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Goal is to slow the growth of poverty, remove barriers

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The news these days can be pretty depressing. With an unemployment rate of 6 percent and the loss of 5,300 jobs in Larimer County since January, many friends, neighbors and colleagues are unemployed and struggling financially.

Others are working but have had their hours cut or are facing multiple furlough days, leaving them financially compromised, too.

My heartfelt concern and best wishes go out to all who are currently facing challenging situations.

Once a family's income is lost or cut dramatically, it is easy to see how quickly reserves can be depleted, leaving them vulnerable to any bump in the road — an illness, the car breaking down, the loss of a hot-water heater. With resources almost nonexistent, it doesn't take much to push a family over the edge. Once over that edge, it takes an awful lot to become stable and self-sufficient again.

With these situations becoming more commonplace, we begin to realize that this can happen to almost anyone.

In the past nine years in Larimer County, this situation has been occurring in increasing numbers.

According to the American Community Survey, the poverty rate in Larimer County has increased by approximately 39 percent since 2000, peaking at 12.8 percent in 2007. Keep in mind these numbers were collected before the current downturn in the economy. That means more than one in 10 people in Larimer County is living on an income lower than the national poverty guideline.

This trend is concerning because increases in poverty have extensive human and economic costs.

Academic success, health and dental care, crime rates, and future earnings are all negatively impacted when children grow up in families with very low incomes.

There is also a high economic cost. According to a report by the Human Services Policy Center (2008) poverty is estimated to cost Colorado's economy \$6.8 billion each year.

Pathways Past Poverty is a countywide effort that began two years ago in response to the dramatic increase in poverty rates since 2000 in Larimer County.

In collaboration with the Coloradoan and Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation, United Way of Larimer County has provided leadership in this effort to turn around this worrisome trend that has the potential to become a drain on our local economy.

The reasons for this increase in poverty are complex and very different for every family. Therefore, Pathways Past Poverty is seeking to impact a comprehensive set of solutions focused on four levels: Individual actions, our health and human service capabilities, our community's human, economic and social resources, and public policies. Future columns will address specific Pathways Past Poverty efforts. Our overall goal is to slow the growth of poverty in Larimer County and remove barriers so struggling county residents have a clear path to better times. We want to ensure that in Northern Colorado anyone with the will, ability and determination can be self-sufficient and thrive. Our local economy depends on it.

To learn more, visit www.pathwayspastpoverty.org.