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Close look at local social issues could influence public policy

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Add Rochester to the list of communities using statistical analysis to study social issues and help find solutions.

The Community Indicators Project, a joint venture of Rochester Area Community Foundation and United Way of Greater Rochester, is now in its planning phase, with an anticipated launch date of September 2008.

The plan is to gather and examine information from the seven-county area to develop an assessment of the community's "health" in a wide range of areas. The goal is to use the information to focus attention on critical needs and to encourage discussion of solutions.

Cities already involved in similar initiatives include Boston, Toronto and Ottawa.

"We're truly at the beginning of something that we think has a potential for significant impact in the way we think about and focus on challenges in the community," said Jennifer Leonard, president and executive director of the Community Foundation.

"We hope to provoke conversation and hold discussion forums and circulate reports based on the data and to have a lively Web site that will have some ways the community can comment on and have a point-counterpoint on some of the issues," Leonard said.

Planning for the local program has been led by Margaret Sánchez, immediate past chairwoman of the Community Foundation's board of directors.

Ed Doherty, vice president of community programs for the Community Foundation, and Dawn Borgeest, senior vice president and chief corporate affairs officer for United Way, are in charge of managing the project.

Costs for the project include a one-time startup expense of \$208,000 and annual operating expenses of \$167,700. The costs will be shared equally by the Community Foundation and the United Way.

The Center for Governmental Research is handling the data gathering and analysis for Monroe, Ontario, Wayne, Orleans, Genesee, Livingston and Wyoming counties.

Kent Gardner, president of the Center for Governmental Research, which contributed \$20,000 to the effort, said the Community Foundation and United Way have made a commitment to funding the effort for at least five years.

"That's a big deal. It really does make a difference when there is a commitment to sticking with it," he said.

"These are the agencies that really are in a position to change public policy and to change how we use the resources we have in the community to address specific problems," Gardner said.

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