

Social services demands increase warned

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The number of households living in poverty or on the brink of it is on the upswing, according to figures from the [United Way](#) of Porter County, a trend that will increase demand on social service agencies across the county.

One of the most dramatic increases was for the city of Valparaiso, which saw a jump from 31 percent in that category in 2012 to 41 percent in 2014, the most recent year data is available. Portage had an increase as well, from 34 percent to 40 percent.

The figures are in a 2014 report called "ALICE in Porter County," an acronym for "asset limited, income constrained, employed." Those considered "ALICE" make more than the poverty level but still don't have enough to get by.

The report, released in late September, measures both those in ALICE and those living in poverty. Overall, that percentage went up from 28 percent in 2012 to 31 percent in 2014 in Porter County.

"I think the perception is with the beach communities and Valparaiso, that there isn't as much need," said Kim Olesker, president and chief executive officer of the United Way of Porter County. "What this tells me is there is need and we are just being made aware of it."

According to the 2014 report, a "survival budget" for a family of four in Porter County is \$53,400. The U.S. poverty level for a family of four is \$23,850.

The median income in the county, according to the 2014 report, was \$60,903, well above the state average of \$49,446, but the cost of living is higher in Porter County than the state average, said Maureen Noe, president and CEO of the Indiana Association of United Ways, which prepares the ALICE reports.

Child care in Porter County is almost \$200 more a month than the state average, Noe said, and housing is \$180 a month higher. Taxes are higher, too, at \$100 a month.

"It all adds up," Noe said, "so it is more expensive to live in Porter County by \$500 a month, on average."

That, she said, pushes more people into ALICE, working and struggling above the poverty rate. That population, she said, struggles silently.

"They quietly work that extra job and don't tell anybody about it to make ends meet," she said, adding

they are as likely to be at their kids' soccer game one afternoon and at the food pantry the next. "They don't say, 'Look at me.'"

Daily expenses have gone up, she said, while wages have not, and part of the challenge for social service agencies is tailoring what they have to offer to a population that is working full-time or more.

That might mean a food pantry holds evening hours for folks who can't get there during the day, or an apartment complex offers on site, subsidized child care.

"Can we think of unique solutions to help these families?" Noe said. "How do we support those who are working very, very hard and still struggling?"

For the United Way of Porter County, the news comes just months after the agency, which provides funding for dozens of social service agencies across the county, started its annual capital campaign, an effort Olesker said will have to be redoubled to serve those in need. That campaign raised \$1.7 million last year.

"While economic indicators show our economy is improving, people are still struggling and we at United Way are going to have to assist them," she said, adding more assistance is available for those at or below the poverty level.

United Way already turns away agencies it can't assist because of budget constraints, she said, and will now be seeing a greater demand for its funds. The more money the United Way receives, the more after school programs it can offer and the more food it can stock at the food bank, she added.

No one could prepare for the recession because they didn't know it was coming, she said, or the economic downturn after 9/11, but now that United Way has the ALICE report, it will work with its agencies to be prepared.

"You can't wait for rain to build an ark," she said.

Amy Lavalley is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.