

SIGNIFICANT ISSUES REPORT – December, 2008

Children's Alliance First, the Bad News

The economic recession has hit Solano families hard:

- Our Family Resource Centers saw an increase of 42% in referrals to utility assistance programs throughout the County in the last year alone.
- Requests by families for housing assistance went up by 78% in the past 18 month period.
- In the last 18 months, requests for employment assistance have increased by an astonishing 135%.
- Solano County continues to register the highest unemployment rate in the Bay Area, nearly 8%.
- About 1 of every 17 residents of Solano County currently relies on Food Stamps. These households are primarily families with minor children.
- Depending on the data source used, Solano currently ranks between 4th and 8th in the nation for percentages of homes in foreclosure.
- Local High Schools are experiencing drop out rates as high as 40%. When teenagers were interviewed about their understanding of the reasons for this, family economic stresses, including the need for the student to work, were among the most frequent reasons mentioned.
- Child Care capacity is also being lost, which makes finding the care families need to get in order to keep a job more difficult. In the last year alone, 8 centers and many more Family Child Care Homes have closed.

The Good News

We are responding proactively:

The Children's Alliance, the Child Abuse Prevention Council, the Child Care Planning Council, the Family Resource Center Network (FRCs), and the Children's Network Board of Directors are all taking concrete steps to better support families in our community and to engage community members in this essential work.

Family Resource Center Network Food for Families:

In the summer of 2007, the FRCs decided to pursue the opportunity to help low income families increase the consistency and quality of food for their children. The economy had already begun to cool and the number of families seeking help with basic needs, including food, was rising. Food Policy advocates from the Contra Costa Food Bank and elsewhere advised us of Federal funds currently available to our county. These funds require no County application process; they can simply be claimed as part of the usual County claiming process. These funds do require a local match, however.

Working together, the FRCs developed a proposal to provide Food Stamp Outreach activities in every community. The total price tag is \$200,000 of which \$100,000 would need to come from County funds.

For this small sum, we anticipate being able to increase the funding available to help low income families with food costs by about \$2.5million. This kind of local expenditure generates

additional economic stimulus which would amount to nearly \$5million brought into our local economy.

The FRC Network submitted its proposal for consideration in October, 2007. In the intervening year, the need for additional food support has only grown. The FRC Network looks forward to the endorsement of the proposal by our County leadership, and a formal presentation of the concept to the Board of Supervisors soon after the first of the new year.

Child Abuse Prevention Council Partnering to Prevent Child Abuse:

Children's Alliance

Statistically, any serious recession also increases the likelihood of child abuse and neglect, as pressures on families increase and family incomes decrease. Council members recognized the need to increase financial support for those agencies on the front lines of child abuse prevention. Since its inception 27 years ago, the Children's Alliance has developed plans for the expenditure of Children's Trust Fund dollars for these purposes, subject to the Board of Supervisor's approval. Council members realize that now is the time to take concrete steps to increase this critically important resource, as well as planning for its expenditure. As a result, the Children's Network sought outside funding to enable us to improve the visibility of the fund in the community.

On November 16th, the Sierra Health Foundation announced that the Children's Network had received one of their responsive grant program awards for its proposal: "Strengthening Sustainability Strategies: Increasing the Local Children's Trust Fund". This is one of 31 grants awarded among more than 400 applicants.

The Children's Trust Fund includes moneys from birth certificate fees, "Kids Plates," and donations secured largely through the property tax insert. Presently, the birth certificate fee is permitted to be increased according to the Consumer Price Index each year, however, there hasn't been an increase in quite a few years. With Sierra Health Foundation funding, we will be able to determine the legally allowable fee increase and hope to obtain permission to increase the fees to the that level. Additionally, the grant provides for a marketing consultant to assist in redesigning the property tax insert and increasing community awareness and contributions to the Fund.

We anticipate the work on this proposal will begin in January and start increasing public visibility of the Fund by April 2009.

Children's Network The Earn It, Keep It, Save It Campaign:

An important way to help struggling families make ends meet is to assure they have expert assistance in getting all the State and Federal tax credits for which they are eligible. The Children's Network will again partner with the United Way of the Bay Area, the IRS, the Family Resource Centers, and other local community-based organizations to assure local families get the free assistance they need from trained volunteer tax preparers as part of the *EARN IT! KEEP IT! SAVE IT!* Campaign. The overall aim of the collaborative is to increase the economic self-sufficiency of low income residents in each of the seven Bay Area counties served by the United Way of the Bay Area. *EARN IT! KEEP IT! SAVE IT!* is dedicated to helping families in the Bay Area meet their basic needs and build financial assets. Last year, during the *EARN IT! KEEP IT! SAVE IT!* Campaign in Solano County, 103 volunteers helped file 2,810

returns, which resulted in a total of \$1,611,489 in refunds to low and moderate income tax payers in Solano County.

This year, the Children's Network Board has set a goal of \$2 million in refunds to local tax payers. We hope to reach this goal by offering Financial Health Fairs throughout the county. In addition to free tax preparation, banks and lending institutions will join forces with tax preparers and community organizations to provide reduced-fee savings accounts, foreclosure and credit counseling and health and nutrition information as well as lots of free fun activities for kids. The fairs are scheduled for:

- 1/31/09 at the Fairfield Civic Center
- 2/28/09 at the JFK Library, in Vallejo
- 3/14/09 at the Vacaville Library

Additional volunteers are needed; please contact Rhonda Smith at 707-421-7229 or rsmith@childnet.org.

Child Care
Planning Council

Securing Solano's Fair Share of Child Care Funding:

The most significant barrier to affordability and accessibility of care in Solano is the chronic underfunding of the state subsidized child care programs in this county. These funds are distributed through the State's Child Development Division exclusively for the benefit of low income working families. The current system of distributing these funds has resulted in inequitable access for Solano families. Despite the great need of families in the county for quality, affordable child care, Solano receives only a fraction of the funds awarded to other California counties with similar numbers of low-income children.

This problem is illustrated by comparing funding levels for San Francisco and Solano Counties, two communities with similar numbers of young children (82,122 and 80,788 respectively). In 2007, San Francisco received \$64,263,294 in child development funds (\$783 per child), and Solano received \$9,149,898 (\$113 per child). As a result, Solano has over 4000 eligible children on the waiting list to receive care.

The Child Care Planning Council has endeavored to have this system corrected for a number of years through legal and advocacy channels, but much remains to be done. As a result of financial assistance provided by First5 Solano, we are now able to secure the assistance of Legislative Consultants to re-engage Solano's legislative representatives at the State Capitol beginning this new legislative session. We look forward to coordinating closely with Shaw/Yoder Inc. and making concrete progress on this issue in the coming year. Our goal: to increase by \$1.5million per year the subsidized child care funding available to families in Solano county. This funding includes funding for Preschool programs.