

# The Dialogue on Homelessness Continues

By Donna Asif, Chair of the ad hoc Homelessness Committee of CNI

The first Dialogue on Homelessness – Nurturing Our Capacity for Change, took place on November 3<sup>rd</sup> and gathered over 175 neighbors, packing the large meeting room of the downtown Public Library. The need for an overflow venue had been anticipated, and the group divided with some good folks walking up the block to a similarly prepared space within the Guild Hall of Grace Episcopal Church, where facilitators and refreshments awaited.

Participants on that beautiful fall day well represented the broad spectrum of our community needed for this process to succeed, i.e. persons who have experienced homelessness, service providers, police, academicians, students, business and property owners, residents, media, policy makers and others. The age range of those engaged was from six to ninety two, plus a sleeping infant. It was a truly inclusive, welcoming environment which extended an embrace of mutual good will and mutual need. There was a Spanish/English translator, and two American Sign Language interpreters

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## *Homelessness. Everyones concern!*

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Courage was apparent that day, as many had come in spite of varied fears; fears of the gathering giving rise to high uncontrolled emotion, fears of becoming the focus of blame or shame, fears of the unknown and unfamiliar in new encounters and uncharted processes, fears of being turned to as experts while standing within the fog of perplexity.

From where was this courage drawn to overcome such fears: Apparently from a powerful thirst for hope, belief that there is reason to hope, and the ripeness for contribution.

Indeed there was trust given and it was rewarded by three intense hours of guided, respectful, real communication and interaction between neighbors in search of one another as working partners toward understanding and ultimate change on the issues of homelessness in our city. The day's process, using the values of Appreciative Inquiry, was quick paced and energizing, spiraling upward from a positive, optimistic, fertile base of what works. By asking the question: *If you had up to three wishes to create positive change in the homelessness situation in Madison, what would those wishes be?* hundreds of ideas emerged that were shared in small groups seeking to identify common ground or themes. Themes growing out of the two meeting venues were: Knowledge and Information Sharing, Health and Well-being, Respect, Shelter and Housing, Public Awareness/Attitude/Cultural Change, Prevention of Homelessness, Access to Resources/Building Capacity, Day Needs/Gaps in Safety Net. The themes were posted around the rooms and participants were asked to **stand by the theme** that most attracted them. The resulting groups were asked: *What are your ideas for creating positive change around this Theme?* Again, bountiful ideas resulted. Two weeks later on November 17<sup>th</sup>, the second Dialogue on Homelessness took off from this point to form research work groups and commit to meet again before the next library Saturday event on December 15<sup>th</sup>. And so it goes on...

We will continue to challenge ourselves by examining our assumptions and biases, developing awareness of the words we use and the attitudes we carry and project. We will exercise our capacities for deep listening and refine our skills as agents of inspiration and change within our community. As amazing as it may be, valuable consequences of these engagements are already noticed both within the meetings and out on the streets. It will never be too late to join in, and past participation is not required in order to gain full benefit. December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2-4pm at the downtown Public Library is our next event. Seeing you then is what I'm wishing for.

In this initiative we recognize our neighbors as being all those who share the streets with us. After all, to know our neighbor we must leave our private space and step out onto the street. It is up to us as to what

happens then. Will we lift our eyes to meet the other's, say 'how are you?', and care about the answer, value that we share a destiny of time and place, and seek ways to improve all our lives by engaging in the dialogues and deeds that can nurture our capacity for change? Will we be worthy of our self respect in the role of neighbor?

Gratitude abounds for all the generous contributions to these dialogues from the Madison Library, Grace Episcopal Church, wonderful refreshments from community bakers, Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and others. Eight dedicated, talented facilitators worked countless hours, all pro bono, in preparation, during and ongoing to serve this process with wisdom and conviction. We owe great thanks for this privileged opportunity to face ourselves and each other with the desire to know, and the will to make good use of that knowledge.

Here is a question for you: *If you had up to three wishes to create positive change in the homelessness situation in Madison, what would those wishes be?*

Donna would love to know: [dcassociated@gmail.com](mailto:dcassociated@gmail.com) (608)251-6610

By the way, our committee has accepted the award of \$11,960.00, offered by the Madison Neighborhood Grant Program of the City's Department of Planning and Development. There will be more to tell about this in the February CNI Newsletter.