

Statement of Helene Nelson in Support of 2014 Dane County RES-575

Health & Human Needs Committee and Public Protection & Judiciary Committees – 3/17/15

Thank-you for the chance to speak in support of Resolution 575, Access to Opportunities. I am speaking as an individual citizen and as a lay member of Orchard Ridge United Church of Christ.

Our church is part of the Southwest Partnership along with Dane County Joining Forces for Families and Common Wealth Development. The Partnership formed to address poverty and homelessness in pocketed areas in southwest Madison, like Russett Road and Theresa/Hammersley areas a mile or so from the church's largely white middle class neighborhood.

As a church, we entered into this Partnership with the notion that if we are called to love our neighbors, it might help to know more of them better. If we are called to serve our neighbors, it might help to ask them their opinions of what would actually be supportive and helpful.

So our Partnership asked over a hundred of our neighbors about their concerns, priorities and suggested solutions. We heard loud and clear from our neighbors that what they wanted was employment to support themselves and their families. So we decided to focus on employment opportunities. We're learning a lot about how church volunteers, professional human services people, businesses and others can do a better job opening doors and supporting our neighbors who want to work, but who struggle with multiple challenges. We're having some practical success helping people get jobs. We're also building caring relationships across race and class, and deeper understanding of challenges people face in our community.

Everyone here is well aware that Dane County is home to some of the widest racial disparities between black and white residents that exist in our country. The 2013 Race to Equity report reported on extreme gaps in outcomes across a wide range of well-being measures -- including employment and income, school success, health, child welfare and the criminal justice systems.

Many people are here today because of their interest in reducing incarceration of African Americans and reducing racial disparities in the criminal justice system generally. The tragic shooting of an unarmed African American teenager has again highlighted the urgency of attention to these issues. Thank you for considering what you can do to address the glaring racial disparities in the criminal justice system and jail.

In addition to addressing criminal justice disparities, we need to focus on disparities in education, employment and other areas. Our Partnership work is focused on supporting access to employment for the most challenged families. Ladders out of poverty are fundamental to creating the kind of community where everyone can thrive. And it will take all of us - all levels of government, public and private organizations, schools, faith communities and individuals - to

make those opportunities real for very poor families in our community, especially people of color, who have been treated unfairly for a very long time.

This is where Resolution 575 comes in. Dane County Executive Parisi has identified some valuable and practical steps to increase family economic success and racial equity in Dane County. These steps may seem small, but they are the kinds of “nuts and bolts” needed to build a better community with opportunity for all. I appreciate the work of the County Executive and his aide Tamara Grigsby, and look forward to supporting it.

Some of you know that about twenty years ago I was Director of Dane County Human Services. So I appreciate that Lynn Green, the current Director, is offering to reallocate funding from other areas to new initiatives to fight poverty and promote racial equity. Thus this resolution has no net fiscal effect while it invests money in new endeavors – a transitional jobs program and two efforts to help people get or recover drivers’ licenses.

The \$15,000 for a transitional jobs program is specifically a program called STEP we developed this past year, funded by a one-time City grant. The money goes to pay the unemployed participants – with SWP staff and volunteers doing the leg work to help them. This program helps people who are not competitive immediately for regular employment but who are motivated and can likely achieve permanent jobs with lots of support, some work experience and references. We’ve had great success with this fledgling effort – about 2/3 of the participants found permanent work after a short term transitional job, as Marianne Morton of Commonwealth Development will tell you in more detail. By the county contributing funds, we will be able to help people from nearby Allied Drive and Williamsburg Way neighborhoods, who live outside the City.

We also support the programs to help people get or recover drivers’ licenses. About a third of the neighbors we’ve helped in southwest Madison tell us that lack of a drivers’ license and/or car is a significant barrier to their success in getting and keeping a job – the most common barrier to employment they cite. The measures recommended in Resolution 575 can be part of the answer to this problem for some of our neighbors.

I believe that our approach of meeting people where they are as people, respecting their choices and challenges, and building relationships among people, can make a huge difference – not just for the folks seeking jobs but for middle class people whose hearts and minds are changed as we learn about the challenges and inequities our neighbors face. We are building opportunity and we are building relationships in southwest Madison, one person and family at a time. Please support Res. 575 to build on these efforts and successes. Thank you.