

# Glover: From the nation of 'me' to the nation of 'we'

By Federal Glover

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Guest Columnist

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"WE'RE AT WAR HERE," said the woman. "We may not be in Iraq, carrying a rifle and wearing uniforms, but we're at war — right here in East County."

The speaker was Anita Marquez, who represented the social service agency Center for Human Development at a forum I sponsored recently at Los Medanos College under the title of "State of the Safety Net."

Marquez, who works out of Antioch, was trying to impress on the audience that the problems facing the less fortunate, the homeless, the jobless, the hungry and the children and families teetering on the edge of insolvency and in danger of losing their homes are just as important and deserve as much attention as the thousands of Iraqis who may, or may not, want a U.S.-style democracy rammed down their throats. Marquez, who speaks from the heart, drew a round of applause.

A year ago, California's unemployment rate was 6.1 percent. Since then, jobs have been hemorrhaging in the construction, finance and retail industries so that last week, the January unemployment rate went to double digits to 10.1 percent.

On top of that, hundreds of our neighbors have been losing their homes and our financial institutions are shaky enough that credit lines have virtually stopped.

Those government and nonprofit agencies making up the Safety Net and who attended my forum noted that their funding is drying up just as the demand for their aid is increasing.

Social workers are seeing the "new poor" coming into their offices. These are people who used to be middle class but because of a job loss, ballooning mortgage or growing debt are applying for assistance for the first time. It just goes to show how delicate the balance is between the haves and the have-nots. The difference is sometimes just a paycheck. The "new poor" never expected to be asking for financial, medical or food aid but now they have no other choice.

East County appears to be in the middle of this maelstrom. Each month 16,000 people come to the county's Social Service offices seeking financial, medical, food assistance. Of the new applicants, East County residents make up the majority.

Last November, when the Housing Authority opened up their waiting list for its Housing Voucher program, 40,000 families applied for the 350 open slots.

The county cut \$90 million from our budget during the current fiscal year. In the next few months, we will be asked to cut another \$56 million out of our \$1.2 billion general-fund budget for the following year.

The morose economy has seen a decline in property values, and we've seen local retailers sold or closed because people are hedging their bets and not shopping. Most of the money the supervisors have control over comes from the dwindling property and sales taxes.

There are some sectors who would rather see government go away. It is ironic that these same critics look toward government for a solution.

Besides individuals, we see big corporations lining up for assistance. In some instances, these are the very same institutions who sought deregulation so that they could conduct business without any oversight, the same businesses that got us into this recession by outsourcing jobs and removing the standards that regulate credit and lending.

Now they come with open hand. The federal government under President Barack Obama cannot afford to ignore the financial woes of some of the biggest corporations in our land because they will be instrumental in helping this nation get back on its feet.

In the same way, we cannot ignore the plight of our neighbors who are asking for help. If we can get them over this rough patch, they will be the same people who will lead us to recovery.

It is not the time for recrimination.

Anita Marquez's statement makes sense. We as a community and as a nation must roll up our sleeves and rally 'round -- and yes, rally around President Obama and government - just as we did during World War II.

If it means sacrifice from those of us who are not as affected by the less fortunate, then we should do it just as readily as the "greatest generation" gave up the luxury of nylon stockings and lived off food rations.

Look at taxes as the price of living and doing business in America, not as a penalty.

It is that mindset of pulling together that will get us through this rocky period. We will be a better nation for it if it makes us re-examine our priorities and conscience. For too long we've been a nation of "me."

During Obama's speech before Congress, one of the big applause lines went to a 14-year-old girl from South Carolina who wrote President Obama about conditions in her school, she wrote, "We are not quitters!"

Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal Glover represents District 5. Reach him at [dist5@bos.cccounty.us](mailto:dist5@bos.cccounty.us)