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Editorial: Topeka JUMP advocates for those most at risk today

Topeka organization seeking to reform education, mental health, housing issues

The Capital- Journal Editorial Board

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Topeka Justice and Unity Ministry Project in only two years has become one of the most active advocacy organizations in the area. It has launched initiatives to address inequality in education, the inadequacy of mental health resources in Shawnee County and substandard housing.

These efforts to illuminate and rectify the problems faced by underserved populations have made Topeka JUMP an invaluable asset in our community.

Here's an example of the laudable work Topeka JUMP has done lately.

The focus of last year's Nehemiah Action Assembly (an annual community mobilization event organized by Topeka JUMP) was improving employment prospects for people with mental health issues. Topeka JUMP asked the Shawnee County Commission to allocate \$100,000 per year to pay four new employment specialists at Valeo Behavioral Health Care.

When the county commission agreed to provide the funds for general mental health issues, Topeka JUMP met with Valeo's board of directors to figure out a way to guide the money toward employment. This demonstrated an ongoing commitment to the problem, as well as a refusal to settle for the second best option.

According to a report released in 2015 by Mental Health America, Kansas ranks 46th in the nation for hospital readmissions associated with mental health. Moreover, the National Alliance on Mental Illness Kansas has found that almost 85 percent of people with serious mental illnesses can't find work in the state. These numbers show that mental health is a critical issue in Kansas, and that Topeka JUMP was right to emphasize employment.

Topeka JUMP had a rocky introduction to the public two years ago, but lead organizer Shanae' M. Elem points to lessons learned from that aggressive outing and wisely says the organization

doesn't need to raise the heat when temperatures are already high.

The coalition has since developed an effective model for local activism. It is comprised of 20 congregations and is always open to new members. It has a solid record of enacting meaningful change. Furthermore, Topeka JUMP's focus on systemic problems in local government has resulted in outcomes that will endure for years to come.

This year's Nehemiah Action Assembly is a push to get "public commitments from officials" regarding housing and economic inequality. It will take place at 7 p.m. April 26 at the Downtown Ramada Inn, and we hope it will be as successful as last year's event.

Topeka JUMP engages in crucial advocacy for at-risk students, the mentally ill and many other threatened members of our community. We encourage its members to continue doing so in the spirit of collaboration and respect they have cultivated over the past two years.

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