

How Are The Children? A Community Sharing

November 9, 2006



How are the children?

What are the urgent needs of children in the community?

What are the roles and responsibilities of groups in our community to respond to those needs?

These questions were addressed at a community forum, “How Are the Children? A Community Sharing,” held November 9, 2006. The event brought together over 100 people, representing interested community members as well as dozens of local agencies and organizations to discuss the current state of children in our community. The forum was sponsored by Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga, Area Congregations Together (ACT), Catholic Parish Social Ministry Network, Community Foundation of Tompkins County, League of Women Voters of Tompkins County, and Tompkins County Youth Services Dept. George Ferrari, director of the Community Foundation of Tompkins County, facilitated the forum.

Keynote Marcia Fort, director of GIAC, stated, “We must ask ‘How are the adults?’ in order to examine how children are faring.” Many parents are stressed, with lack of time, money and resources to give quality care to their children. Citing U.S. Census data, Ms. Fort stated that in 2000, one third of Tompkins County residents were low income. County poverty rates increased from 2000 to 2003. Ms. Fort noted how poverty affects children: a lack of affordable housing, adequate nutritious food, access to quality child care and to mental health services. While local efforts have alleviated the worst of some of these issues, problems remain. And though some complain about a perceived duplication of services, Ms Fort stated that all services are needed and work together to address the needs of those facing the most challenges.

“We need to join forces to let our elected officials know that housing is a grave issue for our children,” Fort stated emphatically. “Families need quality, affordable housing and there is not enough.” It was a concern echoed throughout the evening. In addition, free and reduced price meals provided by schools are important; for some children, these are the only meals they receive. There is a special need for “stop-gap” food services on weekends and for emergencies.

Fishbowl conversation Following the keynote, representatives from ten organizations participated in a facilitated “fishbowl conversation” on the urgent needs of children in poverty and the responsibility and role of not for profits, faith-based groups, government, neighborhood associations, corporations and others in addressing the needs. “We wanted to bring together individuals with various perspectives and experiences on the issues faced by area children and families to engage in discussion,” explained Edie Reagan of Catholic Charities of Tompkins County. “We included several empty chairs so individuals could move in and out of the conversation to share their own insights.” Initial participants included representatives from local food banks, homeless shelters, service organizations, and government agencies with expertise and knowledge in four pre-selected topics: child care, food security, housing and mental health.

“Due to the lack of housing, many [clients of Teen Pregnancy and Parenting Program] end up moving to rural areas,” Sue Dale Hall explained. “They're moving because they can't afford to live anywhere else, they're not moving out there with a car, and then they're dislocated from resources they need.”

Others agreed with the need for more affordable housing; one in three families has problems affording housing and there are long wait lists for Section 8 housing. A safe, affordable place to live gives stability: moving frequently hinders children’s progress in school and when housing is secured, school performance improves. People should be able to complain about housing inadequacies without fear of being evicted.

Pat Karr-Segal of Family and Children's Service said transportation problems go beyond lack of access to services. “They have no way to get to anything, be it a medical appointment or a recreational event. They are isolated and can't form support networks,” she said. “And that isolationism increases the stress that they feel.”

Leonardo Vargas-Mendez of the Latino Civic Association spoke of isolation faced by many in the growing local immigrant population. Some do not speak English and have difficult accessing help and added that poverty affects some ethnic groups at a high rate than others. He encouraged all to have a voice in local government and support local businesses with the vision we want for our community.

Isolation and stress, others noted, contribute to other issues including substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health problems. Interconnected with all themes was lack of access to transportation.

Small Group Discussions and Proposed Action Steps Discussion groups formed for more in-depth conversation on the four topics. Each group also developed an action proposal, a step community members can take to address a need.

Mental Health Group:

Resource person: Pat Karr-Segal, Family and Children's Service

- ACTION STEP: Timothy's Law needs to be passed, allowing for access to essential mental health care services. Bill is currently held up in the NYS Senate.
- Examine how well we, as a community, promote emotional well-being. Support sufficient preventative care, early screening in schools and a way to tune in to the desperate needs of kids flying below the radar screen
- There's a need to designate centers in outlying areas for kids to obtain supports. Expand on work done by GIAC, Food Pantries and Mentors/ Professionals.
- There's a need to work more efficiently with schools and facilitate networking with service providers

Child Care Group

Resource person: Sue Dale Hall, Day Care & Child Development Council of Tompkins County

- ACTION STEPS: 1) advocate for more money from the federal and state governments and employers to help meet subsidy needs; 2) advocate for adjustments in regulations allowing more family members to be involved in child care.
- There are a number of state and national advocacy groups focusing on child care issues with whom community members could check for action steps and information on issues.
- Much of the child care in Tompkins County is not regulated, furnished by family and friends as informal providers. The enrollment requirements have in some cases caused informal providers to leave the field.
- There is a class division as to who can afford and get quality care. Only one in seven eligible low or moderate income families receive child care subsidies. Costs and care environments vary widely. For school age children, families often patch together care, but it becomes more difficult in the summer because of high camp fees. Families of all income levels need help so they can learn more about resources for child care subsidies, scholarships and care options.

Housing Group

Resource persons: John Ward, American Red Cross; Lee Dillon, Tompkins Community Action

- ACTION STEPS: 1) "The Future of Supportive Housing in New York State: What the New Governor Can Do." Inform our new governor about homelessness and the need for housing linked to supportive services to transition people from situations such as jail and rehab. The goal is moving people out of poverty. 2) Sponsor a poor family – Similar to the refugee adoption program, a sponsoring individual or group would help a poor family get on their feet and help overcome isolation. This approach could help us discover the best ways to address the problem of poverty.
- Teen homelessness – There are many homeless teens in Ithaca area, not visible but definitely a problem.
- Poverty simulation - This is a serious role play to acquaint people, especially those in positions of authority, about the problems facing the poor each day. There is a plan for this to happen in the community on Martin Luther King Day.
- The Burlington Land Trust (www.bclt.net) was mentioned as a group that is working to provide affordable housing (in a community similar to Ithaca) in the state of Vermont.

Food Security Group

Resource person: Natasha Thompson, Food Bank of the Southern Tier

- ACTION STEP: Watch for and support the upcoming Farm Bill renewal of federal nutrition programs, particularly the Summer Food Service Program.
- While food pantries are a great resource, some people are reluctant to use them. Pantry schedules don't work for all and some lack transportation to get food. (Some pantries do deliveries to those without a vehicle to pick up food or who are disabled or elderly.) Encourage people who use pantries to sign up for food stamps.
- One good resource mentioned was Smart Buy, a food coop targeted at low income people.
- Encourage people to speak with elected officials; identify effective means of advocacy. For example, have funding cuts to DSS created inadequate staffing to process applications to meet people's needs?
- There is a need for education in making healthy food choices. Encourage people to take advantage of Cornell Cooperative Extension's resources to learn about cooking and nutrition.

"Everything ties together," explained John Ward of the American Red Cross. "They all play a part in the problem [of] poverty. They can't be talked about separately because they all play a role as obstacles to creating stability in the lives of individuals, their families, and children."