

Using Data to Guide the Future

By Barbara Bartle/Council on Foundations

The Lincoln Community Foundation, along with leaders of Lincoln's largest public and private charitable organizations, city and county officials, and the business community worked together for two years to develop Lincoln Vital Signs. The report was just released in January. The study, which was assembled by the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, is based on existing research and data related to the following areas: Community Profile, Economy and Workforce, Basic Needs, Education, Health, Safety and Community Involvement

Lincoln Vital Signs presents the first comprehensive review of key indicators to determine current successes and challenges in our community. We will use this report to generate conversations, spark connections, and spur collaboration to help guide the future direction of the city.

The report indicates Lincoln is in a desirable position with its strong economy, highly educated workforce, strong public school system, good health outcomes and effective civic services. It notes Lincoln's population has grown 16 percent since 2000, has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation, has a high ratio of workers with college degrees and a low violent crime rate compared to comparably-sized cities.

However, the report also indicates a growing proportion of Lincoln's population is facing real needs. The number of people living below the poverty threshold has increased by 48 percent since 2005. There are now 12,500 children living in poverty, a number that has doubled since 2008, and Lincoln's per capital income trails the national average.

The three overarching conclusions from the study that we plan to focus on are:

1. How will we nurture the things we are doing exceptionally well and build on those successes?
2. How will we address the growing proportion of Lincoln's population that faces real need?
3. With 1 in 5 children in poverty, how will we ensure that all of Lincoln's children become productive, engaged citizens?

The study was initiated because leaders of Lincoln's philanthropic organizations were concerned about federal, state, and local budget cuts to programs for social needs. Lincoln's relatively small philanthropic community cannot single-handedly take up the slack, and neither can local government or the business community. It is clear that these complex issues will require cross-sectoral collaboration within our community.

Following the launch of Lincoln Vital Signs 2014 last month, we are encouraging people to read the full report on the website and sign up to participate in future community discussions. We

hope this report generates conversation, ideas and action to further improve the quality of life in our city. Before the end of this year, the goal is to identify no more than three initiatives that Lincoln can focus on to improve our community. During this year of planning, we will work to convene doers, catalyze solutions, leverage resources, learn what works and share knowledge.