

Fed office eyeing Solutions for Change as model to replicate

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A North County-based nonprofit that works with homeless families is among a handful of programs the federal government wants to hold up as a model of how to effectively address poverty and family homelessness.

Clarence Carter, a Trump administration appointee who heads the Office of Family Assistance, said in a phone interview last week that Solutions for Change shares his focus on moving people permanently out of homelessness and emphasizing employment.

“From everything that we have been able to glean — and we did tear up the floorboards on this — it is a model that serves homeless families well,” Carter said of Solutions.

Solutions works with — and provides housing for — 163 North County families. It runs what it calls Solutions University, a full-immersion, 1,000-day program designed to teach parents self-sufficiency. Solutions also runs an aquaponics farm and sells its produce to school districts, and has spread into real estate, buying or building apartment complexes that house its families.

Ironically, while Solutions showed up on Carter’s radar under the flag of the Department of Health and Human Services, the nonprofit faces funding shortfalls because it refuses to meet relatively new requirements of another federal agency: Housing and Urban Development, or HUD.

Funding priorities at HUD have changed to focus on getting homeless people into housing first, then addressing substance abuse and other issues. The approach has been embraced as effective. But organizations using money from that particular pot cannot require drug testing for their clients. Solutions, which insists on sobriety, decided to turn back the roughly \$600,000 it had expected.

Carter oversees a number of programs in his Washington, D.C.-based office, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, a cash-assistance program most commonly thought of as welfare. His office addresses family poverty.

Carter said part of his vision is for the federal government to be an incubator to help models become self-sustaining. The idea is to be a catalyst to help solve problems, not be the problem solver.

His plan is to hold up the Solutions’ model for possible use as a template for organizations regionally and perhaps beyond as a potentially good way to address family homelessness.

Solutions operates independent of the regional coalitions whose members work together to address homelessness. Some of those groups also deal with chronically homeless people, a much different type of population.

Carter, who was appointed to his job over the summer, said he first came across Solutions when it was recently highlighted in an online news and opinion site run by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. He looked into Solutions, then reached out to founder and CEO Chris Megison and asked Megison to present the organization's model at a conference of state officials who oversee cash-assistance programs.

Carter said his team is scouring the country for other programs — 10 in the West, 10 in the East — that can serve as models whose approaches have been effective for addressing issues linked to families in need. So far, his office

has tapped five, including Solutions. Others organizations tackle issues such as literacy and job training.

[Solutions for Change asking for help to cover funding gap](#)

Megison said that Carter's interest caught him by surprise, and that working with Carter has left him "fired up."

"Twenty-six years into this 'Serve to Solve' mission and I have never been more excited," Megison said in an email Tuesday.

Megison said it costs Solutions roughly \$24,000 a year, per family, and that the average family is a millennial-aged single mom with two kids.

Federal money counts for roughly 12 percent of Solutions budget, Megison said. For years, Solutions worked toward weaning itself from federal money, and Megison hopes it will be entirely funded by private sources and their social enterprise work by 2019. The farm is part of that future funding plan.

But for now, the organization is hoping local funds from five North County cities can help cover the hit taken when they walked away from federal HUD funds.

Still, Solutions' move toward self-sufficiency also resonated with Carter.

"It just closed the deal for me," he said.

Carter is aware that San Diego has a large homeless population — "You turn down Imperial (Avenue) and you would think you are in a Third World country," he said. The Solutions model could not solve the whole problem, he said, but it could be a part of it, and he wants to encourage others in the region to take a look at it.

Carter took a trip to San Diego earlier this year to learn more about the county's Live Well San Diego program, which he said he found to be "a really impressive approach" to addressing community wellness as a whole.

"I think that is a model that goes beyond our silos approach of the existing safety net," he said.

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