

Renaissance Man to Lead Stamford Non-Profit Housing Organization

By Devon Lash

STAMFORD -- Jason Shaplenhas undertaken a lot of challenges in his life -- he's worked as a speechwriter for Bill Bradley's presidential campaign, a Newsweek journalist and a diplomatic negotiator in North Korea.

But all these challenges, Shaplen said, have led up to his latest mission: leading St. Luke's LifeWorks as the next chief executive officer.

The nonprofit organization, based on Franklin Street, provides educational opportunities as well as emergency, transitional and permanent housing to families and individuals, including those living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS.

"If you look through my resume, it does seem very diverse, but the common theme is they are almost all about public service," Shaplen said. "Government, politics, communications and the private sector -- nonprofits are the nexus of all four."

Shaplen takes the reins at a time when donations to nonprofits are down on all counts. His transition also comes shortly after the death of the organization's founding executive director and first champion, the Rev. Richard Schuster, after a 22-year tenure.

Shaplen's plan is to make St. Luke's LifeWorks not just a worthy investment, but a necessary one. It's case of simple economic logic, he said.

The city of Portland, Ore., found that chronically homeless individuals each required about \$47,000 in public resources per year. Placing them in permanent supportive housing, the city saved about \$15,000 per participant, he said.

"You can pay now, or you can pay later," he said, but paying now, "gives you more bang for your buck."

Even closer to home, there is compelling evidence for how vital agencies like St. Luke's are, Shaplen said.



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The most recent results for a statewide count showed out of about 260 homeless persons in Stamford and Greenwich shelters, about 60 percent were housed at St. Luke's LifeWorks, he said.

Dana Low, president of the agency's board of directors, nodded in agreement, adding, "We are looking to people to invest in us, not just contribute to us."

Shaplen most recently worked as a senior executive for Project Renewal, one of the largest private, nonprofit agencies serving the homeless in the nation.

St. Luke's is unique in that its model shares space with many other nonprofit groups, such as the Literacy Volunteers and the Community Health Center.

"We don't do it all, but we brought all the services under one physical roof," Shaplen explained. "In this economy, it makes sure we're not spreading ourselves too thin ... it frees us up with limited resources."

To expand those resources, he added, St. Luke's will have to bow to the prevailing trends in evaluating nonprofits. The organization will have to quantify its results, he said.

"It used to be nonprofits were defined by services ... but now ... it's what results do you achieve," Shaplen said.

Low listened intently to Shaplen's whirlwind description about the new world facing nonprofit groups.

"After an extensive search, a number of the finalists were people with more traditional backgrounds," Low said.

Now sitting next to the organization's newest chief executive officer, a former diplomat, writer and policy maker, he said, "We're excited by the differences from the traditional."

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