I keep seeing these words in the newspaper, hearing these words on the radio, and listening to this message in conversation. "You've got to send them a message. This CLT petition will make them change things, convince them they can't go on. We've got to vote them out of office.", them, I presume, meaning the incumbents. These words ring in my ear as if they were orchestrated by John Williams and the Boston Pops.

I usually respond on two levels. In conversation, I ask people if they want to do away with the safety net. Most immediately back off, "No, of course not. People need help. That's why we have government. But the government is too big. The bureaucracy is too bloated. The politicians have taken advantage of us. We need to reduce the size of government, cut out the bureaucracy. Replace the old politicians with some new politicians." Then they stop and look at me, and I hear their unasked questions. "What kind of a person do you think I am? What kind of a person would I be if I didn't believe in a safety net?" I am often struck by the fact that I am never asked "What do you mean by safety net?", as if the questioner would be embarrassed to ask that question. I don't think most people know what the social safety net that we often talk about is, and how it works.

During the last six months I have written numerous essays, most of them personalizing the effects of government services on the needy. The essays have been anecdotal, for the most part uplifting, and hopefully informative. I thought perhaps it would be a good idea to try another approach, that is, to describe how the safety net operates in our Metrowest community, and then to draw some conclusions regarding the impact this "teaching them a lesson" message has on the existence of the safety net.

In the Greater Framingham community there is a safety net which the South Middlesex Opportunity Council is largely responsible for maintaining. There are a number of key elements to this net which I would describe briefly as follows.

In both Framingham and Marlboro, we operate what we call Resource Centers. They are for individuals and families who fall between the cracks, don't know where else to go, can't speak the language, are on the border of holding it together and, in their eyes or the eyes of others who referred them, ready to fall over the edge. People don't need appointments, they can walk in. People don't need to have a specific problem, although oftentimes the problem issues are around housing. The Centers are minimally funded and staffed. There is never enough time in the day. The staff is overworked, underpaid, occasionally abused, but there is a very simple bottom line – they get the job done.
The next essential ingredient of the net is for families who become homeless. Our Pathways Family Shelter provides shelter, support, encouragement and the path back to functional and independent community life for 8 families at a time. When we set up the place four years ago, it was sufficient to deal with the number of families. Two years later, due to a variety of factors, economic, cultural, etc., it wasn't. The number of homeless families in this area skyrocketed. They were living in motels, costly to the state, crushing for a family who has no transportation and no way to cook a meal. We took action and expanded our network. We created what we call Scattered Sites, a program which placed homeless families in units that we manage and control throughout the community. It works, the hotel/motel population was reduced to zero. It is cost effective, costing the state less to fund our program per day than it costs to put homeless families in motels. Like the Resource Center staff, our shelter staff are dedicated, committed, caring. They believe in what they do, and despite the frustrations that go along with their job, they know they can do it well.

The Framingham Detox Center provides medically supervised detoxification for those caught in the grips of the ravaging disease of addiction. Ninety-nine percent of the people who use the Detox Center do not have insurance, many of them don't have a home, and many of them won't succeed in getting the upper hand on what is a lifelong disease. Some of them will, though. The staff knows that and that knowledge is what propels them to reach out with a compassionate hand to those who, by their own hand, have really fallen into the gutter of our culture.

For homeless individuals, we operate 20-bed emergency shelters in both Framingham and Marlboro. Some of the people who use the shelter are transient. Some of the people who use the shelter have fallen into the net for one crisis or another. Some of those who use the shelter have serious mental health problems. Regardless of why them come, the net is there, and it catches them.

There are other elements of this "safety net", and there are a lot of other services that SMOC provides for the poor, disadvantaged members of our communities, but the ones I have just outlined form the basic fabric of the net. We have recognized that it is not enough to simply provide a net. You have to use the net as a stepping stone to get people back into functioning community lives. That's what we do. We are talking about hooking people up with jobs and training for adults, we are talking about hooking children up with educational and health services and day care, and we are also talking about attempting to provide the ongoing support necessary once the transition from shelter to housing takes place.

Four years ago, right after we decided to implement shelter programs, we made a parallel decision to work on permanent housing. We have been successful in creating housing options for
individuals. We have established transitional housing, permanent housing, supported housing and group homes for those with special needs, so when an individual or family comes through the shelter, they have a place to go. We have used government resources, corporate and private sector resources and foundation resources to create this housing. We have over 250 units of housing in four different communities, safe, affordable housing, housing where people have the chance to succeed, that once did not exist.

That is the net that exists in this community that taxpayer dollars fund. To get back to this emotional appeal about sending a message, have the Governor and the politicians heard the message? Probably. What effect will it have on them? I really couldn't say, although I must admit to not being particularly worried for their individual well-being. But I am worried about the effect of this message on those who provide the safety net and those who receive services from the net. Because whether it is intended or not, the effect has been the same, the devaluing and ridiculing of the work and the anger at those who are most vulnerable and receive services.

So here is my question to those of you who keep talking about sending a message - is that what you intend? Do you want to discard the safety net? Do you really believe that those who have committed their lives to working with the disadvantaged and disenfranchised are misguided fools? Because your message is not clear, but the effects of it are increasingly foreboding.

James T. Cuddy
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