



Case for Support
February 18, 2014

Summary

Neighbors of South End Community Outreach Ministries (SECOM) are trapped in the “economic quicksand” of low-wage jobs, and they need a hand to help pull themselves out. SECOM is a strong, sturdy branch of hope reaching out in love to the community it serves. Their key services - food, resources for healthy living, and early childhood education - are important handholds for people who otherwise would be sinking.

Introduction

Have you ever stepped into quicksand? Once you’re in, you have a serious problem. Even though, scientifically speaking, quicksand won’t suck you down, it is true that the more you struggle, the deeper you sink.

Why is quicksand so scary? Most of the time, you can’t see it coming. You’re walking along with confidence, and all of a sudden the sand that looked stable melts away underfoot. It’s also frightening because you usually have to rely on someone else to help you get out.

Unfortunately, quicksand isn’t just a quirk of nature. “Economic quicksand” is a pretty good description for current economic realities in West Michigan. For people who live in the neighborhood roughly bounded by US 131, Burton, Hall and Madison, South End Community Outreach Ministries (SECOM) is the lifeline that keeps them from sinking.

The People We Serve

So what goes into the making of “economic quicksand?” Job instability lies at the heart of the problem. The West Michigan economy used to offer what could be called “good jobs.” They paid a living wage for 40 hours per week; they provided health benefits; and they were, by and large, available to people of varied skill levels who wanted to work.

Job stability has virtually vanished. Although the economy is producing new jobs, the majority of them are either part-time or minimum wage. A person who works 40 hours per week for minimum wage will earn just under \$16,000 per year. That’s right about at the poverty level for a 2-person household.

Many of the people who live within a 10-block radius of SECOM are stuck in this economic quicksand. They may be struggling to overcome a language barrier that prevents them from finding a good job. They may be trapped in a cycle of generational poverty. Some of them simply can’t find a full-time job that pays a living wage. Even if they have the physical ability and skills, and can navigate the transportation challenges of working multiple low-wage jobs,

there's still not enough money for daily living, much less for savings. So what happens when hours and wages are cut, or there's a medical crisis, or the car breaks down, or the utility bills increase? People sink even lower.

Neighbors who are stuck in the economic quicksand are faced with impossible choices. Keep the heat on, or put food on the table? Take the blood pressure medications, or pay the rent? Face those kinds of choices every day and it's easy to lose hope for today, much less for the future.

No one wants to be in this situation. It's not "fun." It's not a choice. It's not a result of laziness. It happens to people like Jane, who came for food but who also wanted to volunteer. It turns out she was a former social worker. "I was diagnosed with cancer and I'm on disability. My husband left me. Now here I am, asking for food. I spent my whole life helping people access resources. I never thought I was going to be the one using them."

A crisis can hit anyone, at any time. It's not an isolated thing that just happens "out there." SECOM's neighbors are real people who are hungry, hurting and looking for hope.

What We Accomplish

SECOM is a strong, sturdy branch of hope reaching out in love to the south end community. While SECOM can't fix every problem, they offer three important handholds to people who otherwise would be sinking.

First, and most important, SECOM meets needs for food, healthy living and education. These are basic and interconnected survival needs, and they have been identified as critical for this community. They are also areas where the government is doing less, so local communities must do more. They're not "nice to haves" - they are "must haves." Food is essential to survival - a person without food can't look for a job or focus in school, or, quite frankly, survive. And since food is quickly consumed, hunger is the first symptom when wages are cut, or unexpected bills overwhelm the family budget. SECOM is there when people say, "I don't know when or what I'm going to eat next." SECOM is there for adults with chronic health issues who need education and preventive services. SECOM gives children hope for the future by providing access to high-quality preschool. If we want a healthier community, these are the things we must address first.

Second, SECOM turns dollars into rubber bands, stretching them as far as they can possibly go. That's critical for an organization whose client ranks have doubled in the last three years, with 20,000 people being served annually. One volunteer couple gleefully shared that they acquired 700 pounds of food to stock the pantry for \$100! Volunteers forage at Feeding America, local stores and restaurants, and local food producers to purchase an affordable, nutritious variety of foods. They also rev up fresh food access by harvesting more than 800 pounds of produce from their garden each year. That kind of stretching allows SECOM to distribute more than 665,000 pounds of food in a year. Key partnerships with organizations such as Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, the YMCA and others also stretch resources and bring services such as glucose testing, exercise classes and preschool slots to a neighborhood that would otherwise not have them.

Third, SECOM treats clients with dignity and respect. It would be easy, for instance, to pass out judgement along with food, but that's not how SECOM operates. As one staff member

says, "Putting love in everything makes a difference." Clients already have a sense of guilt that they need to use SECOM's services. So the staff goes above and beyond to meet people where they are...to provide not just a service, but a listening ear and a friend. How does this play out? It's in the little things...like providing chairs for people while they wait their turn for a consultation, rather than having them stand in line. It's helping clients select foods from the pantry that fit their family, rather than providing a "one size fits all" basket. In short, it's about blessing a lot of people who otherwise would feel abandoned.

Conclusion

When asked why SECOM is needed, one volunteer put it quite simply when she said, "'Do unto others.' There is no better answer. You can't be oblivious to people who are hungry. It's our responsibility to give back."

The economic quicksand is real. And just as with ordinary quicksand, people don't see it coming until it's too late. But once they're in, they need a hand to lift themselves out. SECOM offers that hand, as well as the knowledge and encouragement that people need to fight their way back to firm ground. People say, "I've called a lot of places, but you're the only one who answered the phone."

SECOM can't solve the problems of the economy. But they can - and do - offer help for today and hope for tomorrow. They do help people pull themselves out of the quicksand and find solid ground. Most importantly, they meet people where they are at, and provide love, a listening ear, and the resources to help them move forward.