

Social conscience at work

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OAG

Social services, once regarded as the province of government social workers and do-good private agencies, are moving into the workplace and may settle into a permanent home there.

Businesses frequently find themselves dealing with housing, transportation, emotional problems, drugs, day care and inadequate education as they strive to fill their labor forces.

As executive director of the Community Action Agency of Washington County, Jerralynn Ness is accustomed to working with people in need. Increasingly she is also working with business executives, especially from companies in the westside high-technology industry. They are spending less time screening job applicants and more time trying to solve personal problems to enable prospective employees to work.

The economic turnaround may be the main force behind the shift. When unemployment was high, demand for workers was low. Now, however, there is greater competition for available workers. But the upheaval in the family structure and an awakening to the human element in economic development are likely

to give permanence to social concerns in employment.

Because of single-parent families or homes with both parents working, job care is an issue taking hold in many companies. A failure to link jobs with housing the workers can afford is a problem particularly noticeable in the affluent westside where much of the high-tech industry is located. Related to it is affordable transportation for low-income commuters.

Alcohol and other drug addiction, the cycles of domestic violence and sexual abuse, the school drop-out rate, along with such obstacles as obsolete job skills and inadequate training, are all coming into employer concerns in acquiring, training and retaining a work force.

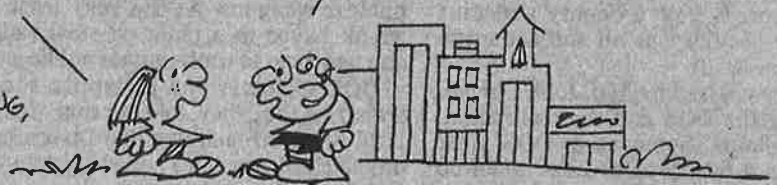
Even so, Ness estimates that in Washington County alone there are 20,000 willing workers who have no jobs because of one difficulty or another that probably could be overcome with the right help. Meanwhile, companies search for willing workers competent to handle available jobs.

That paradox emphasizes the point Ness stresses: A social conscience is a practical part of a sound economic-development strategy.

the small society

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