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MY VIEW

Nurturing fellow citizens — and our community’s well-being

By Joseph Jordan-Berenis Sep 21, 2019

As the executive director of the Interfaith Community Shelter in Santa Fe, I agree with the majority of the views expressed in *The New Mexican’s* Our View (“Putting people to work — it’s great for Santa Fe,” Sept. 13). Kudos to the city and to Life Link for this proposed initiative of putting people experiencing homelessness to work on the midtown campus that was formerly home to the College of Santa Fe.

It has been my strong belief that if the shelter program is going to contribute to employment of our “guests” — the name that we call the people whom we house — the shelter itself should be the number one employer. This is true of us now and in the past. Currently, Interfaith Community Shelter employs six former guests. We have employed as many as 10. Our guests earn from Santa Fe’s living wage up to \$18 per hour.

But it is very important for the public to recognize that more is at stake than a job opportunity. Many of the behaviors that contribute to a person's becoming homeless are resistant to change. To help people experiencing homelessness meet the demands of employment requires a huge investment in a person. This is precisely the investment the Interfaith Community Shelter makes in our guests.

Enabling people experiencing homelessness to go back to work is a laudable goal — but it comes with a caveat that they can only go back to work to the extent that they are capable.

We know from experience that success takes giving people a lot of chances to keep them from failing and to boost them to try again if they do. Remember, the conditions that lead to homelessness frequently include severe trauma and mental illness that the person did not cause and could not prevent. Together these two dominate the calamity of homelessness.

We are committed to seeing our guests thrive again. But we also know that the conditions that many employers need to have satisfied when they offer a person a job are not conditions that a homeless or formerly homeless person can meet without a considerable amount of support. Foremost among those is housing, coupled with navigation services — someone to pay attention to the person's emotional well-being. Housing and navigation are two issues our community must address, and keep on addressing. We applaud this step as a community to come up with workable solutions to the issues of homelessness in Santa Fe. But we must caution against approaching it oversimplistically.

Employment is only one link in a networked chain. More times than not, we've experienced that a formerly homeless employee — with support from numerous agencies and individuals working together — can live a stable, successful and productive life once again.

The lesson we've learned is one we practice every day. It takes the proverbial "village" if we are going to help our fellow citizens regain what they have lost.

Joseph Jordan-Berenis is the executive director of the Interfaith Community Shelter in Santa Fe.