

Institute seeks solutions to urban problems

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The J. McDonald Williams Institute doesn't claim that Dallas can eliminate poverty, crime, inequities in education, health and housing, or the need for public safety and urban revitalization.

But is there a light at the end of the tunnel? And can addressing these issues alleviate some inequities? "We believe the answer is emphatically 'yes,'" said institute director Timothy M. Bray.

Dr. Bray shares the almost messianic fervor of the institute's founder, Don Williams, retired managing director of commercial real estate giant Trammell Crow Co.

The 66-year-old Mr. Williams was the founder and chairman of the board of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, which was created about a dozen years ago to focus on improving the lot of the entire southern sector of the city.

In 2003, Mr. Williams and the foundation team formed a research unit headed by Dr. Marcus Martin, president and chief executive of the nonprofit Education Is Freedom in Dallas, Dr. Bray said.

That group did research about the disparities affecting neighborhoods in Dallas.

Around 2005, Mr. Williams, Dr. Martin and the foundation decided that disparities in Dallas could not be fully understood without some context from urban areas across the country.

"They needed a vehicle to harness the power of research on quality of life occurring throughout the country and distill from it policy recommendations to help Dallas' neighborhoods move into the new millennium while working to execute cutting-edge research projects in Dallas," Dr. Bray said.

"The J. McDonald Williams Institute was born."

But on a local level, the research that was needed didn't exist, Mr. Williams said.

"When I was chairman of the Dallas Citizens Council, I couldn't find any research, so I thought, 'Why don't we start our own research, promote high-quality research to change the conversation? I'm too old for theoretical ideas.'"

This shifted the institute away from trying to find all of the solutions in Dallas.

"I wanted to know why Boston's approach to an issue is better than Dallas'. If this is what works there, why not try it here? Research, the best practices - that's what was missing," Mr. Williams said.

The search for urban solutions to affordable housing led the group to communities as diverse as Baltimore, the South Bronx in New York and Milwaukee.

Area participation

As for researchers, plenty of academics locally at the University of North Texas, University of Texas at Dallas and UT Southwestern Medical Center were eager to participate.

Dr. Bray has been an assistant professor of criminology, sociology and political economy in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Texas at Dallas but will become a clinical professor there when he officially takes over as director of the institute on Saturday. Dr. Martin, who was the first director of the institute, will step down the same day.

Mr. Williams emphasizes an important step in research. "In the applied research, we were interested in results, which meant how do we hold people and institutions accountable for their results."

Dr. Bray agreed that most of us could visit a blighted area of Dallas and conclude that health services and income were below average, education levels were lower, crime was higher and homeownership was low. In many cases, those conclusions would be on target. But to conclude that the situation was hopeless is not in the lexicon of the institute.

The researchers recognized "that many of the strands woven into the fabric of the community do not exist independently, and so we must study them as they are - linked to one another in ways we do not fully appreciate," Dr. Bray said.

"Because quality of life is multidimensional, we know that the solutions that will improve it must also be multidimensional.

"We're beginning to make our way toward it using the right tools, examining the right problems and focusing on the right goal - improving quality of life in all ways," Dr. Bray said.

October Conference

The chief promotional tool for the institute is its October Conference, which started in 2005.

At the conference, key findings from the latest research are summarized, and there are discussions involving academics, policymakers and practitioners.

This year's luncheon forum includes the Dallas mayor and members of the City Council responding to policy suggestions from the latest research. Members of the community who have made special sacrifices of time and effort in their neighborhoods will also be honored.

Each conference ends with a series of roundtable sessions to give attendees strategies for changing their communities.

The Oct. 22 event will be from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Adam's Mark Hotel, and tickets are \$75 each. Call 469-221-0700 or visit www.thewilliamsinstitute.org.

Caption: PHOTO(S): 1. (NAN COULTER/Special Contributor) Dr. Danielle Lavin-Loucks, associate director, and Dr. Timothy M. Bray, director, lead the J. McDonald Williams Institute. 2. Don Williams' institute does urban research.

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