

Executive Summary

Whitman County has been described as the poorest county in Washington state with a poverty level of 32.6% (American Fact Finder², 2013). U.S. Census studies suggest this statistic is distorted by the high number of Washington State University students living in Pullman relative to the general population. Correcting for this still leaves Whitman County with a poverty level of about 16.7 %, higher than the state average of 14.1%. Paradoxically, Whitman County has some of the lowest unemployment figures and best schools in Washington state (Tweedy, 2015). Additionally, it appears that Whitman County has more citizens in need than are accessing resources available to them. This results in reduced allocations to Whitman County from state and federal resources. It is not clear that the lower use of resources results from people choosing not to use such services or if there are barriers to access. The greatest poverty in terms of absolute numbers is in Pullman; however, the smaller towns throughout Whitman County have higher relative proportions of low-income households. This is more pronounced in the northern part of the county.

Child Care

Eligibility limits for the Washington state Working Connections Child Care subsidies exclude many families who are above the limits but who still cannot afford child care on their own. Working Connections eligibility procedures sometimes leave families who qualify temporarily without subsidies, and exclude parents who are full time students (unless single) but who do not work at least part time. As of 2016, state funding for Working Connections Child Care will fall below the demand by families in need. Capacities in state and federal free preschool programs, Early Childhood Education Assistance Program (ECEAP), Head Start, and Early Head Start, are designated as sufficient by the state. However, these programs are required to maintain waiting lists of children ready to move into any vacant slot, so there are always families waiting to get in. Several rural towns in Whitman County do not have adequate or any licensed child care or school district preschool capacities, causing families to travel back and forth to other towns with greater capacities in order to provide their children with child care. This situation is particularly difficult for families in poverty.

Education and Job Training

Whitman County follows the nation and state in having high levels of children living in poverty as demonstrated by participation in the subsidized school meals program. Children represent about one third of the poor in Whitman County. Schools in the county receive significant state and federal resources to promote educational success for low-income students. Participating in job training and seeking employment are requirements of a number of assistance programs. Spokane Falls Community College in Pullman partners with local service providers to encourage and assist low-income students who seek higher education.

Elder Care

The elderly make up about one third of low-income individuals in Whitman County. Services for low-income, elderly persons focus on health care and transportation, as well as housing and food security.

Food Security

Most of the federal and state funds for food go toward programs for children. The regional system for obtaining and distributing food to low-income households is large and complex. Most food within this system is donated by food producers, distributors, and retailers. Food distribution services are present in all of the towns in Whitman County and appear to constitute important social and cultural experiences for both the volunteer providers and users of the food pantries. Food made available by these organizations is often limited in quantity and time of availability. Food from food pantries, as well as state and federal programs, is still not sufficient to meet minimum needs. Promising local efforts are addressing the availability of fresh food and promoting improved nutrition and education to enhance food self-sufficiency. Between 10% and 19% of low-income households in Whitman County report going hungry in the last year due to lack of available nutritious food (Bittinger, 2015).

Health Care

Health care is the most complex and expensive system of services in Whitman County. Greater access to health insurance is improving services but placing greater burden on poorly reimbursed providers. Access to dental services is especially difficult as determined by the Health and Social Services Needs Assessment Study in Whitman County (Bittinger, 2015), as well as this current study. Low-income children and the elderly generally have easier access to health care support than do non-disabled adults whose low-wage jobs often lack benefits. The long history of difficult access to health care nationally has resulted in many low-income communities having insufficient understanding of access to and use of the health care system.

Housing

Homelessness is not currently a major problem in Whitman County, although there is more homelessness than apparent. Emergency funds for immediate access to shelter are modest but appear to be adequate at this time. Of greater concern is the instability of these funds since they are completely reliant on individual and business gifts and word-of-mouth fund raising. The greatest housing needs are for transitional and long-term housing for low-income families and individuals. Family Promise, which works with homeless families with children is an especially effective effort at providing short-term (90 day) shelter as well as food, job seeking assistance, and training in family and financial skills. Low-income, long-term housing resources are inadequate and in Pullman struggle for adequacy in the student driven rental market. Efforts at low-income home ownership are promising and have some unique design and funding partnerships that facilitate construction of such housing in economically diverse neighborhoods, thereby improving the social networks of low-income families and property values within the community.

Law Enforcement and Legal Services

First responders including police, fire, and ambulance services do important work assisting service organizations reaching those in need. Individuals and families needing legal services have access to public support in criminal cases and some civil cases, but lack access to resources in most non-criminal cases. In order to assure emergency communication abilities, federal programs provide free or low cost telephones to low-income households.

Transportation

Public transportation is widely available in Pullman only. In addition, many services and retail opportunities are available only in Pullman or Colfax creating difficulty for those living in the areas more distance from these towns. This is especially the case for non-health care related travel. Pullman Transit as well as COAST transportation are exploring avenues for increasing transportation resources in Whitman County. Thirty percent of low income, non-Pullman households reported difficulty in accessing transportation to needed services in the past year (Bittinger, 2015).

Information Distribution

The work of the large number of public and charitable efforts to serve low income households in Whitman County is hampered by the lack of a centralized, easily accessible, thorough, detailed, and up-to-date description of these services. Service providers are very good at working with other individuals and organizations in their service area, but may lack information about topics beyond their specialty. Multifaceted organizations such as the Community Action Center have the best information, but even this is incomplete. In 2015 YMCA of the Palouse took over the hosting and administration of the On-line Palouse Resource Guide, originally designed to provide health and human service agency information for both residents and service providers. Maintenance of the web site, however, has become problematic and suffers from inadequate staffing and funding.