

Vital Signs Coalition Seeks Attention to Changing Lincoln

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By Richard Piersol and Nancy Hicks/Lincoln Journal Star

Lincoln has a lot to celebrate.

The city has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country, a low crime rate and a high high school graduation rate.

But there is also a growing number of people whose income falls below the federal poverty level and who face real need.

In fact, 12,500 children live in poverty in Lincoln, according to Lincoln Vital Signs 2014, a compilation of data about the community.

Organizers said the report, presented to 400 community and business leaders Thursday morning, is intended to generate conversations, create connections and spur collaboration.

In many ways, Mayor Chris Beutler said, it's a wake-up call.

The report represents an opportunity for the community to come together and find ways to assure a high quality of life for every Lincoln resident, he said, noting that partnerships have helped revitalize the core of the city, including Pinnacle Bank Arena.

"At the same time we have to recognize that a strong community is not just investing in bricks and mortar," Beutler said. "We need to invest more directly in our children, and our families, and our support system."

The study shows that Lincoln was not immune to the great recession last decade, that the number of people in poverty climbed 48 percent since 2005 and that most of these people already lived in Lincoln, said Nancy Shank, of the University of Nebraska Policy Research Center, which gathered data for Vital Signs.

The increase is primarily the result of people falling into poverty rather than poor people moving into town, she said. Ten years ago, no Lincoln neighborhoods were in extreme poverty, she said.

Today, six of the city's 73 census tract neighborhoods are in extreme poverty, with 40 percent of their residents living in poverty, according to the data.

Low wages play a role. The study found that even the city's low cost of living does not make up for low pay.

The study was commissioned by 13 groups, including major city charities and county and city government, and put together by the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center.

Read the findings and learn how to participate at www.lincolnvitalsigns.org.

Lincoln should make good use of the data by identifying priority issues and working on them, said Jeff Kutash, executive director of the Peter Kiewit Foundation.

"It breaks our hearts as adults to look at youth who are not succeeding," he said. "But in 10 years from now, it will not just break our hearts -- it will break our community, unless that cycle is broken."

This is not a report that will sit on the shelf, he said.

The Vital Signs community inventory and evaluation process started in Canada in the past decade.

The Lincoln study aggregated existing research and data in the areas of community profile, economy and workforce, basic needs, education, health, safety and community involvement.