

At conference, participants search for remedies to social ills - Dallas: Organizers aim to improve conditions in low-income areas

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Reducing crime, improving education, revitalizing neighborhoods and eliminating poverty were among the tough social issues tackled Thursday during the inaugural conference of the J. McDonald Williams Institute.

The conference at the Westin Galleria Dallas attracted almost 300 people, including academics, educators, politicians, leaders of nongovernmental agencies and residents.

"The sessions today have been electrifying and energizing," said J. McDonald Williams, chairman and founder of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, which put on the conference. "The ideas and conflicts and discussions between panelists and the audience about the needs and about how to address those needs have been exactly what we were looking for."

Organizers said they intend to make the conference an annual event. The institute has developed a research tool, called the Wholeness Index, to measure annual progress on some of the key issues that contribute to major social and economic disparities between communities in Dallas.

"I think we can learn a lot from each other," Mr. Williams said.

During one session, panelists spoke about crime and its impact on economic opportunities.

"Crime is a symptom, not something that can be controlled by arrest factors and not something that can be controlled by legislation," said Dr. Timothy Bray, an assistant professor of criminology at the University of Texas at Dallas.

He acknowledged that people who commit crimes make individual decisions, "but it's important to say what are the dynamics in which these decisions are made."

Ann del Llano, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, spoke about the impact incarceration and felony convictions have on people and communities. She noted that in Texas, someone who is convicted of a felony is labeled a felon for life and barred from certain services and even jobs.

"In our constitution, a felon is a second-class citizen," she said.

That can have a tremendous impact not just on the person but also on families and children of felons, she said.

Dallas Police Chief David Kunkle said that addressing crime is a difficult issue because it is not just a matter of throwing more police officers at a problem. Other social factors play a role.

"We cheapen the debate when we think of crime as only being a policing problem," he said. "You cannot arrest your way out of the problem, but policing can make a difference."

Similar discussions on housing, education, health care and urban revitalization pleased the Rev. L. Charles Stovall.

Mr. Stovall, pastor of St. Paul United Methodist Church, has been active in civil rights and civic organizations for years.

"When I look at the work I've done as part of a church and with other groups in the community, these were the kinds of issues that we have always dealt with," Mr. Stovall said. "The Foundation for Community Empowerment has been and is being a catalyst for developing change and making improvements."

The foundation works for the revitalization of low-income neighborhoods in Dallas.

Dallas businessman Pettis Norman said he was impressed with the diversity of the conference participants.

"It's very important that we as a city do this, and hopefully bring us together to deal with the No. 1 issue facing this community: a growing underclass of people," Mr. Norman said. "It's very important that this happen before we have our own Hurricane Katrina and we are exposed, just like New Orleans was exposed."

Mr. Williams said the conference and the institute seek to develop the best data and strategies so that efforts to improve conditions are more likely to succeed.

"We can either spend our time arguing the facts, or we can spend our time trying to find solutions," Mr. Williams said.

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