

Fort Collins Coloradoan (Colorado)

August 28, 2008 Thursday

Poverty rate dips in '07

BYLINE: KEVIN DUGGAN

SECTION: A SECTION; Pg. 1A

LENGTH: 561 words

KevinDuggan @coloradoan.com

The number of Fort Collins residents living in poverty dipped last year while poverty across Larimer County remained steady, according to a U.S. Census Bureau report.

American Community Survey for 2007, which was released Tuesday, reported the poverty rate in Fort Collins was 15 percent, down from 19.8 percent the year before. Due to a calculation error, the Coloradoan incorrectly reported the figure Wednesday.

Even with the decrease, poverty in the city and county has risen significantly since 2000.

Averaging figures for 2005 through 2007, the poverty rate in Fort Collins has increased 24.6 percent since the start of the decade. The Larimer County rate has gone up 36.5 percent since 2000.

Based on the three-year average, the childhood poverty rate increased 71.7 percent in Larimer County and 57.6 percent in Fort Collins since 2000, according to the report.

The apparent one-year dip in the city's poverty rate is "good news," said Gordan Thibedeau, executive director of United Way of Larimer County, in that "the numbers aren't as bad as we thought."

But the trend of increasing

poverty across the county remains a problem that needs to be addressed, he said.

"The rise in the number of people living below self-sufficiency levels in our community should be a concern for all of us," Thibedeau said.

Demand for services continues to grow, with some local agencies having to put clients on wait-lists, Thibedeau said. Living costs have increased, but income levels have not.

Rising costs for food and energy hit low-income residents and people on fixed incomes the hardest, he said.

The federal poverty level for a family of three, as in a single mother with two children, is an annual income of \$17,000. The **self-sufficiency standard** - defined as annual income needed to meet basic needs without public or private assistance - for the same family in Larimer County is \$49,000.

The steady poverty rate for the county may not reflect the full extent of the economic downturn and increases in the cost of living, said Mary Carraher, executive director of Project Self-Sufficiency.

"We still have a wait list, and we continue to see a lot of applications," she said. "I think we're serving less than 5 percent of the people who could qualify for the program."

United Way last year launched the Pathways Past Poverty initiative in response to the growth in poverty in the county.

The initiative, which involves government and nonprofit human services agencies as well as business organizations, is dedicated to dealing with the root causes of the problem.

Much has happened around the community in response to the initiative, said Amy Pezzani, executive director of the Food Bank for Larimer County.

About 100 people attended a briefing Tuesday on the Census data, up considerably from a similar presentation in 2007.

"I think people are thinking differently about poverty," she said. "I am hopeful because it's very encouraging that from last year to this year there is much greater interest in the issue."

By the numbers

19,492 - Fort Collins residents living in poverty, 2007

22,267 - Average, 2005-07

40.6 percent - Change from 2000 based on the 3-year average

36,126 - Larimer County residents living in poverty, 2007

34,176 - Average, 2005-07

51.2 percent - Change from 2000 based on the three-year average

Copyright 2008 Fort Collins Coloradan
All Rights Reserved