

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A. COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT: WOONSOCKET

1. Description of Methods

The 2009 Community Needs Assessment of Family Resources Community Action (FRCA) utilized data collected directly from the target population as well as through more formal sources of statistical information. A community needs survey yielded 164 responses from residents of the city of Woonsocket. Surveys were distributed at FRCA's Family Support Center, the Employment & Training Center, Family Preservation Unit, Counseling Department, The Agape Center and the Woonsocket Homeless Shelter as well as Thundermist Health Center and "Because He Lives" soup kitchen. A copy of the survey instrument is included in this proposal.

Four focus groups were conducted including one with parents enrolled in a FRCA Parenting Education Program, two groups enrolled in FRCA Employment & Training Programs and a group of youth participating in a community program. Persons participating in the focus group were asked not to respond to the community needs survey. Lastly, as Family Resources Community Action has done in prior years, other current data relative to the needs of low-income families and individuals in Woonsocket was analyzed and updated. RI Kids Count served as the primary resource for much of this information that is aggregated from a number of data sources. In addition, a report summarizing over 100 interviews of Woonsocket residents compiled by NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley for the Sustainable Communities Initiative was reviewed. Survey tools and summaries of all focus groups are included in this report.

As the final year of Family Resources Community Action's four year strategic plan came to a close, the agency initiated a process to review and update the plan for the next four year period. A committee comprised of Board members and Staff from across all agency service divisions met over a five month period to finalize the new strategic plan. Information gleaned from the needs assessment process, as well as feedback from committee members helped inform the plan that covers a broad range of needs of low-income families and individuals including housing, behavioral health, economic stability, child welfare, health care and employment training.

2. Description of Results

a. Statistical Description of the Environment: Woonsocket, Rhode Island

□ Geography

- Square Miles: 7.96
- Population Density: 5,609 persons per square mile

Source: U.S. Census 2000

□ Population

- Population: 43,224 (ranked #6 of Rhode Island's 39 cities and towns; a decline of 1.5% since 1990 census)
- Number of males (and percent of total): 20,622 (47.7%)
- Number of females (and percent of total): 22,602 (52.3%)
- Age 0 - 5: 3,287 (7.6%)
- Age 5 - 9: 3266 7.56

- Age 10-14: 2901 6.71
- Age 15-19 2780 6.43
- Age 20-64 24, 204 56.45
- Age 65+: 6589 15.24 % (2435 male 5.63% ; 4154 female 9.61)
- Median age: 34.8 (males: 33.5; females: 36)

Source: U.S. Census 2000

□ **Race**

- White (and percent of total): 35,935 (83.1%)
- Black / African American (and percent of total): 1,920 (4.4%)
- Hispanic origin (and percent of total): 4,030 (9.3%)
- Largest Hispanic sub-group is Puerto Rican: 2,798 (6.5%)
- Number of American Indian and Alaska Native origin (and percent of total): 139 (.32%)
- Number of Asian origin (and percent of total): 1,755 (4.1%)

Source: U.S. Census 2000

□ **Household characteristics**

- Number of households: 17,750
- Average family size: 3.02
- Number and percent of female headed families with children under 18: 2,090 (16.2%)
- Number and percent of male headed families with children under 18: 891 (5%)
- Number and percent of adults age 21-64 who have a disability: 6,532 (27.5%)

Source: U.S. Census 2000

□ **Income**

- Median family income: \$30,819
- Percentage of individuals living below poverty level: 19.4% (compared to state percentage of 11.9%)
- Households with income less than \$10,000 in 1999 (and percent of total): 3,074 (17%)
- Median earnings for male, full-time, year-round workers: \$31,465
- Median earnings for female, full-time, year-round workers: \$24,638
- Percentage of families living below poverty level: 16.7%
- Percentage of families, with female head of household, living below poverty level: 45.9% (compared to state percent of 29.1%)
- Per capita income: \$16,223
- Percentage of teens who are jobless 11.7 %

Source: U.S. Census 2000

□ **Housing**

- Number of housing units: 18,757
- Number of occupied housing units: 17,750 (94.6%)
- Number of owner-occupied units (and percent of total housing units): 6,214 (35%)

- Number of renter-occupied housing units (and percent of total housing units): 11,536 (65%)
- Number of vacant units (and percent of total housing units): 1,007 (5.4%)
- Median value of owner occupied units: \$112,800 (RI as a whole \$133,000)
- Median rent of renter-occupied units: \$483 (RI as whole \$553)

Source: U.S. Census 2000

- Of the 6,437 homeless Rhode Islanders who received shelter services in 2007-2008, 370 people claimed Woonsocket as their city of last residence, which is 5.7% of the total sheltered population.
- 1,770 of those who were housed in homeless shelters in RI in 2007-2008 were children under age 18.

Source: RI Emergency Shelter Information Project Annual Report 2007-2008.

□ **Employment**

Statistics for September, 2009 in Woonsocket:

- Total number of employed persons: 19,166
- Total number of unemployed persons: 3,418
- Number of persons in labor force: 22,584
- Average unemployment rate, September 2009: 15.1% (compared to RI rate of 13%)

Source: Rhode Island Department of Labor & Training

- Percentage of teens not in school and not employed: 11.7% (compared to the RI average of 7.3%)

Source: 2009 Kids Count Fact book

- Analysis based on the 1990 census shows that approximately 71% of Woonsocket workers work in Rhode Island, and 28% work in Massachusetts, once again showing a need to look at lack of transportation as a barrier to employment opportunities.
- Percentage of population age 65 or over in Woonsocket: 14.5% (compared to state percentage of 12.4%), yielding a growing service sector.
- Industries providing the majority of employment in Woonsocket:
 - Manufacturing (23.9%)
 - Education, health and social services (17.8%)
 - Retail trade (15.7%)

Source: U.S. Census 2000

□ **Education**

- Percent of adults graduated from high school: 64 %
- Number and percent of persons over 25 with bachelor's degree: 7%

Source: U.S. Census 2000

- Cumulative school dropout rate (2008): 27.6%
- High School graduation rate Woonsocket (2008): 60% (Statewide rate – 73.9%)

Source: RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

- While 57% of schools in RI were categorized as high performing in 2006, only 12% of schools in Rhode Island's core cities (Providence, Central Falls, Woonsocket, Pawtucket, Newport) were categorized as high performing; 0% in Woonsocket were categorized as high performing. 42% of schools in Woonsocket were categorized as making insufficient

progress as compared to 19% of schools in RI categorized as making insufficient progress.

Source: RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and unsure high school students had a greater risk for 27 of 30 behaviors and had similar risk for the other three categories when compared with their heterosexual peers.

Source: 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey

B. Analysis of Needs Identified through the Community Participation Process

Community Need Surveys

Family Resources Community Action distributed and collected 164 completed surveys at FRCA’s drop in Family Support Center, FRCA’s Employment & Training Center, FRCA’s Family Preservation Unit, the Woonsocket Homeless Shelter and the Agape Center as well as Thundermist Health Center and “Because He Lives” soup kitchen. The survey was also available in Spanish. The needs of Woonsocket residents were represented in 7 major domains which were basic needs, housing, education, employment, children and youth services, transportation and physical/mental health. These domains were further broken down into domain specific needs. Responses to these needs were recorded and analyzed as yes, no and no response. The percentages of positive (yes responses) within each of these needs are as follows:

I. Basic needs:

Food assistance	71%
Clothing assistance	65%
Information about DHS	60%
Utility assistance	64%
Rent/ housing assistance	67%
How to fix legal issues to secure housing	60%

II. Housing

Affordable housing	75%
Safe housing	63%
Living independently	61%

III. Education

English as a second language	43%
Life Skills education	57%
GED preparation	48%
Reading, Writing, Math	48%
Health/ mental health education	52%

IV. Employment

Job Training	62%
Help getting a job	71%
Support group for employment issues	50%
Assistance for work clothing	51%

V. Children & Youth Services

Financial assistance for child care	46%
Respite day care for foster/special needs	32%
Parenting education & support	45%
Extended hours for child care	38%
Support groups for single parents	46%
Recreation available for me and my family	47%
Teen Pregnancy (prevention, care during pregnancy, and follow-up services)	34%
Children, Youth and Family Services	36%

VI. Transportation

Transportation to access/keep employment	52%
Transportation to medical appointments	55%
Bus routes near my home	52%
Routes/transportation to evening shift job	45%
Transportation to obtain basic needs	51%
Transportation to social service appointments (RI Works, WIC, etc)	51%

VII. Physical and Mental health

Health insurance	65%
Better access to healthcare	63%
Information about nutrition	52%
Affording prescriptions	63%
Information about Drug/Alcohol addiction	49%
Services for victims of Domestic Violence	46%
Pregnancy education and support	41%
Counseling programs	55%

VIII. Language

Are services available in a language you understand?	83%
If no, primary language spoken: Spanish noted several times	

In addition to the quantitative community needs data, qualitative data was also collected in the form of an optional comments section on the FRCA community needs survey. Statements from the Comments Section of the surveys are as follows:

- *A person should be able to stay at a shelter until housing becomes available.*
- *I'm concerned about clients with no income who need transportation.*
- *More help with security deposits for housing.*
- *I need help with my gas.*
- *I need help with my gas and lights.*
- *Help for people who live alone.*
- *People need subsidized housing.*
- *Help with housing.*
- *Affordable housing; homeless shelters; food stamps; transportation for people to get to appointments (not everyone has a car.)*
- *Need housing where a dog can go with you.*
- *Need more shelters.*
- *Having a criminal record is a major barrier.*

Focus Groups

To assist in the identification of Woonsocket resident's needs FRCA conducted four focus groups in which a total of 22 Woonsocket residents participated. These groups were comprised of:

1. Participants in FRCA's Medical Billing & Coding training program.
2. Participants in FRCA's Parenting Class
3. Youth participants at Neighborworks Blackstone River Valley
4. Participants in TEAMhealth, a Certified Nursing Assistant training program operated by St. Antoine Residence and FRCA.

The groups were facilitated utilizing the following probes:

1. What do you feel are some challenges to families/ individuals in Woonsocket?
2. What do you feel are some services families / individuals of Woonsocket need?
3. What do you think could help with these challenges and needs?
4. What ways could we help let people know about what services are here in Woonsocket?
5. Is there anything else you would like to say about the needs of Woonsocket residents?

A summary of issues raised and sample comments from focus group participants are listed below. Responses are organized by major issues.

Challenges faced by Woonsocket families:

Transportation

- Inconvenient, inadequate, costly bus service.
- No transportation for second shift jobs.
- People don't have cars
- Need bikes with locks; many kids don't ride them--bad experience with bikes being stolen
- Condition of roads is a problem; potholes- damages cars; costly to car owners.
- High cost of car insurance and registration costs (\$100+) is barrier to car ownership.

“The bus runs only once per hour, and it takes an hour to get to Providence.”

Housing

- More homeless services for men.
- Lack of affordable housing; available units tend to be inferior quality.
- Low-income housing or apartment complexes (based on your salary) are still too expensive.

“I've been on Section 8 waiting list for 4 years.”

“Half of what I make in a month goes toward rent.”

Basic Needs

- Difficulty paying bills - rent, food, gas & electric, children's clothing.
- Ineligible for assistance when you are under 21 years of age and living with a parent, even when adult child has children.

“I just moved back in with my mother, but she can't afford to feed my kids.”

Employment

- Jobs for individuals with criminal records.
- Need better, more responsive employment services; more netWORKri classes in Woonsocket
- Child care is barrier to employment
- Credit checks/credit history is a barrier to employment.

“How are you supposed to fix your credit if you don't have a job?”

Healthcare

- Difficulty paying for healthcare.
- Difficulty paying for medicine.
- Going without healthcare coverage due to unemployment.

“I can’t afford health insurance; end up going to emergency room when need care. Then I can’t pay bill and it affects my credit rating.”

Child care

- Lack of 2nd shift hour child care.
- Quality of child care is problem; lower cost care is sometimes inferior quality.
- Cost of care too high (over \$210 / week for preschool care).

“You can’t get child care assistance through DHS until you have proof of a job, but you can’t get a job unless you have child care.”

Education

- Woonsocket public schools need improvement; the private schools are good.
- Need better teachers who care about education.
- Need more computers and resources.
- Could use training for teachers on not being biased.

Safety

- Parks are unclean and unsafe; noted East School Street Park, Social Park, Cass Park.
- Gang violence is widespread.
- Parks not safe.

“There is trash everywhere, and needles in the park.”

Services families/individuals of Woonsocket need/What would help:

Drug & Alcohol Treatment Services:

- More Narcotics Anonymous meetings; there is only one N.A. meeting in Woonsocket (at the Senior Center on Wednesday nights.)
- More services in general are needed to help people with drug and alcohol addiction.

Safety

- Strengthening of sex offender registry requirements.
- More/better policing to prevent drug dealing.
- Curfews for kids
- Programs for kids/teens to keep them out of gangs and out of trouble.

Employment & Training

- More activities for teens/programs to help teens find jobs.
- More employment training in general for adults.
- Better access to netWORKri office; decrease wait times to get into classes.
- Access to internships (paid or unpaid) while in employment & training classes.
- More professional/responsive unemployment staff; customer service training for staff.

Assistance for Ex-Offenders

- Need program to help those who have criminal records—help transitioning back, especially with getting jobs and housing.
- A program that would give a tax break for hiring ex-offenders.
- Prisons need a drug rehabilitation center to help people.
- A bonding program to help those with criminal records have a better chance at gaining employment.

“No one wants to hire us; we need employers willing to take a chance.”

“It doesn’t matter that I’m a different person now. They (employers) don’t care.”

Child Care

- Need playgroups for young children.
- Need parent/mom support groups.
- Need more widespread information about the programs that do exist.
- Need more extended hours/second shift hours for child care.
- Child Care for when children are ill.
- Employer-sponsored on-site child care
- Need better quality child care; quality care is more expensive, though, and low income people can't afford it.
- Educate parents more about what to look for in quality child care.

Basic Needs

- More assistance for individuals not qualifying for federal programs such as SNAP
- Better organization/oversight for food voucher programs; the wait is long, and people do not always wait their turn.
- More affordable housing.
- Money Management classes; assistance dealing with credit problems/credit repair.

Transportation

- Car donation program
- Help paying for transportation

Youth/Teen Programs

- More activities for teens/programs to help teens find jobs.
- Teen center for kids to hang out and watch TV/play video games, use computers, play basketball.
- More free programs; current programs cost too much/membership fees
- More summer employment opportunities for youth/teens.
- More programs/education to prevent teen pregnancy
- Scholarship programs for youth to help pay for college
- Pool/water park.

Ways we can let people know about services that are available in Woonsocket:

- Newspapers – The Call & Valley Breeze

- Do a commercial
- Newsletters
- More ads in newspapers – The Call, the Valley Breeze
- Direct mailings to households
- Calendars of activities – post and/or mail
- DCYF (many individuals learned about the Parenting class through DCYF)
- Post information at netWORKri on Pond St.
- Outreach/information sessions to classes like Medical Billing
- Information on FRCA employment training programs at netWORKri --all RI offices
- More signs/fliers around town about programs: supermarkets, restaurants, Laundromats, unemployment offices bulletin boards
- Sign on RIPTA buses
- Outreach at border states - MA & CT Employment/DHS offices - have FRCA employment training information available

3. Summary and Analysis of Critical Community Needs

The most critical needs to residents of Woonsocket, RI continue to be in the areas of unemployment, education, homelessness, access to healthcare, child abuse and neglect, transportation and challenges related to basic needs access. The impact these challenges have on Woonsocket residents is evident in the city's continued economic challenges reported by a significant number of its families. Woonsocket's median income has remained the third lowest of all Rhode Island cities and towns and has continued to decline in comparison to other communities over the past ten years. In 2000 31.8% of families with children under 18 that lived in Woonsocket had incomes below the poverty level, as compared with 16.9% of families statewide. The most salient of the poverty related problems is evident in Woonsocket's continued rating as the community with the highest level of child abuse and neglect in the state. The child abuse and neglect indicated victims' rate was 28.2 per 1,000 children in Woonsocket, as compared to 10.7 per 1,000 statewide average, underscoring the significant impact of these critical needs to residents of Woonsocket, RI. The long term implications of this level of poverty and reported critical needs on the residents of Woonsocket are seen in the increased likelihood of health and behavioral related problems, difficulty in schools, increased risks of teen pregnancy, increased potential to earn less or experience employment problems as well as increased indices of legal and judicial problems. *(Source of above information: 2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Fact book).*

a. Unemployment, Education and Job Skills among Older Youth and Adults

Unemployment and lack of jobs continue to be a major concern for the citizens of Woonsocket. According to the 2009 Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training statistics, Woonsocket has remained one of the highest annual averages of unemployment in the state. At the end of 2008, Woonsocket's unemployment rate was the fourth highest in the state (9.1%) and higher than the state's overall average of 7.8%. *(Source: Department of Labor).* Woonsocket's unemployment rate has steadily increased every month since August 2008. In September 2009, Woonsocket's unemployment rate was 15.1% as compared to the statewide average of 13%.

This continued challenge for Woonsocket's residents is most evident in the residents' income levels. According to census figures, Woonsocket's median income has remained the third lowest in the state (\$30,819) and the fourth lowest with family income for families with children under 18 (\$34,465). This disparity is compounded by the fact there has been no significant increase in the real median wage from 2000-2004 (State of Working Rhode Island, 2005). Despite this stall in wages, the cost of living has continued to steadily rise, significantly impacting Woonsocket residents.

Lower educational levels have remained a significant challenge to a family's ability to sustain a living wage in Woonsocket. As of 2008, Woonsocket had the third lowest rate of high school graduation (60% compared to a rate of 74% statewide). Woonsocket's high school drop-out rate in 2008 was the second highest in the state (28% as compared to a rate of 16% statewide.) It was also found that from 2003 – 2007, 25% of new mothers that reside in Woonsocket had less than a high school diploma, as compared to the statewide average of 15%. Research shows strong links between parental education levels and a child's school readiness, health and ultimate level of child education. (*Source of above information: 2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Fact book; RI Department of Health*).

The challenges relative to educational attainment and employment are significant. An individual without a high school diploma earns two thirds of the earnings of a high school graduate and a little more than one third of the earnings of an individual with a bachelor's degree (*Source: US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, 2002*). With only 64 % of Woonsocket residents having a high school diploma, the impact goes beyond a person's earning potential; it also affects employment opportunities on a larger scale. With such a high percentage of residents lacking a high school education, new businesses requiring a skilled workforce tend to be reluctant to establish in the community. This impact is further compounded by the local culture's tendency to either not look out of the geographical area for employment or have to rely on an inadequate transportation system to access employment opportunities outside of the city.

This challenge to employment is also evident in Woonsocket's immigrant population. As the number of Woonsocket's immigrant population increases, the needs related to English speaking and reading skills relative to employment also increase. Over the last two decades, the number of English language learners in RI has increased substantially especially in core cities such as Woonsocket.

In the FY 2009 community needs assessment survey, 43% of respondents cited a need for English as a second language support. This lack of English speaking skills not only makes job hunting difficult, it hampers work-related interpersonal interactions and knowledge of safety requirements of the job. RI Poverty Institute reports that a person's ability to speak English is directly tied to the income they may earn. Lack of English literacy is a barrier to enrollment and completion of occupational training programs that require 6th grade or higher tests scores in reading. As a result those with low levels of proficiency in reading and speaking qualify for only the lowest paid jobs or no jobs at all.

The challenge relative to English speaking skills is further compounded by the tendency of these groups to be isolated by both a culture and language. Visible community leaders within these

groups are just beginning to emerge and the lack of recognized leadership continues to hamper efforts to organize services to address the myriad of employment and basic family needs.

To date, efforts to address these employment related challenges in the city of Woonsocket have been limited. While The Department of Labor and Training (DLT), now a netWORKri “One Stop” Center, provides job search skills, training, workshops and a job bank, it primarily serves those that are more easily employed as opposed to the chronically unemployed or underemployed worker in need of additional services and supports. These programs typically do not provide the intensive case management services these Woonsocket residents need as a result of past educational barriers. In fall of 2008, the State of RI changed its welfare model, with DLT assuming responsibility for the new Rhode Island Works initiative, which replaces the Family Independence Program (FIP). The revised RI Department of Human Services welfare eligibility guidelines created a significant and immediate impact on the need for employment and training resources. The change in structure coincided with a significant State budget deficit and the retirement of over 1000 State employees. These events have resulted in a severely understaffed local netWORKri office and have forced many to travel to Pawtucket for all but the most basic of DLT services.

Another employment related service delivery problem is evident in the continued DHS and DLT case personnel shortages at the Northern Regional office. The work requirements related to the new Rhode Island Works Program and SSI/SSDI can often be confusing and result in benefit sanctions due to a client’s difficulty in comprehending program guidelines. Clients are challenged by a new complex program needed to secure employment and training services. State personnel are dealing with an array of client needs (housing, child care, counseling, substance abuse) in the midst of a system that is fragmented and rapidly changing. This is further compounded as a result of the tremendous level of information and support-related needs clients report. When a client is working to comply with program guidelines, such tasks as day care coordination, securing child care subsidies, identifying health insurance services and complying with welfare income reporting guidelines are all difficulties that must be simultaneously addressed. The resulting confusion and lack of support from an already taxed social service system can have devastating effects on a family.

The existing workforce development system is fragmented and caters to the more job ready job seeker. This is particularly problematic with the Rhode Island Works eligibility guidelines implemented in 2008 that require recipients to transition into jobs more quickly than ever before. Given this, as well as the state of the economy, new paradigms for delivery of education, job training, employment transportation and support services need to be developed. The low income low skilled workforce needs access to a continuum of education and job preparation opportunities, so that there is a path to employment for everyone, no matter what the level of his or her academic/literacy skills.

FRCA believes the cyclical challenges related to education and unemployment require a comprehensive approach to employment and training. As a result FRCA has been advocating for a regional system of workforce development services which provide a continuum of education and training opportunities. The Rhode to Success network seeks to create a collaborative and integrated adult education, training and employment system that includes employer participation

and benefits and offers comprehensive services that meet low-skilled workers' unique learning, support service and employment needs. This network must connect and coordinate with other initiatives providing basic job skills and career laddering opportunities such as the healthcare sector initiatives led by Quality Partners, St. Antoine Residence and Stepping Up in this region. The continuation and expansion of programs and collaborative networks such as these will provide much-needed support to low income, low skilled individuals.

b. Homelessness

FRCA has been serving homeless individuals and families for over 20 years. FRCA's Woonsocket Emergency Shelter at present serves 27 families with children in its primary facility and emergency apartments. Every day the Woonsocket Emergency Shelter serves over 40 homeless children, including newborn infants. In the last fiscal year, the agency provided 24,933 bed nights of shelter, serving 293 homeless individuals. This number reflects 82 families with 167 children and 38 single women. (Note: The Woonsocket Shelter underwent extensive renovations in 2009, leaving several floors uninhabitable for weeks at a time. Despite the reduced shelter capacity, the shelter provided nearly the same number of bed nights as last year.)

While statewide there has been a reduction in the total number of individuals experiencing homelessness between 2006 and 2008 (from 3,290 in 2006 to 2,288 in 2008), the number of homeless children and families increased during this time period (28% and 8%, respectively). The number of homeless children grew from 1,378 in 2006 to 1,770 in 2008; the number of homeless families grew from 882 in 2006 to 953 in 2008. (Source: *RI Emergency Food and Shelter Board, Annual Shelter Reports 2006-2008*). A more recent trend shows that shelter use was 43% higher in February 2009 than in February, 2008. Reasons given for shelter use reflect the impact of the economic crisis—higher unemployment and foreclosure rates. The extent of the foreclosure crisis in Woonsocket is seen in the 2009 Federal Reserve Bank of Boston study that noted Woonsocket has the 7th highest foreclosure rate in Rhode Island.

When not including utilities, 2008 rent for a standard two bedroom apartment in Woonsocket is \$976.00 requiring a family's income to be approximately \$37,000 annually to afford housing and basic needs such as heat, electricity, food and clothing (Source: *RI Housing 2008 Rent Survey*). Housing is considered affordable if it consumes 30% or less of a family's income. A family of three living at the poverty level in Woonsocket would have to devote 67% of their household income to the cost of rent. (Sources: *RI Housing 2008 Rent Survey; RI Kids Count Factbook 2009*).

Homeless individuals and families have a variety of needs that range from healthcare and mental health needs to substance abuse challenges and safety concerns. The risk of homelessness to children presents the greatest concern. These risk factors include problems associated with inconsistent pediatric care, poor developmental outcomes, a decline in academic performance and interpersonal challenges associated with the emotional trauma of homelessness and living in a shelter.

In the past several years, the state's housing crisis has brought diverse groups of social service, business and public interests together to address the issue of housing, especially affordable housing. Highly visible advocacy efforts within the non-profit, public and for profit arenas

resulted in the passage of a \$50 million state housing bond during the general election of 2006. However important these moves are, it will still take time to resolve the housing and homelessness problems faced in this state. The State's recent fiscal problems have endangered funding for various housing programs while contributing to job loss and homelessness. Advocates will need to continue highly visible strategies to maintain gains made and prevent the issue from losing ground.

FRCA remains committed to meeting the needs of the homeless individuals and families of Woonsocket through its comprehensive network of programs. Employment and training programs, life skills seminars, access to counseling programs and access to the Woonsocket Shelter after school program serving children in the shelter ages 3 through 12. FRCA also works to assist in meeting the needs of those homeless individuals not accessing services at FRCA. Through an active coordination with Harvest Community Church, a faith based shelter program in Woonsocket, Family Resources Community Action works to ensure that all homeless persons have an opportunity to receive shelter from November – April, the most crucial months of the year. In addition, FRCA has been working with faith-based and community development organizations to develop permanent supportive housing for single homeless men who do not have access to year round shelter in this region. In 2008, FRCA began a new program to provide housing and case management support services to homeless individuals living with HIV/AIDS through the HOPWA (Housing Opportunities for People With AIDS) program. FRCA has been able to tap the experience of our Agape Center to support people living with HIV/AIDS and the agency's experience operating permanent supportive housing to homeless persons with disabilities to provide this service.

Two major programs to prevent homelessness and assist families to obtain housing are available through Family Resources. The Road Home Emergency Housing Assistance Program assists families in crisis with a one time rent and/or security deposit payment. A new federal stimulus initiative called Homelessness Prevention/Rapid Re-Housing will serve about 43 Woonsocket families per year for the next three years with one-time or repeating financial assistance toward rent, security and utility costs and provide case management and financial counseling. These are both important programs but the criteria for eligibility is both strict and narrow, thus they will not serve all the households in need of this assistance.

Adding to housing issues of concern is the planned phase-out of approximately 300 subsidized units operated by the Woonsocket Housing Authority. This plan will significantly affect the number of subsidized housing units in the city and, due to the resulting impact on available housing, may require citizen advocacy at local, state and federal levels. As the units which are slated to be taken off line are those most likely to be affordable to families moving out of the shelter, this plan is expected to result in an increase in the amount of time families are in emergency shelter while awaiting permanent housing that is affordable.

c. Healthcare

Nearly one sixth of the US population currently lacks healthcare, including 44% of low income citizens (*source: State of working America*). As of 2006 approximately 20% of Rhode Islanders who were below the federal poverty level reported no access to health insurance (*Source: RI Department of Health Center for Health Data and Analysis, 2006*).

This lack of insurance is often the result of individuals being rationed out of the healthcare market. Quite often people report lacking healthcare due to an inability to meet guidelines for government subsidy insurances or access it through their employers due to high cost or limited work hours. In the most recent Community Needs Assessment Survey, 65% of respondents reported healthcare as a need, and 63% noted the need for better access to healthcare. The concern about the cost and availability of healthcare was noted several times in focus groups.

The risks associated with this lack of health care include higher mortality rates, higher rates of women seeking prenatal care later into their pregnancy, higher treatment costs incurred through emergency room visits and higher medical care costs due to an increase in the number of people who are unable to pay. Woonsocket's low-income residents are often those most vulnerable to these risks, particularly those families with children. Of the estimated 18,057 uninsured children under age 19 in Rhode Island in 2007, 11,155 were income-eligible for Rite Care but were not enrolled. In Rhode Island, the recent increase in the rise of uninsured children is partly due to a decline in employer-sponsored insurance. The long term implications for this lack of health care are significant. Children who lack health care risk poor school attendance, lower school achievement and long term health related issues as a result of limited preventative treatment. *(Source: 2009 RI Kids Count Factbook).*

In an effort to address this underlying cause of poverty in Woonsocket, Thundermist Health Associate's Healthcare for the Homeless grant provides resources for outreach and coordination among agencies on the behalf of homeless persons. As a part of this program they facilitate access to their clinic for persons living in the Woonsocket Shelter or other homeless individuals and families. However, given the continuing rise in homelessness, these resources may soon be surpassed by the need. Family Resources Community Action is therefore committed to a continued effort to help meet the basic needs of Woonsocket's low income families in efforts to mitigate the rising costs associated with lack of healthcare, a significant contributory factor to homelessness. There can be no doubt that the inability to afford appropriate healthcare is a significant factor contributing to poverty. Poor health has a direct negative impact on employability and learning.

Recent changes in eligibility for Rhode Island Rite Care and increases in premiums pose additional difficulties for low income families. As of June 1, 2008, Rite Care eligibility was eliminated for the grandfathered group of 2,800 children including those with legal permanent resident status for less than 5 years and undocumented children. In addition, parent eligibility for Rite Care was reduced from 185% of the federal poverty level to 175% FPL, except for pregnant or post-partum women *(Source: 2009 Kids Count Factbook)*. Premiums for Rite Care also increased, resulting in an exponential increase in children, parents and families being sanctioned for inability to pay premiums. In January, 2009, 908 individuals lost their health coverage compared to a month average of 264 in 2008 *(Source: 2009 Kids Count)*

Early prenatal care is critical to identifying and treating health problems and behaviors that can affect fetal development and infant and maternal health. With a delayed prenatal care rate of 15.4%, Woonsocket had the third highest rate of delayed prenatal care in the state between 2003 and 2007. The Woonsocket infant mortality rate of 6.4 per 1,000 births (between 2003-2007) is

down from a reported 8.2% from the 2002-2006 reporting period. At 9.9%, Woonsocket's rate for infants born low birth weight was the highest in the state. (*Source: 2009 RI Kids Count Factbook.*) In 2008, FRCA began several new programs to support mothers and their infant children. Great Beginnings provides support to at-risk mothers and their families beginning at the end of the second trimester, continuing through the child's first birthday. The First Connections Infant and Toddler Home Visiting Program helps improve the health and development of young children through home based outreach, screening, assessment, referral and follow-up.

In addition, Woonsocket had the second highest teen birth rate in Rhode Island for teens ages 15-19. The teen birth rate in Woonsocket (66.4 births per 1,000 girls ages 15-19) is more than double the state rate of 30.4 births per 1,000 girls ages 15-19. (*Source: Rhode Island Department of Public Health 2003-2007; 2009 Kids Count Factbook.*) Teen mothers are less likely to have financial resources, social supports and parenting skills for healthy child development.

Challenges relative to rising healthcare costs clearly impact a large number of Woonsocket residents, especially those residents living with HIV/AIDS. It is estimated that over 3,000 persons living with HIV/AIDS are Rhode Islanders, and 22% of these people reside in the Northern region of the state. Woonsocket is one of five core cities that include Providence, Central Falls, Pawtucket and Newport that are particularly susceptible to the disease due to the high rate of intravenous drug use where syringes can be passed among multiple users thereby spreading the virus. FRCA has worked to help meet the varied needs of these residents through the Agape Center, an HIV/AIDS drop-in center committed to assistance with basic needs, education about the disease, peer support and other health related supports. The Agape Center is committed to enhancing the quality of life of those persons living with HIV/AIDS.

d. Child Abuse and Neglect

Woonsocket has had the highest rate of child abuse and neglect in Rhode Island for the past ten years. Woonsocket's 2008 child abuse and neglected indicated victims rate of 28.2 per 1,000 children was the highest in the state by far, and more than double the statewide average of 10.7 per 1,000 children. (*Source: RI Kids Count Factbook 2009.*) According to the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, poverty is the single most consistent indicator for this social problem. In relation to Woonsocket, poverty indicators that contribute to this phenomenon include:

- Rate of teen pregnancy (66.4% as compared to 30.4% statewide; second highest in state)
- Low high school graduation rate (60% as compared to 74% statewide; third lowest in state)
- Percentage of children being raised by a single parent (46%; third highest in state)
- Percentage of children of incarcerated parents (20.3 per 1,000 children as compared to 11.1 statewide; fourth highest in the state.)
- Decline in available affordable housing
- Incidence of homelessness (third in the state)

(*Source: 2009 RI Kids Count Factbook*)

This data overall underscores the long term multigenerational impact of poverty and child abuse and the reality that in urban centers such as Woonsocket this problem is deepened by harsh

economic circumstances. Whereas the lack of affordable housing inevitably leads to greater homelessness, this creates the conditions for children to enter the child welfare system. As low income single parents (generally women) lose custody of their children, they also forfeit their access to Rhode Island Works, thereby creating an economic and emotional spiral and nightmare for children and parents.

The State of Rhode Island and its surrogate, the Department of Children, Youth and Families, have viewed the issue of child abuse and neglect from a traditional protective services perspective. This means that the primary tool DCYF has employed to manage risk has been removing children from their homes and placing them in foster homes. The result of this long standing practice has been a dearth of community based resources designed to strengthen families and look past the significant impact poverty has on creating the conditions for child abuse and neglect. Only recently has this practice been re-examined to better address the complex effects of poverty.

In February 2008, the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families announced that FRCA would be awarded a contract for the Northern Region Family Care and Community Partnership (FCCP) project. This new initiative establishes FRCA as the lead agency for a network of community based services some of which are provided by the agency and others by partner organizations subcontracting with Family Resources Community Action. In addition, FCCP has over \$100,000 in flexible wrap-around funds through which more non-traditional supports (e.g. respite, mentors, crisis daycare, etc.) can be developed to address specific and unique needs. Relative to this initiative, FRCA will also map the array of human services throughout the region to leverage these resources on behalf of vulnerable families. While providing a comprehensive array of services, FCCP is also a community framework through which to identify needs, customize services, collaborate with families and focus resources strategically in order to achieve the outcomes relevant to children and families.

Lastly, due to high levels of substance abuse and incarceration among parents in Woonsocket, it is estimated that over 200 grandparents have assumed the care and financial responsibility of one or more of their grandchildren (*Source: 2000 U.S. Census data*). While it is a positive that grandparents assuming this care affords children the opportunity to remain connected to family and remain with siblings, it also creates an enormous strain for retired persons on fixed incomes that may be struggling with health and economic challenges.

e. Transportation

Transportation has been one of the most often cited needs for low-income individuals and families in the community participation components of the needs assessment process for over a decade. While there is public transportation through the main routes of town, residents complain that buses do not come frequently enough and that routes and available hours of operation do not get them to personal appointments, potential jobs, or colleges/training programs for classes in a reasonable amount of time.

The reliance on RI public transportation for the low income family and incumbent worker is a significant challenge when considering the local job market. This impact is most evident in the

2005 American Community Survey which reports that 46% of RI workers aged 25 to 44 years of age relied on their own transportation to access employment; and 42.9 % relied on public transportation as their primary means of access to work (*Source: <http://factfinder.census.gov>*). This need is magnified in Woonsocket as the majority of job opportunities available to unskilled workers in this area occur during second or third shift; and workers have consistently reported their most significant challenge to securing employment during these 2nd and 3rd shift hours is the limited public transportation options. Without access to a car or carpooling options, residents will continue to find it difficult to secure these jobs.

In the transportation needs survey targeting those working or looking for work conducted by FRCA in June, 2008, 17% of respondents reported they do not own a car. Fourteen percent of respondents reported they can't afford a car, 16 % reported they can't afford gas and 12% reported they can't afford car insurance. The lack of car ownership was seen in respondents' reports about the transportation they rely on to get to work to seek employment; while 49% noted they used their own car to get to work or seek employment, 17% noted they rely on a regular bus route, 16% noted they walked to work, and 10% noted they rely on a ride with friends and family. Transportation has continued to remain a barrier to employment opportunities both in the city of Woonsocket as well outside of the city. Current Federal restrictions on interstate travel using federal funding pose a major barrier for Woonsocket residents needing public or other modes of transportation to get to work out of state.

Through its work with the Woonsocket Transportation Advisory Committee, Family Resources Community Action is working with local organizations—both public and private—to address some of the transportation issues that are preventing low income residents from securing and maintaining employment. FRCA recently received funding from the FTA (Federal Transit Authority) Job Access and Reverse Commute Program to expand FRCA's Way to Work Transportation Center. The program serves as a local hub providing transportation information, education and service development to assist Woonsocket and other northern Rhode Islanders with their employment transportation needs. The focus of this program is to assist low income individuals in securing and maintaining employment through enhanced transportation options. The Way to Work Center has worked closely this year with Good News Garage, a program that accepts, repairs and awards donated vehicles to families in order to assist them to commute to work and become financially self-sufficient; this program expanded to Rhode Island in 2009. The Way to Work Center identified a partner garage in Woonsocket that will assist with repairs to donated vehicles, and provided support and assistance to help a family secure one of the first donated vehicles in Rhode Island. FRCA will continue efforts to expand transportation resources that can lead to increased economic opportunity for low income families.

Transportation is a barrier not only to jobs, but also to obtaining healthcare, accessing educational opportunities at institutions of higher education and other services. Mothers often have no alternative but to walk with child or children in a stroller, even in inclement weather. Often they “no show” because of the weather, or a sick child who cannot go out, or the extraordinary effort it takes to get several children ready to walk a mile and a half to the clinic or the bus and get there on time. Transportation is also a barrier to parents and children participating in school events and volunteer activities. Many Woonsocket residents rely on public transportation to get to and from classes at local colleges. Continued access to buses that

offer evening hours is critical to residents' ability to access educational opportunities that will promote increased economic opportunities, GED and ESL courses.

In addition, transportation challenges significantly affect elderly residents of Woonsocket. Elderly patients report significant difficulty in accessing subsidized transportation resources to attend medical appointments, as they must schedule their ride weeks in advance. In addition, they cannot rely on subsidized transportation after 2:00 p.m., the time when most doctors see their non-hospitalized patients. To make matters worse, many doctors serving the needs of the elderly are located outside of Woonsocket. Beginning October 2008, the RI Department of Elderly Affairs, which funds the (formerly free) RIDE van program that transports seniors to such places as the Senior Center lunch sites and medical appointments, implemented a \$2 fee each way. This change places an additional burden on low income elderly residents, potentially affecting their access to services and increasing isolation.

f. Basic Needs, Service Linkage and Coordination

An analysis of poverty statistics and community input indicates that challenges in relation to poverty are still a factor of every day life for many Woonsocket residents. (See Appendix A) Issues of basic human needs: food, shelter, and healthcare continue to be dominant in surveys of the community. Low-income families live financially "close to the edge" knowing that the slightest unexpected or unplanned expense can cause a crisis. The high cost of food, gas and home heating oil and other living expenses has placed significant strain on many families, as has the soaring unemployment rate (15.1% in Woonsocket, September 2009), placing many at risk for homelessness. Families are becoming increasingly dependent on emergency food programs as an ongoing means of support, a situation that causes a strain on local food cupboards. From July, 2008 through June, 2009, the Family Support Center at Family Resources Community Action served over 6,615 households representing 8,732 individuals on a drop-in basis by addressing an array of needs including housing, utilities, food, parenting and other crisis concerns. This represented a 42% increase in the number of families served over the same period the previous year. As noted, this period was marked by significant unemployment in Rhode Island which contributed to the 15 % return of clients to the Family Support Center who hadn't been served in over two years.

The stress experienced by many low income individuals make them especially vulnerable to financial misinformation, which can lead to choices that push them further into poverty. Through the United-Way funded Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program (VITA), FRCA helps low income individuals access tax credits for which they are eligible and help people retain more income by avoiding costly rapid-tax return services. In 2009, FRCA assisted over 1,200 low income individuals with tax preparation last year, returning over \$1.6 million to the local community, \$690,000 of which was from Earned Income Tax Credits. The need for services to increase the economic stability of individuals is seen in the 300% increase over the past five years in the numbers of individuals seeking assistance through FRCA's VITA program. Depending on needs and interest, individuals are given additional information to assist them with managing their finances such as budgeting their tax refund, consolidating their credit card loans, or opening a bank account. Due to increasing expenses for families such as food, housing, gas

and utilities, FRCA will continue this project and explore additional asset building and financial literacy strategies for the future.

In addition to basic need challenges, the existing fragmented and confusing social service system causes significant strain on low income families and individuals. Moreover, human service agencies have become overly specialized and have difficulty working with families and individuals in a holistic or comprehensive manner. Examples include mental health or substance abuse organizations that fail to recognize the economic, healthcare and other challenges facing low income families by not fostering collaboration or links to agencies that might complement their efforts. Families receiving services from the Department of Human Services and DCYF also experience this within the context of having a mandate to adhere to two different and perhaps contradictory service plans. In an era of shrinking state and federal human service financing, the need to use resources in an effective and efficient manner through improved systems planning, coordination and collaboration is critical, especially in urban settings such as Woonsocket.