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Future DeLand program aims to give homeless ID, dignity

By Jen Horton BEACON STAFF WRITER posted Nov 10, 2009 - 8:39:22am

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Note: The Beacon hosted a round-table interview with those involved in the IDignity program so that many sides of the story could be told at once. In attendance were County Council Member Andy Kelly, Coalition for the Homeless Executive Director Tony Schefstad, Coalition for the Homeless Secretary Missy Kelly, Executive Director of Dignity Michael Dippy, DeLand Co-coordinator for Dignity Patti Rausch and Co-coordinator Carolyn Wilson. The session was conversational, with many ideas and passions shining through as one great desire to benefit the entire community.



BEACON PHOTO/JENNIFER HORTON Working to bring IDignity to DeLand — Clockwise from left are Patti Rausch, Michael Dippy, Missy Kelly, Tony Schefstad and Carolyn Wilson, who attended a round-table discussion recently at The Beacon. Along with County Council Member Andy Kelly, they are working to bring the Dignity program to West Volusia. It helps the homeless and poor get identification so they can qualify for help.

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The woman walked back and forth along West New York Avenue. She pushed a shopping cart filled with all of her belongings. A hospital wristband was on her right arm.

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Her ex-boyfriend had been released from jail that day. He had gone to jail for hurting her, and she was afraid of him. She was trying to get a restraining order against her ex.

But she couldn't. The hospital band around her wrist was her only identification. If you can't prove who you are, you can't get a protective order. This woman isn't alone. The poor and homeless face a crushing cycle that can push them further down the path of poverty, and lack of identification is a key problem.

A coalition of volunteers is working on the problem. They plan to bring a program called IDignity to West Volusia.

Michael Dippy, executive director of IDignity in Orlando, said the program brings four governmental agencies together, and with the help of volunteer advocates, provides identification to those who need it.

Paid employees from Social Security, the Department of Motor Vehicles, the Health Department and the Department of Veterans Affairs gather in one place to make IDignity work.

The volunteers help participants fill out forms and track down proof of who they are. Because the agency representatives are right there, together, the homeless and helpless are able to get real identification documents immediately.

"What we provide is a physical address, a credit card, and advocates," Dippy said. "If you need school records to prove who you are, we have someone on the phone for four hours calling high schools, grade schools."

Dippy said IDignity is not about avoiding governmental rules for identification documents.

"I'm not a proponent for making the system easier," he said. "I am a proponent of providing advocates who can help people navigate the system."

DeLandite Patti Rausch said IDignity makes it possible for volunteers to make a real difference in the lives of the extremely poor and homeless.



"The need seems so overwhelming," Rausch said. "The beauty of the IDignity program is that it's real. It accomplishes something right now. I can't meet all of your needs. I can't feed you, clothe you, house you, but what I can do is I can help provide ID."

Carolyn Wilson volunteered with Rausch at a recent Orlando IDignity event.

Wilson said, "And let's talk about the dignity in IDignity... At intake, you are one human, face to face with another human."

It's dignified, and while it is free for clients, it's not a handout, but a hand up.

Tony Schefstad and Andy Kelly both talked about the plight of the poor and homeless: Without ID, they can't get jobs, apply for welfare or Social Security, or sign a lease.

"The homeless lose their bags, lose their belongings," Schefstad said. "Homeless providers have always been concerned about identification."

Schefstad said IDignity saves taxpayers money.

"If someone is arrested for loitering or trespassing because he doesn't have proper identification, it takes \$795 to book him," he said. "It costs \$25 for an identification card."

But even \$25 is too much money when you're homeless, like the woman pacing, tightened, on West New York Avenue.

Kelly left the meeting about IDignity to try to help the woman. When he returned, he explained her problem, and why she kept the hospital bracelet on her wrist; it is the only way she could prove who she was.

Likewise, newly released prisoners sometimes wear their inmate badges around their necks, because it's all the ID they have.

Carolyn Wilson explained navigating governmental bureaucracy is often overwhelming for the people who need government services the most.

"When normal, average people see homeless, their immediate reaction is 'Get a job!'" Wilson said. "They do not realize the horrors some of these people have been through. We think they are able to reason like we do. But they can't."

The need for identification is so great that people start to line up at the Orlando IDignity location at 3 a.m., waiting for the program to open.

Of the 250 needy who line up monthly in Orlando, 245 will walk away with some form of identification that day.

Local leaders are hopeful DeLand will have as much success, and they challenged the community and its officials to get involved.

"I want to challenge all city officials to volunteer at IDignity," Rausch said.

First Presbyterian Church of DeLand, 724 N. Woodland Blvd., will host the first West Volusia IDignity event in late March.

To make a contribution or to volunteer for IDignity, call the Volusia/Flagler Coalition for the Homeless at 386-258-1855 or visit www.vfch.org.

For more information about IDignity, visit IDignity.org.

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