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Opinion

In the struggling New Orleans neighborhood of Central City, Craig Cuccia runs Café Reconcile, a restaurant staffed by troubled youths.

Through the nonprofit venture, about 400 graduates who once had few prospects have learned skills that allowed them to get jobs in the Crescent City's hospitality industry. Proceeds from the restaurant go back into the training program, making Café Reconcile less dependent on the kind of hat-in-hand fundraising required of many nonprofits. The presence of Café Reconcile in Central City also is helping to revitalize the neighborhood, making it less likely that residents will be perpetrators or victims of crime.

Blending a business model with a philanthropic cause, Café Reconcile is a prime example of social entrepreneurship, a movement that's attempting to harness the creativity of the entrepreneur to solve social problems.

Cuccia was one of several speakers at a March 14 forum on social entrepreneurship sponsored by Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu's Office of Social Entrepreneurship.

The recent forum at the Baton Rouge River Center kicked off just a few blocks from the State Capitol, where lawmakers were wrapping up a special session on the budget.

While much attention naturally was focused on the nearby Capitol, a prominent center of social policy in Louisiana, speakers at Landrieu's forum suggested that grass-roots social entrepreneurs, not large government institutions, are starting to drive social change here and across the country.

Government, both at the state and federal level, will continue to have a large role in addressing social problems such as poverty, illiteracy and neighborhood blight.

But with an uncertain economy, a huge federal deficit and the financial obligations of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington does not seem poised for big, new social programs, regardless of which party wins the White House this year.

Meanwhile, even beyond the ranks of hardcore conservatives, many have grown skeptical of top-down government initiatives to address chronic social ills.

"We're spending well into the trillions of dollars at the federal level, and there's plenty of money being spent at the state level as well," nationally known social entrepreneurship expert Andrew Wolk told participants in the local forum. "Why is the dial (on social progress) not moving faster?"

"My grandfather was a councilman in Pittsburgh. He dedicated his life to civic change," Wolk said. "My father took a different path. He worked on Wall Street. Social entrepreneurship brings these two worlds together."

Wolk said government can assist social entrepreneurship by providing seed money, passing laws that give nonprofit groups more flexibility, and taking solutions incubated at the local level and scaling them to help even more people.

The grass-roots nature of social entrepreneurship seems to have particular appeal among a new generation of Americans who feel empowered by the Internet and other self-help tools. "I'm the king of Google," said Scott Hutcheson of the Louisiana Cultural Economy Foundation, a panelist at the forum. "You type in words, and the more you type in, the more you see how things go together."

As part of its mission to expand Louisiana's cultural economy, Hutcheson's foundation helped artists and musicians affected by the 2005 hurricanes. He found the Internet a help in connecting him with assistance.

That sort of social networking, once managed by large institutions, has become more diverse and diffuse, creating a climate of social experiment and innovation.

The social entrepreneurship movement also has coincided with a renewed interest in national volunteer service. "For the first time, national service is on the platforms of all the remaining presidential candidates, rather than being an afterthought," said panelist Camm Morton, a real estate developer who guided several projects for the nonprofit Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

But Morton cautioned that not all social entrepreneurship ventures will succeed. "We have to accept the fact that there will be failures," he said. "But if we're not failing, we're not trying."