

Social justice and the Mobile grant for alleviation of poverty in Mobile

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One of the most important principals of Reform Judaism is the struggle for social justice. It is so important that we even have a term from Jewish mysticism which we have applied to it - Tikkun Olam. Tikkun Olam literally means "repairing the world".

Its origins in mystical thought come from the myth of origin in which God has to make room to create the world and so has to break "the vessels" sending countless numbers of shards flying in all directions out into the universe. We repair the world by bringing those shards back together and reassembling them.

In more practical terms Tikkun Olam refers to making the world a better place, but the world is a very big place and it is not easy to have much of an impact out there. So it is best to start at home with small appreciable changes that can make a difference in the lives of those who live in relatively close proximity. That is why it has been so gratifying that Mobile has been able to setup a Mayor's Innovation Team that is concentrating its efforts on transforming Mobile by fighting urban blight.

Under the leadership of Mayor Sandy Stimpson, the goal is to make Mobile the safest most business and family friendly city in America by 2020. To do that we need to revitalize neighborhoods, something that is impossible to do if urban blight spreads. This effort has fortunately been aided greatly by the awarding of first one and now a second grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies, the foundation created by former New York City Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, himself a Reform Jew.

The Mobile Innovation Team has been working in neighborhoods that suffer from urban blight, the phenomena where thousands are neglected or even abandoned. High vacancy rates lead to all sorts of other problems, which have a tendency to cascade and make areas virtually uninhabitable. Drug dealers and criminals of all types gravitate to neglected and abandoned houses, terrorizing the neighbors and forcing many of them to leave their homes. The long term impact of this dynamic can be catastrophic. Two of the neighborhoods being assisted are Texas Hills and The Bottom, located about a half mile from downtown Mobile.

When I met with Matt Anderson, Special Assistant to Mayor Stimpson, he proudly told me about some of the innovative ways that we have been trying to address this problem of urban blight. For example, we didn't know how many houses were affected by blight. Of course, Mobile has code enforcement officers who have seen many houses that could be described as part of urban blight - houses with peeling paint, boarded up windows, uncontrolled weeds, and roofs with holes in them.

Mayor Stimpson compared blight to having pancreatic cancer. When blight spreads through our city, it can be completely devastating. But how to document exactly how many blighted properties are in Mobile and to be able to see each one and to evaluate the full extent of the problem was not accessible.

The solution was to use Instagram. Most of us over a certain age are only vaguely aware of this app and think of it as a photo sharing vehicle for social purposes, but it can also be used to do more practical things, including posting photos of each house that seemed neglected, as well as its exact location within the city limits. The result was a plethora of new data, including thousands of photographs documenting the condition of each house.

Mobile was one of 14 cities to win a Bloomberg Innovation Team Grant. We are the only one of those cities to have, so far, shown quantitative improvement. If we can continue to harness innovation in the cause of municipal improvements, we can serve as a model, not only for the entire nation, but urban environments throughout the world. We can prove that just because we have always done something a certain way does not mean that we have to continue doing it that way forevermore. We have an opportunity to experiment with new ideas and to try out those ideas in a practical urban laboratory.

Mobile has been able to recruit quite a few large manufacturing companies, which have in turn created quite a few new jobs. However, we have placed less emphasis on developing smaller businesses and particularly smaller businesses that are situated in low income urban areas. Many of those areas are close to our downtown. As the Carnival Cruise Line brings many new visitors to our city, we have an opportunity to build our micro-economy and to do so in ways that benefit those who need economic help the most.

We are looking forward to hearing Mayor Sandy Stimpson and Mr. Jeff Carter, the Director of the Mayor's Innovation Team, address the community at our Temple, the Springhill Avenue Temple, this Sunday, May 7th at 1:00 p.m. All are welcome. There is no price for admission. We are planning to serve delicious ice cream following the program. This is an idea that combines politics and religion in a positive way giving us the opportunity to fight for social justice and bring Tikkun Olam.