



SERVANT MANOR, INC.

MILWAUKEE PROMISE

Statement of the Executive Director

**Presented:
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Judiciary Committee
Milwaukee City Hall**

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INTRODUCTION

What is the “Milwaukee Promise?”

The Milwaukee Promise is a twofold commitment by Servant Manor to change the way youth and family services are delivered in Milwaukee. At its core the Milwaukee Promise is a pledge by Servant Manor to:

1. Engage the community and child welfare providers in a collaborative effort to research and pilot behavioral treatment programs; which
2. demonstrate a youth and family care model that improves performance measurably in education and employment after age 18.

To accomplish these goals Servant Manor is committing to work in a collaborative fashion with other child welfare agencies. This effort must transcend the issue of race which has historically divided Milwaukee service providers.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S SUMMARY

Overview of who and what Servant Manor is

Servant Manor is an African American, non-profit, Christian social services agency. Inspired by the notion that families can help families become stronger, we are committed to empowering our youth and building relationships that last a lifetime. Our vision is *a family for every person*.

Foster Care in the State of Wisconsin

According to a report issued by the State of Wisconsin Department of Health & Human services, there are more than 7,000 young adults within the foster care system today. This includes youth in foster care and group foster care. A substantial portion of these youth, after spending several years in the system, moving from home to facility back to home, will "age out" of the care system.

Historically the focus in foster care and group care has been family placement or permanency. Success has been measured in terms of youth placement and longevity. A youth success story is one in which a child moves from group care to family or kinship care, and is able to remain within the family until the age of 18.

Results of our recent Strategic Planning Process

Servant Manor's strategic planning process, begun in February of this year, and concluding in August allowed our agency the opportunity to address many of the issues and assumptions commonly held by African American social service providers.

While sharing the belief in "family-to-family" placement Servant Manor also believes that permanency outcomes are incomplete and indeed are an unacceptable measure, if young adults are only to become dependent upon the welfare system again after reaching the age of 18.

This line of reasoning has caused our agency to question the broader goals and implications of both foster care and group care for youth. Is it our intention to simply “place” youth? If our successes are measured by geography, institutions, and time horizons, what does this indicate about our work and our focus?

The Wisconsin Department of Health and Human Services indicates that for youth aging out of the foster care system:

- 51% more likely to be unemployed
- 27% more likely to be incarcerated
- 42% more likely to become premature parents
- And 25% more likely to be homeless than their peers outside the child welfare system

If permanency, in terms of location or housing alone is our only measure – what comment then is it – that statistical majority of these young adults will simply revert to public assistance within two years of turning 18? Have we merely delayed or postponed system dependency by shuffling youth from one housing situation to another, only to find these same young adults unequipped and unprepared to cope with life once they reach the age of legal maturity?

These questions and many others have caused Servant Manor to seriously address the goals in group foster care, our role, and the way in which our agency relates to the youth it serves, their families, our partners and the community at large. This questioning has taken on the form of a strategic planning process, begun in February of 2007 and culminating seven months later in August.

What have we learned from the process?

Involving more than thirty participants including our board, management, staff, volunteers, business and community leaders we have attempted to candidly discuss the forces impacting our industry, the local business climate, changes and trends, services we offer, our treatment methodology and overall identity.

What are the financial realities facing us?

The results of our research have been sobering, yet offer insight into what and how we may change to better serve our youth, families and Milwaukee. Speaking from a business perspective alone, we believe the Milwaukee Group Care market is supersaturated. Twice the number of licensed group care providers exist in Milwaukee as are licensed in the City of Chicago. Chicago has nearly twice the foster youth population as Milwaukee. The State of Illinois has also been nationally recognized as a leading reformer in the child welfare system.

As individual agencies we struggle to exist day-by-day competing for scarce and increasingly diminishing financial resources. Examining broader business and non-profit economic trends, we find this competition is indicative of the non-profit industry throughout the country. Basic business and economic principals are at work. Government agencies are demanding increasingly higher levels of quality as resources become increasingly scarce.

To survive, agencies must position themselves as best of breed providers. Only those agencies with the financial capacity to do this will continue to exist. My friends the question is not whether or not the number of group care providers will diminish? With fewer youth in foster care, and reduced budgets, fewer group care providers is an inevitable reality.

Servant Manor's "Milwaukee Promise"

Servant Manor has articulated several goals within our strategic plan. These changes and our commitment to a renewed quality of care represent our "Milwaukee Promise" to youth. As part of our promise we commit to:

1. Identify and implement a behavioral treatment model which not only facilitates youth permanency outcomes, but also empowers young adults to make meaningful choices throughout all areas of their lives,

2. Achieve a financial capacity and wherewithal sufficient to weather changes in the market, ensure the highest quality of care, and accomplish our mission over the long term,
3. Create community partnerships transcending lines of service delivery and race.

By achieving these goals, we believe that Servant Manor can demonstrate measurable changes in the lives of youth we serve. Our impact can be long term and address issues of employment, education and home ownership.

How can the City of Milwaukee help our youth?

Given the crisis and costs associated with failing our young people, we as foster care providers must find meaningful ways to work together to accomplish genuine change. These changes must ultimately result in young adults empowered to make good choices and given the tools and skills necessary to not only reside, but participate, and uplift the families into which there are placed. Such skills transcend environment and allow individuals to function and succeed broadly at home and in life. Our measure must become, not how many youth did we house or for how long, rather how many lifelong relationships have we established, in which we empowered one another, enabling us to join together as we collectively improve the quality of our City.

We ask the City :

1. Enter into partnership and support our efforts to define a behavioral treatment model suited to Milwaukee's unique environment and youth needs,
2. Support the re-organization and renewal of the African American Alliance for Wisconsin Children and Families – this newly invigorated Self Regulatory Agency can help African American social service providers receive the training and regulatory support necessary to ensure quality care. Further this agency can help address market needs and operating conditions locally.
3. Provide legislative, licensing and municipal support for new programming efforts following the results of our feasibility study

My promise to you, is to commit personally and on behalf of Servant Manor, firstly to pursue the research and relationships necessary to ensure these changes occur in our community; and secondly to pilot and disseminate programming which impacts youth education, employment and decision making. We are calling this promise, "The Milwaukee Promise" based on the belief that our children, represent a great unlocked potential for the future of Milwaukee.

I Thank you for the opportunity to share with you our vision, invite and encourage you to join us as we embark upon this bold path toward a healthier tomorrow.

Very truly yours,

ADRIENNE HUNTER

Chief Executive Officer