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Ron Kaye: Holiday philanthropy is vital in time of cutbacks

by Ron Kaye

Charity begins at home -- and for Southern California communities that was never more important than it is today, when government is cutting back sharply on providing services and funding for those in need, while poverty is soaring amid enduring affluence nearby.

That was my take-away from an extraordinary event last week at Valley Presbyterian Hospital where more than 100 nonprofit service providers met with major Los Angeles-area funders, including the Weingart Foundation and California Community Foundation and experts in managing and operating charities.

It was timed for Thanksgiving and the start of the season of giving, to be sure. But more importantly, it marked a critical step, long overdue, to place the San Fernando Valley's philanthropic identity high on the civic agenda. It serves as a call to action for communities throughout the Los Angeles County region.

Most of all, it was a recognition of the dramatic demographic changes that have transformed the Valley from being America's quintessential suburb - the nation's largest overwhelmingly middle class (and white) enclave - into what is now America's quintessential urban core where the divide between rich and poor is deepening and middle class opportunity shrinking.

The contrast between rich and poor is stark, according to data culled from a 2011 study called "A Portrait of California."

Residents of communities like Panorama City and Arleta have shorter life expectancies, much lower incomes, and much higher rates of diabetes. One-third to half of adults lack high school diplomas, and a third as many have college degrees than communities like Woodland Hills.

On "average," the Valley remains comparatively affluent, but as Bill Allen, head of the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp. and former head of the Valley Economic Alliance, noted:

"This valley is made of distinctly different communities. There is significant wealth along the foothills of this community. But there are significant challenges with poverty along the Valley floor, particularly in the Northeast Valley. ... Participation in the labor force is critical for both physical and psychological health. Losing a job undermines well-being, erodes self-esteem and can chip away at our very identity."

That was not news to participants in the conference Hiding in Plain Sight: Engaging Philanthropy With San Fernando Valley Nonprofits, an event organized by Valley Council of Governments head Robert Scott, Valley Economic Alliance leader Ron Wood, Valley Community Foundation head Peter McCarty, and Valley Nonprofit Resources Chairman Thomas Backer, among others.

But it was a call to begin to define a strategy to boost the Valley's share of dollars from foundations and individual donors, to get those with skill and experience in the nonprofit sector to work together and finally to execute the planning for the benefit of those in need of health care, jobs, education, housing, food and other basic necessities.

"Part of the purpose of this conference is to look at what kind of support we can provide for philanthropy in the Valley," said Backer, who moderated the event. "It's not inevitable. In order for it to happen we all have to work together."

Longtime Valley community leader and philanthropist David Fleming recalled how he and his wife, Jean, both grew up poor, and how the wealth they have attained is going to charities.

"It's all going to those in need," he said. "We remember what it was like to be needy."

"I hope this is something more and more people will think about. We're hoping that the number of people who do this will grow over time. We have a long way to go. We have a lot of people in the San Fernando Valley who need the help of charity. And to get that help we're going to have to work hard far into the future to make sure the Valley just like the rest of Los Angeles is the recipient of funds."

For Fleming, Scott and so many others who have worked so long to strengthen the Valley's identity politically, economically and culturally, the conference represented a shift in a new direction that was necessary in no small part by the realities on the street level.

Government has been crippled by gridlock and runaway spending at a time of dramatic changes when unemployment and under-employment are high. We can complain all we want about the situation, or we can begin to share our wealth if we have it, or give our time and energy to help others.

It is, after all, the season of giving.

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