

Social Services & Social Risks

The other night I was ranting to friends about the shredding of the “safety net” for many thousands of neighbors here in our county, and my impression that most citizens and public officials alike, though appalled, are feeling helpless and even passive in the face of that atrocity. Where was the outrage? Where the determined resistance?

One friend heard me out, agreeing I think with the basic sentiment, and then observed in his thoughtful way that it might be time to stop using that mischievous Reagan-era term when referring to the essential public services that alone can hold a democratic society together. The safety net image suggests a trapeze artist who will need the net momentarily if skill fails her, but normally makes no use of it at all.

Real life, however, is not a ten-minute spectacle. It lasts a long time. It’s full of opportunities but also fraught with stumbling-blocks. Nobody gets through it without help from many other people. Sometimes that help is literally indispensable – to health, the “pursuit of happiness,” physical survival itself. So where self-help and family can’t do the job, it’s a responsibility of societies and governments to guarantee the essential services (education, food, shelter, health care, recreational opportunity, fire and police protection) to everyone as needed, regardless of ability to pay. Other services may be left to philanthropy or the market. But the basic social services are neither charity nor luxury; they are a must, and they should be of uniformly high quality and availability for all.

Here’s what’s been getting my goat. Since 1971 when I moved here, California and the country as a whole have tolerated the steady erosion of basic economic and social rights and services through budget cuts, union-busting, knee-jerk incarceration and relentless privatization. Real “national security,” I believe, has declined accordingly.

In Santa Cruz County, however, we’ve gone against that current. Thanks to the skillful mobilization of public and foundation monies, and to the indefatigable efforts and generosity of thousands of county residents – among them public officials and numerous

poorly paid non-governmental organization staffers -- we've constructed an amazing array of effective local solutions to social problems the whole country faces.

To highlight just a few of those, we're miles ahead of most places in the practice of restorative justice, early childhood education, health insurance for kids, food, health care and legal services for the poor and the elderly. We meet many needs of low-income families, victims of domestic violence, people living with AIDS and breast cancer, substance abusers, at-risk youth, the terminally ill. These community achievements, together with many others on the social, cultural and environmental protection fronts, are as precious to me as the ocean, the redwoods and the garden-perfect climate.

Today, however, most of them are in danger of elimination. That's because the economy's down, and because so many Americans – ever ready to shell out for a stadium, a moonshot or a war – won't pay what it takes to make life better and safer for one another. Then too the short-sighted minority who currently call the shots in Sacramento are ready and willing, it seems, to wipe out the Santa Cruz County and statewide social service sectors altogether if they possibly can.

Are we really going to sit still for that? Say goodbye to the fruits of the best efforts of the best among us over four decades? If so, what about those whose miseries will deepen? If not, shouldn't we be meeting right now, as community, to figure out how we're going to reaffirm and reinforce our unique local vision of the humane civil society?