

Empowering Families to Achieve Their Full Potential

Report from United Way of the Eastern Panhandle

Strong Families Community Solutions Council

Overview of the Situation

Many families in the Eastern Panhandle continue to struggle to meet basic needs on a limited income. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2004, 11.2% of persons in Berkeley County, 9.0% of persons in Jefferson County, and 10.6% of persons in Morgan County lived below the federal poverty level. The federal poverty level for a family of four in 2007 was \$20,130 year.

The number of families that struggle to meet basic needs, or do not make a living wage, is even greater. A living wage is the theoretical wage level that allows the earner to afford adequate shelter, food and the other necessities of life with no more than 30% of income to be spent on housing. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition report “Out of Reach 2006” an hourly wage of \$12.60, or approximately \$26,000.00 annually, is needed to afford a modest two bedroom apartment in Berkeley County.

In addition to, or often because of, financial issues, many families struggle with numerous other concerns that affect their ability to achieve their full potential. These include, but are not limited to: lack of access to health care including behavioral health care, overwhelmed parents or guardians, limited job opportunities, substance abuse, violence, etc.

Council Findings

The Strong Families Community Solutions Council was charged with setting goals that would help the Eastern Panhandle community support strong families: **families that are able to achieve their full potential and be self sufficient.** (Self-sufficiency is the ability for a family to have the resources to meet its own needs without public or private assistance.)

Financial instability is linked to problems with reliable transportation, affordable housing, child care and adequate health care. One bad day (personal illness, lack of child care, unexpected expense) can lead to crisis. If individuals miss work, they may lose their job. No health care coverage can lead to a minor health problem going untreated and turning into a major health problem. An unexpected expense requires them to decide if they are paying rent or putting food on the table. Families are exhausted and depressed and can't seem to break the cycle.

To explore these issues further, the Council members asked “Why are families struggling?”

Key findings, included:

- Many individuals who are struggling come from families where there is a generational cycle of poverty and few positive role models who encourage success, self esteem, self respect, and an achievement mentality. These individuals also have limited opportunities to broaden their horizons.

Key findings, cont.

- Women (or girls) are having children too young and are having more children than they can support, financially as well as emotionally. Often they are having children by multiple fathers who are not involved and do not provide financial nor emotional support for the children or the mother.
- Lack of education or basic skills is another barrier to success. In Berkeley County, 15% of the population is illiterate (can't read at a fourth grade level), and approximately 25% of the Eastern Panhandle population has not earned a high school diploma
- Many individuals lack basic life and parenting skills.
- Due to a lack of education and employment skills, many individuals are either unable to obtain or keep a job.
- Substance abuse is a common thread that runs through many of the problems families face.

To address these issues, the Council identified the following goals and key elements:

Goal: Families have the life skills to function as a stable unit.

Key elements:

- * To improve parenting skills
- * To assist families in developing effective problem-solving skills.
- * To assist families in identifying and accessing appropriate resources to move toward self sufficiency
- * To increase skills needed to obtain and maintain employment

Goal: Families have good health status

Key elements:

- * To provide and promote health education
- * To ensure a safe living environment
- * To address substance abuse prevention
- * To increase access to dental, behavioral and medical health services

Goal: Families are financially stable and are able to access the basic resources they need

Key elements:

- * To assist with maximizing and enhancing income
- * To increase access to private and public transportation
- * To provide access to quality and affordable child care, including evening and weekend hours
- * To increase awareness of and access to decent, affordable housing

Goal: Families are motivated and empowered to develop positive aspirations

Key Elements:

- * To provide opportunities and experiences that enhance self respect and self esteem
- * To promote and increase positive goal setting
- * To provide exposure to positive role models
- * To increase opportunities and appreciation of life-enriching experiences