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United Way's assessment of social issues released

CHRISTIAN HILL; The Olympian

Access to affordable medical and dental insurance remains the top issue for county residents surveyed for a community assessment presented Tuesday.

The United Way of Thurston County sponsored the community assessment to pull together data to see whether its investments of public dollars in four basic social issues – helping young people, meeting basic needs, promoting self-sufficiency, and supporting health and wellness – are paying dividends.

The report, which updates similar work from six years ago, also provides a snapshot of social and economic conditions in the county. It was produced by citizen volunteers and students from the masters program in public administration at The Evergreen State College.

The report puts in stark terms the toll the recession has taken on the area and how economic concerns have jumped to the forefront for those who participated in the assessment.

The assessment noted the increases in unemployment and home foreclosures, and decline in retail sales, which has forced local governments to scale back programs and services.

“Contrasting recent with past statistics will induce whiplash, from looking back and forth at how quickly our economic performance and related statistics have deteriorated,” the report stated.

Ninety-two percent of those surveyed rated access to or a lack of affordable medical and dental insurance as a major or moderate community issue, compared with 79 percent in 2003. In both cases, it was the most pressing issue of the top 10 identified in the assessments.

Poverty and homelessness, issues absent in the 2003 list, placed high this year. Lack of local jobs was prominent in both lists. Also new this year was lack of local career opportunities.

Two issues in the 2003 list, land use and overcrowded classrooms, didn't make the top 10 this time. Hunger, not present six years ago, made the list. Alcohol or other drug abuse dropped from fourth to 10th.

The identified issues this year appeared to take on urgency. In 2003, 64 percent rated the 10th issue, overcrowded classrooms, as a major or moderate community issue. This time around, the lowest-ranked issue on the list drew 83 percent.

“Overall, people seem to see these as more serious issues than they did in 2003,” said Larry Geri, the assessment's chief author.

Two factors might have affected the results: greater knowledge of issues by those who participated and how the information was gathered, through online surveys as opposed to the telephone survey last time, he said.

This year, 108 community leaders took a survey. An additional 303 residents took another survey.

Two online surveys of local social service providers were conducted in October and April. In addition, researchers conducted interviews with nine focus groups, including social service clients and providers, donors and others.

Overall, the investments made by United Way and others have paid off for young people, but the county continues to struggle with hunger, homelessness and medical services, the assessment said.

Services for senior citizens as the population ages will become an increasing challenge, the assessment said.

The assessment notes the community method for organizing and funding social services is “dysfunctional” and recommends increased collaboration among nonprofit organizations and that the United Way join with service providers to explore if the current ways of distributing money can be improved.

Identified community assets were community generosity of donations and volunteer hours, tolerance and diversity of the community, high priority on quality of life and engaged officials at all levels of government. The assessment notes the most common theme throughout the responses was a perceived lack of collaboration in the community. The state of community leadership and frustration about multiple jurisdictions were related issues.

The entire 43-page report can be viewed at www.unitedway-thurston.org.

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