

NCBR ARTICLE

Hickenlooper: Look at homelessness from business perspective

By Staff

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LOVELAND - Denver Mayor and Democratic gubernatorial hopeful John Hickenlooper likened the Homeward 2020 initiative in Northern Colorado to the largely successful effort to reduce homelessness in Denver at Thursday's United Way of Larimer County's annual State of the Community luncheon.

Hickenlooper explained that, as "an entrepreneur on loan to public service," he took on Denver's homelessness issues through a business approach.

"We said, 'What would it look like to end - actually look at and address - homelessness?' " he said, adding that serving more meals at a shelter is not success.

In October 2003, a 48-member commission was formed to look at the issue from the perspective of Denver's business community.

"I saw it as not just a social problem, but an economic problem," he said.

In Denver, the cost of services for the homeless population was around \$70 million annually - about \$40,000 per person. The average hospital visit for a homeless patient cost \$28,000.

Hickenlooper and the commission set out to "lure" the homeless into shelters, counseling, job training and other programs. Local churches agreed to "adopt" and mentor homeless families. Of those mentored, 90 percent remained in housing a year after getting in. Five years into the campaign, Denver has seen a 60 percent decline in chronic homelessness.

Bryce Hach, director of the Homeward 2020 initiative, confirmed that chronic homelessness carries a high cost in Northern Colorado as well. For example, Poudre Valley Hospital saw \$1.3 million worth of emergency room visits from homeless residents. Of the homeless population in Fort Collins, only 11 percent are chronic cases. The rest, families and children, go largely unseen.

Hach added that Homeward 2020 is making strides in connecting organizations and is continuing to consult with the 450 other communities around the nation with similar programs to identify and implement best practices.

Later in the program, Adam Molzer, director of United Way's Volunteer Center, presented annual awards to four individuals and one organization for their efforts on behalf of the community. Marlene Schilling, a charter member of Read Aloud Loveland, which reads to preschoolers, received the Senior Volunteer Excellence Award, while Arvind Karwan, a counselor for children at the Crossroads Safehouse in Fort Collins, received the Volunteer Excellence Award. The Fort Collins Sertoma Club, which donates handyman services to those in need through the Volunteers of America RSVP Program, was named the Outstanding Volunteer Group. The Linda Nerger Youth Volunteer Excellence Award went to Tallon Nightwalker for his work with the Larimer Humane Society, and Glorie Magrum, executive director of the House of Neighborly Service in Loveland, was named Community Collaborator of the Year.

Kim Wilson, publisher of The Fort Collins *Coloradoan*, presented United Way with a check for \$10,000 in recognition of its community-wide efforts during Make a Difference Day in October. More than 4,400 Larimer County residents helped complete more than 150 volunteer projects during the six-day event, making it the largest volunteer project in the state and one of the top 10 in the United States.