

Two Approaches to Security

By Craig Rennebohm

Urban congregations and survival service programs (shelters; meal programs; drop-in centers; food and clothing banks) serve individuals who may come for help in conditions of profound poverty, serious mental illness, struggles with drugs and alcohol and desperation. Trauma and fear, anxiety and frustration can be triggered by the smallest of slights, unmet needs or simply the basic requirements of waiting a turn or standing in line.

I work with a man who has virtually no short-term memory. He is given an instruction and twenty seconds later, he has no memory of that direction, nor does he recognize the person who just asked him to do something. Volunteers and staff become frustrated and angry. The man feels disrespected and ashamed. His fists clench, his mouth tightens, and his eyes narrow. He mutters. Mostly he is able to leave the scene when he experiences these emotions and signs of anger. But occasionally he becomes verbally belligerent and then physically resentful when confronted, ending in being barred from services for days, weeks, even months and years at a time. He is escorted out, police are called. Sadly, moments after the incident, he has no memory of what has happened.

Anger, verbal abuse, explosive outbursts, physical agitation, threats, and actions may be impulsive or aggressive, but in general they are signs that a person feels hurt, unsafe, attacked, diminished, or humiliated. Such feelings are often deeply rooted in previous trauma, abuse, or neglect. Current scenes of conflict and hostility reenact old experiences of wounds and suffering, and repeat painful, but familiar, patterns of hurt.

Hospitality is a basic practice in opening ourselves and our services to the neighbor who is in need and on the edge, to our sisters and brothers who are isolated, alone and hurting. The late Father Henri Nouwen, an important twentieth-century spiritual thinker, defined hospitality as creating safe space with the stranger.

One way to create safe space is provide some form of official security – an off-duty police officer or a security guard in uniform. The uniform, the stance at the door, the patrolling represent an authority and a potential punishment capacity intended to remind people of behavioral limits and keep people within the boundaries of basic, civil behavior. Security personnel at their best are trained to be proactive, to anticipate trouble and mediate conflicts and confrontations in a humane and restrained way. The use of physical threat or power is a last resort.

Security officers and rule or law enforcement are part of a larger, comprehensive approach to insuring a welcoming, functional, and safe environment. Creating a secure, hospitable setting is primarily a function of community. It is a process of exploring together what service practices we will use – from opening the door and approaching a person, to walking and working with each other, to listening, to recognizing our limits, to encouraging each person's healing and growth responsibilities, wholeness, and worth.

Whether we employ some form of official security or not, creating a safe space with a neighbor in need begins with sensitivity, compassion, and concern for the person who comes deeply wounded, oppressed, or profoundly bound in hurt and anger.

In acts of careful and thoughtful hospitality – including setting clear expectations and guidelines for behavior by all in the community, we begin to create a trust, building a supportive common ground. How we introduce ourselves as human beings and neighbors helps shape a secure and healing space. Joining the persons we are serving, “side by side” in their journey, looking out at the situation and the world together fosters cooperation and minimizes challenges and confrontations. Taking time to listen to a person’s story, to the themes and feelings of a person’s account, develops a basic, caring connection. Exploring possibilities, looking at options, deciding with each other on next steps, holding a person with basic respect and regard, taking a next step together develops confidence and new strengths.

Honestly recognizing and acknowledging our limits is crucial. We cannot alone meet a person’s range of needs. We must be prepared to refer, to help a person begin to create a circle of care in the wider community, knowing that health care, benefits or employment, shelter, and housing are insufficient in every one of our communities.

In the end we are called to recognize that our security rests in building truly inclusive neighborhoods with adequate, readily accessible, and proactive care and support for all. Acts of mercy and emergency or crisis service are necessary to help fill the gaps or meet the immediate need of a particular soul. But our deeper calling is to create compassionate communities in which homelessness, hunger, and poverty are the rarest of exceptions, and proactive care for the fragile, vulnerable, and wounded is a basic priority in organizing our life together.