

In a city of helpers, who will be changers?

Your Turn

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Guest columnist

Fred Rogers once wrote, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

Rochester, New York, is overflowing with helpers.

We have an abundance of people, organizations, and agencies, all making an impact, and we're blessed with countless creative initiatives, nonprofits, and innovative ideas. But our city is also hurting and facing obstacles that feel insurmountable.

Rates of poverty are higher than in most cities of our size, graduation rates are far lower than most school districts in our state, and gun shots echo through dark nights. All of which begs the question – how can a place with so many helpers have so

many crises on its hands?

Recently, I have been part of conversations with some of Rochester's leaders aiming to address inequities in our city. These dialogues are fraught with undertones of exhaustion, questioning, and skepticism around having tried so many approaches over the years and continuing to find ourselves facing many of the same challenges.

So, we are at a crossroads – a moment in time where we have a choice to make. To either throw our hands up and walk away. Or, to hit these same problems head-on in ways that haven't been tried before, looking at them with a new set of eyes.

I'd challenge more of us to invite the experiences of those living these crises more into the work of solving the problems. The voices of those most affected by these issues of social injustice are the ones who are all too often overlooked in the dialogue.

How can we expect to change a failing school system without sitting down with its students, parents, and teachers to learn from their perspectives?

How do we quell gun violence in the city without talking to those who live in neighborhoods where bloodshed is occurring and the responders who are first on the scene?

How do we reduce poverty and other hardships stemming from inequity without seeing things

through the eyes of those who experience it?

Adequate representation from the constituents whose lives we are so desperately trying to affect can help us come up with more effective solutions. We could all learn from the disability community phrase, "nothing about us without us," and recognize the powerful message it contains.

We still have many obstacles to face before the issues are no longer as large, looming, or defining. But with the voices, insights, experiences, and dreams of those whom we are trying to help, our city of helpers will be even more effective as changers.

Jennie Schaff has been the president and chief executive officer of Jewish Family Services since 2018. Schaff will become the CEO of the Max and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation in January.

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