

Some who need help in Union County can't find it

Survey surprises agency

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MARYSVILLE, Ohio — Rochelle Twining, as executive director of a social-service organization, spends her days guiding the poor and disadvantaged to help.

She knows the network can be a maze, but she thought that people navigated it fairly well.

So a new study released yesterday analyzing the social-service needs in Union County surprised her: It emphasized that the public is generally unaware of how to seek help.

Twining, director of the Community Action Organization of Delaware, Madison and Union counties, said more people are using the Internet to search for assistance and that's leading to a less-cohesive network.

"People Google and search out agencies on their own, and then the other agencies don't know who is getting what by way of help, and we may be losing track of some of the needs because of it."

Twining was among about 50 community leaders who attended a meeting yesterday where the results of the Union County Community Needs Assessment were released. Social-service providers say it had been decades since such a comprehensive study was done locally.

Community Action, the United Way of Union County and several businesses and organizations covered the \$27,000 cost of the study, which was done by Community Research Partners, a Columbus nonprofit research and data center.

Executive Director Roberta Garber said the research showed that transportation needs and access to affordable housing are among the county's biggest problems.

Garber's organization culled data from a variety of sources, conducted focus groups with 23 people and surveyed 21 social-service agency clients and 37 agency directors. She said that small survey pool is typical. "We're not presenting it as scientifically significant data," she said. "It is a snapshot of the need."

Among the findings:

- At least 590 of the community's 18,000 households have no access to transportation. With little to no taxi, shuttle or general-public bus service, it's a barrier to employment.
- Only 23 percent of the housing in the county is rental, and a wage of \$14 an hour is required to be able to afford the average \$773 rent.
- Nearly 2,300 homeowners and at least 1,000 renters spend more than 35 percent of their income on housing.
- Nearly 20 percent of the county's 52,300 residents are over the age of 55, and the demand for senior services is expected to grow rapidly.

Although the research showed there are pockets of deep poverty, in the villages of Richwood and Unionville Center in particular, the overall median household income was \$67,798 in the years 2007 to 2009 (about \$21,000 higher than the statewide median).

John Gore, executive director of the Union County Department of Job and Family Services and also mayor of Marysville, said the poverty numbers don't tell the whole story. In July, more than 10 percent of the county's population was receiving Medicaid health benefits and, in August, close to 2,000 families were receiving food stamps.

"It's the working poor, those just barely getting by, that are so badly in need of the help and not finding it," he said.

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