifeline for many people who do not want to be alone.

The Denver Public Schools Foundation has created "Lights on After School," a new collaboration bringing together a variety of resources, including some of these nearly 16,000 nonprofits, to provide after-school programs that will support good outcomes for DPS kids.

And another that I am particularly proud of - for the past six months, Mile High United Way, in response to Mayor (John) Hickenlooper's request and in conjunction with the Denver Rescue Mission, has housed upward of 70 homeless men every night in our organization's board meeting room. Why did we do this? For one simple reason: The urgency and the enormity of the homelessness problem is too big to not find a way to do our part.

Let me take a moment and focus on homelessness because it shows the challenge, and the huge opportunity, for us to pool our various community resources together for people most in need and least able to care for themselves. You have seen the statistics. In Denver County alone, on any given night, nearly 10,000 people are estimated to be homeless - nearly 40 percent of these are children and families. Denver estimated the cost of all services for these people to be in excess of \$70 million last year.

For many of these individuals, the difference between a safe place to live and being homeless is a very thin line - one paycheck, one job, one person who jumps in and shows they care. One thing we've learned at United Way is that families living along this thin line have the continuing challenge of building a base of assets to help them move ahead. I would venture that middle- and upper-income residents who are able to move ahead do so by the accumulation of assets, like the purchase of a home, to build a secure investment for the future stability of their family.

These facts have caused United Way's board of trustees to launch our "Assets for Family Success" strategy and work with a different set of partners, outside the usual United Way mix, to help families move to financial independence and security. As part of this strategy, we have partnered with numerous organizations to help low-income families expand their asset base and achieve first-time homeownership or post-high school education for themselves and their family members.

Last fall, United Way partnered with the Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce to identify chamber-member businesses that would promote matched savings

programs to their employees and first-time savings accounts to individuals. **A**

striking 25 percent of the minority population is "unbanked" with no primary banking relationship, and falls prey to predatory lenders and

financial scams. Our goal is to use our relationship with the chamber, and a federal treasury grant, to connect more than 200 low-income,

unbanked people with banks and financial institutions. The key here is for employers and chamber members to promote this sort of program to their employees and give them the information they need to get connected with services that promote savings and the building of an asset base. Wells Fargo and other area financial institutions have been major proponents and partners in this strategy.

In the city of Lakewood, the housing authority is working to offer low-income residents the chance to build savings for the purchase of a home of their own. The city provides economic counseling and support for these families, who are often new to the idea of saving. United Way brings the matching funds - federal and private - so that savers can have their funds matched on a four-to-one basis. Ten people are in this program. We anticipate that one of the first families to move to home ownership will benefit from a Habitat for Humanity house.

A national effort is under way with the Jim Casey Foundation to help foster children end the cycle of homelessness and hopelessness in their lives. The stark reality is that 25 percent of foster children become homeless within one year after their emancipation at age 18. For the five-county metro area, that would be 125 youths annually. That number may not seem big, but it is important to mention for two reasons. First, we can wrap our arms around them and really understand the issues they face. Second, we need to overcome the attitude that "it's only 125 youths." If we can play a role in changing the lives of these people, we can have a generational impact.

We will do this with the support of the Casey foundation and the creation of its "Opportunity Passport," a mix of services that gives foster children a mentor for career exploration and job shadowing, an individual development account - which is a matched savings account for college and beyond - and a debit card, with economic counseling and support, to show them the way to financial literacy and independence.

What we are looking for now is concerned business leaders to do two things: One, be mentors and sponsors of these young people, and two, find ways to encourage the organizations that they serve as board members and supporters to align with programs like these.

Our economy is stabilizing and may be starting to turn the corner. This is welcomed good news, but for many of the people I talk about, some of whom might be your neighbors and employees, current and former, the economic upturn hasn't hit yet. They are all too often at the tail end of the good news.

Whether it is foster kids, the homeless folks staying at United Way or at the Denver Rescue Mission, or a family just starting out at Warren Village, people in need in our community won't succeed if we are only focused on the fund-raising success of a favorite charity, or because we have committed to buying a table at the next fund-raising dinner. We certainly have plenty of these every year, and the problems persist.

The change will come when you and I put our collective effort into leading not only our good nonprofit - one of the more than 15,000 - but when we put a stake in the ground and challenge our favorite nonprofit to engage in "unnatural acts" that lead to new ways of working together to help those least able to turn the corner on their own.

NOTES:

Michael Durkin is president of Mile High United Way. He gave the above speech on Aug. 17 at the annual State of the City luncheon sponsored by the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce. To contact Durkin or for more information on Assets for Family Success, visit www.unitedwaydenver.org
<www.unitedwaydenver.org> .