

Posted on Tue, Jan. 26, 2010

Charity not a substitute for government response

By Charles L. Baker

I'm sure you've seen it — across the bottom of your TV screen or as a text on your cell phone, "Text XXX and a donation of \$10 will be added to your cell phone bill for Red Cross Haitian relief."

I know a little about charitable giving, and this is a very clever way to raise funds. But this also raises some questions about this Herbert Hoover style support.

What about all the other disasters in the world that didn't get this much attention — who addresses their suffering?

What if all our text gifts don't add up to be enough to care for all the needs of the Haitians?

Shouldn't our leaders assess the full list of concerns for Haiti — schools, water, garbage pickup, health care, earthquake stable buildings, etc. and set some priorities for an overall economic plan?

Cynically speaking, are we really interested in helping Haiti? Is our charitable giving approach designed, not to meet the needs of the Haitians, but to give us a false sense that we've "done something?" Is it part of an underlying scheme to avoid any real sense of responsibility?

We know better. Those of us, individually and as nations, who have had good luck have a responsibility to share our good fortune with those who aren't so lucky.

There is a Haitian proverb, "A single finger can't catch fleas," which is the clearest reminder that we can best solve problems by working together.

This is why we have government, so issues that are too big to be solved by the individual can be addressed by all of us.

Conservatives, both Democratic and Republican, have undercut any sensible attempt to collectively solve these concerns. "Compassionate conservatism" works, but not to address difficult problems, only to make us feel better.

Before he became President, Herbert Hoover led a massive charitable campaign to feed Europeans following WWI. Later, during the Great Depression, President Hoover's

efforts to address the needs of starving Americans fell flat. Charity left the poor both hungry and hopeless.

Franklin Roosevelt understood that we are all dependent on each other, and he marshaled major efforts by the federal government to analyze problems, set priorities and take action. Thanks to Social Security, for example, we're no longer individually responsible to provide for our aging parents or grandparents.

My point is not to oppose charity; it is to oppose the notion that charity is a substitute for the thoughtful and organized efforts through government.

In my years as CEO of Buckhorn Children's Foundation, we were very fortunate to receive generous gifts to support our work with abused children. New cottages, furniture, equipment, food and clothing for children — all were purchased with charitable support.

However, the staff had a standing joke, "Who will make a special gift when we need to replace the sewer plant?"

To ask a more basic question, why didn't the local, state or federal government provide wastewater treatment for all the citizens of Buckhorn?

Text messages aren't sufficient.

And our governor and the legislature have an obligation to lead us with thoughtful approaches to generate the revenue needed to address Kentucky's critical problems.

Charles L. Baker of Louisville is a past mayor of Buckhorn and a former Herald-Leader contributing columnist.