



2015 Human Service Summit Highlights

United Community Services of Johnson County hosted the 2015 Human Service Summit on June 9th. The event, which drew nearly 200 participants from the local community, took place at the BEST Conference Center at the University of Kansas Edwards Campus. The plenary session featured an overview of what we have learned in our research on suburban poverty in Johnson County. UCS presented a framework for moving towards solutions to reduce poverty and create opportunity. A Call to Action challenged Summit participants to commit to next steps to encourage for good jobs, early education, and a strong safety net.

UCS Executive Director Karen Wulfkuhle opened the Summit by sharing poverty trends in Johnson County. Since 2000, the number of persons living in poverty has more than doubled, even though the total county population has increased only 26 percent. The economic recessions of the last decade have driven many longtime residents into poverty, and people have moved to the county seeking better jobs, quality schools, and safe neighborhoods. A survey of service providers reveals that the poverty population in Johnson County falls into three categories: new poverty (due to a change in circumstances); ongoing poverty (resulting from a lack of resources); and persistent poverty (caused by a long-term barrier such as a disability). Persons in each of these categories have a unique set of needs. Maury Thompson, Assistant County Manager, shared the desire to centralize county government's human services and case management to ensure timely and efficient service delivery for the poverty population.

Valorie Carson, UCS Community Planning Director, offered a framework for reducing poverty and creating opportunity on a local level. While no single policy, program, or innovation can eliminate poverty, there are approaches that will make a difference until long-term, systemic change can be achieved. The framework for local strategies includes household sustaining jobs, opportunities for healthy development and learning, and a strong safety net to meet the basic needs of vulnerable persons.

Within the framework are specific action strategies that were presented to Summit participants as a Call to Action, each one explained by an expert in the field. Dr. Scott Helm of the Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership supported the call for every job in the human services field to be a "good job", sharing statistics about paid leave and wages in the nonprofit sector. Dean Olson, President and CEO of the Family Conservancy, told participants about the 30-million word gap that exists between low-income children and their more affluent peers; therefore, UCS called on the audience to promote the "Talk, Read, Play" campaign in their organizations to encourage early development. Ken Williams, President and CEO of Catholic Charities, encouraged participants to increase access to safety net supports for adults without children and transitional age youth, highlighting the programs Catholic Charities has innovated to support this population.

Summit participants were able to discuss the Call to Action in small group caucuses facilitated by Consensus, where they explored opportunities and barriers for the recommended action strategies. The summary for these small group discussions will be posted on the UCS website. Wulfkuhle closed the Summit by telling the audience that UCS will follow up with each of the Summit participants to plan and implement these strategies.

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