

East Contra Costa lags West Contra Costa in nonprofit help for poor

By Eve Mitchell *Contra Costa Times* *Contra Costa Times*

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The number of people living in poverty in many East Contra Costa cities has climbed in recent years, but the nonprofit resources available to help them have not kept pace.

The percentage of the population in the East County communities of Antioch, Bay Point, Brentwood, Oakley and Pittsburg that is impoverished averaged 13 percent in 2010, up from 9.5 percent in 2000, census figures show. A family of two adults and two children whose yearly income is less than \$22,811 is considered poor, according to census figures. "The need has just skyrocketed over the past four years. That has a lot to do with our economy here, which relied on the housing market," said Alissa Friedman, executive director of Opportunity Junction, an Antioch-based nonprofit that runs a job-training and placement program to help East County residents become self-sufficient.

"Definitely, we need more resources out here in East County."

How much more? Consider this:

For every dollar in nonprofit resources that a poor person in East County has access to in the form of mental health, employment, housing assistance and human services, such as food banks, homeless shelters and child care centers, \$8 is available to a poor resident living in the more urbanized West County, according to a report published in September by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. The ratio does not take into account government-funded benefits such as food stamps, Medi-Cal and welfare payments. Nor does it take into account services provided by regional nonprofits that serve more than one location.

The report was authored by Chris Schildt, a researcher at Oakland-based PolicyLink and a former UC Berkeley graduate student.

The 8-to-1 ratio is not news to Ed Diokno, senior district representative to Contra Costa Supervisor Federal Glover, whose jurisdiction includes Hercules, Martinez, Pittsburg and portions of Pinole and Antioch as well as the unincorporated community of Bay Point.

"Everything goes back to the fast growth of this area, especially in the early part of this century and the 1990s," he said. "So in this area, a lot of services were concentrated in West County because the need appeared there first."

In the past decade, as the population of East County grew, so did the need for more nonprofits, "but the infrastructure for social services did not. They were caught behind the curve," Diokno said. "What we find now is that the needs in East County for a lot of services provided by nonprofits are as great as they are in West County."

East County has a lot more land and more people than West County. That helps explain why 52 percent of Contra Costa County households receiving state welfare benefits providing cash aid and other services to needy families live in East County, compared with 31 percent in West County and 17 percent in Central County, which includes Martinez, Concord, Walnut Creek, Danville and San Ramon, according to county statistics.

Reina Garcia drops off her 6-year-old grandson, Diego Silva, at an after-school program operated by Village Community Resource Center, a Brentwood nonprofit whose mission is to provide social services to low-income residents. The program provides homework help for K-8 students.

But Garcia's 5-year-old granddaughter, Gimena Garcia, cannot share in the learning experience with her cousin who goes to the K-2 session. That is because she is one of 16 children on the program's waiting list.

"She has to stay in the house," Garcia said in Spanish through Kirsten Rigsby, the nonprofit's executive director. Garcia said she hopes a spot will open up so her granddaughter "can take advantage of the resources that are here, (the) homework help and activities."

Rigsby and others who work for nonprofits are not surprised nonprofit resources in East County have not kept up with the area's growing need.

"If we had a lot more nonprofits in the area, we could really network better," Rigsby said. It's difficult being so far on the east side and lacking the resources of other nonprofits."

The history of the region explains why so many nonprofit resources are concentrated in West County, said Schildt, the report's author.

"West County and Richmond, they have been grappling with problems of unemployment and high poverty ever since the shipyards closed (after World War II). So there was more time for a robust safety net to develop," she said. "Now you have the fact that the (East County) communities are growing and, unfortunately, were hit pretty hard in the last economic recession and just didn't have a safety net already in place."

Over the past decade, East County has seen good-paying construction and manufacturing jobs decrease while lower-paying service jobs have increased, said Schildt's report. On top of that, the housing bust led to a glut of foreclosures.

In her report, Schildt suggested some solutions for bringing more nonprofit resources to East County. One is for regional nonprofits to devote more resources to the area. Another is to have nonprofits work more closely with each other to serve the needs of their clients.

Schildt pointed to SparkPoint East Contra Costa in Bay Point, which opened in June 2011 and serves as a one-stop center that works with other nonprofits to provide services such as career guidance, job training, housing assistance and financial education in addition to helping people obtain government benefits.

The Bay Point facility is one of 10 SparkPoint centers that serve residents in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Mateo, San Francisco and Solano counties. Regionally, nearly 70 nonprofit and government agencies are collaborating in the poverty-fighting initiative led by the United Way of the Bay Area.

Effective nonprofits have a track record of results in meeting a community's needs, said Friedman of Opportunity Junction.

Nonprofits also have to produce financial reports that show how money has been spent to help obtain new grants from regional nonprofits.

"There is a little bit of the chicken-and-egg thing. It's not that easy to launch a nonprofit that comes off the bat with that kind of (financial reporting) capacity," she said.

"Foundations are looking for nonprofits doing effective work in East County that have the capacity to do both the financial reporting and outcome reporting they need to justify their investments."

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