

Salerno: Poverty: A suburban issue too

By **Judy Salerno**/Guest columnist

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The number of people living in poverty across the country is staggering.

The Census Bureau recently reported the poverty figures from the 2010 census and with adjustments for both government benefits and personal costs, the total is an alarming 49.1 million .

Despite these statistics many people who live or work in the MetroWest region believe that the challenges of poverty don't effect the suburban communities we call home. However, there are food pantries in our towns, unemployed heads of households looking for home heating assistance, and neighbors trying to find ways to avoid foreclosure on their homes.

If the current economic climate has made one thing clear it's that poverty, homelessness, and hunger have no geographic boundaries. The Brookings Institution has been studying the changing patterns of poverty for several years and after reviewing metropolitan trends from 2000 to 2008, the Institute concluded what many of us have known for some time — that poverty is not just an urban issue. The challenges that poor families face are an issue that the entire Commonwealth of Massachusetts must address, with suburban communities and their non-profits facing a unique set of challenges as we begin 2012.

Capacity of services, community involvement, and funding are the most critical of the challenges that our suburban non-profits must address in order to meet the needs in our communities. With poverty rates in suburban areas increasing at a quicker pace than in urban areas, many suburban communities are not adequately prepared to address the necessary growth in capacity. Generally providing critical services in more than one municipality, and sometimes across multiple counties, scarce resources are being stretched thin. Suburban nonprofits have a more difficult time finding financial and volunteer support, and often see dollars and time leaving their service areas to help their larger urban counterparts. In addition, suburban non-profits are trying to find ways to cope with the rapidly increasing demand while having reported a loss in key revenue sources over the last two years.

Finding solutions to these challenges will not be easy, but there is hope.

In a July 2011 report, a Brookings report states that an important way to strengthen the suburban safety net is to have strong suburban community foundations. This is because of the unique role they play in their regions, serving not only as grant makers, but as community leaders.

Community foundations play a key part in understanding the needs of their regions, and identifying and solving gaps between services and problems. They have a degree of independence that enables them to connect with many diverse donors and bring together both financial and human resources. This independence often allows them to support the most innovative social programs and nonprofit entrepreneurs, enabling new ideas and approaches to grow and flourish.

Taking the long-term view of the overall health of their region, a community foundation acts in a variety of roles: convener and catalyst across municipal boundaries; source of information on needs and the organizations that meet them; supporter of, and resource for, non-profits; and facilitator of local philanthropy.

Like all other community foundations, Foundation for MetroWest is dedicated to using philanthropy to have a positive and long-lasting impact on our MetroWest communities. Through our work, we seek to build strong communities and productive citizens that can handle the challenges of today, and stand ready to tackle those in the future. We know that together we are stronger than when we stand alone.

There is a powerful way you can help — take a moment and remember all of the positive reasons we chose to live in the towns we live in and then make a concerted effort to support the community foundations and local service organizations with the time and money necessary to continue making our towns such great places to live. If each of us did this, we might just find that things look a little brighter in 2012.

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