

MSU CCED Community and University

Flint Help Centers, Trauma, and Community Resilience

Intro Music

Heather

Hello and welcome to Community and University, the MSU center for community and economic development podcast aimed at providing outreach to both community members and students throughout the state of Michigan. I'm Heather Mahoney and I'm the producer for Community and University. Today on Community and University, we have Bob Brown, director of the Flint center for Community and Economic Development, interviewing Pastor Tommy, a citizen in Flint who assists in running the help center that operates out of the church he serves.

Bob Brown

So this is Bob Brown from the Center for Community and Economic Development in Flint, and today I'm talking with Pastor Tommy, who is a Asbury United Methodist church, that is one of our help centers in the community that's responding to our ongoing water and lead crisis. Pastor Tommy, I wonder if you make start by telling us a little bit about the help centers, the history of your help center; you got closed down and then it's reopened, if you could trace a little bit that for us?

Pastor Tommy

So the three help centers was a community partner response to a way that we could make not just bottled water, but other human necessities available to the public. So, it began there and we ultimately had plans for six locations so that we could cover the city well north, south, east, west, and in between. And we were able to raise sufficient funding that we were able to open three of the six. And the idea was to provide food that, through a nutritional basis had been, I'll call it prescribed by health professionals that contained the nutrients that our bodies need to be able to mitigate, to an extent, the negative impact of lead. I talk about that because for us at Asbury, that has been our focus as we try to shift to the extent we can from a crisis approach in emergency response to a longer term response, which will be required over the next couple of generations. The help centers then were what we call "point of car." It means cars drive through the parking lot and we put the groceries and bottled water into the vehicle, they do have the option, have had the option, of pulling over and parking and our parking lot, and going inside. In the past, we've provided personal items and other water related resources like filter cartridges, zero pitchers for a while. And as the funding began to run out, and the funding is quite complicated in its own right in the sense that the state of Michigan was providing the budget for food through a Department of Labor grant. Work Alliance or Michigan Works, was

providing the labor that was there on a consistent basis. And the bottled water then was also budgeted separately, and that came through a state allocated budget. And we essentially ran out of money. The Department of Labor grant was coming to an end. Apparently, the water crisis was beginning to be declared over, and the water was improving at least the test that they were holding dear to. And so we closed down. But that was the basic idea. I call it somewhat as it's not intend to be negative, but a superficial relationship, the kind you have when you go through mcdonalds and pick up your order as opposed to a relationship where you're able to help our residents and point them to other services. But I will say though, particularly Genesee Health Systems, but a number of different organizations would stand out there and greet the people waiting in line and ask questions and do surveys and try to give them at least the information that they needed. And I think people really appreciated that.

Bob Brown

So you were open four or five days a week?

Pastor Tommy

We were open monday through thursday for days a week, and we opened a 10:00am and we were open until 4:30pm.

Bob Brown

In this new revised way of doing it without those streams of funding and without those streams of labor support, what's the structure like now?

Pastor Tommy

Okay, so we reopened after being closed for two to three weeks. We scrambled because we kind of knew it was coming, but at the same time, what we also did know was what was going to happen with state funding in particular. And so we reopened, but at this point, we have one day a week, and for Asbury, it's on Tuesdays, but there's also Bethel United Methodist Church on Mondays and Greater Holy Temple on Thursdays. Our hours are a bit shorter. We opened at 10:00 am still, but we close at 2:00pm. So one day a week, and each of three help centers West side, North side and East side.

Bob Brown

The other big difference is the bottled water, that that was not advertised as being available because nobody knew if indeed that was going to be available.

Pastor Tommy

Right. So the reality is that we weren't anticipating and we were told not to anticipate bottled water and lo and behold tuesday morning, a truck shows up full of cases of water. Well, I say full of cases of water, so we don't know how much water is going to come. And we did say,

and I remember one of my peers, Greg Temins telling the channel 12 that, we don't know. Water would be available as we could make it available. And so the reason Greg said, that's the same reason I would have said that, and that is we've had offers, we've had calls from around the country with people wanting to know what they could do and providing bottled water has been one of the calls that people have made. And so it'll be on a limited basis. But what we have to do is sort of assess, okay, how much do we have? How many cases divided by roughly 325 and say, okay, we can get one, two, three cases to each vehicle. And that is a huge change over families that had larger needs, being able to leave our premise with six to 12 cases of water as they might need.

Bob Brown

So this past tuesday was your reopening. So what was that day like?

Pastor Tommy

Hectic but organized, hectic. We sort of suspected we would see long lines, and these were long lines. When you're open four days a week, people get into a pattern, and our crew was the fisher enough that we seldom had vehicles backed up on the main road. And yet we served hundreds of vehicles each day that we were open, but you compress the hours, you compress the days and you scare the dickens out of everybody with a last minute bomb drop that you're no longer gonna provide water. And guess what, they show up. And so an hour before we were open traffic was backed up on the main road, way down, several blocks.

Bob Brown

On thursday, I went to Greater Holy Temple and the experience there was identical. They were lined up out of the driveway down the major highway that they're located on probably two or three blocks. There could have been 100 cars in line waiting to get in. So, it was very, very busy, and I know that this may be guessing your part because you're not actually doing the actual distribution, but did you run out of water or did you have enough water? What did it seem like?

Pastor Tommy

We knew we would run of commodities before the line stopped. There's no doubt about that. We had an idea ahead of time of how many cases we know that the food that were provided and what's called a nutrition truck has been designed to, for 325 vehicles to each get their bag of food and their potatoes and so forth. And so we did the same thing with cases of water. So did we run out of water? Well, yes, but we also ran out of food. In our particular case, I guess the good news is we've been doing this long enough now; we feel that our staff is quite proficient, but still people were coming by and they do come by. They come by every day and going on or why. And they're not mean, they're not upset with us, they just simply, what can I do? And when we explain to them, when the other help centers are open, they're appreciative.

And that has been a pleasant surprise 'cause there's a lot of anxiety. But the good news is, I think all of the churches not just are the three health centers, but other churches have built good, long term lasting relationships with our neighbors and they know we're in this together.

Bob Brown

So you are also the largest site that deliver to homebound folks, delivered water to homebound for us. What's happening to that?

Pastor Tommy

Well, that's a bigger mystery. The part I suppose is not a mystery, is that the warehouse is gonna be empty and we're going to run out of water, and we are not going to hold on to our staff beyond when there are means to pay for those staff. We have maintained a fleet of three box trucks, three commercial trucks. In our best days, we had three people in each truck, so we had a staff of nine, and they were able to deliver to around 1,100 households a week. And our total distribution is about 1,400 different households. So some households would be delivered to less than once a week, some really needed to have deliveries every week, and they would take the water up and put it on the kitchen table or in the kitchen floor, whatever the families needed. But in addition to that, it's... one of the things was very heartwarming, is these crews built relationships with the families they were serving. The families were very seldom was there ever an issue. And they knew that if they didn't get water, something happened, they were at a doctor's appointment or something that they wouldn't get forgotten. So what's gonna happen to that? Well, if we listen to the political pundits, what's gonna happen with that is we're not gonna be it anymore. We're not gonna have the resources. These trucks are quite expensive. They use a lot of fuel and volunteers can do this for a few days, but not for months. And those are the most vulnerable of the families. They tend to be a group that struggles with, ya know if they have mobility issues, trying to know how to change their filter in their sink, they have... they're sort of at the mercy of those of us who are healthy enough and mobile enough that we can bring them what they need.

Bob Brown

So, what was the reaction of the crews? They had built relationships with these families, and then suddenly they had to stop, and it was very suddenly. And then with the PODs closing down, also all water just stopped.

Pastor Tommy

There's a lot of pressure all the way around. Well, it varies quite bit in general. My sense is they have loved their jobs and it was a better job. I think they never expected it to be in terms of how rewarding it was. But all along, there seemed to be this understanding, well, this is only temporary. We're gonna do what we can while we can do it. And we did what we could to encourage them to seek full time employment in other places, offered to provide references,

whatever they would need, because we knew it was going to be temporary. We would rather it not be as temporary as it is because we still have a water problem. It's just at this point, and I don't wanna say the world has decided, "get over it." What I'm saying at this point is the people who should be held accountable or seems to be the ones that are not holding themselves accountable. Whereas many people around the country and around the world when they learn, it's not over: number one, they're not shocked. And number two, they presume that we're still getting help. And when they find out, we're not... many of them offered to help.

Bob Brown

So, along at line, what was your reaction on this past Monday when our mayor met with the governor. And within a matter of minutes, according to her, his statement here was, "you all just need to get over it and get moved beyond it."

Pastor Tommy

Me, I'd like to say my reaction was disbelief, but it's unfortunately not. We find ourself in kind of a new way of being in the world with our leaders led by the one in the white house, who you're allowed to tweet anything that happens to come to your mind at any time of the hour or night. The good news is we kinda know what they're made of, and we kinda know what their ethics and her morals are. The bad news is they're in office and they seem to have a lot of influence over lives that I'm sort of angry with us, the public. We live in a democracy and we get that kind of power to people that are going to say things, and mean them, "why don't you just get over it"? And that perhaps is what is pervasive at this point throughout the country

Bob Brown

that whole aspect of democracy, and many people might not remember this, but this crisis occurred when the democracy of this city was stripped away from us.

Pastor Tommy

Absolutely.

Bob Brown

And we had no voice in decisions that were being made that affected us.

Pastor Tommy

Absolutely. Yeah, I had the pleasure, I guess, the honor of participating. And this was a church discussion, but we were looking at issuing a resolution that would condemn the ability of government to do that, to take away that kind of power. And I found myself being first of all, the only one from Flint and second of all in a room full of people that that's all no reason why we should be putting forth a resolution that says that we disagree with this. The good news is, I'll tell you about the time we finish the debate, the resolution passed. And so what that meant

was our bishop was asked to weigh in on this conversation and to say at least the members of the United Methodist Church who live in Michigan have determined that we believe that this is an ability to take away government that you shouldn't have. And so we've asked our members to stand up an opposition to that doesn't mean they will. We all have free will, and this is not a... We also have a democracy. And so it may not be that way, but I feel good about at least being able to have the conversation.

Bob Brown

Well, I'm gonna turn our conversation a little bit to another area. I use my house and my family is an example. So we tested really high for lead. Anything over 15 parts per billion, according to the government, is bad. Anything over zero parts, according to the scientists and doctors, are bad. There's no level of lead, that's a good thing. And we tested at 200 parts per billion in our house. I was able to change all the pipes. I have two whole house filters, we're down to testing at zero, and I still can't bring myself to drink on with a tap. So this, that trauma, that psychological trauma, that's still sitting there, even though I had the money to replace everything, most people online don't have that option. How long do you think that that trauma is gonna persist? And that's the key issue right now, even if the pipes are okay, the trauma is still here.

Pastor Tommy

Right, right. Yeah. I've heard you and potentially damage you for your life, but your children's life, and you should get over that trauma, I guess, is what we're talking about. And how long will that trauma last, if we don't get over it right away, there's a number of things at play here. And first of all, my own personal sense of this is that, and only do you deserve if you will, to be able to have the emotions that you have and the rest of us have, but it might be wise, and to have that level of skepticism. You and I are relative insiders, and we know that not all is well with the world and the world of Flint in the world of water. There's still questions about chlorine levels, for example, and therefore, questions about bacteria that can't necessarily be taken out by the filters that we tend to use in our homes. Asbury runs a commercial urban farm, and we're working with Kettering on a project to harvest water, water catchment systems. And we know that we need to filter that water. We can't... the food safety laws on the farm or similar to what they are in the kitchen with the new act that went into effect into law this year, and which by the way, I think is a good law. And so we need to test our water and whether we use Flint city water or we use water that we catch, but we're looking at technology to make sure there's no bacteria in the water. So when our harvesters wash their hands before they harvest spinach or lettuce... we want that water to be free of bacteria. I think it's wise because we have this water infrastructure that clearly is a problem. And we have an infrastructure that was built for maybe 300,000 is the number I've heard, and we have 100,000 or less residents, and we have more and more homes that are being abandoned and the water connections to the water system or being cut off. And therefore, there is a great deal of reason to be skeptical of tap

water. It seems like if you came into this. So let's say I just moved to Flint, and I knew Flint had a water problem, and there's people that have moved to let believe it or not, and recently into our neighborhood, and they understand the water situation. I come into it, I know what I'm getting myself into. Right? I know I can't trust the water. And I think in that case, because this happened to me when my family moved to Massachusetts, we build a new house and we immediately put a whole house filtration system. Why? Because we knew the water was crap. And so we didn't... I didn't want my... and guess what? I wouldn't drink the water and I wouldn't let my children drink the water even though we had a whole house filtration system. But the company that put it in challenged me, they tested the water in my water bottle 'cause we were buying bottled water. And this goes back, my children were in preschool. And the bottled water tested worse the water we were drinking out of our taps that had been filtered, but I knew what I was getting into. But even then... and it took me a while, even though I saw the scientific evidence and no one had tried to fool me and say, my water was good and I drink it and I smelled it, and it looked bad and it tasted bad and they kept telling me it's okay. Maybe they said then, "get over," but I don't blame you. I think it will be maybe a generation, but hopefully and. Where we can... And a lot of them will have to do with, I start trusting, you start trusting and and someone else starts trusting and they say, they seem to be alright with it. Maybe it's time that we began to deal with trust.

Bob Brown

The city is part of it for me, and my house was the water never was colored. The water, never smelled.. It looked absolutely normal. And then it came back: no, you're really poisoned and all the guilt that goes along with that. Of, why didn't I do something sooner? You were... well, it looks good to me. Nothing's changed.

Pastor Tommy

Yeah, and some of us chose denial over feeling guilt but whatever way we cope with it. It insidious is a good way to describe it, even if it's not intentional, it still is the reality.

Bob Brown

Maybe because of my vocation, I'm not one for going and trying to prosecute people and determine what was their intention, but at the same time, the reality is what it is and the fact that now we had that done to us, and those who were the doers are suggesting that not only should they're done helping, but we should just get over the fact that they ever did that to begin with, pretend it never happen. Right. That seems ludicrous. I'm not surprised. Unfortunately, because of the climate of the political landscape that we're operating in.

Bob Brown

I would totally agree with that on a very positive note, in spite of all of this that was done to us. There are some who even say, in spite of this criminal act that was done to us. The resiliency of the people of this community is remarkable.

Pastor Tommy

Oh yes, I think we have seen that people are capable in a very positive way of doing much more than I ever imagine they were capable of doing. And again, maybe it's my vocational hazard, but I look for the positive outcomes even in the face of disaster. And if I were going... and so I'm always looking for that, and I'm saying, okay, so here's one thing that's happened; We lived in a very disconnected neighborhood. No one trusted each other. People were always afraid that if they'd leave their house, their neighbor's gonna break into their house. Very early into the water crisis, we're delivering water door to door, trying to find out where.. 'cause we didn't know who couldn't come out and get water early on. We didn't know who the folks are that we're now delivering water to. And so we're knocking on doors and we have neighbors saying, you know, "I'm okay," which was already unusual. I'm here with something free and you're turning it down. That was a good start. And the second is, "could you check on the lady, the man, the person across the street down the road away? I noticed that it looked like they wouldn't be capable of getting water, and I just... I'm concerned about him." I didn't think I would ever hear that in our community at least when I first began pastoring here, because I felt that was the number one problem we had: we were disconnected. We hadn't yet realized that my well being depends on your well being, and you are well being depends on mine. And I wouldn't be doing my job. I didn't quote scripture, but there's something in Jeremiah says to work for the prosperity of the city where I put you and I believe that that comes full circle.

Bob Brown

Well, I appreciate you taking some time this afternoon to talk with me, but I have saved ventures, but our trials and tribulations of the last four years as we've dealt with this in our community.

Pastor Tommy

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Heather

Thanks again to Bob Brown and to our guest Pastor Tommy, and thank you for listening. This has been Community and University from the Center for Community and Economic Development.

Outro Music