



Guest view: Alliance fosters community knowledge that can help us grow

By **Peggy O'Shea**

Special to the Observer-Dispatch

Posted May 01, 2010 @ 09:00 PM

"An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest."

Benjamin Franklin

In 2009, The Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties, Mohawk Valley EDGE and United Way of the Valley and Greater Utica Area decided to invest in community knowledge.

Over the course of several conversations, we realized that we all had a great need for information about our two-county area. The three organizations began working together under the name Leadership Alliance for a Vital Community (LAVC).

Rather than conduct separate studies, we collaborated on a community indicators project with full support from our respective boards. For this project the Center for Governmental Research (CGR), a leading indicators consultant, collected data in the areas of arts and culture, demographics, economy, education, financial self-sufficiency, health, housing, public safety, technology and transportation. In October 2009, we were joined by more than 100 community leaders who reviewed the indicators and provided us with insight and guidance. This project is meant to benefit their work, too. The information gathered is now available at www.hocindicators.org, and has the potential to be a powerful tool for all of us to use on behalf of the community.

The most frequent question asked about this project is, "Why?" The short answer is that each of our organizations can use the information in the project to inform our work, but there is a more valuable investment. We live in a community that examines itself often – an important collaborative health study was recently released, and we can all think of others. These studies are wonderfully detailed in their particular area, yet they do not always provide an overall picture. A community indicators project provides a broader snapshot of our overall quality of life.

As noted in the Regional Overview by CGR, "The vision for the study is that it will provide an opportunity for local not-for-profits, municipalities and businesses to establish shared goals toward increasing the community's economic viability, well-being and sustainability. With this information, organizations and individuals can be inspired to form partnerships and take action to build a vital community." This is a powerful concept.

You may ask yourself why the snapshot is important when you have access to specific reports – the "close-up," if you will. The snapshot matters because it allows the viewer to see the big picture, and how specific areas are intertwined.

By looking at indicators together and collaborating across disciplines, we can find new ways to improve any specific community issue. The progress will neither develop nor show results overnight – it will require much time and effort. CGR stated, "Like all communities, Herkimer and Oneida counties have strengths to celebrate and challenges to face."

This community indicators project is not an end, but a start that has the potential to inspire extraordinary positive change in the community. Other regions have used their community indicators studies as a starting point for:

Targeting juvenile crime – Dallas, Texas, cut its juvenile arrest rate by 66 percent.

Addressing poverty – Tempe, Ariz., offered education about the Earned Income Tax Credit and taught families how to use their refunds to build financial stability.

Preventing elder abuse – our neighbors in Auburn conducted a community education program to raise awareness and decrease incidents.

The Alliance has made an investment in knowledge. Community partnerships have the power to create change with it. When the Alliance launched www.hocindicators.org last week, we described it as a call to action: we can choose to look at the data and accept it as it is, or we can look at it and roll up our sleeves to make positive change. Which will you choose?

Peggy O'Shea is president and CEO of The Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties. She wrote this on behalf of the Leadership Alliance for a Vital Community.

Copyright 2010 The Observer-Dispatch. Some rights reserved

Comments (0)

Login or register to post a comment:

Login

Username:

Password:

[Forgot password](#)

[Register](#)