
The Olympian

United Way to survey county's needs using Web site

Rolf Boone

The United Way of Thurston County launches an online survey today, the first in the organization's history, to help shape and better understand the social-service needs of South Sound.

To participate in the 10-minute survey through Saturday, go to www.unitedway-thurston.org.

The online community survey was produced, in part, with the help of faculty and staff members at The Evergreen State College. It is a follow-up to a similar survey in 2003 in which residents and community leaders identified the county's strengths and weaknesses.

Compared to 2003

In 2003, for example, concerns were raised about access to affordable health care, affordable housing and affordable child care, executive director Pam Toal said.

Now that the economy has slowed in 2009, those issues might be magnified, Toal said.

Other goals of the online survey include:

- **Identify** gaps and duplications in social services.
- **Create** data for local organizations to use for planning purposes.
- **Provide** a snapshot of the community's priorities.

Once the online survey is complete, the results will be combined with the results of a January survey of community and business leaders. The combined data are expected to be released in May, Toal said.

The United Way of Thurston County, which helps to fund about 50 programs at 34 organizations, also has felt the slower economy, Toal said. She said \$1.1 million has been pledged; the goal is raising \$1.4 million by March 31.

"We are pretty concerned about reaching our goal," Toal said, although she pointed out there are four weeks left in its campaign.

Other social-service organizations, too, are feeling the pinch of the slower economy.

The Olympia YWCA's The Other Bank, which gives away personal hygiene products and household cleaning materials, has watched demand go up and donations go down in this economy, director Randi Miller said. This year, The Other Bank is expected to serve 20,000 people, up from 17,000 last year, she said.

The Thurston County Food Bank served 10,000 households in 2008. Of those, 4,000 were first-time users, executive director Robert Coit said.

"They just don't know where to turn," he said.