

Ask what you can do - and then pitch in

By: Henry (Hank) J. Shea

What's the greatest challenge facing our state and our nation?

Many would say finding solutions to our economic crisis. While I agree, I would not limit the focus to addressing rising unemployment or mortgage and lending issues. We must also ask two questions: how we got into this crisis and what can be done to prevent it from happening again.

How did this crisis arise? One obvious answer is unethical conduct by some and a lack of ethical leadership by too many. This occurred not just on Wall Street and in government, but throughout this country -- in our businesses, schools and communities. If you want proof, just look at some statistics that should concern everyone.

In a 2008 national survey of 30,000 high school students, 64 percent reported cheating on a test in the prior year and 30 percent reported stealing from a store. Both numbers show increases from the same Josephson Institute survey in 2006.

These unethical behaviors continue as students progress. A 2006 survey of 5,000 graduate students by Donald McCabe and others showed 56 percent of MBA students reporting cheating at least once in business school in the prior year. Law students surveyed at the same time said that 45 percent admitted cheating in law school, U.S. News and World Report reported in October.

My 20 years as a federal prosecutor tell me that unethical behavior breeds criminal conduct, ranging from Ponzi schemes to tax fraud to street crimes. It is a sad fact that more than 2.1 million Americans are incarcerated in our jails and prisons -- more than in any other country. Five states -- including Connecticut, Michigan, and Oregon -- are spending as many or more taxpayer dollars on corrections than on higher education, according to a 2008 Pew Center report. This imbalance is a recipe for disaster for those states and our nation.

On a different note, one particularly disappointing for those of us who are baby boomers or older, is the December 2008 International Communications Research survey that asked AARP members if our nation has lived up to President John Kennedy's call in 1961 to "Ask what you can do for your country." Only 23 percent said yes; 70 percent said no.

Our economy will get better. Confidence in the market and our financial institutions will return. But our greater challenge is how we improve our nation's character for integrity and service. This challenge can be met only by instilling ethical behavior everywhere, with a shared commitment to doing what is morally right. How do we do this?

Ethics plus public service

Ethics education is an essential first step. Ideally, the seeds of ethical conduct are planted at home. But they must be nurtured throughout our educational system and, in some situations, schools will provide the only opportunity for such growth. While fostering ethics should be on every school agenda, our efforts must extend beyond the classroom.

We need to enlist civic, business and religious organizations in this critical task of teaching younger generations about the meaning of personal responsibility and genuine accountability. President Obama

raised these themes in his inaugural address. The need for change is recognized -- now we need to act. Let me propose two concrete steps.

First, our nation should explore adopting one year of voluntary, or even mandatory, national service for all able-bodied young adults upon their graduation from high school or reaching age 18. Some form of military service would be encouraged (but not required) with substantial scholarships, while service in AmeriCorps-type programs would be required of all others. Ethics would be woven throughout every participant's experience. All would serve their country, forging patriotism and commitment to something larger than themselves.

Second, we should not look solely to young adults for sacrifice. Our older generations -- from boomers to seniors -- should be asked (and expected) to serve part time (at least five hours per week) as mentors, tutors, coaches, activity directors and organizers in our schools, religious organizations and communities, modeling ethical behavior for our youth.

Why should we do this? Some will do it out of love for this country, recognizing "servant leadership" as part of our national heritage. But for others not so motivated, there is a very practical reason for this initiative. This nation faces daunting demographics.

We are an aging population. If we are to continue to grow our economy and compete in the world, we will need every young American to be educated to his or her fullest potential and to be committed to the values that have made this country strong.

In short, we are all in this crisis together. It is time to stand up, step forward and work together to create ethical citizens and leaders for our future.