

## Poverty forum discusses solutions for struggling families around Tampa Bay

By Rachel Crosby, Times Staff Writer

Friday, January 23, 2015 5:07pm

TAMPA — Nearly half of Florida households are struggling to stay financially afloat.

Ellen Stoffer used that Suncoast United Way statistic to open a poverty forum Friday. This means that more than a million people are living below the poverty line, said Stoffer, the organization's income and investment director.

Just a notch above them on the income scale, however, are another 2 million Floridians just one car problem or medical emergency away from poverty. Frequently, they won't admit they're close to trouble, she said.

"We know that there are families that are working hard, and yet they're still not making it," Stoffer told an audience of about 75 community members and organization leaders in Tampa. "They live in a world of fear, because if that one incident occurs, they don't know what to do."

The group gathered at the Children's Board of Hillsborough County on Friday afternoon to discuss solutions to the statistics that were released in November.

"We all know what poverty looks like," Stoffer said, opening the floor to examples.

"No health care!" someone shouted.

"Deprivation on every level," another sternly said.

Stoffer nodded. Deanna Willsey, Suncoast United Way's marketing vice president, used an acronym to describe working people at risk of poverty: ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed).

"ALICE is in nursing, ALICE runs our retail stores, ALICE is in our child care centers, ALICE is in our workplace and our office buildings," Willsey said. "If ALICE is struggling and distracted and not making ends meet, it impacts every single person."

The statistics are consistent around the bay area. In Pinellas County, 46 percent of households are struggling, while in Hillsborough and Pasco, about 45 percent are.

"It's not new," Stoffer said. "Our main purpose now is to raise awareness."

Willsey pointed to a lack of affordable, quality housing and a shortage of well-paying jobs in Florida. More than half of all jobs in the state pay less than \$15 an hour, she said.

"The nature of our economy is that we are dominated by lower-paying career options," Willsey said.

So how do people break past broke?

The panel proposed a handful of options such as focusing on early child care development and offering financial counseling.

"We need to be sensitive," she said. "I don't think people realize bad things happen to good people."

At the end of the forum, USF anthropology professor Susan Greenbaum opened the floor for questions.

Tim Moran, with Hillsborough County's League of Women Voters, stood up.

"Did you send a copy to the governor?"

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At Friday's meeting, Deanna Willsey said that there are people at risk of poverty in various careers across the Tampa Bay area.

To view the full ALICE report, visit [unitedwaysuncoast.org](http://unitedwaysuncoast.org).

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