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Volusia study identifies goals to help improve lives

Ken Ma | Sentinel Staff Writer

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Suicide is on the rise in Volusia County, while domestic violence and juvenile delinquency are decreasing, according to a nonprofit report released Wednesday.

The 55-page study examined issues concerning children, families and the elderly and social issues that affect the community's well-being.

Completed by One Voice for Volusia, an advocate for children and families based in Daytona Beach, the report provides a blueprint for health and human services in Volusia and Flagler counties, officials said.

"This report doesn't tell us how to solve social problems," said Carrie Garnett, the nonprofit's executive director. "It's a snapshot of what is going on in the entire system."

Five main goals were identified in the study to improve the lives of the elderly, children, the homeless and others. The goals include building strong families and neighborhoods and promoting wellness.

Volusia's suicide rate, according to the study, increased from 18.3 deaths per 100,000 residents between 2001 and 2003 to 19.2 deaths between 2002 and 2004.

In some cases, the trends are more difficult to assess. The county's child-abuse rate increased dramatically from 22.6 substantiated investigations per 1,000 children in 2003-04 to 27.8 investigations in 2004-05, the most recent years covered by the study. But during the five-year period, that represented an overall decrease after averaging more than 30 investigations the first two years.

DCF officials have said that special events such as Speedweeks and Bike Week bring a transient population whose problems with their children become part of local child-abuse statistics.

Officials from One Voice and members of the steering committee that contributed to the study

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did not offer a clear explanation of the suicide numbers. But they said the increase means more dollars must be spent on prevention.

Garnett said the report can be used by nonprofits and government officials as a guide when they make funding decisions for the 250 health and human services in Volusia and Flagler.

The report is not all bad news: Domestic violence is declining in Volusia.

In 2004, there were 783.4 domestic-violence offenses per 100,000 people, compared with 840.4 in 2000, the report shows.

The decrease in domestic violence is "a very good thing," said Susan Caplan, a Daytona Beach businesswoman who is a member of the steering committee. "It could signal perhaps some trend in people seeking services before things get out of control."

Sam Willett, a regional marketing president for Bank of America and co-chairman of the steering committee, said he isn't sure whether some of the decreasing trends are really declining because the numbers do not indicate unreported cases.

The data raise "questions for us to dig further," Willett said.

Other areas highlighted are the increase of homeless people in shelters and the streets, better reading test scores, more drug arrests, and decreases in unemployment, juvenile delinquency and alcohol-related motor-vehicle crashes.

The report, which cost \$30,000 and took more than a year to complete, will be updated annually so the community will know what's working and what's not.

"If we do this every year, we can see if the quality of life for children and families has improved," said Alan Abramowitz, a DCF administrator and co-chairman of the steering committee.

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