

GUEST OPINION: Catholic Charities responds to recent coverage

By LARRY LAKES

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There is a community nearby of about 500 children and adults — from newborns to high school students; young adults to seniors, diverse in race; veterans and people with disabilities.

It's a community, like most. There are people with jobs and people who lost jobs, some without work or without income for a long time.

As with other communities, the people are proud. They are parents working for a better life for their children and adults overcoming personal issues, moving forward with their lives. Unique to these people is the time spent in this community — from a few days to a few months before moving on.

This community could be anywhere in our town. It is the community of families and adults who happen to be homeless and who are helped by programs coordinated by Catholic Charities.

Many believe the people we serve deserve the same dignity and respect as others. Many reading this column know people in economic trouble, have children who must move back home, or have friends with family members in similar crises. What causes some of us to look at a young woman or man, working at low wage, as a valued member of the community, and after being laid off and losing a place to live, begin to group them differently: "the homeless" or "those people"?

I write to clarify information in recent articles and letters covering topics relating to people who happen to be homeless.

The community we serve is active, diverse and, unfortunately, growing. Fortunately, it is well served by the dedicated employees and volunteers at Catholic Charities, as well as other local agencies committed to work with this growing community. Funding cuts, which we all must share, cannot cause our shelters to close unless the broader community allows this to happen.

Catholic Charities programs consistently receive high marks for our service to people and for our stewardship of the neighborhoods in which we serve. We have worked with neighborhood groups for almost 20 years and will continue to do so. We welcome input and constructive suggestions from all.

We are a vendor for the community and receive funding to do our work. We also raise money from caring people who want to help the families we serve. We need even more help from those able to donate.

With the closing of the Brookwood Shelter last year, no one was sent to the streets. We moved families and single adults to other shelters. One shelter was approved to increase capacity by the city of Santa Rosa.

We do this work well. We go beyond our basic job requirements and do more in every community we serve. We will continue to do this work because it is our calling,



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and this community has reached out to us and asked us to do it.

No one can predict how much need there will be, but we believe it will be larger. In December 2009, the number of people employed in the Santa Rosa/Petaluma area was the same number employed in December 1998 — an 11 year period with no net growth in employment — yet the labor force grew by more than 11,000. The economic downturn wiped out years of job growth.

Catholic Charities will continue to work on behalf of the people in our community who are most in need.

Finally, we applaud the efforts of all in local governments, the greater community, steadfast supporters who donate time and resources and the people in our neighborhoods who stand with us and help us assist people in need. Working together, we will continue to find solutions to any sporadic issues that arise, just as we have for many years.

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