



University of Idaho
Extension

Bonner County, 208.263.8511, Fax: 208.263.6191
4205 N. Boyer, Sandpoint, Idaho 82864

Newsletter reaches national audience with information on poverty

The Situation

Idaho has followed national trends in that from the early 1970's to the present, wages and income have stagnated, the gap between rich and poor has widened, and increasing numbers of working families have fallen below the poverty line. Nationally, nearly one-fifth of our population is either in poverty or precariously close to falling into poverty at any point in time. The United States has the highest rates of poverty and income inequality among Western industrialized countries (Rank, 2004).

Many Idaho counties have poverty rates that exceed state and national rates. For example, in north Idaho, 40% of Bonner County's residents are considered low income. Per capita income in the county is below state and national averages. In 2005, Bonner County per capita income stood at \$19,000 while state per capita income was \$23,727. Idaho incomes lag behind national incomes of \$29,469.

Poverty carries specific consequences for families, including additional stress on parent-child relationships, mental health and substance abuse problems for parents and children, low quality child-care, and the absence of connections to resources, services and opportunities. Children in poverty can develop a sense of shame and feel socially isolated, face transience, live in poor neighborhoods and attend schools that lack the resources they need to overcome the deficits of their early years.

Our Response

The University of Idaho partnered with the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAf) to deliver a community leadership program designed to address poverty – the Horizons program. As part of that program, a newsletter was created to provide research based in-

formation about poverty. *Class Matters* was originally intended as a reference for Horizon coaches and participating community leaders. The newsletter began publication in May 2007. The original e-newsletter was sent to about 30 people in Horizons communities.

Program Outcomes

Since the inception of *Class Matters*, the audience has expanded from Horizon's coaches and communities to other groups and individuals working to end poverty. The most recent issue – volume 2, issue 3, was sent to 250 individuals in Idaho, Oregon, Washington, North Carolina and Iowa. One of those readers reported that she sent the newsletter to over 100 individuals working in the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. The newsletter appears on the Move the Mountain web site as an example of quality resources for communities using the Circles methodology to combat poverty. (For more information on the Circles' Initiative, visit Move the Mountain.org.) On the UI Bonner County website, the newsletter was downloaded 2,400 times in its first year.

Class Matters examines the systemic issues that perpetuate poverty using recent research as the basis for the articles. The newsletter opened doors for UI Extension in Bonner County to partner with the Greater Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce in creating a new committee: the Nonprofit Development Council. This committee sponsored nine workshops in its first year. The workshops topics assist nonprofits with tasks including fundraising, recruiting volunteers, developing a strategic plan, and other topics designed for the success of area nonprofits.

As the chair of the Nonprofit Development Council, I spoke at a Chamber of Commerce event on the impact of poverty on business and community sustain-

ability. Poverty has an economic impact on many parts of the community that may not be readily apparent.

A result of that presentation a newspaper article; *Poverty's Impact on Bonner County's Workforce* appeared in the *Bonner County Daily Bee* the week of October 27, 2008. The article highlighted the impact of poverty on businesses from an economic point of view – low-income families buy fewer goods from locally owned businesses and are more likely to shop in “box stores.”

The presentation and newspaper article also described poverty's influence on children's development. From conception through adolescence, poverty – separate from other factors such as single parenthood – leaves a lifelong imprint. Low income preschool age children are less likely to attend quality day care and lack access to the tools and parenting style that would prepare them for kindergarten. School districts then spend additional funds for remediation. While poverty's impact on cognition is most evident when children are young, it also delivers a negative wallop for teens. Young people living in poverty for one to three years are 60% less likely to graduate from high school than are middle class teens. Those experiencing four years of poverty are 75% less likely to graduate. As a result, these young people will be less likely to have the basic skills businesses seek in employees. They will likely find themselves trapped in a cycle of ongoing poverty as they work in dead-end jobs that pay less than a living wage and parent another generation of children who will live in poverty. Idaho has the highest rate of poverty for young people age 18-24 in the U.S.

Readers' responses to *Class Matters* have been positive and include:

- “This newsletter presents researched material and is a valuable resource for those engaged in work with low income families.” (Dept. of Health and Welfare Employee.)
- “*Class Matters* is an example of resources for Circle teams and we are happy to add it to our web site as a resource for Circle teams.” (Move the Mountain.org)
- “Thank you for presenting important information that everyone who works with families in poverty should know, but few understand.” (Mountain States Head Start.)

The Future

Class Matters will continue if or when the Horizon program ends. The newsletter increases community discussions about poverty and provides research based information that can be used to dispel misconceptions about the cause of poverty and replace those misconceptions with knowledge of the systemic causes and solutions that would end poverty.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Sue Traver, Extension Educator
University of Idaho Extension, Bonner County
4205 N. Boyer
Sandpoint, Idaho 82864
Phone: 208.263.8511
Fax: 208.263.6191
E-mail: straver@uidaho.edu

7-09straver-poverty.pub
4/09