

Originally appeared on News-Journal Online at

<http://www.news-journalonline.com/special/agenda2008/opnOPN50020608.htm>

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February 06, 2008

A tax for social services? First an efficiency plan

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COMMUNITY VOICE

I was intrigued after reading that The News Journal editorial board's Agenda 2008 addresses dedicated funding for social services. Many individuals working in the health and human services field would agree there are several essential components necessary to promote and sustain quality services for the community.

While there is an array of services that are recognized to be under-funded, having a strategic plan in place to efficiently use and maximize existing funding streams is absolutely critical and should be the first stage of studying the issue. Prioritizing social service needs based on data and ongoing evaluation can lead to better programs, improved collaboration and a cohesive service delivery system.

A community that monitors data indicators on a regular basis has the foundation necessary to effectively direct resources to address the most relevant policies, practices and programs.

Our community is fortunate to have a local initiative, the Community Agenda, which portrays a snapshot of key indicators related to the health and human services sector. The annual Community Agenda report illustrates data trends ranging from prenatal care through eldercare. The full 2007 report can be found online at www.agendavf.org.

Over the last five years, research tells us that community change is more likely to occur when practices are evidence-based and data-driven. The Community Agenda offers a snapshot of data to assist with driving decision making. Published research in each field of health and human services provides the evidence on which to base program improvements and select new programs to invite into our community.

Another benefit of the Community Agenda initiative has been the convening of a Funders' Council. The Funders' Council is comprised of key leaders from organizations that fund health and human services who have been meeting to explore improvements to the local funding allocation system. The Funders' Council is in an ideal position to research the cost saving benefits of investing in prevention.

Investing in prevention efforts now will save money and benefit the business and overall community later, especially when compared to the cost of deep-end services. An added incentive is that there are usually better outcomes for people who receive services earlier before their issues become more complicated. Research shows:

- The most efficient strategy for strengthening the future work force is to invest in the environments of disadvantaged children during the early childhood years.
- Cost-benefit studies demonstrate positive returns from some programs that target vulnerable children beginning as early as prenatal and as late as age 4.
- For every dollar spent on drug abuse prevention, communities can save four to five dollars in costs for drug abuse treatment and counseling.

Our community is only as strong and healthy as the people living here. Leadership and community support will drive any effort, but let's make sure that there is a quality foundation on which to build a sound process to utilize current funding in an effective and efficient manner.

Baird is executive director of One Voice for Volusia. One Voice for Volusia provides staff resources to the Community Agenda initiative and the Funders Council.

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