

Wednesday, May 15, 2013

City moves ahead with compassion

Clive McFarlane

Carl McCarthy was driving downtown in 1976 when he came upon a drunk lying on the sidewalk in front of City Hall. He loaded the man into his car and took him to a detox center at the old City Hospital on Queen Street.

Much to his surprise, driving downtown the very next day, Mr. McCarthy found the same man drunk and in the same spot in front of City Hall. But, this time when he took him to City Hospital, they wanted nothing to do with the inebriated man, describing him as a regular who was disruptive and wouldn't cooperate with staff.

Mr. McCarthy was instructed to take the man to a place on High Street, opposite St. Paul Cathedral, where a small shelter for the inebriated was being operated.

About 10 years later, after the High Street shelter had become the Public Inebriate Program shelter at 701 Main St., a friend invited Brian Chandley, a local banker, to take a seat on the board of directors for the PIP shelter, an invitation Mr. Chandley gladly accepted.

"You have to see the value in the individuals who are suffering alcohol and drug addiction," Mr. Chandley, now senior vice president at Southbridge Savings Bank, said in explaining his decision to join the board of the PIP shelter, later the People in Peril shelter. The roles Mr. McCarthy, Mr. Chandley and others like them play in this community's ongoing effort to combat substance abuse and homelessness are significant and indispensable, even if they are seldom highlighted.

Both were present Tuesday as the latest evolution of the PIP shelter — The Greater Worcester Housing Connection Triage and Assessment Center — was celebrated in its new facility at 25 Queen St.

James Cuddy, executive director of the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, which operates the center, said that instead of just warehousing clients, the center will provide job training, housing opportunities and other wraparound services.

"When you do this kind of a paradigm shift, you have to make sure the culture is ready, because if folks don't believe in it, it is not going to happen," Mr. Cuddy said of the center's new strategy.

There are plenty of community members who are committed to his vision.

That commitment was exemplified by former PIP director Edward A. McCann, a former alcohol abuser who became one of the city's strongest advocates of comprehensive services for substance abuse. His son, Bob McCann, a banker at Country Bank for Savings, is managing the loan on the new property.

Mr. McCarthy, whose 1976 experience at High Street led him to a career in social services, to include serving as regional coordinator with the Governor's Alliance Against Drugs and as a Department of Social Services family support specialist, went on to serve on the board for both the PIP and SMOC, and will serve on the board of the new facility.

Like Mr. Chandley, others in the business community, including Chris Collins, senior vice president and deputy general counsel of Unum Group and Rene Labonte of Hanover Insurance, have gone to bat for the center.

Mr. Collins and Mr. Labonte serve on the board of The Life Initiative, a \$100 million community development fund that lends to affordable housing projects, small businesses and key community facilities in Massachusetts, and were key to helping SMOC acquire the site on Queen Street. A number of local foundations have also contributed generously to the center's programs and initiatives.

There will perhaps be some skeptics of Mr. Cuddy and his organization's ability to significantly reduce homelessness in the city. But his commitment and that of the community to try and do so is unquestioned. And that is a foundation for success, because such commitment is the first steppingstone to a compassionate society.