Listening to the unemployed

The sad state of the local economy was on display when state Rep. Janet Cruz hosted a job fair for her West Tampa district last week. An estimated 1,700 job seekers packed Higgins Hall at St. Lawrence Catholic Church. Many had been out of work for a year or more and were desperate for new employment. Job fairs are not unusual during this economy, but this day-long event provided more promise than most.

Cruz made sure only companies with job openings participated. She and her staff "cooled-called" human resource departments throughout the region. Nearly 100 firms had exhibits. Macy's, for instance, needed to hire 400 workers for its call center in Clearwater. Grow Financial Credit Union also was seeking workers for its call center.

Other firms looking for workers included USAA, Tampa General Hospital, Progress Energy, the Hillsborough County school district, Busch Gardens, Coca-Cola Refreshments, FedEx, H&R Block and Hilton.

Jobs ranged from delivering groceries to preparing tax returns. There were job opportunities for seniors, Spanish-speakers and teenagers. Some jobs were temporary. Others required extensive experience and a college degree. Some applicants came in suits; others wore shorts and T-shirts.

"This is the face of unemployment in District 58," Cruz said. Volunteers offered to help people prepare resumes.

Many participants, no doubt, went away disappointed. But others left with a solid chance for employment.

Cruz used leftover campaign funds to pay for the fair and said it was a direct response to her constituents' request: "They are not worried about Tallahassee. They want jobs."

Her response is a useful reminder that sometimes politicians best serve citizens not by passing new laws but by simply providing them the resources they need to help themselves.

U.S. males in distress

The summer has shed light on the troubling state of our nation's men and boys. The last few days alone include startling examples with TV personalities and professional athlete suicides, city rioting, and high school attack plans making the news. The discouraging statistics confirm that our males are just not coping. According to a variety of sources, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Center for Education Statistics, the United States currently has more boys and young men locked up in juvenile institutions, jails, prisons and mental hospitals than any other developed nation.

Males in general are the majority of the homeless, HIV positive, physically abused, neglected and murdered children, foster kids awaiting adoption, and alcoholics and drug addicts in need of treatment.

While the trend for girls is moving in a positive direction academically and professionally, boys of all races, from every community and all walks of life, are not thriving in their homes, neighborhoods and schools. We see the results in tragic news stories every day. It's even more obvious when compared to how girls are coping. For every 100 girls ages 15 to 19 who commit suicide, 540 males in the same age range kill themselves. And for every 100 girls ages 15 to 17 in correctional facilities, there are 837 boys behind bars.

These numbers are even higher when looking at the 20 to 24 age range, which shows for every 100 females in this group who commit suicide, 624 males of the same age kill themselves. For every 100 women ages 22 to 24 in correctional facilities, there are 1,448 men.

Nationally, boys account for 71 percent of all school suspensions and 75 percent of all expulsions. They drop out of school at 4:to-1 the rate of girls.

The social and economic costs associated with these negative outcomes are staggering. It's time to decide what we, as parents, educators, mentors or adults, can do to change the negative direction of our nation's boys and men.

Locally, many efforts aimed at improving the lives of boys and men are supported by our Children's Board and woven throughout programs they fund, including Family Support and Resource Centers, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tampa Bay, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Tampa Bay, the YMCA and others. The Double Duty Dad program from the National Fatherhood Initiative and the Annie E. Casey Foundations' Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative are also making great impacts nationally.

It is important to recognize that these programs, while necessary, are not sufficient for improving outcomes alone. It is also important to reflect on the media messages and cultural environment portrayed to boys and men and the lack of positive role models and values they often convey.

By supporting communities in their efforts to strengthen outcomes for males, we can become part of a solution that will have tremendous impact on our children, our children's children and our nation as a whole.

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