

The Post and Courier

‘Prosperity Centers’ can help families build financial stability

BY CHRIS KERRIGAN

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The Post and Courier’s Sept. 19 front-page story on the persistence of economic distress across the nation is obviously a subject of great concern for most Americans. Over the past five years, the percentage of tri-county residents living in financial instability has increased from 29.1 percent to 33.7 percent.

Bleak macroeconomic conditions are obscuring some groundbreaking lessons our community has learned during the last half-decade about how to increase financial stability among families.

First, we must address the inter-connected issues of education and health in order to attack poverty. Without 21st century workplace skills, even people with initiative and work ethic can’t earn an income sufficient to raise a family.

And second, we must connect all of the uncoordinated programs aimed at addressing these issues. This is critical, as low educational attainment, generational poverty and poor health afflict a growing segment of our tri-county community.

We cannot sustain a high quality of life for all of us with 230,000 people living in financial instability and one of the unhealthiest communities in the nation. Only by aligning the work of many partners in business, government, charities, neighborhood groups, faith communities and health-care organizations can we hope to share this incredible community’s boundless riches with all of our citizens.

Research across the nation demonstrates that “large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, not the isolated intervention of individual organizations,” according to the Stanford Social Innovation Review. This process, called collective impact, underpins the work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and increasingly, community efforts around education

and poverty.

Recently in the Lowcountry, leaders from a broad swath of organizations established a Cradle to Career education initiative that builds on the individual efforts of many to increase the graduation rate and prepare more of our children to become productive adults. Each participating organization agreed to sublimate its own priorities for a common agenda and shared measuring tools to determine their progress. Trident United Way is proud to be a partner in this promising venture.

For the past five years, Trident United Way has been developing collective impact relationships to address the inter-related issues of education, poverty and health. Serving as the backbone organization that creates the structure, designs the agenda and institutes the measuring tools, we have coordinated the work of a variety of businesses and non-profit agencies with 11 area schools serving low-income families in all three counties. They weave together targeted services in each school that address the academic and non-academic barriers to success.

This intensely collaborative effort has produced remarkable results with the most at-risk children. Of the more than 2,500 children in the programs, 91 percent have improved their grades and 98 percent have reduced their suspensions. Nine of the 11 schools have improved their state ratings.

On the complex issue of poverty, Palmetto Goodwill, Family Services Inc., and Trident United Way have combined on a collective impact approach. They have recently established Prosperity Centers in Moncks Corner and Summerville that focus on moving individuals into financial stability by providing services under one roof that increase basic skills, increase income and help individuals gain and sustain assets. Of the 194 individuals who received employment assistance services, such as resumes, online application completion assistance and interview skills in the first six months of operations, 111 of them secured full-time jobs.

The Prosperity Centers are new, but the early returns are very encouraging. In 2011-2012, 89 percent of families seeking help at United Way's Berkeley County service center sought basic needs services, like food, bill-paying assistance and shelter. In the early months of our collective impact venture with Family Services and Goodwill, only 28 percent are seeking basic needs services. The rest are moving up the financial stability ladder, seeking literacy skills, GED training, financial education and employment training.

In every case I've mentioned, we and our partners were forced to suppress our egos and align our work for the good of the team — and for the people of our shared community. Our experiences so far suggest that following this formula will give all of us more to take credit for as our efforts produce real, long-lasting improvements in people's lives.

Once the economic backdrop improves, our community will be particularly well-positioned to help large numbers of families raise themselves out of poverty.

Chris Kerrigan is president and CEO of Trident United Way.