

# Real safety nets need personal touch

By Todd Svanoe

After years on Wisconsin's urban streets, New York Times reporter Jason DeParle gave a helpful, behind-the-scenes view of Wisconsin's welfare-to-work experiment in the State Journal recently, with this sweeping conclusion: It was "a bold effort (that) leaves much in life unchanged for Wisconsin's poor."

His analysis showed how multidimensional are the causes of poverty, how deeply ingrained the disillusionment, and that employment is but one factor in a complex "swirl of influences."

Unfortunately, while declaring W-2 "the nation's most ambitious effort to redesign a social safety net," DeParle gave almost

no space to assessing that new safety net. Basic to the philosophical revolution that brought about welfare reform in the 1990s was the assumption that people of faith and charity would step in to provide the social and economic safety net that had been relegated to the U.S. government for 60 years. Are they stepping in?

Private philanthropy cannot adequately replace government assistance. But the AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy reports that America's economic boom generated a record \$135 billion in charitable giving last year. The philanthropic rich should be commended for doing their part.

If welfare programs like W-2 are judged to be failing, however, it proves that much of this wealth is being

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Svanoe

## Here's how to volunteer

Are you looking for a way to give that makes use of your talents, fits your values and is satisfying? Coordinators at these locations can help you sort through the maze of opportunities:

- United Way, 246-4380
- Madison Urban Ministry, 256-0906
- Big Brothers and Sisters, 249-7328
- The Nehemiah Community Development Corp., 256-4221
- School/Community Partnerships, 261-9006.

To contact the InterFaith Hospitality Network, call 294-7998.

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lobbed like an occasional loaf of bread over a fortress wall. What is needed is not only an economic safety net but also a social safety net — a welcoming and befriending hand offered by thousands of average citizens. Consider:

One Madison man had not worked in 20 years and had no job history to build on. A former alcoholic, his reputation was spotted with major misdeeds. But a marriage gave him new hope. When W-2 forced him into the workforce, he reclaimed his love of cooking. When an average citizen advocated for him at a job interview and agreed to be called as a back-up, the employer and manager took a chance on him. That's four links in the net, in case you're not counting.

The job provided a wonderful, renewed sense of purpose and dignity. He held it for eight months. That may sound like a failure, but it was a victory.

Employees of Electronic Printing Systems Inc. in Milwaukee saw the connection between home security and co-worker George McNeal's work life. They provided a security deposit, helped move him into an apartment, and picked him up for work each day.

Following their lead, business owner Bob Kraft backed his aspiring worker when McNeal was thrown into prison on charges McNeal claimed were false. Kraft paid his rent during the imprisonment, traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify on his behalf, hired a lawyer to investigate his case, put him up in a hotel after he was released and flew him home to put him back on the payroll.

In less heroic ways — but just as needed — new relationships are forming in hundreds of non-profit efforts throughout the state. Relationship-building, as opposed to charitable donations, requires patience and forgiveness. It's a matter of the heart and requires soul-searching, prayer and a willingness to be inconvenienced.

In a major effort that began in Madison in April, 33 churches and 30 to 50 volunteers per week have befriended the homeless, providing meals and lodging to mostly single women and children — not at a shelter but in their own home churches. This InterFaith Hospitality Network, which provides overflow help to the Salvation Army, has been full since the day it opened.

Face-to-face interactions and first-hand knowledge of these families' circumstances have elicited an outpouring of practical help and donations, so that the strong majority have found jobs and housing. This story, says Neil Gleason of Dane County Human Services, is nothing short of miraculous.

"This is a loaves-and-fishes operation, a completely volunteer enterprise in a town of professional organizations," he said. "It shows how much untapped compassion there is out there."