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What's working: Rubicon, an underappreciated Richmond gem

By Globe Staff

Though Richmond has a limited number of community programs and many nonprofits that need to build capacity, the city also has one of the most promising programs in the Bay Area, Rubicon Programs.

Since 1973, Rubicon has built and operated affordable housing and provided employment, job training, mental health and other supportive services to individuals who have disabilities, are homeless or are otherwise economically disadvantaged. Based in Richmond but with services throughout the Bay Area, Rubicon employs more than 200 people, many in their flagship bakery.

Rubicon was established by community members concerned about the closure of state psychiatric hospitals. The founders recognized the need to develop local services for people disabled by chronic mental illness who were returning to the community. The organization expanded from providing services to the mentally ill to offering services and opportunities to the impoverished, homeless and drug addicted. Rubicon's solution was to develop a comprehensive service approach that also offers affordable housing and social purpose businesses.

Although known for its bakery, where it employs disadvantaged members of the community and produces excellent products, Rubicon also provides an array of other services, including: employment training programs, housing and case management for the homeless, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, and legal services through the Hawkins Center, which provides legal representation and assistance to people living with physical and mental disabilities and HIV/AIDS. Rubicon also operates the One-Stop Career Center in Berkeley.

The organization gets its name Rubicon from the pivotal moment when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River in Italy in 49 BC, changing his life forever. Today, Rubicon Programs offers people the chance to cross their own personal Rubicon and transform their lives.

Rubicon Programs boast of many success stories. One such success is Katrina, a bakery assistant at Rubicon Bakery. "Rubicon gave me my independence," said Katrina.

A former heavy drinker and drug user, Katrina had been attacked on the street one night. Rubicon helped her get her life together again. She got clean and sober, she found a place to live in Rubicon housing and she graduated from the bakery training with flying colors.

"Now I have a job," she said. "And a way to take care of myself."