



Hope for Systems Change

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Transformational Times: What is one thing that you hope for when you think about 2023? Why?

I hope to have stronger connections with colleagues, students, and the community in 2023. We all recognize the current health inequities and know there are limitations to lessening these inequities. For example, we often stop under a bridge on a busy street when taking colleagues, students, and early career workforce out on the streets. We observe the orange needle caps, and if we were to count, there would be at least twenty. We walk up a steep embankment and look at the remnants of being unhoused – bottles and bags, socks and underwear, more needles, and a dirty cushion to sit or lay on to get some rest.

The question stops us cold: “The person staying here is your patient; what do you tell them?” Though there are no words, the cold emphasizes the stark horror of the situation and is punctuated by the constant noise of cars and trucks rolling over the bridge and reverberating. In a staccato voice like the rhythm of the truck tires, we ask: “What can we do?” or “What might be possible?”. There is no need for a response. There is nothing to be done but provide hospice care for those living here. Those living here will die.

It seems impossible to do more than provide a sandwich or a new pair of socks. The systems cannot do more, whatever “more” is under the circumstances. People living on the margins are seen as a nuisance or not seen at all. Invisible people live in a hidden world magnified by the weather conditions and the privilege of those of us who get to go home at the end of an outreach shift.

I hope for continued recognition that our systems can do more for this community in 2023. Change and breakthroughs do not happen in giant leaps. Still, they occur in small increments – maybe not in this generation, but in the future with the realization that it is alright to ask unanswerable questions. A medical student recently asked why I made the statement “not in my generation,” Maybe I just took it for granted that change would not come sooner but later. Why not now? Why not start in 2023? And so, we make our connections and keep moving forward this year and into the future.

David Nelson, PhD, MS, is a family and community medicine professor who advocates for change through his work in medicine, public health, and the community. StreetLife Communities serves as a conduit for seeing the systems of inequity and encouraging asking questions even if there are no answers. Anyone interested in learning more can contact Dr. Nelson at danelson@mcw.edu or by cell phone at 414-324-4595.