

First Step Taken to End Poverty

By Carol Graham | Posted: Friday, November 14, 2014 12:00 am

A group partnering to address and alleviate hidden poverty in the Tri-Valley held a forum on October 30th in Pleasanton. More than 160 people attended the Hidden Poverty of the Tri-Valley Lunch, which featured three speakers, including Livermore Superintendent of Schools Kelly Bowers.

"People move to the suburbs with the hope of living the American dream, but that hasn't materialized for all," Bowers said. "The faces of poverty are our veterans, our elderly and our youth. Each person is someone's mother, daughter, sister, father, brother or son. Poverty in the suburbs comes with a stigma, so people are reluctant to ask for help or self-identify. Yet with the cost of living and the severe budget crisis we have faced for many years, there are hundreds of people who are just one job loss, medical crisis, divorce, or housing loss away from the poverty line."

The forum was hosted by a partnership involving Hacienda Helping Hands, Kaiser Permanente, the East Bay Community Foundation, and the East Bay Leadership Council in conjunction with community services agencies and city and local business leaders.

"The purpose of the event was to highlight the issue of suburban poverty, as poverty in these areas can often be hidden," said Hacienda General Manager James Paxson. "Our goal is to begin a process of raising awareness, creating the foundation for collaborative impact, increasing connectivity between safety services, and increasing donors and volunteers for local nonprofits."

Paxson added that Helping Hands, Hacienda's community initiative, was created to help the Tri-Valley community through fundraising, granting and networking. Over the last six years, Hacienda Helping Hands has distributed more than \$100,000 to philanthropic organizations including Senior Support Program of the Tri-Valley, Open Heart Kitchen, Axis Community Health, Tri-Valley Housing Opportunity Center and Buenas Vidas Youth Ranch.

"The biggest misconception one hears is that poverty is not an issue in the area," Paxson said. "Addressing poverty is difficult but solvable, particularly through a collaborative effort from the different groups represented at the event."

Kaiser Permanente's mission includes a commitment to improving the health of the communities they serve. Since poverty is a key driver of poor health, reducing poverty and increasing prosperity is an effort Kaiser Permanente embraces.

"Poverty in the Tri-Valley is diverse," said Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit Manager Marianne Balin. "Many people would be surprised at who's struggling; it might be your recently divorced neighbor whose home is being foreclosed. Or, it could be your dental assistant or teacher's aide. Perhaps it is an elder who has outlived her savings, or a proud, struggling veteran. There is a distinct stigma around being poor, so our neighbors who struggle are likely to work hard to maintain the perception that all is well."

Forum speakers were selected on the basis of their expertise on the subject, along with their ability to provide varying perspectives. Elizabeth Kneebone, co-author of "Confronting Suburban Poverty in America," has researched nationwide suburban poverty, including areas in close proximity to the Tri-Valley. Alex Briscoe, Director of Alameda Health Care Services Agency, spoke from a county perspective. Kelly Bowers, Superintendent of the Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District, spoke about the challenges of poverty for children and their families.

"My presentation was titled 'Submerged in the Suburbs,' as folks are living below the poverty line yet struggle in silence, often due to stigma or difficulty navigating and accessing social services," said Bowers. "I have met hardworking folks who just need a temporary lifeline or boost, a voice, and access to resources, so that they can reboot. They have hopes, dreams, a work ethic, grit and determination, but the recent hard times have given them a setback. Their children are suffering. If we can invest in them and their education, there will be a guaranteed economic return, for them personally as well as for our whole economy. We take risks when we invest in real estate and the stock market, but if we invest in our youth, via supports and education, there will be a guaranteed return."

Bowers added that she supports a three-step approach to alleviating poverty: awareness, analysis and action.

"I hope attendees gained a new awareness of the levels and concentration of poverty in the region, that they analyze the data to identify patterns and trends in order to determine root causes, and then strategically take action," she said. "It is not enough to talk about the issues or be aware of them; we must raise consciousness so that at every level we are combining our voice to initiate a call to action, and ensuring available resources are actually channeled to make a difference."

Balin agreed. "The team that produced the hidden poverty forum wants to make certain that the needs of the Tri-Valley are not overlooked just because they can be hard to see."

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