

Editorial, 1/27: Collaborate against poverty

By the Journal Star editorial board

Just as doctors monitor a patient's vital signs to assess health, the Vital Signs report -- an infographic was distributed with Thursday's Journal Star -- provides a checkup on the community's health.

The project was born in a spirit of community collaboration, and there is every reason to expect that it will achieve its goal of spurring more collaboration in the future.

Joining forces to produce the report were 13 groups, including Lincoln's major philanthropic organizations, local government, the University of Nebraska Foundation and the Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development.

And just as a patient might be proud of their cholesterol scores but worried about their blood pressure, the community can find reasons to take pride in the report, and reasons for concern.

Lincoln has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. The local metropolitan statistical area that includes Lancaster and Seward counties ranks 18th in the percentage of workers with college degrees. Violent crime is 44 percent of the rate in comparably sized cities. High school graduation rates are high and rising.

And there are those national rankings -- admittedly some were probably designed to attract the online clicks valued by advertisers -- that identify Lincoln as the happiest city in the country, the fourth-best-run city in America, the best place to find a job, and so on.

But yet ...

Poverty is on the rise. In 2000, there were no neighborhoods in Lincoln in extreme poverty. Today six of the city's 73 census tracts are in that classification, with 40 percent of their residents below the poverty line.

Alarming, 12,500 children in Lincoln live in households with an income below the federal poverty guidelines.

Incomes are not keeping pace with the rest of the country. Even taking into account the low cost of living in Lincoln, the average local income trails the national figure by \$1,400.

The report's findings can be considered both a de facto guide to priorities and a call to action.

Fortunately the community already has a strong tradition of collaboration that serves to focus energy and resources where they can do the most good. For example, the obituary for Robert Clark earlier this month told how in the 1970s he created the joint funding system for local

human services. That framework, which brings the United Way into local government planning and funding discussions, continues today.

Like any system, however, the community strength of collaboration needs to be nurtured. The Vital Signs report has renewed connections and provided a factual basis for setting a community agenda. Now the work continues.

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