

Role of the Private Sector

For the entirety of my political life, which is a long time since my parents were very active in politics, I have heard about the debate between the role of government as opposed to the duty of the private sector. Two recent incidents are demonstrative of the difficulty of making the marriage work between the private sector and government. Nevertheless, we must try to reinforce that partnership in order to have a better functioning society.

I am a lawyer who, for as long as I can remember, has done *pro bono* work for Wise Options for Women. We represent people, it can be men or women, in need of a Protection from Abuse Order. Lately, finding lawyers to handle these matters *pro bono* has been extraordinarily difficult for Legal Services, which administers the program. Many of the Protection from Abuse complaints deal with custody matters. Sometimes, it may even be that the Protection from Abuse system is utilized to get people into custody court more quickly. The Judges and Legal Services understand that this is a problem and are empathetic to the Bar which is doing the Protection from Abuse representation on a *pro bono* basis.

Our legal system, on the state level, is swamped with domestic family matters and criminal cases. The personal injury case is a tiny blip on the radar screen of work that the courts deal with. I have been told by Judges in some counties they rarely, if ever, see a personal injury or medical malpractice case.

Recently I suggested that Legal Services consider a new approach. Instead of hiring an attorney at Legal Services to handle Protection from Abuse Act claims, especially where children are involved, perhaps consider paying members of the Bar a reasonable amount to handle this work. Doing the math quickly, it seems to me that the salary of a Legal Services attorney could be used to pay private sector lawyers who have experience with custody matters, thus saving Legal Services administrative costs. This would also spread work among knowledgeable lawyers in the field of Domestic Relations who sometimes struggle to make a living themselves. A partnership between Legal Services, Wise Options, the Court and the private Bar would be a way to bring excellent representation to Protection from Abuse matters, particularly those involving children, while perhaps providing a more robust system to address Protection from Abuse Act claims. Changing the thinking about outsourcing this work no doubt will take time, attention and a different way of thinking.

Not too long ago, I learned of a man who was in jail on misdemeanor charges because the District Magistrate received from the landlord of the accused false information that the man had fled the area with a substantial amount of money. The accused did not show up for his preliminary hearing, somewhat unusual that there would even be a preliminary hearing in misdemeanor cases to begin with, because he was in the mental health unit at Geisinger Medical System. The bottom line is that the very responsible and responsive people involved all acknowledged that this man should never have been in prison. However, they told me that other people, without an address or a place to go, also wind up in prison. That represents a tremendous expense to the taxpayers of Lycoming County. A wonderful meeting was held hosted by the Commissioners about coordinating efforts by and between the courts, the prison, mental

health and others in government so as to keep people out of prison with treatable mental health problems, who should not be in prison to begin with. I was very impressed with the sincerity and the remarkable cooperativeness shown between these government agencies. An initial plan was discussed as to how to obtain more resources, and more meetings are planned. One point did strike me as odd, however. Towards the end of the meeting, I brought up the role of the private sector. I said that there were many nonprofits in the community and private social service entities that might be able to assist. In other communities the private sector had assumed a major function in working with government to address community mental health problems. The representative from the prison, also an amiable and cooperative man, did not seem warm to the idea. No one else said a word. There is a role for private community service and nonprofit organizations in connection with community problems concerning mental health issues.

One of the major challenges facing all communities, large and small, are mental health issues. We know that somewhere between 25% and 40% of all people at some time will have a mental health issue that impairs their ability to work, deal with their family, or otherwise to be part of an orderly and safe society. We pray that these problems will not happen to us or our loved ones, and when it does, we are the most shocked.

I am proud to live in a community where there are so many people of good will who are working hard, sometimes at public expense, to selflessly raise the bar in connection with our community challenges. However, it would be a wonderful thing to have one or more people in the community working with government and quasi-government agencies to integrate funding and assistance from the private sector. United Way, and a number of private foundations, assist financially government entities in their work, but my recent experience is that there may be an opportunity in our community for enhanced cooperation and coordination between the public and the private sector.

There is always a tendency for the question concerning private intervention in government function to become political. There are those who approach these problems from a particular perspective as to the role of government as opposed to the obligation of the private sector. In reality, a partnership between the public and the private sectors would work best for our citizens without imposing any particular philosophical imperative on our hardworking citizens.

Just something to think about: Our own community is a microcosm for the world. What we do for ourselves, our family and our immediate community is transmissible (to use a popular word these days) to our nation and ultimately, the world.

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