Dane County Task Force on Poverty Report to the County Board November 5, 2009

Table of Contents

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I.   INTRODUCTION

Appointed in 2008, members of the Task Force received the following directives:

> 1. ***Assemble and analyze Dane County specific data on poverty, focusing on employment and education opportunities, access to community services such as child care and transportation.***
> 2. ***Review the support available currently and identify policy solutions to ameliorate poverty in Dane County;***
> 3. ***Hold hearings throughout the county to gather input; and***
> 4. ***Make recommendations to the County Board.***

After holding its first meeting in September 2008, the Task Force set out to tackle a moving target. Given the rapidly changing economic conditions in Dane County, and the incredibly complex nature of poverty and its causes, the Task Force wanted to be able to report on existing conditions of poverty as well as the newly emerging issues – especially in the area of job loss and home foreclosures. Why did the task force undertake such a broad issue? The mission was simply to:

Engage the Dane County Community in the Elimination of Poverty and Challenge the Dane County Board to Lead that Engagement Process.

II.   UNDERLYING PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH POVERTY IN DANE COUNTY

Language in the resolution itself was direct and on point.

"In economic terms, poverty can be defined as a lack of income or resources to meet the basic needs of life. More broadly, poverty is a lack of opportunities, access, assets and means, not only to meet physical needs but also participate meaningfully in one's community or to fulfill one's potential.

Every child in Dane County needs conditions that lead to success in school, good health care outcomes, a safe place to live and family economic security. Children in Dane County who grow up in poverty do not have the same opportunities for early childhood experiences that lead to school readiness, access to health care, a place to call home and family economic security. Children in poverty are at higher risk for poor health care outcomes, low academic achievement, child abuse and neglect and juvenile delinquency.

The poor outcomes affect every resident of Dane County in higher costs for the remediation of these poor outcomes. Federal, state, county, and local policy changes and programs can improve opportunities for families to get out of poverty by helping people move toward greater self sufficiency."

The Task Force got to work compiling information related to poverty in Dane County, meeting with County staff, agency staff and members of our communities who work with those in the most need. Task Force members also met throughout the County directly with those who need help. As of the publishing of this report, the Task Force held 12 meetings and held listening sessions in Deerfield, Sun Prairie, Madison's East side, Stoughton and Mazomanie.

What we learned from this work was that while Dane County has always had people living in poverty, the current economic downturn is having a profound impact on our communities. We now see people living in poverty and living with its effects throughout the County and in every Supervisory district with little regard to demographics. Poverty in Dane County affects people of all races and ethnicities, the old and the young, men and women, singles and families, and people living in urban and rural areas.

Attached at the end of this report is a resource list for additional information. The Task Force has gleaned information from many sources in order to highlight the following findings:

For Dane County citizens in poverty needing health care:

- Among people seeking emergency shelter in Dane County, more than half (53%) reported having an existing medical condition, 34% reported issues with mental health, 18% reported developmental and/or physical disabilities and18% reported alcohol and/or other drug issues. *(City of Madison CDBG office, 2008 Year End Data and previous Years End Data Comparison for Persons Served in Emergency Shelter; Transitional & Supportive Housing; Outreach; Tenant Services; and Financial Assistance Programs)*
- Public Benefits as a whole (Food Share, Badger Care, etc.) has risen in Dane County from 20,623 in 2007 to 22,690 in 2008. (*United Way of Dane County*)
- Badger Care enrollment has grown from 18,496 cases in 2008 to 21,185 cases in 2009. (*Dane County Dept. of Human Services)*
- Badger Care Plus, the new program for childless adults, has enrolled 2,108 people in Dane County since it began taking applications on June 15, 2009. 60,000 people have applied across the state (including Dane County). There are funds available for only 54,000 for the program and the program has now implemented a waiting list. (*ibid.*)

For Dane County citizens in poverty facing issues of hunger and nutrition:

- Pantry usage in Dane County pantries is up over 20% since the beginning of 2008. Well over 100,000 visits to pantries are expected for 2009 compared to 99,700 in 2008. (*CAC)*
- The number of pantries within the Dane County Food Pantry Network has grown from 21 in 2004 to 50 in 2009. More pantries are in the planning stage. (*CAC*)
- Food Share (formerly known as Food Stamps) usage has grown from 10,216 cases in January 2008 to 16,197 as of June 2009.(*Dane County Dept of Human Services)*

For Dane County citizens in poverty participating in the public education system:

- 47% of children in the Madison Metropolitan School District receive free or reduced lunch, compared to 34% statewide. *(United Way of Dane County)*
- 776 children attending schools in Madison in 2008 were homeless and met this Federal McKinney Vento definition of homelessness in at least one of the following ways:
  - They were staying in a shelter;
  - They were waiting for foster care placement;
  - They were sharing housing with others due to loss of housing, economic hardship or similar reason;
  - They were living in a car, park, campground, abandoned building or other inadequate accommodation;
  - They were temporarily living in a motel or hotel due to loss of housing, economic hardship or similar reason;
  - They were living as a minor student without an adult (unaccompanied youth). *(ibid.)*
- For the school year of 2007-2008 (most recent year counted) there were 31,501 students in Dane County public high schools. 452 of them dropped out before completing high school. While this 1.44% rate is lower than the statewide rate of 1.68% it means that 452 people have shortened the list of options for themselves. *(data.dpi.state.wi.us)*
- For African-Americans, there were 3,577 high school students in Dane County public schools. Of those students, 154 dropped out. This is a rate of 4.3 %. The statewide rate for African-Americans is 5.6%. *(ibid.)*
- For Hispanic-Americans, there were 2,087 high school students in Dane County public schools. 88 of them dropped out at a rate of 4.2% which is ABOVE the statewide rate of 3.7%. *(ibid.)*
- Often, cutbacks in programming in school systems due to budget difficulties result in lack of services that are desperately needed by families, including families affected by poverty who have special-needs children. One mother at the Mazomanie listening session told of how cutbacks at the Wisconsin Heights School District meant that her son, who struggles with a developmental disorder, could no longer participate in special education and was receiving F's in regular classroom work. The mother solved this problem by transferring her son to the Sauk Prairie School District. However, since there is no school bus service to that district where she lives, she has to drive him to and from school every day. This limits her options for work and increased self-sufficiency.

For Dane County citizens in poverty seeking employment:

- The unemployment rate for Dane County in July 2009 was 5.9%. While it is better than the state (8.7%) and national (9.7%) unemployment rates, it is significantly higher than July 2008 when it was 3.6% The unemployment rate has fluctuated between 2.8% and 4.1 % from January 2006 through December 2008. *(danecountymarket.com)*
- Employers in Dane County report being overwhelmed with applicants for job openings. A recent announcement of 425 jobs with a new HyVee Store brought more than 5,000 applicants for those positions. Of those 425 jobs, only 90-100 are full-time. (*Wisconsin State Journal, 9/24/09)*

- W-2 Community Service/Trial Job Cases in Dane County have doubled since January 2009. (*Dane County Dept of Human Services*)

For Dane County citizens in poverty with young children:

- 1,700 children under age 5 in Dane County who are living in poverty receive unregulated informal child care. What this means is that these children may not be receiving the early childhood development necessary before Kindergarten. Studies show that these children are at a great risk for lower test scores, lower grades and fewer future employment opportunities.
- There are only half the number of spaces available for infant, toddler care as are needed to meet the demands. (*Community Coordinated Child Care, Inc*)
- While the Dane County Parent Council (Head Start) serves as a valuable resource for families, serving close to 1,000 children in Dane County, it often has waiting lists for services as well.

For Dane County seniors in poverty:

- "Wisconsin (and Dane County) low-income elders face financial challenges that threaten their already fragile economic stability… On one side, they are pressured by ever-increasing expenses—housing, health care, fuel and utilities. On the other, they see fixed incomes eroded by weaknesses within the economy. Social Security payments that are by themselves inadequate, Supplemental Security Income that lies stagnant below the poverty level, under funded public support programs, and asset limits which prevent those receiving public supports from saving for retirement." (*Elders Living on the Edge, WI Women's Network, April 2008*)
- 8.2 % of females over the age of 65 in Dane County live in poverty.(*ibid.)*
- "Older divorced or single women experience greater problems than women who are still married. Very old women will constitute a seriously impoverished group of females. … Issues of greatest concern include poor older women, isolated and living alone.   Racial minority women who are old and poor face a triple threat."   (*Task Force on the Aging in Dane County)*
- Nearly 13,000 households in Dane County where the head of the house is over the age of 65 live on incomes less that $25,000 per year. Of those, 4,293 households have incomes less that $15,000 per year. (*ibid.*)

For Dane County citizens in poverty needing access to transportation:

- Citizens who attended listening sessions outside of Madison gave nearly identical stories of the isolating effects of poverty in their communities and how those communities str not readily accessible to public transportation.
- Since most services used by citizens in poverty require appointments in Madison, the price of gasoline and the costs for keeping a working vehicle have an enormous adverse effect on rural family budgets—not only on the ability to secure services, but also to find and keep employment.

For Dane County citizens in poverty in housing or seeking housing:

- In 2008, there were a total of 3,894 individuals served in 297 year round and 67 overflow emergency shelter beds, motel rooms paid for by vouchers, warming house mattresses and volunteer host homes. During the same period, the shelters reported that 3,636 individuals were turned away without shelter. Of those individuals turned away without shelter, a majority, 95% were individuals in families. *(City of Madison CDBG office, 2008 Year End Data and previous Years End Data Comparison for Persons Served in Emergency Shelter; Transitional & Supportive Housing; Outreach; Tenant Services; and Financial Assistance Programs)*
- 61% of all households in emergency shelter in 2008 lived in Dane County for two years or more – reflecting "a slight shift toward current Dane County residents seeking shelter away from homeless individuals moving in the area. 72% of all households in emergency shelter in 2008 lived in Wisconsin for two years or more." (*ibid.*)
- Foreclosure filings in Dane County through August 2009 have shown a 31% increase over 2008 – outpacing the 23% in statewide foreclosure filings. As the overall increase in foreclosures in Dane County from 2007 to 2008 was 46%, many communities outside of Madison have shown dramatic spikes over the same year – such as Mt. Horeb (75%), Oregon (85%), Waunakee (90%), Mazomanie (150%), Black Earth (200%), and Belleville (500%). (*danecountymarket.com*)

For Dane County citizens with disabilities who live in poverty:

- People with disabilities who live in poverty face an extreme challenge in Dane County when attempting to access disability benefits. It was recently reported that " a request for a hearing before a federal administrative law judge, the average wait at the Madison office this year has been 688 days – almost two years. That delay is the second-longest among the nation's 142 hearing offices." People who qualified for disability benefits are reported to have lost homes and savings and have not been able to access health benefits – which have very negative effects on physical and mental health. (*Wisconsin State Journal, 9/20/2009*)

What is very clear from what we've learned since September 2008 is that ***inaction is not an option.*** The current levels of poverty are affecting all of our communities in Dane County with increased strains on County governmental agencies, municipalities, school districts, businesses, non-profits, charities and families. It is the responsibility for Dane County government to rise to these challenges.

In formulating our "**Recommendations for Policy Initiatives at the County Board Level"** the Task Force struggled with how to define achievable goals and where to use concrete benchmarks for County government to achieve. We believe that this report shouldn't be seen as the end of the Task Force's and County government's work, but as a starting point for ongoing work. We need to have a structure in place not only to monitor incoming data so that we are better aware of the impact of poverty in Dane County, but also to re-evaluate how poverty is measured in Dane County as conditions change.

III.   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY INITIATIVES AT THE COUNTY BOARD LEVEL

Poverty issues need to be front-burner issues for Dane County government.
Our findings have reinforced this position. Based on the highlights of policy and community impact, review of resources and most effective ways to move people from a state of crisis or vulnerability to stability, the following recommendations are proposed to the Dane County Board:

1.   **Consider the impact on people in poverty before any decisions (finance, zoning, ordinances, resolutions and otherwise) are made by the Dane County Board.**

- **Include low-income people as citizen appointees on committees – not just ones that concentrate on poverty issues.**
- **Include "Impact on Dane County residents in poverty" sections to Policy Analysis Statements attached to County Board resolutions and staff reports for Zoning and Land Regulation Committee applications.**

2.   **Restore proposed cuts to vital Human Services Programs throughout Dane County and resolve to maintain or increase the level of investment in services.**

3.   **Make the Task Force on Poverty a permanent commission.**

- **A permanent commission will be able to work with the County Board to implement policies to help people become more self-sufficient. Elimination of poverty requires on going attention, resources and commitment. Rotating membership allows broader participation and engagement on these issues.**
- **A permanent commission with a rotating membership can serve as a reminder of the need to keep this issue on the front burner for the County Board.**
- **A permanent commission will be able to work with other counties' anti-poverty commissions to share ideas and best practices.**

4.   **Collaborate with municipal and school leaders to maximize resources for households affected by poverty.**

- **Encourage further communications between Dane County Dept of Human Services staff and representatives from Dane County municipalities and school districts.**
- **Encourage agencies that have clientele most affected by cuts in services to inform the Dane County Board of changes in funding priority.**

5.   **Ensure that future transportation plans include practical and affordable options for people in poverty to improve access to jobs and services.**

6.	**Transportation planning for senior services must include access to no-cost food options for older adults, like community meals, pantries or farmers' markets, Make a affordable transportation available for those who need it.**

7.	**Support the expansion of community and pantry gardens to enable more people to grow their own food. Community gardens have proven to be an effective community development tool to strengthen communities while increasing access to locally grown food.**

8.	**Adopt a self-sufficiency matrix to measure progress out of poverty. This matrix could be used by the public, private and non-profit sectors to track progress and make course corrections in programming and services.**

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While 4,209 non-profits may operate within the county, most are located in Madison, leaving a large gap for smaller communities. This disparity is addressed through some county wide services, some through Dane County Dept of Human Services, but they are inadequate. Citizens at listening sessions often repeated this concern.

At issue as well, is how coordinated these services are in terms of assessing need and case management that result in people moving toward greater self-sufficiency. How many different places do people need to go to get help? What role does the faith based community play? Is there a better system?

Finally, while there is much work to be done to alleviate poverty in Dane County, the Task Force recognizes that the Dane County Board cannot accomplish these goals on its own. It can, however, take the lead and mobilize a community-wide system that works with people to move everyone toward greater self-sufficiency.

The Task Force challenges the County Board to lead the way.

Appendices

List of Committee Members, interested community partners

Task Force Meeting Dates

Listening Session Questions – list of dates/locations

Listening Session Notes

Dane County 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness

Dane County WisKids Count Data

US Census Data

Housing and Services Related to Homelessness – City of Madison

Additional Resources:

Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

COWS WI Center on Workforce Strategies (www.cows.org)

WI Workforce Development

Dane County Dept of Human Services

United Way of Dane County (uwdc.org)

The City of Madison Community Development and Community Services

Community Action Coalition for South Central WI, Inc.   (www.cacscw.org)