

Bucks County housing director said issues surrounding poverty and housing are complex

By Freda Savana

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Jon Rubin told a gathering of social service leaders and lawmakers Friday that meeting residents' complex needs requires increasing integration of services.

Jon Rubin, Bucks County's director of housing and human services, had a number of things to share when he addressed a room full of social service leaders, community volunteers and lawmakers, during a wide-ranging discussion Friday.

While Rubin touted the innovative and dedicated work of his department, which is responsible for aging, mental health, children and youth, behavioral health, and drug and alcohol services, he didn't shy away from the challenges facing those in the social services community.

As the opioid epidemic intensifies, adding to the already steep mountain of issues social service agencies face, Rubin cautioned against a "failure of imagination" when designing and implementing effective programs.

"We need to think more on a macro level," he said. Drug or alcohol abuse, health, housing, prison, education are often interrelated, he explained.

"We need better integration of services ... delivery (of services) should be seamless. There should be no wrong door for them to go in," he said of those seeking assistance. And, he noted, "we need to address the root causes" of these problems.

Efforts are underway, Rubin noted, to create a more cohesive and unified system of support, including strengthening a broader database of services and agencies.

Lynne Kallus Rainey, the county's director of children and youth services, agreed. "Integration of services really is the key," she said.

As Rubin and others strive daily to meet the needs of thousands of Bucks' residents, flat funding and shrinking budgets make it difficult, Rubin said. People trying to climb out of poverty face many obstacles, including getting the same level of financial support provided in 1990. The minimum wage, too, is stagnant, at \$7.25 per hour, the federally designated rate.

U.S. Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, R-8, Middletown, said Congress is exploring the idea of a "living wage," which could be tied to inflation. Perry Warren, a Democratic state representative from the 31st district, said discussions about gradually increasing the minimum wage also are underway in Harrisburg.

When the conversation turned to affordable housing, Bucks' Democratic commissioner Diane Marseglia suggested the problem isn't a lack of units, it's a lack of people with enough money for security deposits and first and last month rents, as well as too few landlords who want to offer housing to low-income renters. However, Susan O'Neil, with the Bucks County Housing Group, disagreed.

"We do not have enough affordable housing in Bucks," O'Neil said. "We focus on the people with the greatest need" but neglect the Section 8 crisis. "We're shooting ourselves in the foot," she said.

Section 8 is a federally subsidized housing program that provides vouchers to low-income residents. Bucks County has closed its years-long waiting list because it is filled.

"There are systemic issues," said Rubin, of the Section 8 program. "It's a complex system ... with a web of regulations."

The pressing issues of domestic violence, Medicaid and child abuse also were touched on, as the audience of about 100 shared concerns and looked for workable solutions.

State Rep. Frank Farry, R-142, said he recently had discussions with Bucks County District Attorney Matt Weintraub about expanding the legal definition of domestic violence to include those who commit such acts in front of a child. Such abuse would be considered endangering the welfare of a child.

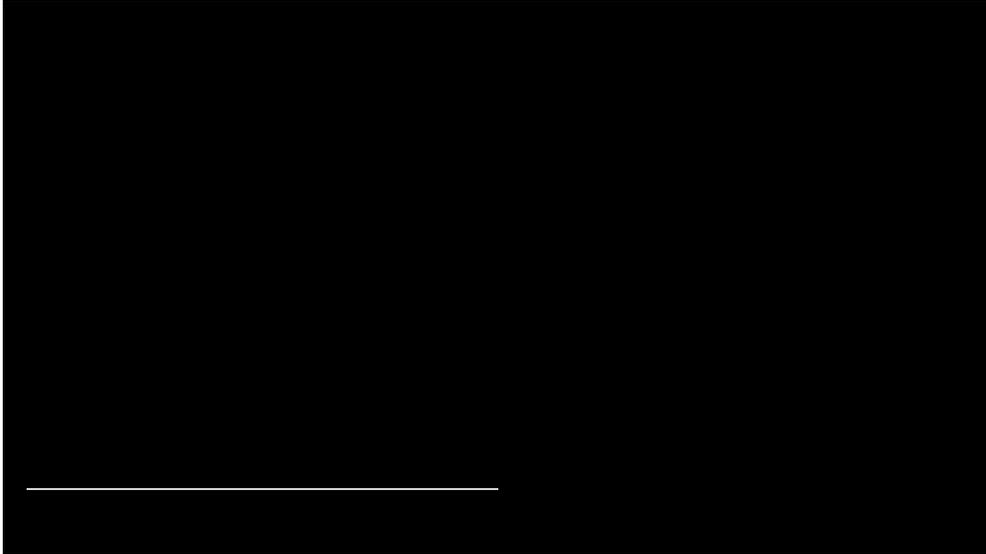
Paraphrasing President Theodore Roosevelt, Rubin said, "until the country is a great place for all, it won't be a great place for any of us to live."

The program was sponsored by The Bucks County Women's Advocacy Coalition and the BuxMont Unitarian Universalist Fellowship's peace and justice committee.

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