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COMMENTARY

Health starts in our homes — for those who have one

Community Action's vision is that Washington County's residents are strong, resilient, involved in the community and live with dignity and security. Our mission is to lead the way to eliminate conditions of poverty and create opportunities for people and communities to thrive.

For over 47 years, Community Action has witnessed over and over again how poverty impacts families and can contribute to poor health. The conditions in which we live have an enormous impact on our health, long before we need medical care. And when conditions of poverty are eliminated, one by one, people's health and wellness are greatly improved.

The slow return of jobs from the recession has left record numbers of families un- and underemployed, many living in poverty. In Washington County, between 2010 and 2011, the population living in poverty grew from 9 percent to 13 percent, the highest increase ever recorded in one year. All of these families and individuals are now at much greater risk of suffering from poor health.

So what are the social determinants of health that we tackle every day? Let's start with the prevention of homelessness. What we know for sure is that being homeless is bad for your health. It interrupts sleep, exercise, healthy eating and obtaining routine medical and dental care. It creates high stress for children and families. Children perform poorly in school and are at higher risk of disease. For the adults, it disrupts employment and creates cycles of instability.

Since 1974 Community Action has

GUEST COMMENT Jerralynn Ness



been sheltering homeless families with children in our Hillsboro Shelter Home. Day in and day out, the staff works hard to support families experiencing homelessness, helping them through a maze of issues as they strive to get back on their feet. Our homeless liaison works in the Hillsboro School District to make sure that children experiencing homelessness get the support they need to succeed in school during this very difficult time in their lives.

While shelter is not the solution, it does provide temporary respite until the family is able to regain some economic security and locate affordable housing. The best way to prevent homelessness is to provide families with the resources and services they need to stay in their home.

Whenever we can keep a family in their home with emergency rent assistance, we not only have prevented their homelessness, but we have prevented them from having all of the experiences that would take a toll on their physical and mental health. Every year, Community Action prevents hundreds of families from becoming homeless through rent assistance, education programs and supportive services.

Since the beginning of 2012, Community Action has received over 205,000 calls

for utility and heating assistance. Many families who call don't have heat and electricity, as it has been turned off. Children come home to cold, dark housing. They eat cold food, wash with cold water and are more susceptible to illness. They are often living in overcrowded conditions, doubling and tripling up and it is difficult to sleep through the night.

Kids need uninterrupted sleep for focus and learning. Without adequate lighting, it is a challenge to do home work. While we are so grateful we were able to help nearly 8,500 households restore their heat and electricity, we regret having to turn away so many families in need.

Health literally starts in our home — and living in safe and affordable housing contributes enormously to good health. In collaboration with many others, Community Action provides a wide range of programs and services to help families meet their basic needs, achieve housing stability, and access critical resources to thrive.

We understand how our work promotes health and wellness and are proud to be able to contribute to the overall health of our community. We all want to live in communities where everyone has the opportunity to live in housing that is safe and affordable and where everyone has access to the services they need be able to make choices that lead to good health and wellness. And together with our partners we are achieving great outcomes, one family at a time.

Jerralynn Ness is the executive director of Community Action.