

Redefine goals to eliminate hunger and improve lives

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WACO—Hunger-fighting ministries should not allow lesser goals, such as distributing a prescribed amount of food, to substitute for truly worthy goals of eliminating hunger and helping families emerge from poverty, speakers told participants at a Baylor University conference.

A Fort Worth-based charity saw its work transformed when it shifted from serving mass numbers to adopting as its mission “ending poverty one family at a time,” Heather Reynolds, former president and chief executive officer of Catholic Charities Fort Worth, told participants at the Together at the Table Hunger and Poverty Summit.



“Invest in what works, and quit investing in what doesn’t work,” Heather Reynolds urged participants at the Together at the Table Hunger and Poverty Summit at Baylor University. (Photo / Ken Camp)

“The status quo is not enough. If we are serious about the eradication of poverty, we need to treat the root causes and not the symptoms,” said Reynolds, who recently accepted a position as managing director of the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities at the University of Notre Dame. “Invest in what works, and quit investing in what doesn’t work.”

Discouraged by seeing “repeat customers” who could not escape the poverty cycle, leaders of Catholic Charities Fort Worth decided to “shake the model up,” Reynolds told participants at the summit, sponsored by Baylor University’s Texas Hunger Initiative.

Her agency began focusing on long-term, in-depth case management with working poor families to help them “live up to their God-given potential,” she explained. Catholic Charities Fort Worth piloted a new approach to client-focused case management built on relationships, designed to create “a customized path to a bigger, better future,” she said.

“Throw away preconceived notions of one-size-fits-all case management,” Reynolds stressed.

After one year, full-time employment increased by more than a fourth, she said. After two years, participants’ earnings increased by a third, she reported.

‘Be strategic’

The Fort Worth charity also piloted a “Stay the Course” program to encourage clients to advance their education at community colleges. The on-campus case management program involved weekly check-ins and bimonthly face-to-face meetings, and it required measurable progress on action steps every 21 days.

Nearly half (48.9 percent) of clients who participated were still enrolled at

community college after six semesters, compared to less than one-fourth (23.8 percent) in a control group who did not receive case management services, Reynolds reported.

More than one in five (22.3 percent) completed an associate's degree, compared to only 5.7 percent in the control group. Most significantly, among female students in the program, 31.5 percent earned their degree, compared to less than 1 percent in the control group.

"Commit for the long haul, and be strategic. Learn from your mistakes," Reynolds advised other non-profits focused on hunger and poverty. "Believe in people's bigger, brighter future. Ending poverty is possible."

Don't reach goals by ignoring hard-to-reach people

Hunger-fighting organizations can be guilty of meeting goals without making a significant impact on complex problems, Eileen Hyde, director of strategic initiatives at the Walmart Foundation, told summit participants.

While numerical goals are important, she suggested focusing on who is being served and which geographic areas or groups of people are underserved. If the objective becomes meeting a certain metric, the temptation is to reach that number the easiest way, rather than working among hard-to-reach groups of people, she noted.

"We need to be sure we are not incentivizing the failure to serve certain communities by becoming so goal-driven," Hyde said.

In funding grants, foundations evaluate whether applicants have been intentional about designing programs "from the human perspective" and considering "equity and inclusion, both demographically and geographically," she said.

Hyde, who previously worked with Feeding America, emphasized the importance of non-profit organizations, government agencies and private-sector businesses in serving society.

“Each sector and space has a role to play,” she said, pointing to opportunities for collaboration and partnerships.

From the perspective of a corporate-sponsored philanthropic agency, Hyde expressed the desire for honest feedback from grant applicants.

She recommended service providers ask:

- What is working, and what is not working?
- What problem are you trying to solve?
- What is your strategy?
- What are your unique capabilities?