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Desperate conditions -- how will we respond?

The number of Volusia County residents receiving food stamps grew sharply from 2003 through 2006, as did the number of Volusia and Flagler families applying for welfare. Homelessness grew in both counties, and the percentage of Volusia families living in poverty increased sharply.

The numbers included in the Community Agenda Snapshot, which details social conditions in Volusia and Flagler counties, read like the rumbling of an approaching storm. But local leaders say that in many ways, the storm is already here. Most of the statistics in the report, released earlier this month by One Voice for Volusia, are from 2006. Economic conditions have worsened considerably since then.

As of late May, Flagler County's jobless rate of 7.6 percent is the highest in the state. Volusia County also saw an increase from previous years, though the county's rate of 5 percent unemployment remains below the average. When the unemployment rate increases, local social-service agencies know to brace for an increase in desperate families who show up needing help. For example, there were 17 people at the Family Life Center, a domestic-violence shelter in Flagler County, in the first quarter of 2007 -- and 34 in the first quarter of 2008, a doubling that shelter officials attribute in large part to interfamilial stress caused by the economic downturn.

Housing may be the biggest pressure point. Foreclosures are soaring in Volusia and Flagler counties, and area apartments still rent for rates above the federal "fair market rate," meaning many families face an increasing battle just to keep a roof over their heads.

But many agencies have little help to give. State budget cuts and local tax reductions hit social programs hard, a problem that cuts across the spectrum of need. In the past few years, this area lost beds and outpatient treatment slots for mental health and substance abuse. Organizers of food pantries say their cupboards are running bare, and programs meant to prevent child abuse and redirect youthful offenders also face shortfalls.

Local officials should continue to push federal and state governments for better funding. They also can advocate policy changes that help struggling families before economic disaster creates a breeding ground for domestic violence, depression, homelessness and substance abuse.

But the Community Agenda Snapshot should drive home the message that this is a local problem -- and one that demands a local reaction. Other communities have responded to the evidence of need by taxing themselves to create sources of funding for social services. In the counties that opted for a property tax, the amount levied on each property is barely noticeable -- but the good accomplished through local funding is obvious, and a long-term investment that can prevent even greater costs to taxpayers.

Creating something similar in Volusia and Flagler counties will take courage and leadership. But the alternatives -- bemoaning the growing problems while doing nothing to provide assistance, or simply ignoring the increasing desperation -- should be untenable to those with a conscience.

Community Snapshot

A sampling from the

Snapshot (most figures

from 2006 data):

Percentage of residents living in poverty:

Volusia County: 12.8

Flagler County: 7.6

Florida: 12.6

Percentage of renters unable to afford fair market rent, as determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development:

Volusia County: 49

Flagler County: 46

Florida: 53

Number of girls ages 10-17 who have at least one child, per 1,000 people in the general population:

Volusia County: 7.8

Flagler County: 6.1

Florida: 9.2

Number of homeless children and youth (2006-07 school year):

Volusia County: 1,884

Flagler County: 17

Florida: not available

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