

Community Needs Assessment Summary Fiscal Year 2009

Based on information Family Resources Community Action obtained through written surveys, focus groups, our agency's strategic planning process and available statistical, historical and experiential data, the following areas have been identified as priority needs for low-income residents of Woonsocket:

✓ **Basic needs services**

Basic needs services for families of Woonsocket continue to be a priority. Significant numbers of respondents reported a need for food assistance (71 %), housing assistance (67%), utility assistance (64 %) and clothing assistance (65%). The high level of these needs demonstrates the continued importance of mobilizing both public and private entities to ensure that sufficient affordable housing, basic needs and other community based resources are available. Helping families to address these basic needs is critical in order to stabilize families and prevent homelessness.

✓ **Income and increased employment and self-sufficiency:**

Woonsocket residents continue to report employment and economic self-sufficiency as a significant need. These reports are not surprising, given the surge in the unemployment rate which reached 13% in Woonsocket in September, 2009. The need for job training has remained a concern of Woonsocket residents with 62 % reporting the need for training and 71% reporting a need for help to secure employment. The need to provide specific support and assistance to ex-offenders seeking employment was several focus group participants. In addition to employment assistance and support, 57% of respondents noted a need for Life Skills education, including budgeting and household management assistance.

The economic stability needs of unemployment and underemployed Woonsocket residents can be strengthened by helping link individuals to the many supports in the community including basic needs, information about accessing state/other benefits, employment and training, income tax preparation assistance and other financial education supports.

✓ **Housing:**

The Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that housing costs should reflect 30% of a family's income. With 75% of respondents reporting the need for affordable housing, the ability of Woonsocket families to afford a home is slipping further out of reach. Well over half (63 %) of respondents reported the need for safe housing in the city of Woonsocket. The significant numbers of individuals reporting a concern with housing issues clearly underscores the need for a concentrated effort to alleviate the strain on Woonsocket's families caused by the high cost of decent safe housing. The surge in unemployment and rising foreclosures rates have placed additional strain on low income individuals and families, contributing to an increased risk in homelessness.

✓ **Children, Youth & Families :**

Affordable child care remains a significant need for Woonsocket residents, with 46% of respondents indicating a need for financial assistance with child care. There also continues to be a need to provide safe, affordable and flexible day care to aid a family's employment pursuits, as demonstrated in the 38% of respondents citing a need for extended hour child care to maintain employment. It is critical that families have community resources available to them to address their childcare needs in order to maintain their economic independence.

In consideration of Woonsocket's child abuse and neglect rate (highest in the state), as well as the significantly high teenage pregnancy rate, the need to address a multigenerational cycle remains a significant issue to the community of Woonsocket. This is evident in the 45% of respondents reporting a need for more parenting education programs, and the 46% of

respondents reporting a need for support programs to address the emotional strain associated with being a single parent.

There was a significant response for the need for recreation and youth programs, with 47% of respondents reporting a need for recreation programs for families of Woonsocket. The need for recreation programs for adolescents and teens was mentioned multiple times in focus groups. In an effort to address this need Woonsocket should work to establish recreation programs during weekend and after-school hours that are affordable for low-income families.

✓ **Transportation**

Transportation relative to employment remains a significant need for Woonsocket's residents. Over half of respondents (52%) reported the need for transportation to access employment, and 45% noted a need for transportation (bus route or other) to access evening shifts. In addition, 51% of respondents reported problems related to transportation to access basic needs. This is of particular concern given the high numbers of respondents who reported needing assistance with basic needs services.

Transportation for other kinds of needs remains one of the most often cited problems among low-income individuals and families in Woonsocket. While there is public transportation through the main routes of town, residents repeatedly report significant challenges relative to accessing medical appointments (55%) and social service appointments (51%). These results clearly demonstrate the need to further examine and effectively address the challenges found in the existing transportation system. The need for reliable, flexible, and affordable transportation for Woonsocket residents presents as a primary barrier to economic self sufficiency and an improved quality of life.

✓ **Physical and Mental Health:**

Participants in focus groups and survey respondents expressed concerns regarding access to and cost of healthcare. 65% of survey respondents noted a concern regarding health insurance and 63% reported a need for better access to healthcare. In addition, 63% noted a need for affordable prescriptions. Counseling services were noted as a need by 55% of respondents. Residents also noted a need for education and information, with 49% indicating a need for drug and alcohol addiction information, 52% noting a need for general health/mental health information and 46% noting a need for services for victims of domestic violence.

✓ **Education:**

With the third lowest high school graduation rate in the state and second highest drop-out rate, there clearly remains a significant need to address the educational challenges found in Woonsocket. Respondents report the need for enhanced education programs, evident in 48% of respondents citing a need for improved literacy education programs. In addition, 43% of respondents cited a need for ESL support, and 48% indicated a need for GED preparation. These results clearly demonstrate the need to develop and maintain comprehensive education supports for both children and adults. Through improved education outreach and programming, the high school drop out rates can be reduced and the ability of residents to maintain long term economic self sufficiency increased.

✓ **Information, referral and advocacy services:**

Respondents to both the written survey and focus group probes report a need for improved community outreach and advocacy efforts to help residents of the community locate resources. The need for information about available services was included across many content areas in the survey. In addition to what has been previously highlighted, respondents noted a need for information on: general health/mental health (52%), DHS programs/eligibility (60%), nutrition (52%), pregnancy education and support (41%), and legal issues concerning housing (60%). These service referral needs can be effectively addressed through comprehensive program development, advocacy efforts and providing individuals with information and links to resources in the community.