

The Impact Poverty Task Force met September 9 to continue examining data regarding poverty in Paducah/McCracken County and to assess the recent “Bridges Out of Poverty” workshop.

The Task Force has devoted most of two meetings to the data review and while members admit statistics can be dull, they agree it is important to research the many factors that influence local poverty in order to better understand the lives those statistics represent.

After the initial presentation, Task Force members broke into small groups to discuss which statistics and trends were most troubling and identify where the Task Force should concentrate its efforts.

Task Force members expressed concern about that fact that U.S. Census figures for McCracken County show that almost 45 percent of all families headed by a single female parent, with children, live in poverty, compared to 20 percent of all families with children.

They also discussed the growth in numbers of local students qualifying for free and reduced lunch programs, as reported by the Kentucky Dept. of Education. From 1998 to 2008, the number of qualifying students at Reidland Elementary School grew by 19 percent while Reidland High School grew by 31 percent. During that same period, Paducah Tilghman’s free and reduced lunch number grew by 30 percent and the number of qualifying students at Lone Oak High School grew by 21 percent.

Test scores for area students were another area of concern, showing dramatic drops as students moved from elementary to middle and on to high school. The Kentucky Association for Schools Council 2009 transition report shows that while McCracken County elementary school students on free and reduced lunch scored 91 of a possible 100, that score dropped to 88 in middle school and all the way down to 67 in high school.

Judge Cynthia Sanderson noted that many of these students are dealing with emotional trauma in their homes that makes it difficult for them to be successful students. Other Task Force members agreed and cited the powerful impact of domestic violence, drug use and crime on the family.

Paducah Police Chief James Berry noted that the bulk of the city’s assault cases involve domestic, inter-family violence of some sort. Chief Berry shared his previous experience with a successful “Family Reunification” program that responded along with law enforcement to domestic violence calls and worked with the entire family to help resolve the issues contributing to the violence.

Berry said he was pleased to report that juvenile crime and the overall number of arrests are trending down in Paducah, something he attributes to his department's "community policing" approach that helps establish law enforcement as a routine, well-known part of the neighborhood.

Further discussion focused on the "Bridges Out of Poverty" workshop conducted by "Bridges" author Terie Dreussi Smith September 3 at West Kentucky Community & Technical College.

Task Force Facilitator Kristin Williams said the feedback from workshop attendees has been overwhelmingly positive. "Even seasoned social workers who have spent their careers in this field said they gained new insight from the training," said Williams.

The Task Force was impressed by the flexibility of the various Bridges programs now being implemented around the country and how they can be adapted to fit specific needs. Of particular interest is the "Getting Started" training program that provides several weeks of training for individuals committed to moving out of poverty, helping them prepare for the practical and emotional challenges associated with changing their way of life.

The Task Force will meet again in October.