

Editorial

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Doesn't the Missouri Legislature Have More Important Issues to Deal With?



Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City (Getty Images).

Universal System of Support for Youth, Adults Affected by Crime Must be Sustainable

Editor's Note: *Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas and Clyde McQueen, president/CEO of the Full Employment Council (FEC) on Tuesday announced that they have received two grants totaling \$2.2 million to fund a youth development program and re-entry support program. The announcement came as Lucas hosted a roundtable discussion focusing on violent crime issues impacting Kansas City youth.*

The Kansas City Globe asked McQueen for his reactions from the roundtable and his commentary is below:

The roundtable discussion facilitated through the efforts of Melesa Johnson, director of public safety policy in KCMO Mayor Quinton Lucas' office, was quite extraordinary due to the frank/authentic dialogue that occurred.

The people from the community who expressed the concerns and reasons for community violence were real and based on true life experiences. It was moving to hear the director of the Lyrik's Institution talk about the trials encountered in delivering a needed service to the community in terms of mentoring, community intervention, student engagement, and how he had to balance the tremendous need with keeping the doors of his office open even though he was adept at doing so, with the constant demand for his service.

It was impactful to hear two preachers from within the Kansas City Urban Core, discuss how they were in rival gangs, the Crips and Bloods, but now work with each other to address community violence. They talked about the violence and how they engaged in it when younger and now embrace



By Clyde McQueen
 President/CEO
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 Council

the community in trying to prevent it. One minister talked about the number of funerals he had attended and was being asked to address more but had to say his schedule was full and that he could not do more.

However, to me, the most impactful part of this direct community dialogue was when a young man was asked by Mayor Lucas, about the ability to secure weapons. The young man said that you can buy a gun any where in the neighborhood, and that you could get a 380 pistol for \$100 any time of the day with no questions asked.

The young people talked about how they felt that no one had their interests at heart, and they were looking for the feeling of belonging wherever they could find it.

It became obvious to me that we need a universal system of support for these youth and adults that is sustainable, that connect these community members, organizations, and elected officials, in a coalition for a "win-win" for them that will result in a "win-win" for our community. This means that we have a system that connects the young people, adults, community volunteers, elected officials, public policy makers, community organiza-

tions, and others to reduce this violence that is consuming our community.

Different organizations that have different specialties must facilitate this system of support between themselves, whether they have money or not for a specific purpose, to reduce and strive to eliminate this pandemic of crime within our community.

As a part of the FEC effort to help address some of these concerns being noted, FEC announced two projects, Generating Opportunities (GO) for Young Adults between the ages of 17-24, for youth who have been engaged in the criminal justice system through incarceration, probation, gang violence, or other related incidences. This project was funded for \$1.2 million dollars for three years to serve 125 youth with training scholarships and internships that pay a minimum of \$15.00 per hour.

The Ad Hoc Group against Crime is also working with FEC in this effort. FEC also announced another \$1 million dollar project called, "Pathway Home" which serves the reentry population on a pre-release basis for those persons returning to Kansas City, or Jackson, Clay, Platte, Cass, or Ray counties, in correctional facilities located in Kansas or Missouri. This is one of the first Pre-Release Reentry approaches of this type engaging both Kansas and Missouri prisons. This project will serve at least 150 persons.

These projects are funded through Midwest Urban Strategies located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin by the United States Department of Labor/Employment & Training Administration.

With just a little more than a month into the new legislative session, there is still time for Missouri lawmakers to change direction and focus on issues that are important to many Missourians.

But, will they?

The legislature got off to a roaring start proposing bills to limit transgender students' participation in schools' sports, and banning the teaching of "critical race theory."

At least 10 bills have been filed to limit the ability of transgender children to play in youth sports. There are proposed bills also on banning discussion about gender and sexual identity by school staff, and how health care providers treat children with gender identity issues.

Since 2012, only 13 transgender students have been approved to play sports by The Missouri State High School Activities Association, which requires transgender athletes to apply and provide medical documentation in order to compete as the gender they identify with.

Drag performances and shows have also reached the legislative radar. Stay tuned.

An education bill banning the teaching of "critical race theory," or CRT, in high schools is moving through committees gaining approval when in fact, CRT is not even being taught in Missouri high schools.

CRT has been included in what is called a "Parents' Bill of Rights," which seeks to limit how race and history are taught. The bill goes so far as to allow lawsuits against school districts with the potential of cuts in state funding if there are any curricula violations.

What unnecessary threats and misguided intimidation toward the public education system.

One must ask, how can these superficial, superfluous — misguided and potentially very harmful — issues be the most important facing our state?

Are they being used as strawmen, deflectors, distractions or phantoms?

Or, is there something more sinister occurring: New and blatant attempts to continue to oppress and discriminate against the Black and LGBTQ communities, as well as legitimize censorship as a means to suppress how we factually and truthfully educate our children.

Whatever the reasons,



By Dr. Janice Ellis

focusing on these issues is taking precedence over other pressing needs crying out for action and remedy.

Needs like addressing homelessness, fixing a foster care system bursting at the seams, and determining how best to spend a \$6 billion dollar surplus in areas that will benefit most Missourians.

When it comes to homelessness, the legislature would rather focus on implementing a law that would criminalize those forced to shelter on city or state-owned property.

Instead of incarcerating them, why not spend some of the state's multi-billion-dollar surplus on providing temporary housing and funding more permanent affordable housing options?

Why not use some of those surplus dollars to increase mental health services and substance abuse rehabilitation services for those who have clearly lost their way?

For individuals and families who became homeless because of economic decline and hard times, why not provide job-training for re-entry into the workplace?

Surely, in addition to giving tax cuts and tax breaks, and widening I-70, shouldn't some of those surplus dollars be used to help some of the most downtrodden citizens among us get back on their feet?

Then there is the ever-present and growing crisis in the foster care system for Missouri's abandoned and neglected children. The percentage of kids entering foster care in our state is among the highest in the country.

According to Missouri's social services agency, the state has made too many children permanent orphans by severing the legal ties to their biological parents, yet not doing everything it can to find adoptive parents. They wait in foster care — some interminably, never being adopted or aging out as they languish in the system.

The solution is two-fold. First, more resources, ser-

vices and crisis intervention programs can be provided to vulnerable families to prevent those conditions — poverty, abuse, addiction, mental illness — that cause children to enter the foster care system in the first place.

Second, the social services agency must be adequately staffed to get these children either back with their biological parents or adoptive parents.

Foster children need not linger in an institutional setting for most of their childhood and formative years.

The agency is requesting that the current legislature provide funding to provide critically needed staffing and resources to get more children placed in permanent homes.

Will some of that \$6 billion surplus be used to give our foster children the best chance at a healthy, meaningful and fulfilling life?

Another high priority issue is the availability of affordable housing for low income and middle-class working families. As in most states, there is an endemic affordable housing crisis.

The crisis is more severe in Missouri's largest metropolitan areas, Kansas City and St. Louis. But there is also a shortage of affordable housing in smaller cities and rural communities all across the state.

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, Missouri has a major shortage of homes.

How can this be, as the state continues to amass and sit on billions of dollars?

In addition, the Missouri Housing Development Commission, which oversees affordable housing, has hundreds of millions of unrestricted dollars (see page 7 in PDF link) and programs that could be applied in a more urgent way to address the growing housing shortages.

Given these major challenges facing Missourians all across the state — and there are others — how can a fabricated issue like banning "critical race theory," and an over-exaggerated issue like preventing transgender students from participating in sports have top billing on the legislative agenda?

They shouldn't. *Janice Ellis, Ph.D. is the author of two award-winning books: From Liberty to Magnolia: In Search of the American Dream (2018) and Shaping Public Opinion: How Real Advocacy Journalism How Real Advocacy Journalism™ Should be Practiced (2021).*

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