Randolph: What we get wrong about poverty

By Brandale Randolph/Guest Columnist

The persistent misperception about poverty is that it is a simple equation: people either live in poverty or they don’t. Many believe there is a single tipping point that lands an individual or family in dire circumstances or, by contrast, that allows them to quickly rebound out of severe economic challenge. While that may sometimes be true, studies show that it generally takes five to years to overcome poverty. And that’s only when there are effective supports in place from family or community programs, and if nothing goes wrong in the way of health, employment, housing and other areas.

In reality, poverty is both more complicated and more nuanced than many people think. These days, even households earning middle-class wages can find themselves in a slow spiral, living paycheck to paycheck, facing difficult choices. In the case of those coping with emotional, health, substance or legal challenges, the burdens and hurdles are even greater.

So, we shouldn’t expect quick-fix solutions to address the problems that cause and result from poverty. Instead, we need to come together as communities to wrap their arms around our struggling MetroWest neighbors — which is a far greater number of individuals and families than many would think. To make a difference, it takes partnership between local nonprofits, businesses, and residents.

As the founder and owner of 1854 Cycling Company — a business that trains, certifies and provides living wage employment, particularly for people who were formerly incarcerated — problem-solving around poverty is a subject that is near and dear to my heart. What I’ve learned is that the nonprofits that understand the complexities of poverty and attack the problem from multiple angles have the best, most sustained outcomes.

Organizations that take a holistic approach to supporting individuals and families, such as Framingham’s Bethany Hill Place, provide a valuable model for building long-term success and self-sufficiency. While Bethany Hill’s primary function is providing independent, affordable housing for those in need, they provide so much more, not the least of which is a judgement-free, supportive environment. At the same time, they take a proactive approach, asking residents what they need and how the organization can support their hopes and dreams. It’s an overarching philosophy that recognizes how important self-determination is in rebuilding lives. Bethany Hill also provides meaningful programming for in-house education and life skills training, food assistance, child care, youth programs, social and recreational activities, computer access, scholarships for trade and higher education programs, and so much more.

Average citizens and community members all play an important role, too. For the broadest impact, it’s truly valuable to provide financial support to organizations that are on the frontlines and have the infrastructure to make a real difference. With organizations like Bethany Hill, the return on investment in lives changed is immense.
But our engagement can't end there. We need to stop thinking of those living with poverty as outside ourselves. This issue is affecting our neighbors — not only strangers, but acquaintances, co-workers and possibly friends we might not otherwise suspect. Those who are in need deserve our compassion and understanding. Contrary to some harmful perceptions, people who are poor neither choose nor want to be in those circumstances; it is a scary and dark position we wouldn't wish on our worst enemies.

By far the biggest negative aspect of poverty is hopelessness. For families living with poverty, the negative effects are often passed down to the next generation. So, it is especially important to do everything possible to give hope to the children in these situations by giving them the tools to understand that things can get better. When children are supported, they learn that they're as smart and capable as anyone else in the room and they develop the skills to take advantage of the opportunities before them.

Small actions can have a meaningful impact. Sometimes just lending our time to those in need, providing a compassionate ear, or sharing our own stories and experiences are all important ways to show people we care. That not only makes all the difference in a person's life, it's the kind of connection that is the very definition of community.

Framingham resident Brandale Randolph is the founder of the 1854 Cycling Company and co-founder of the non-profit Project: Poverty. Randolph will share his experience and perspective on poverty alleviation at the Bethany Hill Spring Gala on Thursday, May 2, from 6 to 9 p.m. at the Sheraton in Framingham. Visit BethanyHill.org for information about the organization and this annual event.