

Editorial: Concerted effort needed to tackle financial instability in Madison County

Posted: Sunday, May 10, 2015 7:20 am

The three-day special report Living ALICE, which begins today in The Herald Bulletin and at heraldbulletin.com, reveals a sickness eating away at the core of our community.

That sickness is financial instability. Those who suffer from it, roughly half the local population, can't afford life's necessities and save enough money for the inevitable "unexpected" expenses brought on by family illnesses, car breakdowns and work layoffs.

But the symptoms of financial instability spread far beyond those directly affected by it. The entire community pays the price. It reduces consumerism while expanding the need for expensive social services.

What can be done?

Here's a four-pronged approach to reduce greatly the number of local people who live in poverty or fall into the range of ALICE, an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed:

- Better organization of and easier access to local services

The United Way of Madison County has set the goal of connecting all nonprofits and other organizations that provide help to one another, so that when a person in need visits one such location, they are automatically connected to other resources.

A database shared among all local nonprofit agencies that enables them to work together better and to provide easier and more thorough access to resources is a must.

- Higher educational attainment and more (and better) jobs

In Madison County, 28 percent of the population has either some education beyond a high school diploma or has a two-year degree. Just 14 percent have a four-year college degree or more. Both of those levels fall well below state and national averages.

While the workforce needs more education and training, the community also needs better jobs. The unemployment rate has fallen from 13.6 percent in February 2010 to 7.0 percent in March of this year, and that's a good sign. However, Anderson and Madison County have too high a percentage of service jobs and not enough professional positions.

It's up to local economic development officials to pursue businesses that pay higher salaries and

offer more hopes of advancement.

- Establishment of a specific program that brings community resources to bear for those who strive to get ahead but need a hand up

Many local agencies provide help to those who want more education, better skills and a better understanding of how to budget and save money. But none boasts the concerted approach taken by TEAMwork for Quality Living in Muncie. TEAMwork has implemented a program that engages the middle class and the rich in helping the financially insecure distance themselves from poverty.

- Goodwill of government representatives, employers, neighbors, family and friends

The most inspiring stories in the Living ALICE series will be published Tuesday, in the third and final day of the special report. Here, you'll learn about people who are willing to work hard and, with the assistance of employers, family members and others, have gotten the training for better jobs and are earning higher wages. They can now afford health insurance and are setting money aside for those inevitable unexpected expenses.

Working smart and hard together, we can conquer financial instability in Madison County.

"This community is blessed with big hearts," Beth Erskine of the Leadership of Academy of Madison County says in an article in the Living ALICE report. "Every day, we talk with people who are working tirelessly through a nonprofit agency, their church, their school or their neighborhood to better the life of someone else."

Erskine is right; people in Madison County really do care. Now, the community just needs a concerted, continual effort to make it happen.