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Facts in hand, we need solutions for social needs

THE OLYMPIAN

United Way of Thurston County recently completed a survey that should spark a conversation about social service needs and how we, as a community, can best meet those needs.

Economic recessions are especially challenging for nonprofit organizations which pick up the slack when people fall through the cracks in government programs. Nonprofits are struggling to meet increasing demands for services at a time when government entities are cutting funding to community programs.

What the community assessment found – and it's no surprise – is that South Sound is a very giving and caring community. People here care about their neighbors – those they know and those they don't. They donate money to feed, clothe and shelter the needy. They care about homelessness and those parents and children without medical insurance. They recognize that there are pockets of poverty in this county so deep that half the school children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. We are blessed to live in a community where residents are willing to share their time, their talent and their treasure to make this a better place to live for everyone. The community assessment found some interesting transitions in the community since the last survey six years ago.

The findings:

We have grown – a lot – since 2003. Since then, roughly 38,000 more people have taken up residence here. Yelm, which grew by 57 percent between 2000 and 2008, leads the way, with Lacey and the unincorporated area around it also seeing double-digit population increases.

We are not a very diverse community but diversity is coming. Of a countywide population of 245,300, 86 percent are white. But consider this statistic: Between 24 and 27 percent of the county's youth under the age of 19 are from a minority racial group.

Likewise, the impact of the aging baby boomer generation hasn't hit fully, but by 2020 the county expects to have more than 60,000 senior citizens. We, as a community, are not well prepared to provide services to the aging population.

And we see a community divided between haves and have nots.

Ninety-three percent of the residents hold a high school degree, 33 percent have a bachelor's degree and 12 percent hold a graduate or professional degree. The household median income is \$61,000, according to Larry Geri, a professor at The Evergreen State College who spearheaded the community assessment survey and crunched the numbers.

But there's a significant part of the population living at the other end of the spectrum.

School census counts last fall showed 806 homeless kids enrolled in local schools. That's enough kids to fill 32 classrooms with 25 school children in each class.

Hunger parallels homelessness. In 2008 the Thurston County Food Bank served 37,000 clients, a 39 percent increase from 2007. A typical Food Bank client, according to executive director Robert Coit, is "a white woman with children. She is disabled, unemployed, receives some kind of food assistance in addition to Food Bank services and has lived in Thurston County more than a year."

While the community assessment survey paints a picture of who we are, the question is how can the information be used to make this a better place for those struggling to make ends meet.

Pam Toal, executive director of the United Way of Thurston County, said the assessment — which included surveys of community residents and leaders, along with focus groups — said the senior baby boom is coming and we had better get prepared. There's more room for collaboration among local nonprofits and there needs to be a strategic approach to allocating funds.

Toal said she'll be encouraging the United Way board to take a closer look at three key areas: hunger, homelessness and health care.

Rhodetta Seward, president of the local United Way, said she wants to use the assessment to answer two questions: Is the United Way focused on the right areas and are United Way dollars being invested in the right programs to make a positive difference in the community?

But the conversation needs to involve the entire community. Residents will have even more information available to them later this summer on the extent of giving and the breadth of the social service safety net. A census of service clubs is under way to catalog services they are providing. A similar survey is assessing services provided by the faith community and a third survey is checking out the nonprofit sector.

When compiled, that will be this community's first comprehensive look at social services from multiple sectors. It will show duplication of services, gaps in programs and provide a road map for how the community can work collaboratively to draw more volunteers and donations.

Community leaders can then use that information to map a united vision for South Sound, something that's lacking today.

A good place to begin is to read the United Way's community assessment survey at www.unitedway-thurston.org.