A Growing Reason for the Season of Giving

By Federal Glover

During the holiday season, the newspaper and TV usually start doing "aw" stories. The type of stories that causes a reader to respond with an "aw," as in "Aw, isn't that cute," or "Aw, that brought a tear to my eye," or "Aw, what an inspirational story."

A new report by the non-partisan think-tank Brookings Institute entitled "Two Steps Back," says that for the first time, more and more poor people are living in the suburbs than in the cities. This shouldn't be a big surprise for residents of East County. More homeless are finding their way here. The affordable housing is drawing more housing voucher recipients.

When large numbers of people move here, you can expect them to represent the entire spectrum of our economic strata. Besides those who can afford million-dollar homes, we also get our share of the working poor.

The poor have always been here in East County among the working poor: the homeless, farm workers and those working at jobs paying low-wages. Before our growth in population, you couldn't see them. They lived in their cars and makeshift shanties along the river, hidden in the fields. They were: out of sight, out of mind. But now -- there are too many to ignore.

Economic conditions and policies of the last few years have caused more people to slip out of the lower-middle class and into poverty. Ominously for the vast number of Americans in the middle class, the other income group that grew was the uber rich. In other words, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

Traditionally, the poor have been concentrated in our large cities surrounded by middle and upper-income suburbs. However, since 1999 when the number of poor was equally divided between cities and suburbs, the suburban poor have grown to outnumber their urban peers by 2005, the period examined by the Brookings study.

Another report from the U.S. Census had similar conclusions because overall, there are simply more people who fall in the poor category. There was an increase in overall poverty -- from 11.3 percent of all Americans in 2000, a 26-year low, to 12.5 percent in 2003. In the last year alone, 1.3 million people fell below the poverty line, bringing the total to 35.9 million.

The growing numbers of poor in the suburbs mirrors the general population shift as suburbs continue to grow while cities are losing population.

The Brookings study said that America's suburbs are becoming more diverse racially and economically. "There's poverty really everywhere in metropolitan areas because there are low-wage jobs everywhere," said researcher Alan Berube.

This was brought home to me last Thanksgiving when my staff and I distributed 500 turkeys to District 5 agencies that serve the poor. Even with the generosity of the local business that paid for the turkeys, the following day there was a story about the Salvation Army needing hundreds of turkeys to feed the people coming to that charity for a Thanksgiving meal or assistance. No matter what we do, it never seems to be enough.

As daunting as the task of helping the plight of the poor might seem, that doesn't discourage most people from offering help. Local charities like the Salvation Army, Brentwood's Community Board, Loaves and Fishes and the numerous East County faith-based groups that dispense food and assistance are always challenged by the growing number of people asking for help during this holiday season. Toys for Tots, for instance, don't have enough gifts for the kids this Christmas season.

For too many, there is a fine line between a roof over our heads and being out in the streets or one paycheck away from going to a soup kitchen.

But it warms my heart when our local residents offer this assistance to the poor and indigent. East County responds without holding back: from the fraternal groups raising funds, the Scouts collecting coats or blankets, to the elementary school kids collecting pennies, I've found that East County's people are generous and giving of their time and money.

In many cases, East County is more generous than wealthier parts of the county. Maybe that's because many of us still remember what it is like to miss a meal, to suffer through the cold dampness, or go without gifts this Christmas season.

As they say in the old folk song: "There but for fortune, go you or I."

The researchers found that "public and private efforts that give growing suburban poor populations access to economically integrated neighborhoods and in-work supports could enhance economic security and mobility for a significant number of Americans."

The new suburban poor seek the same thing everybody else seeks when they move here: a safe neighborhood, better schools, and a place to call home.

Yet, there are those who heap scorn upon the newcomers and look upon them as "outsiders" and "those people."

It reminds me of another family who came to a town. They were poor strangers. They knocked on many doors but the townspeople turned their backs on them.

Merry Christmas.

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