



NAVIGATING THE FUTURE:

UPDATE JUNE 2008

Setting the Course 2007-2011

One Year Progress Report

United Community Services of Johnson County extended its commitment in 2006 to a broad community planning process to address local needs. Originally begun in 2001, the new project, *Navigating the Future: Setting the Course 2007-2011*, took a fresh look at current community conditions in Johnson County and set strategic goals to address human service needs and issues affecting local residents.

Multiple national trends affecting well-being set the context for the new strategic goals. Suburban poverty was growing throughout the U.S. Childhood poverty levels increased from 2000 to 2005 at a faster pace than that of the general U.S. population. There was growing evidence of the potential impact quality early childhood education and supports could have on children's future success. Americans increased their debt and reliance on credit to meet their basic living expenses. And the growth in cost-burdened households – those that paid more than 30 percent of their incomes for housing – continued to grow as the growth in low-wage jobs outpaced that of higher paying jobs.

Similar trends were also evident in our community. Between 2000 and 2006, the level of poverty in Johnson County increased 64 percent, with more than 25,000 persons at or below 100 percent of poverty in 2006. Children are over-represented among the poor – while they make up 25 percent of the total population, they represent one of three poor residents. And more and more Johnson County residents invest 30 percent or more of their income to meet their housing needs – in 2006 one in four homeowners and more than one in three renters were cost-burdened.

A Leadership Committee, representing community members from across Johnson County, was convened in June of 2006 to review current data and trends and recommend strategic action. Members represented multiple sectors of the community invested in assuring quality of life for all Johnson County residents. Together, they worked to identify those

areas of need on which the community and its leadership should focus.

The process set out to be a complementary one, as planning efforts related to aging and health care access were already moving forward in the community. As a result, the Committee chose not to focus their priorities in these arenas. The Committee narrowed possible areas of focus to a select few that they thought had the greatest potential to advance positive outcomes for individuals and families with limited resources. A set of guiding principles was used as criteria for selecting action opportunities that included: whether opportunities to link efforts were available, whether evidence-based programs were known, if capacity would be built through the effort, if data was available to track changing needs locally, and would this focus result in the greatest gain for local residents.

In 2007, the method resulted in four strategic action priorities that the Leadership Committee pledged to advance in order to address trends in Johnson County. United Community Services of Johnson County (UCS) committed to ensuring that steps were taken to implement action related to bringing about each of the four priorities and to collect data measuring whether or not improvements resulted that would advance these priorities. The priorities were called: **Access and Assets for Economic Security, Bank on Change, Housing Opportunity Trust Fund and Quality Early Learning for School Readiness.**

In order to achieve the four strategic action priorities, the broader human service delivery system would also need to be strengthened in order to support needed action. Three cross-system needs emerged as priorities within which to build capacity among human service providers. These included the need to respond to changing cultural dynamics, make services accessible, and raise awareness of human service needs. Each of these areas requires strengthening to assure that the human service delivery system meets local needs.

Moving the Agenda Forward

UCS committed itself to the planning process and subsequently (in partnership with others) to supporting the implementation of activities related to bringing about identified priorities and addressing cross-system needs. Since the June 2007 release of *Navigating the Future: Setting the Course 2007-2011*, UCS has continued to move forward the agenda set by the Leadership Committee and raise awareness of their recommendations.

Access and Assets for Economic Security

Goal: Low-income households access benefits that encourage employment, reduce financial stress and safeguard economic security.

UCS has sought to assure that low-income households have the supports they need to secure employment, reduce financial stress and safeguard their economic security through multiple projects that address food security, housing and related services, and access to healthcare for children.

To advance the goal, UCS began working with the Johnson County Department of Human Services and Aging to develop a grant proposal to Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS) for targeted Food Stamp Outreach among Johnson County residents. According to SRS, only 44 percent of those eligible for food stamps in Johnson County received them. If those who are eligible for food stamps could be enrolled, the stress of choosing to use limited resources for food versus rent, heat, fuel, or medicine could be reduced.

In September of 2007, UCS was awarded a nine-month grant to increase enrollment in the Federal Food Stamp Program in Johnson County. In partnership with the Department of Human Service and Aging, UCS began recruiting organizations across the County in October to act as outreach and enrollment sites to increase access to food assistance for local residents. Once organizations were recruited, staff and interns were trained in pre-screening, enrollment, and follow up procedures. As a result of UCS and its partners' efforts, 513 additional Johnson County residents were enrolled in the Food Stamp Program in Johnson County between September 2007 and March 2008. Recruitment activities will be ongoing through June of 2008.

UCS continues to stand behind low-income households

through its official policy platform and legislative advocacy efforts. UCS has adopted a policy platform that specifically supports additional funds for SRS staff dedicated to Food Stamp outreach and bringing more federal nutrition dollars to Kansas residents. In addition, UCS advocated for an automatic enrollment process for income-eligible households to Lifeline telephone services in order to ensure that these households would maintain access to emergency services via telephone. Kansas HB 2637 was passed in April, 2008 and will take effect July 1, 2009.

Finally, in July 2007 UCS joined the Kansas S-CHIP Coalition and lobbied Kansas senators and representatives for support of increased funding for S-CHIP, the state children's health insurance program that addresses the gap of health-care coverage needs for those children who do not qualify for Medicaid but whose families are unable to afford private insurance. Based on state rates of children who are uninsured, Johnson County would have over 9,000 children who are uninsured and whose families' economic security could be threatened by one serious illness or accident. The expansion of S-CHIP would assure that many of these families would not face a financial crisis if their child was ill and would enable them to seek out preventive services and screenings for minimal cost, thus enhancing their future health.

Bank on Change

Goal: Low-to-moderate income households are connected to financial products and develop the financial management skills they need to build economic security.

UCS and partners have only just begun their activities related to assuring that low-to-moderate income households are connected to financial products and develop the financial management skills they need to build economic security. Plans are underway for UCS Board member Brad Stratton to host a meeting with leaders of area financial institutions. This meeting will provide an opportunity to raise awareness within the financial community of challenges that low-to-moderate income households face, and to creatively collaborate on how to make available products and skill building opportunities that will assist such households gain or maintain economic security. Additionally, UCS will link its efforts with other related initiatives in the community in order to improve communication and coordination of efforts.

Housing Opportunity Trust Fund

Goal: Quality housing opportunities are available for low-to-moderate income workforce and special needs households.

Quality housing opportunities for both those households with low-to-moderate incomes and those with special needs are essential to the overall stability of Johnson County's workforce. Research has shown that decent, affordable housing can not only provide needed shelter but also reduce health problems, increase residential stability, and decrease residential crowding and related stress.

UCS has been working to assure quality housing opportunities for local residents. Board member Gary Anderson was appointed by Johnson County Commission Chairman Annabeth Surbaugh to co-chair the Housing Choices Task Force in 2007-2008. Carol Smith, UCS Associate Director, chaired the subcommittee on examining affordable housing models. The Task Force's report was released in May 2008, recommending multiple policy strategies to develop more affordable housing choices.

UCS' policy platform supports the development and retention of housing opportunities that are affordable for low-income working households and special needs populations on fixed incomes, including support for a local housing trust fund. This platform was in turn, distributed to the local Johnson County delegation of legislators to raise their awareness of the housing needs of local residents.

Quality Early Learning for School Readiness

Goal: Young children enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school.

UCS understands the relationship between accessible and affordable quality early learning programs and children's readiness and subsequent success in school. It has long worked to

assure that the Johnson County community has the programs and policies in place to promote school success for all of its children. Consistent with this history, UCS began partnering with the Kansas Coalition for School Readiness in the summer of 2007 to raise awareness of the important link between quality early childhood education and school readiness and success, and to advocate for greater state investment in education programming.

As a result of this partnership, UCS has convened multiple forums from different sectors to promote greater awareness of the relationship between quality early childhood education and school success, and to promote greater collaboration and advocacy for such programming. UCS brought the issue to the Children's Coordinating Council, a senior management level group of child-serving institutions with a public mission, in August of 2007 in order to prompt their engagement in new planning and opportunities in Kansas related to early childhood learning. The following September, UCS staff convened a roundtable of early childhood providers to promote collaboration and a shared sense of mission. The group worked together to build a support network which would recruit other organizations to join the Coalition for School Readiness, and act as advocates for increased state funding for early childhood education.

UCS has continuously worked in the past year to advance public policies related to early childhood education through engaging business, civic and parent groups. Presentations have been given to Boards of Directors of the United Way, leaders of business in Johnson and Wyandotte Counties, human service providers, local foundations, and a local community college class made up of low-income parents. In November of 2007, UCS staff made a presentation to the Johnson County Public Policy Council, prompting them to include early childhood education in their legislative platforms, and subsequently individual chambers of commerce represented in this council went on to do so. A similar presentation to the Board of County Commissioners resulted in the County also including such support in their 2008 platform. UCS itself voted to prioritize support of increased investment in early learning as part of their Policy Platform. Business leaders were asked to write letters to their associates, asking for their support of increased state investment in early childhood education in December of 2007. These efforts, along with those of many others, resulted in \$11.1 million dollars being set aside in the state's FY2009 budget to establish a Kansas Early Childhood Block Grant.

Building Capacity in the Human Service Delivery System

Throughout the past year, UCS has moved forward priorities set by the Leadership Committee to address cross-system needs by offering skill building workshops and educating community organizations and influential leaders. In both December 2007 and April 2008, UCS held a Cultural Competence Workshop for Executive Directors and Human Resource staff of human service organizations to share successful strategies for addressing cultural competency and available resources within the community to support their organization's efforts. One hundred and five persons attended the three-hour workshops, representing 70 plus agencies and organizations.

Our Future Course

"Navigating the Future: Setting the Course 2007-2011" was conceptualized as a five-year plan to address the unique needs of this community and improve the quality of life for those who live and work in Johnson County. Much has yet to be done by UCS and its partners before the four strategic action priorities are fully addressed and consequent improvements in local residents' lives are demonstrated. Raising additional awareness of human service needs is required to give greater weight to the issues. Broader and deeper commitments to move forward the agenda set by the Leadership Committee by human service organizations, elected officials, and community leaders are crucial for success. But the course has been laid and UCS, with its community partners, will continue to work to assure the plan's goals are achieved as part of its overall commitment to acting as a catalyst for positive community change in Johnson County.

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