Herald & Review

Central Illinois slips on poverty report

By Theresa Churchill
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Rising unemployment rates and persistently high teen birth rates caused Central Illinois to lose ground for the second consecutive year on an annual poverty report released today.

Macon and Fayette counties slipped from the Illinois Poverty Summit's watch list in 2007 to the warning list for 2008, while Champaign, Logan, McLean and Moultrie counties joined Christian County on the watch list.

Coles County improved its standing, coming up from the warning list last year, and Sangamon and Shelby counties came off the watch list.

In all, 44 Illinois counties made the warning list, and 22 made the watch list in a report prepared by the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights in Chicago for a summit by a bipartisan group of leaders. This compares to 25 counties on the warning list and 32 on the watch list a year ago and eight counties on the warning list and 31 on the watch list in 2005.

"After decades of having the lowest amounts of poverty in the country, the Midwest now has one of the highest levels," said Amy Rynell, director of the Mid-America Institute on Poverty of Heartland Alliance. "The increase we've seen since 1999 is by far the largest in the country."

Macon County is one of just four counties in Illinois to fall on the wrong side of all eight factors used to measure a county's economic well-being: High school graduation rate, teen birth rate, unemployment rate and poverty rate, plus the change in each over the previous year. The others are Green, Knox and Wayne counties.

Vicki Bean, community services block grant coordinator for Decatur-Macon County Opportunities Corp., said her agency is getting more requests for help from people whose income is too high to qualify for it.

"We've lost a lot of people in Decatur-Macon County, and many of them were higher-wage earners who left after they were laid off," Bean said. "We could definitely serve more people, but there are only so many dollars out there."

Primarily responsible for Macon County's lower rating were about-faces in teen birth and graduation rates, with a drop in Decatur's graduation rate from 78.7 percent in 2006 to 73.3 percent in 2007 likely a key factor.

Gloria Davis, superintendent of Decatur the Decatur School District, said this year's Miss School Miss Out campaign, encouraging businesses not to serve school-age children during school hours, already has increased attendance, and she hopes it and other new initiatives will raise the graduation rate for 2008.

"It's something we know has to improve, and we believe it will, based on preliminary assessment results," she said.

Davis also noted that the high school graduation rate for the entire state also went down during the period studied.

Craig Coil, president of the Economic Development Corporation of Decatur and Macon County, said he doesn't understand how Macon County can make a poverty warning list while Coles and Vermilion counties don't make either list with higher levels of poverty.

Each had a poverty rate higher than 18 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey for 2005, compared to 15.2 percent for Macon County.

"We've also had a net increase in total labor force of 1,400 jobs between February 2007 and February 2008, while some of the numbers in this report date back to 2005," Coil said. "At some point, we're going to start to see a reversal in these numbers."

In Fayette County, a change in the direction of its unemployment rate was what worsened its poverty rating, but the city of Vandalia has restored its position of economic development director, hired JoAnn Sasse Givens and taken other steps in the past year to turn things around. City Administrator Jimmy Morani said the city council also expanded the tax increment financing district on the city's west side to lure more employers.

Coles County, meanwhile, improved its graduation and teen birth rates while maintaining an unemployment rate below the state average.

Angela Griffin, president of Coles Together, said the improvements reflect a willingness by individuals and groups to "leave their comfort zones, cross lines, share information and work together."

Doug McDermand, executive director of the Coles County Regional Planning and Development Commission, said the higher poverty rate could be a residual effect of the last recession and/or a distortion caused the inclusion of Eastern Illinois University's student population in the American Community Survey.

Marsha Roll, executive director of the Embarras River Basin Agency that serves nine counties, including Coles and Douglas, said certain businesses geared up in anticipation that Mattoon would get a $1.8 billion FutureGen project to burn coal and create electricity cleanly.

The U.S. Department of Energy pulled the plug on the project last year.

"I can tell you this year the poverty rate in our other counties also increased," Roll said. "You can try to bring a person to self-sufficiency, but if there are no jobs, there's only so much you can do."

U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and co-chairman of the Illinois Poverty Summit Steering Committee with U.S. Rep. Judy Biggert, R-Willowbrook, called the situation described in the report "an economic crisis that has caused millions of Americans to fall into debt, default on their loans and even lose their homes."

He said an effective response would involve stabilizing the housing market, covering the uninsured, extending unemployment benefits, bolstering nutrition programs and bringing a college education within reach of more people.

The report is available at www.heartlandalliance.org/maip/research.html.