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## Compassion's window

A measure of help for every measure of need

The social-services needs in Volusia and Flagler counties will continue to grow as the economy worsens. And the flow of federal and state money available to meet those needs will probably continue to shrink. That raises a question: What can this community do to help our neighbors in trouble?

Start with one assumption: Identifying a new source of money, such as a potential tax levy, will be a time-consuming, painstaking process. It has to be, in order to build the kind of support within the community that such a measure would need to pass muster with governing councils, the Legislature and/or voters.

But go back to something Ray Salazar, president of the United Way of Volusia and Flagler Counties, said last week. When community leaders make a convincing case for an additional tax levy -- when they can show local residents the data proving a need, and spell out exactly what would happen with those funds -- local residents have always been willing to listen. Economic times are tough, but voters have proven before that they have the compassion and good sense to understand the value of investing in Volusia and Flagler counties' future.

Understandably, the idea of asking for any extra funding leaves county and city officials uneasy, especially in the wake of last week's election, where a property-tax-cutting referendum passed by more than 64 percent in Flagler County and nearly 62 percent in Volusia County. It will take courage to face voters again. A deliberative approach that identifies needs in all parts of the community, while seeking plenty of input from the residents of both counties, is the best way to build consensus for an achievable solution.

One local organization has already taken the first steps. One Voice for Volusia released the first edition of its Community Agenda last year, outlining in hard numbers many of the needs in Volusia and Flagler counties (the statistics boxes that accompanied this week's editorials draw heavily from One Voice's work). Using that as a starting point, local officials and community leaders could probe more deeply into the challenges facing low-income, elderly, disabled and very young Volusia and Flagler county residents.

There's clearly not time to prepare an initiative before the Legislature begins its spring session, and no point in trying. Realistically, the earliest a question could be put to local voters would be the September primary elections, and leaders might well opt to wait until November. Some options also require legislative approval.

But the effort to build consensus should start now. Too many Volusia and Flagler county residents are suffering already. The choice is between standing by while others join their ranks -- or taking direct action to make this a better community for all. It shouldn't be a hard decision.

### Local funding options

*Volusia and Flagler residents might consider these options among others for social-services funding:*

- **Sales tax:** Voters could opt for two different indigent-care surtaxes that could help fund mental-health treatment and health care for low-income residents, including a quarter-penny tax that could also be used for trauma care and a half-penny that would go for care. Flagler County also has the option of a 1-penny "small county" surtax.
- **Children's Services Council:** Florida law allows county councils/commissions to create an independent Children's Services Council. Twenty-five Florida counties have such councils. Most commonly, these districts fund child care, mental health care, foster care, school readiness, prenatal care and neighborhood initiatives. Two or more children's services councils are allowed to enter into cooperative agreements to share administration and to jointly fund programs serving a multicounty area. Voters can grant such a council the ability to levy a small property tax -- 50 cents per \$1,000 in taxable property value -- which does not count against counties' property tax cap, or they can fund councils from existing county revenue.
- **Other property tax levies:** Florida law allows the creation of dependent taxing districts that are ultimately governed by the county commission or council, though authority can be vested in advisory boards. Any dedicated property tax for these districts

counts against the county's property-tax cap. Voter approval is usually not required.

· **Legislature-created districts:** The Legislature can create -- by general legislation -- a taxing district that would provide funding for a specific purpose over any county or multicounty region. Miami-Dade County has at least three such special districts, two funded by special sales taxes and one by food and beverage surcharge. The Legislature could create a Human Services taxing district for Volusia and/or Flagler counties. In addition, the Legislature could (possibly) open up the opportunity statewide by passing legislation expanding the potential reach of Children's Services Councils.

CHET BELL

Addiction, mental illness and homelessness are issues highly visible, yet poorly resourced, in our community. The decentralized -- some would say fragmented -- approach to both human services funding and programming results in a system that frequently doesn't respond rapidly or appropriately. We bind together in communities to "promote the general welfare." Therefore a dedicated human services funding source, coupled with an over-arching strategic plan for addressing these on-going societal problems, would be a positive step forward. At the same time, we must be careful that the creation of such a funding source does not reduce the existing dollars currently allocated by state and local governments for these services.

*Bell is CEO of the Stewart-Marchman Center, an addiction-treatment facility in Volusia and Flagler counties.*

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