

Spring 2014 Future Leaders' Town Hall  
Remarks by Richard N. Morrison  
April 16, 2014

As you might know, every year the Arizona Town Hall picks a topic to research and discuss. Part of the reason we 'discuss'... is so that people hear the reality of fact, versus fiction, and can come to their own conclusions. Part of reason we 'come together'... is to raise awareness about the issue, and start a conversation that we hope has traction and moves forward. A conversation that starts the energy around determining what's right, what's wrong, what's working, what's not... and where do we head in the future. The future is where you come in.

The topic for this year's Town Hall is Arizona's Vulnerable Populations. The background report which has been prepared by Arizona State University addresses unseen vulnerability in six critical areas: education, employment, finances, health, family dynamics and access to resources. Across all of these issues the primary objective of our discussion will be to identify systemic barriers and explore responses to those barriers that have potential to increase individual and community resilience. The report examines both governmental and non-governmental responses and looks beyond service delivery to structural change and public policy options.

The Town Hall grew out of a question – Who is Responsible for Arizona's Vulnerable Population? One must ask what is meant by the word 'vulnerable'. I know what the word means in general: *capable or susceptible of being wounded or hurt* is one definition, and another is *open to assault, difficult to defend*.

What do you think of when you hear the word 'vulnerable'?

I suspect when most of us think of Arizona's vulnerable population, we think of people who are homeless, jobless, uninsured, children in poverty, elderly without families, the hungry, vets on the streets. We think of various descriptors that refer to life circumstances we find less than desirable or even worse, perhaps life threatening.

Interestingly, the ASU report attempts to focus on people who are not poor, explaining that the poor are already in crisis. The report asks us to see how vulnerable other people are too – people who may not yet be poor. But certainly the poor are vulnerable.

We know that globally, over half of the world's population lives with income under \$2/day. By comparison, our vulnerable here in the United States are probably considered rich. But in Western civilization we have religious and moral standards that suggest that to one degree or another, all of us should be concerned about the welfare of our neighbors.

Neighbors? So who is my neighbor? Who is YOUR neighbor? Who do we include in the category of neighbor? And who do we EXCLUDE – either unintentionally – or not?

Some might say "Well I get that everyone is my neighbor." And that's true, but there are some demographics that perhaps will bring the vulnerable snapshot a little closer to home. I am going to give special emphasis to the statistics available concerning the young people in our state because in thinking about neighbors, you may know some people whose stories are subsumed within the statistical

information. And frankly, it is at least possible that you are most concerned about your own age group and its vulnerability.

The US Census Bureau and Kid's Count Data Center shares that 27% (2012) of people aged 18 or younger live in poverty in our state. Arizona has the 5<sup>th</sup> highest percentage of children living in poverty in the country; the 6<sup>th</sup> highest percentage of individuals overall. Among young adults in Arizona aged 18 to 24 (181,000 people), 2012 data indicates that 30% of you are living in poverty, with incomes below the federal poverty level. ( family of 4 – 2 adults / 2 children : \$23, 283.00 )

In Arizona, it is estimated that on any given night, some 600 youth under 18 are on their own and homeless in Maricopa County. Arizona schools (statewide) reported that there were 31,683 students homeless over a 1 year period. Remember as well that statistics tend to be misleading – many young people 'couch surf' – they live at friend's houses – most of these people are never represented by statistics. Half of all homeless youth cite they were abandoned or ran away from home. Many had been physically abused and over half share they have experienced emotional or verbal abuse. I would say, these 'neighbors' of yours, of mine, are vulnerable.

Did you know that Arizona tied as the worst state in the country when it comes to child hunger, and the 5<sup>th</sup> worst for overall food insecurity. 1 in 4 children, 1 in 5 adults, 1 in 7 seniors struggle with hunger in this state. Almost half of the officially 'hungry' are under the age of 18. I would say, these 'neighbors' of yours, of mine, are vulnerable.

Broad estimates are that about one percent of the total U.S. population, or between 2 and 3 million people, exhibit some type of self-abusive behavior. Here's the shocker: in the U.S., it's estimated that one in every 200 females between the ages of 13 and 19 years old, cut themselves on a regular basis, and up to 70 percent of teen girls have tried it. And the statistics tell us these numbers are on the rise. Our 'neighbors' are vulnerable indeed.

Currently: we have approximately 14,000 kids in foster care today in the state of Arizona (AZ Town Hall report 2014 Vulnerable Populations). Kids who have been removed from their homes due to things like abuse, neglect, abandonment or exposure to things like substance abuse – drugs, alcohol. 70% of those in foster so called 'care'... are in the system for 2 years. It's a scary and confusing time, no matter how old you are. And... It is the exact time when you need a loving home the most, when you need stability the most, when you need someone to talk to the most, but maybe more important... someone you trust to listen to you the most. And as I'm sure you're aware, once you're 18 to 20 - depending on the state – you're cast out of the system, whether you have support around you or not. So it's a tough road. In 2011, over 1200 kids aged 16 and older exited foster care in Arizona... to what? You have to wonder. (Children's Action Alliance / National Kids Count data)

Binge alcohol use remains high in our state – some 47,000 kids aged 12-17 engaged in the practice as defined by drinking five or more drinks at the same time or within a couple of hours of each other on at least 1 day. Among 18 – 25 year olds in Arizona, that number rises, to 271,000. (Children's Action Alliance / National Kids count data)

Let's consider the use of illicit drugs OTHER THAN marijuana in Arizona – 26,000 kids have reported using cocaine, crack, hallucinogens, inhalants or prescription drugs in a non-medical kind of way. 60,000 young adults aged 18 – 25 reported the same. These stats answer the question, have you used an illicit drug other than marijuana in the last month. In terms of how we compare to parallel demographics in

the country, youth numbers are about the same, but the 18 – 25 year old age bracket in Arizona ranks a percentage point higher than the national average.

When you consider suicide among young adults aged 20 to 24 in Arizona, while numbers are not as high as in the mid-1990s, rates among young adults have been on the rise again since 2000. If you broaden the age criteria, the American College Health Association shares that the suicide rate among young adults ages 15 to 24 has tripled since the 1950s. Suicide is currently the 2<sup>nd</sup> most common cause of death among college students. That bears repeating – the 2<sup>nd</sup> most common cause of death among college students.

The same report shared that Arizona State University estimates that 11% of its students have considered suicide. Not to mention the students who have actually tried and succeeded throughout the country, and the growing trend of suicide clusters. Young men seem to be especially vulnerable in these statistics. Twice as many young men than women of the same age commit suicide between the ages of 20 -24. And if you're 17 to 19 – suicide is claiming nearly five times the number of young men. Are your neighbors at risk? Do these men and women define vulnerable? I would say so.

In terms of Arizona's population at large, consider all the other topics we hear debated at the state legislature and beyond. While we have examples all around us of social policies intended to acknowledge the plight of the poor, the poor continue to exist, the poor continue to be our most vulnerable, and the numbers tell us far too many people continue to live a life that hurts, harms and goes against what we believe as a good and moral people.

All this is to say, while we can talk about the homeless, jobless, uninsured, the elderly without families, the hungry, the children, youth and young adults of this state, our 'neighbors' are indeed vulnerable and indeed in need of community around them.

The question is, how do we help, who is responsible, and how do we move forward?

How should we respond as a state, as a people, through our various public and private associations, and that requires consideration of both a legal approach to the question—one that examines existing public programs authorized and indeed required by statutory authority—as well as a personal, moral approach to responsibility for change.

I believe in the fundamental dignity of each person, or at least in the potential for the same. However, each person is born with a tendency to self-regarding behavior. Therefore, reform is not about how many others must change, or even about how at least some others must change. In order to be enthusiastic about working for the common good, each of us must change, at least a little. Each of us must respond, at least a little. On June 10, 2008, David Brooks, of the New York Times wrote a column about Abraham Lincoln's greatness consisting, in part, of his willingness to look inward. Brooks wrote, "The central illusion of modern politics is that if only people as virtuous as 'us' had power, then things would be better. Candidates get elected by telling people what they want to hear, leading them by using the sugar of their own fantasies." I know this sounds preachy, but I honestly believe each of us must look at ourselves in the mirror and be willing to hold ourselves accountable for our wrong-headed notions, inappropriate actions, and selfish choices. First and foremost, we need to concern ourselves with our own virtue as the fundamental basis of what can become a collective, public response.

I am interested in the Common Good because it gets at another dimension of the base question, the one that deals with the effect of institutional, political and economic structures in society and whether they serve everyone appropriately. Indeed, this focus has been adopted by ASU's research report. In general, examples of the common good include things like an accessible and affordable public health care system, an effective system of public safety and security, peace among the nations of the world, a just legal and political system, an unpolluted natural environment, and a flourishing economic system. Because such systems, institutions, and environments have such a powerful impact on the well-being of members of a society, it is no surprise that virtually every social problem in one way or another is linked to how well these systems and institutions are functioning."

Is government the answer? You could ask, does everyone get access to the goods and services provided by government? But in asking that question, you are still looking for the government to be a direct service provider. Some of us seem to favor the virtual elimination of government for all purposes except national defense. But if the government is not seen as solution, then who? Are we each willing to step up? To get out of our own lives even if for only a season, and sacrifice part of self for the whole of someone else? Does it take a village? Does it take an individual? Or both?

I am not afraid to ask you, in the spirit of community, in the spirit of the common good, in the spirit of a moral response of shared interest and action, what are YOU WILLING to do? What will you give of yourself so that another has an easier day tomorrow than today? Whether its nonprofit participation, blog and post creation, serving on boards and agencies, speaking out for authentic passion, fierce grassroots advocacy, civil disobedience, collaboration in shared beliefs, or running for office, WE need YOUR voice and imprint. More important, the homeless vet, the hungry child, the lonely student, you fill in the blank.... THEY need your voice. They need your ear. They need your unbridled energy for change.

So now is your opportunity to discuss the unseen vulnerability in the six critical areas identified in this year's Town Hall report: education, employment, finances, health, family dynamics, and access to resources. Remember, across all of these issues the primary objective of our discussion is to identify systemic barriers and explore responses to those barriers that have potential to increase individual and community resilience.

I look forward to hearing your ideas.

<http://www.kidscount.org>

<http://www.azfoodbanks.org/index.php/hunger/index/#a1>

[http://www.tumbleweed.org/az\\_homeless\\_youth.php](http://www.tumbleweed.org/az_homeless_youth.php)

<http://unitedfoodbank.org/aboutus/hungerfacts/hungerstats/>

<http://www.mental-health-matters.com/topics/cutting--self-harm/924-self-mutiliation>

[http://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/\\_i/i-104.pdf](http://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/_i/i-104.pdf)

<http://youthtruthusa.com/cutting-self-mutilation/>

<http://www.teenhelp.com/teen-health/cutting-stats-treatment.html>

[http://www.aask-az.org/help\\_a\\_child/foster\\_care/about\\_foster\\_care.php](http://www.aask-az.org/help_a_child/foster_care/about_foster_care.php)  
<http://www.azspc.org/about.html>

<http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/41-illicit-drug-use-other-than-marijuana-by-age-group?loc=4&loct=2#detailed/2/any/true/857,105,118,104,19/30,31/14410,318> (used many of the links found at this site)

<http://www.azdhs.gov/plan/report/im/im/im04/3/3-keyfindings.pdf>

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