

## United Way brings business tactics to homeless problem

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LOVELAND - Ending homelessness is more than a moral issue, it's crucial for the economic health of a community.

That was the message delivered Thursday by keynote speaker Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper during the 2010 United Way of Larimer County State of the Community luncheon at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Loveland.

Before Denver started its Road Home program to end homelessness in 10 years, the city had more than 12,000 people who were homeless. A variety of agencies worked to address the problem and were spending about \$70 million a year to fight the problem.

"But we weren't addressing the issue of homelessness," Hickenlooper said. "We were just finding bigger Band-Aids to cover the problem."

To tackle the problem, Hickenlooper and others decided to bring a business perspective to a social issue.

To that end, Denver has gotten its professional sports teams, downtown restaurants and hotels, and other businesses involved. Then the organization decided to get the metro area's 1,100 congregations involved.

So far, 275 congregations are providing mentors to help the homeless and have been able to help 1,500 people, mostly single mothers with children, move into their own homes. Ninety percent of the families that have been placed in homes have remained in them after a year, Hickenlooper said.

"It's a huge success that didn't require a government bureaucracy," he said.

Five years into the program, Denver has cut homelessness in the city by 60 percent and has reduced panhandling in downtown Denver by 90 percent, Hickenlooper.

The past two years have been a challenge as the economy has faltered, but that makes it the perfect time for this kind of effort, he said.

"There's no more important time to deal with homelessness than in a recession like this."

Bryce Hach, director of Homeward 2020, a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Fort Collins that will kick off soon, told the 650 people at Thursday's luncheon that it's important for the Fort Collins area to address homelessness before it becomes a crisis.

"You can ignore homelessness, but you can't avoid it," Hach said.

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Housing instability comes at a tremendous cost to the community in terms of providing emergency medical care and space at the jail.

“We can no longer incur the costs to manage this issue,” Hach said. “We need to move people from being tax users to taxpayers.”

Gordan Thibedeau, United Way of Larimer County executive director, said Hickenlooper was chosen as the keynote speaker for the annual luncheon several months before he decided to run as the Democratic candidate for Colorado governor.

The United Way decided to have Hickenlooper speak despite his candidacy because he’d be able to make the business case for ending homelessness.

“Homelessness is an issue that affects all of us,” Thibedeau said. “He’s able to speak authoritatively about the issue.”

The luncheon is a nonpolitical, nonpartisan event.

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