

II. Executive Summary:

Vision: A great start for every child – safe, healthy, and ready to succeed in school and in life.

Mission: To assure a coordinated system of community resources and supports to assist all St. Joseph County families in providing a great start for their children from birth through age 5.

Through the efforts of the Great Start Collaborative over the past 18 months, county residents are beginning to understand the importance of providing for children in the early years, and the costs to the individual and the community when these needs are not met.

Our Community Assessment revealed data that indicated great challenges for many young families. St. Joseph County has struggled to maintain industries and employment for its workforce. Over the past 10 years, a number of major employers have relocated, scaled back, or simply closed. Many families struggle to maintain a living wage. Poverty is especially prevalent among single moms, 56% of whom live below the poverty level. A staggering 44.4% of school children qualify for free or reduced lunches – 7 percentage points above the Michigan average. These economic woes are compounded by a populace in which 32% of mothers giving birth have not obtained a 12th grade education. The county also shows higher than average statistics around teen pregnancy and inadequate pre-natal care. Methamphetamine use has skyrocketed in the past 5 years, and with it, substantiated cases of abuse and neglect. Many of the children born into these families arrive at kindergarten unprepared to begin a successful educational journey. They start out behind and they stay behind.

St. Joseph County service providers have attempted to bring many forces to bear in order to make life better for children. The St. Joseph County Human Services Commission was one of the first, and remains one of the most effective collaborative bodies in the state. For over 10 years, the members of the HSC have met together to find solutions to poverty, homelessness, inadequate transportation, limited access to health care, and many other problems which confront a rural community. The HSC is now turning its attention to impacting these problems at the front end by aligning resources for young children. Great strides have been made in health care, as evidenced by rising rates of lead testing and immunizations. The Three Rivers hospital has just broken ground on a new health care clinic adjacent to the high school. A multitude of taskforces seek solutions to the challenges which face families. The Great Start Collaborative has joined forces with these existing groups, bringing with it resources not previously available.

The identification of Action Agenda items through our Strategic Plan process signals the beginning of a new phase for St. Joseph County human service organizations. We are poised to take action in a new and vital way, to make our Vision for young children a reality.

IV. Strategic Analysis Findings:

Demographics – St. Joseph County is a largely rural county, with 2 small cities on opposite ends of the county. The populace of the county is primarily White. The bulk of the African-American population resides in Three Rivers, while a rapidly increasing Hispanic population favors Sturgis. A sizable Amish community exists in the southern and southwest corner of the county. Birth rates have increased slightly over the past 10 years, but the ethnic distribution of births has changed significantly. Births to Hispanic mothers have increased from 3.2% of total births in 1992 to 12.3% in 2005. The county is beginning to struggle with finding ways to embrace these changing demographics. Emerging issues include educating children for whom English is a second language, incorporating bi-lingual messaging in business and agency services, and employers making legal and ethical choices about hiring undocumented employees.

Also at issue is the general economic health of the county. While a 2001 report undertaken by the Upjohn Institute (*St. Joseph County Benchmarking Study*; Appendix II.G) is optimistic about the quality of work life in SJC, even that report admits that workforce development a major concern of the business community. At the same time, parents across the county identify finding employment that pays a living wage a significant challenge for their family. The average salary is slightly below that of the state, and the poverty levels slightly higher, particularly for African-American families and single mothers. While the business community seeks to attract business and industry with favorable tax and wage incentives, it also recognizes that the workforce to support these newcomers may not be in place. The business community has long recognized the role of high quality schools in attracting new business and in educating a suitable workforce. This understanding has laid the foundation for extending that support to early childhood development.

Physical Health – In terms of assuring the physical health of young children, a “bad news/good news” situation exists in St. Joseph County. The county is fortunate to have a public health agency which is serious about its mission, and is effective and accessible. The Agency has succeeded in increasing lead testing and immunization rates significantly over the past 10 years. WIC services are widely utilized, as are the clinic services. However, 39.7% of the county’s children rely on Medicaid or MICHild as their only health insurance. These children are less likely to have a primary physician or a medical home. Very few dentists in the county accept Medicaid, and those who do reach their quotas quickly.

More “good news” comes from the increasing recognition of the need for affordable and accessible healthcare supports. Three Rivers Health has recently received a Rural Healthcare Grant and has begun construction of a clinic facility across from the High School. While this is not a school-based clinic, there is a collaborative agreement between the hospital and the school district concerning the use of the clinic to treat students transported by school medical staff. Conversations have now begun in Sturgis around implementing a similar school/community partnership model. In addition, a Three Rivers church is providing clinic services to uninsured families (including dental services

to adults). Much remains to be done in this area, particularly with involving private practice physicians, but the resources of an effective health department and involved and progressive leadership at the Three Rivers hospital provide a foundation for expanding access to healthcare for all families.

Early Care and Education – As in many communities across the state, a large percentage of the county’s children under 5 (62.8%) have both parents in the workforce. The majority of these families will rely on some form of out-of-home child care. Many of these children will spend their day in unregulated relative care. In 2006, 57% of child care subsidies were paid to relative home care providers. Out of an estimated 146 facilities of all types in the county, only 1 maintains NAEYC accreditation. School readiness surveys reveal that, across the county, 40% of children entering kindergarten in 2006 had no preschool experience at all. In some districts that number exceeds 60%. Within the ISD, 38% of children entering kindergarten in 2006 were judged “not ready” or “somewhat ready” to learn.

Head Start and Early Head Start boast favorable outcomes in the area of school readiness. However, Head Start programs exist only in Three Rivers and Sturgis. Children from rural communities are welcome to attend if they meet eligibility, but no transportation exists to support their attendance. Every district within the county has an MSR classroom for those who qualify. Many working, lower income families fall into the gap between Head Start and MSR income eligibility and full economic independence.

Among parents who participated in Community Conversations, 28% named finding safe, affordable child care as their biggest challenge. The only category which exceeded this was that of finding a job with a living wage (39%). However, it is difficult to separate these issues. Time and again parents told a story of being unable to maintain a decent job because of difficulties finding high quality, flexible, affordable child care, and of not being able to afford high quality child care because of low wages and inflexible work schedules. In a county which is struggling to attract and maintain a qualified workforce, it is essential that the community begins to understand this link, and that business owners participate in formulating solutions.

Economics and Basic Needs – As touched upon above, employment and wages are a major concern for parents. Some parents complained bitterly of not being able to find employment which supports the basic needs of the family, and talked of having to leave the community to find jobs for which they qualify. All of the indicators for poverty at all levels exceed that of the state. The rates for families seeking food and financial assistance have risen steadily over the past 5 years. Achieving economic security seems to be particularly challenging for African-American families, Hispanic families, and single mothers. (children living below poverty rates of 47.8%, 35.1%, and 56% respectively, compared to an overall rate of 16%). According to KidsCount, St. Joseph County’s families have experienced a 64% increase in children qualifying for free or reduced lunch over a 10 year period.

The problems of housing and homelessness are beginning to rise to the forefront of agency thought. The Human Services Commission has identified homelessness as an area of priority, and has developed a 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, a problem which is much harder to assess in rural areas.

Child Safety – St. Joseph County has experienced a dramatic rise in abuse and neglect investigations and substantiations over the past 10 years. It is very tempting to correlate this rise with the proliferation of methamphetamine use and production in the county, and this may indeed be a factor. However, DHS staff also point to greater efficiency in discovering and intervening in situations that may have gone undetected in the past. It is difficult to tease out the “drivers” with the data that currently exists. One thing that is certain is that the systems upon which we rely to insure child safety – principally DHS – are under siege. Cuts in funding have reduced staff and increased caseloads beyond reasonable expectations.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the epidemic of meth use in our county has far-reaching effects on children. Increasing numbers of children are exposed to the toxic effects of fumes and the dangers of fire and explosions from meth production and use, and to neglect by parents addicted to its use. Grandparents are being called on to parent grandchildren as parents are lost to addiction. The cost to law enforcement and agencies responsible for clean-up is tremendous, prompting the community to form a broad-based Meth Taskforce.

Social and Emotional Health – This has been the most difficult area to assess. The county does boast an Infant Mental Health program through Community Mental Health, but statistics available through that program speak only of the Medicaid population. Likewise, increases in the rate of children in foster care placements are troubling, but describe only a small segment of the county’s children. We assume social and emotional challenges for certain populations – those who have been removed from parental care, those whose parents suffer from mental illness or substance abuse, or those with cognitive or behavioral challenges. However, we heard a very different story through our community conversations. Parents from all income levels complained of the lack of social and recreational resources in the county. These parents are concerned that their families find ways to enjoy their recreational time together, and that their children learn to be socially competent with peers through diverse experiences. Families who lack discretionary income and/or transportation to leave the area are particularly challenged in this area.

One excellent resource for families with young children are the Playgroups sponsored by the Great Start program at the ISD. Playgroups are held in every community through-out the school year, and are free of charge to anyone who wishes to participate. These playgroups provide an excellent way for families to provide a social experience for children, and for agencies to begin to identify unmet needs and connect families with resources.

Parent Support – St. Joseph County exceeds the state average in a number of areas which indicate a need for increased support for parents. In 2005, 46.9% of births were paid for by Medicaid, 14% were to teen mothers, 38.5% to unmarried mothers, 22% to mothers who smoked during pregnancy, and a staggering 30.8% to mothers who had less than a 12th grade education. When we consider all of the essential components that must be in place for a child to reach his full potential, it is difficult to believe that these mothers will have the tools to provide those components without significant support. Yet

in St. Joseph County, these services which might alleviate these conditions are among the most sparsely addressed and poorly funded. Many service providers are reluctant to invade the “family circle”, regardless of the cost to the community. As an example, we are in the beginning stages of developing an Action Agenda for the collaborative Teen Pregnancy Prevention Taskforce, but the membership is struggling to achieve inclusion while avoiding becoming polarized by ethical and religious diversity.

The Parent Coalition is poised to play a major role in the achievement of our goals in this area. The PC members seemed to be enthusiastic about this opportunity to increase their own skills and knowledge, and to provide support to other parents as well. The need for a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group quickly emerged as a need for this community, and PC members have crafted and implemented a solution. At the same time, they are participating in trainings aimed at adding to their advocacy and legislative action skills.

Of huge significance in the areas of parent support and the emotional health of families is the Healthy Families Program, governed and funded by a partnership between Community Mental Health, the ISD, the Community Health Agency, the Department of Human Services, and the St. Joseph County Commission. Home Visitors provide in-home support to families referred through our Multi-Agency Referral Form. In general, service provider staff agree that in-home services is one of the most effective intervention strategies, and that adding Home Visitors would increase positive outcomes for families.

The identification and referral process for young children is one of the most significant collaborative successes of the early childhood system. All major service providers subscribe to this process, funneling children into Head Start, MSR, Early On, Healthy Families, and all other relevant services. Collaboration is furthered by weekly Early Childhood Review Team meetings, where service delivery is coordinated by line staff. These efforts have set a precedent for collaborative planning to meet the needs of our county’s children, and created a foundation upon which to build a more comprehensive system.