

Originally appeared on News-Journal Online at
<http://www.news-journalonline.com/special/agenda2008/opnOPN48020608.htm>

[| Print This Page](#)
[| Close This Page](#)

February 06, 2008

Safety nets essential

But better to help working poor avert crisis

In Volusia and Flagler counties, there are advocates who speak for children. There are those who stand up for seniors and fight for the disabled. But what about the tens of thousands of working adults who live paycheck to paycheck, working two and three low-wage jobs to pay their rent and praying that they don't get sick?

It's astounding to realize how many local residents struggle to keep a roof over their heads. The median rent on a modest two-bedroom apartment in Flagler County is \$919 -- which translates into \$11,028 a year. Imagine what that means to a worker who earns around \$22,000 before taxes -- a figure that represents a 40-hour work week at the average hourly wage of Flagler renters.

The Volusia County median rent is slightly lower at \$764, or \$9,168 a year, but still tough to afford, especially since Volusia wages are also lower than Flagler's. Factor in the cost of food, utilities, transportation and the plight of low-income working people becomes apparent.

Those workers rarely draw notice -- until it's almost too late. For an increasing number, disaster comes in the form of a lost job -- and there's little doubt that jobs are disappearing. Day-labor facilities in Daytona Beach, which once provided employment for hundreds of people a day, have all but run out of placements. The construction industry in particular is hurting, but the service industries are also seeing cuts (and job loss) as residents cut out discretionary spending.

Many more are showing up, these days, at homeless facilities and food banks. Many more are applying for benefits -- if not for themselves, for their children. And their desperation plays out in increased addiction, petty crime and other destructive ways.

What can communities do for these low-income working people? Strengthening the safety nets, such as homeless shelters, will help those who have fallen through the cracks. But leaders can also focus on measures that help workers avert crisis.

For some, simple measures such as better transportation networks can provide immeasurable benefits. Volusia County has a good basic structure with Votran, but buses stop running at 1 a.m. in Daytona Beach and before 8 p.m. everywhere else, leaving many workers without a way to get home after a late shift. Meanwhile, Flagler lacks public transportation. Child care is another stumbling block for working parents.

Community leaders can also take a cue from the early days of welfare reform, when officials focused intensely on providing struggling Floridians a ladder up and out of poverty. Better training could help move more local residents into higher-paying jobs in health care -- one of the biggest employers in the area -- or provide an attractive pool of workers for incoming industries.

The ideas may sound ambitious. And by focusing attention on low-income working adults, Volusia and Flagler counties would be blazing a trail instead of copying what other communities have done. But the payoff -- for all local residents -- would be enormous.

In their own words

Gail Camputaro

We've been preaching for 15 years that our elderly are going to be increasing at a rate of two-to-one of youth. Well, guess what? It's happened. We are so late addressing this. I'm afraid the storm of tax reform will roll over us. We will see a tremendous reduction in social services. In order to provide for the safety and well-being of our community, we need to have what I call a big tent meeting. Let's start visioning, with the business community -- all the chambers together -- the government, the schools, the advocacy voices, the colleges and universities, the medical community.

You can't do a needs assessment based on the six o'clock news. You can't stand in the Volusia Mall and do a survey of the

community's needs and get an accurate picture. There are very big needs in this community, but you have to create a plan that's strategically thought out. Unless you know where your funding is going to come from, it's a waste of time. It's like bringing a kid into a candy shop, letting them take a lick and then saying "You can't have any more."

Camputaro is executive director of the Volusia Council on Aging.

© 2007 News-Journal Corporation. ® www.news-journalonline.com. Do not republish or distribute without permission.