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## Area group dissects poverty issue

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Moving people from poverty to self-sufficiency is a daunting task.

It's so daunting that the Pathways Past Poverty group of the United Way of Larimer County has broken it into 12 goals - ranging from affordable, accessible child care and job training to mass transit and financial literacy. Each goal has a task force studying that issue to determine the challenges and obstacles that must be overcome.

And the challenge keeps growing.

According to results released this fall from the American Community Survey, the poverty rate in Larimer County has increased by about 39 percent since 2000, peaking at 12.8 percent in 2007. That means more than one in 10 people in Larimer County is living on an income lower than the national poverty guideline.

Poverty as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2008 was a family of four earning less than \$21,200 a year. For an individual, the poverty line was set at \$10,400.

And those stats were compiled before the current recession hit Northern Colorado.

In 2009, Larimer County lost 4,500 jobs. Other workers were hit with pay cuts, furloughs and reduced hours.

Demand for services at the Food Bank for Larimer County climbed 30 percent in the past year. Neighbor to Neighbor served 30 percent more people, and the Homelessness Prevention Initiative provided rental assistance to 56 percent more people.

The need is there, but many people in Larimer County don't recognize it.

"A lot of people don't want to believe poverty is an issue in Larimer County," said Marija Weeden-Osborn, Pathways Past Poverty coordinator and community investment associate.

"Because we don't see people sitting on the corner, it's easier to believe they're not there," she said.

The Pathways Past Poverty group recognizes poverty is a complex issue with no simple solution. That's why the group, with help from the community, determined 12 goals that will address the issues, problems and barriers that keep people in poverty.

The process is taking longer than organizers had hoped, Weeden-Osborn said, but she believes it's important to thoroughly address the issues.

"It's all a balancing act. How can we work to change society and create plans that we'll then be able to tailor to help fit different needs?" she said.

## **Affordable child care**

Mims Harris leads the task force studying affordable, accessible child care.

The biggest challenge is affordability. "There are many families who are not in a position to afford child care," Harris said. "It's become even more critical given these economic times. There are families, single parents, who are having to make more tough choices like, 'am I making enough money to afford child care? What are my options?' "

Traditionally, Larimer County has not had enough child-care spaces, but with the economic downturn, there are fewer people putting their children into child care because many are no longer working, she said.

The other challenge is making sure child-care providers earn a livable wage.

"We don't really pay our providers what they ought to be paid in terms of quality salaries and benefits. These are people who are responsible for our little people."

But paying child-care workers more in turn raises the costs for the service. "It's a vicious cycle," Harris said.

The task force is also looking at other options for child care. Currently, no major employers provide onsite child care, and Harris hopes to get more of them involved in solving the problem.

"There's a direct impact on the work force. When parents are concerned about their children, especially if they are sick, they're not able to focus or they may have to take time off to care for the child," she said. "We need to find out what options businesses would consider exploring to support their employees in relationship to child care."

The task force plans to survey businesses in 2010.

## **Financial literacy**

Sara Gilbert, executive director of Consumer Credit Counseling Services, and Laurel Kubin, Larimer County Extension Office director, serve on both the financial literacy and financial justice committees.

Both think financial literacy is key to not only helping people escape poverty, but also to being financially solvent.

"We live in a complex financial society," Gilbert said. "Thirty years ago, you opened a savings account, a checking account and got a loan from the bank to buy your house. You were good to go," she said.

Now people are overwhelmed with different financial offers and options.

"We want to arm people with basic financial tools. All of us need this," Gilbert said. "It's not as easy as riding a bike."

The goal is to take away the embarrassment people might feel about taking courses to learn more about their finances, Kubin said.

"Finances are a very private topic. Some people don't want to be embarrassed by saying out loud that I don't know enough about credit reports or whatever the topic may be," she said.

Financial management is basic.

"It's all about making choices and weighing needs versus wants," Kubin said. "Absolutely everybody needs to have good knowledge and skills. It doesn't matter your age, background or how much money they make. It's something everybody needs to work on."

Financial justice is a trickier issue to tackle, Gilbert said.

People who make little money often have few choices for managing their finances, and those services, such as pay day lenders, can be expensive.

"People who don't know much about finances tend to fall victim to these more expensive ways," Gilbert said.

The group's goal is to educate people about free or low-cost ways to manage their finances.

## Additional Facts

### Poverty in Larimer County

This is part one of a two-part series.

> **Wednesday:** Agencies that provide emergency services saw demand skyrocket in 2009.