

## Poverty's harm can be relieved

Lane County has begun an unprecedented effort to address the problem of poverty. Public and private organizations are coming together and putting in place efforts to improve citizens' economic self-sufficiency and ensure that children living in poverty get the evidence-based programs that will help them develop the skills needed to escape from poverty.

Poverty is a big problem. The United States has the highest rate of child poverty of any developed nation. More than 20 percent of those younger than 18 are living in poverty. Older people have much lower rates.

Here in Lane County we have a higher rate of family poverty than Oregon as a whole. United Way's 2012 report indicates that more than 30 percent of families of four have annual incomes of less than \$35,000, or not enough to live on.

Poverty harms families. For one, it undermines good parenting. Imagine that you have two kids. You just lost your job and will be living on unemployment insurance — as 7.6 percent of people in Lane County were in April.

Would that make you a more patient and effective parent?

Poverty causes stress that can lead to family conflict. Research done in Eugene by Jerry Patterson and his colleagues showed that family conflict can lead to children failing to develop the social and behavioral skills they need to get along with peers and do well in school.

Children in such stressed families are more likely to develop aggressive behavior, delinquency, depression and drug abuse. They are more likely to fail in school and drop out. And they are more likely to have children during their teenage years.

That is why poverty tends to be multi-generational. Anxious and aggressive people who have children in their teenage years are more likely to raise children who are similarly anxious and aggressive — children who have the same social, behavioral and academic problems that their parents had. The stress of poverty may explain why children raised in poverty have more heart attacks in their 40s and 50s than those who grew up in families that weren't poor.

All these problems may give people a negative view of children living in poverty. But I think we should think of them more like diamonds to be discovered in the sand.

These children have tremendous potential. If we nurture their development, they can make great contributions to our community. And helping families achieve financial stability will help prevent costly psychological, behavioral and health problems such as academic failure, drug abuse, cigarette smoking, delinquency and mental illness.

That is why it's such good news that a large and growing number of public and private organizations are coming together to ensure that every person in Lane County has the financial tools and resources to become a productive member of the community.

United Way of Lane County is playing a key leadership role. It has adopted a goal-oriented, accountable system for creating opportunities for a better life for all members of the community.

The organization's three goals are financial stability, affordable health care and good education. Each is essential to ending intergenerational poverty.

United Way has partnered with the AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) to help families take advantage of the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit. In 2013, volunteers from AARP helped low- to moderate-income families in Lane County recover \$6.5 million in tax credits.

United Way also helps fund the 211 call line and website, [211info.org](http://211info.org), which provide referrals to supportive services, such as rental assistance, food stamps and other food assistance, dental and health care, and help with electric bills. In the second quarter of this year, 211 received nearly 5,000 requests for assistance, about three quarters of which were from people living below the poverty level.

Increasingly, organizations such as Goodwill Industries, Looking Glass Youth and Family Services and the Neighborhood Economic Development Corp. are providing financial education to many people who never learned how to manage money.

Affordable health care is also critical for low- and moderate-income families. The No. 1 reason that people file for bankruptcy is that they have incurred huge medical bills. Lack of health care is also a stressor that undermines nurturing in families. Moreover, families without health care don't get timely treatment for physical illness or for psychological and behavioral problems that can escalate into lifelong difficulties.

It is in the field of health care that the most ambitious efforts are under way. Oregon has created a system of Coordinated Care Organizations that are enrolling a steadily growing number of poorer families. Trillium Community Health Plan has partnered with Lane County to provide health care for those without it and to implement evidence-based programs to prevent many health and behavioral problems.

Then there is education.

Without a good education, children living in poverty have a hard time escaping it. But under the leadership of United Way's Success by Six program, ambitious efforts are under way to provide high quality preschools for children living in poverty.

Thanks to Gov. John Kitzhaber's leadership, Oregon's Early Learning Council is implementing similar efforts throughout Oregon. High quality preschool education can improve significantly children's chances of arriving at kindergarten with the verbal, social and self-regulatory skill they need to succeed. And to be sure that what we do works, each year in Lane County we assess how many kindergartners are "ready to learn."

At the same time, our local schools are getting better at ensuring that every child is learning. I have reviewed the data for the Bethel and Springfield school districts. The proportion of children who are at grade level has been increasing steadily, and the disparities in achievement among ethnic groups are declining.

In past essays, I have described some of the other programs being implemented in Lane County that will help poor children escape from poverty. They include the Nurse Family Partnership for high-risk teenage mothers, the Good Behavior Game that helps elementary school children learn vital self-regulation skills, School Wide Positive Behavior Support and the Family Check-Up.

As the economy improves, the number of families living in poverty will diminish. But the activities I describe here can take us well beyond the usual dip in poverty that occurs when the economy grows stronger.

Keep in mind that the United States has had a higher rate of child poverty than most developed countries for a long time. Is this what we want?

I know from reading comments on the online version of these essays that some people are skeptical that anything can be done. I understand and appreciate their skepticism.

But there is something new under the sun: Never before in human history have we had the detailed understanding of how to help families, schools and communities nurture the successful development of virtually every young person.

Never before have we had the methods to assess and strengthen the effectiveness of our efforts.

If we continue to implement, refine and expand our efforts, we have the potential to become a community with historically low levels of poverty and fewer young people with psychological, behavioral and health problems.