

Newark Think Tank focuses on poverty



Hannah Sparling, hsparring@newarkadvocate.com 6:34 a.m. EDT August 14, 2014



(Photo: Michael Lehmkuhle/The Advocate)

NEWARK – Calling all oppressed: The unemployed, or seemingly unemployable. Those struggling to pay rent, buy food or keep gas in the car.

The newly formed Newark Think Tank is seeking experts on poverty — those experiencing it — to try to solve it. The think tank had its third meeting Saturday, and the fourth is scheduled for 11:30 a.m. Sept. 6 at the Licking County Library.

At least for now, the meetings are for people experiencing some type of poverty or joblessness, said Lesha Farias, group facilitator. Too often, focus groups center around the haves trying to help the have-nots; the goal of the think tank is to work with those who are struggling rather than for them, Farias said.

"We're giving them a seat at the table and a voice to find out what's going on in our community and what we can do about it," she said. It's "allowing people that usually don't have a voice, who are not the decision makers, to have a voice — to advocate for change so things can get better."

For now, the think tank is focusing on three main issues: increasing access to stable jobs with living wages, increasing affordable access to mental-health services and ending discrimination against people with felony convictions.

Donald Lee is well-versed in the struggle that comes with having a criminal record. The 58-year-old Newark man has several convictions on his record — for drugs and theft, but mainly centering around addiction, he said — and it's been difficult to find work.

Lee was last in prison in 1999, he said. He's been clean for 10-plus years and is going to school to become a chemical-dependency counselor, but still, potential employers talk about whether they can "take a chance" hiring him, he said.

Lee has moved on from his past and is a different man, he said, but it's tough to shake a record.

"I would like to believe I'm mostly through all that," he said, adding that the true test will be when he tries to find work after his graduation in about a year and a half. "You know, I'm a 58-year-old black man with a criminal history, and there are some jobs I'm sure my past has disqualified before, no matter how much time I've led a different lifestyle."

Lee was at the latest think-tank meeting, and he was impressed by what he saw. His dream is to help people coming off a prison sentence have an easier time than he did re-acclimating. The think tank is as good a place as any to start, Lee said.

"I'm really, really excited about working with them," he said. "I can only see it growing. The vision is clear and the message is solid. ... We'd like to see people have another chance, and I think the think tank is a good vehicle for that, if we all pull together."

The initial idea for the think tank came, at least in part, from Farias' work with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Nationally, the society is taking a turn toward finding people who are in poverty and — rather than just helping with bills or supplying some groceries — finding why the poverty exists and tackling the issue at its source.

It's about solving the problem rather than treating the symptoms, Farias said.

"That's where the idea of the Newark Think Tank was born," she said. "Why isn't there affordable housing? Why are so many people going to food pantries? ... We can help you keep your apartment maybe for one month, but that doesn't solve the issue."

The think tank has a grant through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Farias couldn't disclose the amount, but it's enough to hire a community organizer to work in Newark, Columbus and Lancaster for a year, she said. That community organizer will start September, then the group has a year to get itself together before it can apply to extend the grant five years.

Using the grant, the think tank will form an official nonprofit, and 75 percent of the board members will be people experiencing poverty, Farias said.

"The exciting part is giving voice to the voiceless," she said. "It doesn't happen very often, and we have so much power that we don't even know that we have, because it's never been organized."

It won't be easy, Farias admits, and it will require an abundance of endurance.

"Because we're in it for the long haul," she said. "It doesn't change overnight."

hsparling@newarkadvocate.com

740-328-8822

Twitter: @hksparling

Get involved

The next meeting of the Newark Think Tank is at 11:30 a.m. Sept. 6 at the main branch of the Licking County Library. For now, the meetings are for people struggling with poverty or joblessness.

To RSVP, call Lesha Farias at 740-334-2152.

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