

2007 COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Poverty Forum Findings

Poverty Forum 2007
Local Community Discussion on
Poverty

INTRODUCTION

Schuylkill Community Action (SCA), a private non-profit Community Action Agency, conducts the 2007 Community Needs Assessment in accordance with agency planning efforts. The Assessment is SCA's effort to report on the needs and resources for low-income persons, social/human service providers, stakeholders, and the general community.

Assessing the needs of our local community, specifically Schuylkill County, is essential to coordinating, planning, and providing a variety of social programs and services. Identifying problems and issues that extend beyond poverty rates and general demographics is crucial to determining the services and programs that meet the needs of all people.

The 2007 Assessment included three components: web-based surveys (surveys designed to elicit feedback from clients, service providers, key stakeholders, and the general community), a Poverty Forum, and analysis of existing community data.

This document contains the findings of the Poverty Forum. Findings were developed from the qualitative data collected through small group discussions that occurred during the Poverty Forum. The report may be utilized as a reference tool by other interested parties. However, Schuylkill Community Action requests the user of the report include the following citation in any materials referencing the report: *2007 Community Needs Assessment—Poverty Forum Findings*. Report prepared by Schuylkill Community Action. March 2008

About Poverty Forum 2007: Local Community Discussion on Poverty

SCA, through the generous support of Susquehanna **Bancshares** (formerly Community Banks) hosted the Poverty Forum 2007: Local Community Discussion on Poverty—on Thursday, August 9, 2007 in Pottsville, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania. The forum was part of the 2007 Community Needs Assessment, and was the third poverty forum facilitated by SCA since 1990.

The Forum elicited information from a wide range of community residents, public officials, and service provider’s concerning community needs and issues via group discussion. The forum provided public awareness of poverty in Schuylkill County and a way for public officials, service providers, business leaders, and low-income people to come together to discuss issues of poverty. The forum included 90 participants.

Forum Objectives:

- Create awareness in regards to the prevalence/extent of poverty in Schuylkill County.
- Identify issues and concerns surrounding poverty.
- Identify Barriers and Resistance to Addressing Poverty
- Identify Community Strengths and Resources for Change
- Obtain Recommended Action Steps/Solutions
- Review and Elicit Follow-up Activities to the Forum

Forum Participants

- Low Income Persons
- Elected Officials
- Educators
- Faith-Based Groups
- Social Service Providers
- Other (Community leader, Funding Source, Media, Appointed Officials)

Forum Process:

Participants were randomly assigned to a group. Lead by the Forum Facilitator, the groups discussed each question and recorded their summations. Primary focus questions included:

1. What are the issues and concerns surrounding poverty in Schuylkill County?
2. What are the barriers to addressing/eliminating poverty in Schuylkill County?
3. What are the local community’s strengths and resources for change in regards to poverty in Schuylkill County?
4. What are your recommended action steps/solutions to educating/eliminating poverty in Schuylkill County?

Additional questions were provided as “discussion starters” in order to assist the group process.

Data derived from forum on poverty:

- Issues and concerns surrounding poverty
- Barriers and resistance to addressing poverty
- Community strengths and resources for change
- Action steps/solutions

Poverty Forum Analysis

Qualitative data was obtained from responses. Responses were recorded on separate response forms. Responses were reviewed and entered into a database and further analyzed. Further analysis included reviewing responses and recording the frequency of prevalent concerns and issues cited by each group. Responses were then coded into major themes.

FINDINGS

ISSUES AND CONCERNS SURROUNDING POVERTY IN SCHUYLKILL COUNTY

Forum groups identified a variety of issues and concerns regarding poverty in Schuylkill County. Overall, themes, perspectives, and phrases were repeated and prominent among the various groups’ responses. Education, individual issues, health, employment, and transportation are among the major themes. The following findings present major themes in order of most to least prevalent.

Theme 1: Education

Perspective: lack of education as a factor relating to poverty

As a whole, the groups identified education as an issue. Groups are concerned with educational levels, specifically level of educational attainment in Schuylkill County:

Lack of education as it relates to drop out rates, literacy, and truancy

Family support and encouragement to pursue educational opportunity as a factor related to educational attainment, and financial aid

Individual groups identified sub-themes related to education and poverty, such as:

- Lack of financial education
- Consistent funding base for all school districts
- The economic impact of poverty on school districts
- Correlation between educational attainment and higher wage employment

Response sample:

- Schools need to support kids to stay in school and not allow 17 Year- olds to quit.
- Education [is a factor in] getting a higher income job to pay bills.
- Education levels, financial aid [are] needed to further education.

Theme 2: Individual Issues and Groups Affected

Perspective: Personal attitude and behaviors as a factor relating to poverty

Perspective: The elderly population is most affected by poverty

Groups identified a theme that may be described as conceptual or individualistic. A common response included mention of the “individual” in relation to poverty issues and concerns:

- An individual’s poor attitude, negativity
- Lack of individual/family motivation
- Individual’s feeling powerless
- Personal pride as an impediment to obtaining assistance

Other factors commonly cited by the groups include:

- The existence of generational and cyclical poverty
- prevalence of single parent families

Response Sample:

- *Personal pride. Poor (Especially widows) simply don’t want to accept charity.*
- *Generational poverty in Schuylkill County - kids having kids on assistance.*
- *Generational (mom and dad can’t see hope to get out of it).*
- *Certain populations were noted by the groups as experiencing or affected by poverty on the local level. Groups of people most commonly noted include:*
- *Elderly population, high number of elderly*
- *Single parent families, grandparents as caregivers, children, disabled persons*
- *[There is] a large majority of communities [with a] population over 60 with incomes below the poverty levels.*
- *People affected are those on fixed incomes (elderly).*
- *Prevalence of single parent families with many children under 18 years old, [they] can not go to work and lose benefits given to them*

Theme 3: Health and Employment Issues

Perspective: Lack of health insurance and healthcare is a concern for people in poverty

Perspective: The economy and local economic environment are factors associated with local poverty

Health insurance and employment concerned many groups. Health insurance was noted in several responses:

- Lack of health insurance, the “underinsured”
- Lack of affordable healthcare
- Individual struggle to obtain health care

Responses that included employment related the subject to the economy:

- Limited employment opportunities
- Loss of quality employment
- Low wages
- Lack of economic development

Response sample:

- *Medical insurance – if someone has health insurance through employer and loses [their] job, [they] can easily fall into poverty with a serious medical condition. Need to have healthcare not dependent on employment.*
- *Schuylkill County should increase [county wage levels] since the minimum wage was increased. More people with college degrees [are] making 10 to 12 dollars an hour [and] may end up in poverty.*
- *Need more options and better pay [wages] for those that are here [living in the County].*

Theme 4: Transportation**Perspective: public transportation and transportation in general is a concern for people in poverty**

A portion of the groups noted transportation as an issue in regards to poverty.

- Lack of and quality of transportation available
- Transportation as a barrier to employment

Response sample:

- *Bus transportation doesn't fit schedules, sometimes [people do not have a]*
- *vehicle*
- *Transportation – if [there is] no way to get vehicle, [then it is] hard to get job, etc.*

FINDINGS**BARRIERS TO ADDRESSING AND ELIMINATING POVERTY IN SCHUYLKILL COUNTY**

Forum groups noted several barriers that impede the reduction or elimination of poverty in Schuylkill County. Individual issues, education, community/culture, and programs/services are among the major themes. The following findings present major themes in order of most to least prevalent.

Theme 1: Individual**Perspective: Individual behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes serve as barriers to addressing and eliminating poverty**

Regarding barriers to addressing and eliminating poverty, the forum groups identified barriers relating to the individual:

- Lack of personal initiative, motivation
- Lack of accountability of those utilizing services/assistance programs
- Negative personal attitudes
- Self pride
- Lack of education
- Cyclical poverty, the poverty “culture”

Response Samples:

- *Individuals don't want help because their needs are met through welfare.*
- *People will spend their last dollar on lottery tickets and booze*
- *Pride – admitting you need help or needing to take in your surroundings – your home, job, etc.*
- *Cycle continues – lack of motivation, do not want to change, comfortable with status quo*

Theme 2: Education**Perspective: Lack of education and literacy rates are barriers to addressing and eliminating poverty**

The forum groups also identified education and issues relating to education as barriers:

- Lack of education in general

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- Lack of education resulting in skilled laborers
- Extent to which population is literate
- Responsibility of local school districts to educate
- Costs associated with secondary education

Response samples:

- *Companies should allow time for employees to increase literacy, this would benefit companies in the long run by investing in their employees*
- *Create programs to show value of education, [so people] can see what is needed to succeed*
- *If issues can not be resolved through programs, for children – have mandatory educational classes once the child reaches 6th grade – for the parents*
- *Drop out rates – programs to help motivate students to complete education*
- *High schools are letting our children down by not teaching communication skills and skills that allow students to transfer to college and be successful in college*

Theme 3: Community/Culture

Perspective: The community's perspective and views on poverty are barriers to addressing and eliminating poverty

The attitude and perspectives held by the local community serves as another theme prevalent among group responses. Groups expressed concern with the local community view on poverty:

Widely held misconceptions regarding poverty
Lack of empathy, apathy, and unawareness

Response samples:

- *Lack of encouragement from the community*
- *Resistance to change*
- *Vision and perceptions of community – internally and externally*
- *We need to focus energies, pick goals, narrow the focus*
- *We attract the poor*
- *Apathy – not willing to “see” the problem – get out and see it*

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Theme 4: Programs and Services

Perspective: Lack of programs, services, and funding and program structure that target poverty create barriers to addressing and eliminating poverty

Groups noted concerns regarding programs and services. Many responses indicated concerns related to programming and the administration of services:

- *General lack of programs and services needed to address poverty*
- *Gaps in services and programs*
- *Lack of funding to support programs and services*
- *Problems regarding program guidelines*

Response samples:

- *Barriers create the poverty problem (lack of services to fill the gap)*
- *Programs need change, they are not working as they are*
- *Dependency on grant funding to provide services [is an issue]*
- *Make programs more strict to get on*

Theme 5: Government, politics, funding, and economy

Perspective: The actions of the government and elected officials, in addition to the state of the economy are barriers to addressing and eliminating poverty

A secondary issue cited by groups included mention of the government and economy in general:

- *Variances in local governmental priorities*
- *Actions and decisions by elected officials*
- *Lack of funding for programs and services*
- *Lack of jobs, low wages, and other economic factors*

Response sample:

- *Need the government to step up and take care of our own [people]*
- *Misplaced priorities from our governmental officials – local, state, federal*
- *Higher wages for educated individuals can help reduce poverty*
- *Elderly people who live on fixed incomes and still have to support them [selves] but prices are rising*
- *[Lack of] income to live off of to support an average family size*

Theme 6: Social Problems

Perspective: Teen pregnancy, criminal justice populations, and drug abuse are examples of social problems that create barriers to addressing and eliminating poverty

Group responses revealed an outlying concern regarding the existence of social problems. Forum groups discussed social problems as barriers to addressing/eliminating poverty:

- Teen pregnancy
- Criminal justice populations
- Drug abuse

Response Samples:

- *Inadvertently the teenage pregnancy effects entire state because the parent and child will end up on welfare and the taxpayers must compensate to raise the child*
- *Prison system (influx of outside poverty due to prison)*
- *Getting past the drug issues to address poverty*

FINDINGS

LOCAL STRENGTHS AND RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Response documentation to this question shows that this question was the least discussed, and/or the forum groups provided the least amount of responses to this question (although the duration of discussion time was allotted for each question throughout the forum).

Forum groups cited few local strengths and resource for change. Agencies/organizations, services, education, and community are among the major themes. The following findings present major themes in order of most to least prevalent.

Theme 1: Agencies, Organizations, and Services

Perspective: The number of local agencies and organizations and the existence of these agencies is a strength and a resource for change in regards to poverty

Regarding local strengths and resources for change, the forum groups identified barriers relating to agencies, organizations, and services:

- The existence of various agencies and organizations in Schuylkill County
- The extent to which agencies work together to serve the public
- The existence of non-profit agencies, volunteer organizations, and local faith communities

Reponses Sample:

- *A lot of good agencies to help people*
- *Organizations are willing to help*
- *Progressive in area of social services, interagency cooperation and fellowship*
- *Strong faith-based communities*
- *Numerous volunteer organizations*
- *Most organizations try to help as much as they can*
- *Agencies get together and talk about working together*

Theme 2: Education, Secondary Education

Perspective: The existence of quality schools and secondary education opportunities is a strength and a resource for change in regards to poverty

The forum groups frequently discussed education as a resource:

- Local schools offer quality education
- Cost of secondary education, community colleges

Response sample:

- *Secondary education has improved in the county with all the satellite colleges but more access to GED classes are needed for people to make use of secondary education*
- *Colleges – LCCC [Lehigh County Community College] half-price tuition for County residents in Schuylkill County*

Theme 3: Community

Perspective: The extent to which the community as a whole comes together to help is a strength and a resource for change in regards to poverty

Groups noted the community in general as strength and a resource:
 Work ethic among local population
 Efforts of the community in general

Response sample:

- *Work ethic of people – people are willing to help their neighbor, [it is] important that people work together, community coming together*
- *Having a close knit community [is a strength], [people] help each other, community [and] neighbors*

FINDINGS

RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS/SOLUTIONS TO REDUCING/ELIMINATING POVERTY IN SCHUYLKILL COUNTY

Forum groups formulated multiple action steps/solutions to reducing/eliminating poverty in Schuylkill County. Programs/services, outreach/advocacy, networking/approach to the problem, and education are among the major themes. The following findings present major themes in order of most to least prevalent

Theme 1: Programs and Services

Perspective: The development of programs and changes in current service provision are steps/solutions to reducing/eliminating poverty in Schuylkill County

Most recommendations made by the forum groups include mention of programs and services:

- Development of new programs
- Change in service provision

Response sample:

- *More affordable counseling to help increase self esteem or other issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, mental health and mental retardation*
- *Financial education – show them how to budget, use financial institutions, pitfalls of credit cards*
- *Have more “medical profession” (dentist, specifically) accept patients who cannot pay or have access card*
- *More educational and work ready programs*

Theme 2: Outreach and Advocacy

Perspective: Outreach and advertising programs, in addition to advocacy efforts are steps/solutions to reducing/eliminating poverty in Schuylkill County

Focus groups noted a lack of outreach and/or advertisement of programs and services. In addition, advocacy is an area identified by the groups in regards to reducing poverty:

- *Advocacy on the behalf of people in poverty*
- *Improvement of advertising/outreach methods used to reach people in need of services*

Response sample:

- *More advocate groups to go out into the neighborhoods to actually talk to individuals about programs available*
- *Better advertisement of all services available*
- *Need more exposure of what services are available like flyers, handouts,*
- *resource packets at different places*
- *Educate county leaders (police, elected officials)*
- *Give voice to the consumers and empower those in need of services*
- *Develop a creative advertising campaign discussing success stories*

Theme 3: Networking, the local approach to poverty, and current focus
Perspective: Changes in the extent to which agencies network and their approach and focal points regarding poverty are steps/solutions to reducing/eliminating poverty in Schuylkill County

Recommendations were provided regarding the approach to poverty in the local area, as well as the focus points:

- *Increase the extent to which agencies and other organizations network together*

- Adjustments to the local focus on poverty, including the utilization of different approaches

Response sample:

- *More networking – banks, non profits, government officials, churches, general public*
- *Identify all organizations that will be able to work together to address concerns/needs of people in poverty or need*
- *Focus on the individual community needs, separate communities often have different issues*
- *Treat the whole family not just pieces, for example show low income parents it's a good idea to encourage kids to go to school and not use social services*

Theme 4: Education

Perspective: The expansion of the types of education offered, other than purely academic (e.g. life skills) locally, is a step/solution to reducing/eliminating poverty in Schuylkill County

Education related recommendations were suggested by the focus group:

- Increase the extent to which various types of education is offered, such as trade skills and life skills

Response sample:

- *Education at all levels, life skills, budgets, job training*
- *Schooling – are we training our children in the right fields, trades (plumbing, electric) need to be taken seriously Use Head Start program for Early Intervention and promote principles of healthy, positive lifestyles*
- *More incentives for people to complete high school diploma*
- *Long term planning (education/career) starting in high school, classes to guide students through application process/determining career paths*

CONCLUSION

Poverty Forum participants provided a variety of responses to several questions. Overall:

- Forum participants identified education, individual issues, health, employment, and transportation as primary concerns and key issues regarding poverty in Schuylkill County.
- Forum participants cited individuals in poverty, education, community views, lack of programs, and services, as barriers to reducing/eliminating poverty.
- Local agencies, organizations and services, education, and community perspectives were noted as local strengths and resources for change.
- Forum participants recommended program and service development, outreach and advocacy, networking, and education – as action steps/solutions to dealing with poverty on a local level.

Forum participants were asked to suggest possible follow-up activities to ensure action is taken on ideas generated from the forum. Common suggestions include a subsequent forum, distribution of the forum findings, and efforts to create public awareness regarding poverty.

SCA expresses sincere gratitude to the following for efforts expended during the 2007 Community Needs Assessment:

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