

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A. COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT: WOONSOCKET

1. Description of Methods

The 2011 Community Needs Assessment of Family Resources Community Action (FRCA) utilized data collected directly from the target population as well as through more formal sources of statistical information. A community needs survey yielded 205 responses from residents of the city of Woonsocket. Surveys were distributed at FRCA's Family Support Center, the Employment & Training Center, NRI Visitation Center and the Woonsocket Homeless Shelter as well as through the "Adopt a Family" program and Thundermist Health Center. A copy of the survey instrument is included in this proposal.

Three focus groups were conducted including one with individuals served through FRCA's Agape Center, one with Youth enrolled in Youth411 Career Center, and parents participating in a group at Woonsocket Head Start and Day Care. Persons participating in the focus groups were asked not to respond to the community needs survey. As FRCA has done in prior years, other current data relative to the needs of low-income families and individuals in Woonsocket was analyzed and updated. RI Kids Count served as the primary resource for much of this information that is aggregated from a number of data sources. Survey tools and summaries of all focus groups are included in this report.

2. Description of Results

a. Statistical Description of the Environment: Woonsocket, Rhode Island

Geography

- Square Miles: 7.74
- Population Density: 5,322 persons per square mile

Source: U.S. Census 2010

Population

- Population: 41,186 (a 4.7% decline from 2000-2010)
- Number of males (and percent of total): 19,934 (48.4%)
- Number of females (and percent of total): 21,252 (51.6%)
- Persons under 5 years: 3,130 (7.6%)
- Persons under 18 years: 9,885 (24%)
- Persons 65 years and older: 5,437 (13.2 %)
- Median age of women and men is 34.8 to 36.8

Source: U.S. Census 2010

Race

- White (and percent of total): 31,713 (77%)
- Black / African American (and percent of total): 2,636 (6.4%) - (up from 4.4% in 2000)
- Hispanic origin (and percent of total): 5,848 (14.2%) - (up from 9.3% in 2000)
- Number of American Indian and Alaska Native origin (and percent of total): 165 (.4%)

- Number of Asian origin (and percent of total): 2,224 (5.4%) (up from 4.1% in 2000)
- Persons reporting two or more races, percent: 4.3%

Source: U.S. Census 2010

□ **Household characteristics**

- Number of households (2005-2009): 17,162
- Persons per household (2005-2009): 2.45

Source: U.S. Census 2010

- Number and percent of female headed families with children under 18: 2,090 (16.2%)
- Number and percent of male headed families with children under 18: 891 (5%)
- Number and percent of adults age 21-64 who have a disability: 6,532 (27.5%)

Source: U.S. Census 2000

□ **Income**

- Median household income 2005-2009 estimate: \$41,001
- Percentage of individuals living below poverty level 2005-2009: 21.1% (compared to state percentage of 11.6%)
- Median earnings for male, full-time, year-round workers: \$31,465
- Median earnings for female, full-time, year-round workers: \$24,638
- Percentage of families living below poverty level: 16.7%
- Percentage of families, with female head of household, living below poverty level: 45.9% (compared to state percent of 29.1%)
- Per capita income: \$18,300
- Percentage of teens who are jobless 11.7 %

Source: U.S. Census 2000

□ **Housing**

- Number of housing units: 18,757
- Number of occupied housing units: 17,750 (94.6%)
- Number of owner-occupied units (and percent of total housing units): 6,513 (38.2%)
- Number of renter-occupied housing units (and percent of total housing units): 11,536 (65%)
- Number of vacant units (and percent of total housing units): 1,007 (5.4%)
- Median value of owner occupied units: \$231,000 (RI as a whole \$283,700)
- Median rent of renter-occupied units: \$483 (RI as whole \$553)

Source: U.S. Census 2000

In 2010, the average rent for 2-bedroom apartment in Woonsocket was \$974. A family of three living at the poverty level in Woonsocket would have to devote 64% of their household income to rent. Housing is considered to be affordable if it consumes 36% or less of a family's household income. (*RI Kids Count Fact Book 2011; RI Housing Rent Survey, 2010.*)

- Of the 6,437 homeless Rhode Islanders who received shelter services in 2007-2008, 370 people claimed Woonsocket as their city of last residence, which is 5.7% of the total sheltered population. (*Source: RI Emergency Shelter Information Project Annual Report 2007-2008.*)

- In 2010, 1,770 children under age 18 received emergency housing in a homeless shelter or a domestic violence shelter in RI. Woonsocket was the last permanent residence for 8% (138) of these children.

□ **Employment**

Labor Force Statistics for Woonsocket, September, 2011:

- Total number of employed persons: 19,424
- Total number of unemployed persons: 2,557
- Number of persons in labor force: 21,981
- Woonsocket September, 2011 unemployment rate 11.6% (as compared to RI statewide average unemployment rate of 10% during that period.)

Woonsocket unemployment rate averaged 13.2% in 2010, the third highest unemployment rate in the state (as compared to RI statewide average 2010 unemployment rate of 11.6%) (Source: Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training Local Area Unemployment Statistics.)

- Percentage of teens not in school and not employed: 11.7% (compared to the RI average of 7.3%) (Source: 2011 Kids Count Fact book- Census 2000.)
- Where Woonsocket residents work: Woonsocket: 34.2%; Massachusetts: 34.2%; Other RI Towns: 30.7%; Connecticut: .5%; Elsewhere: .4% (RI Department of Labor State of the State Report, April, 2010.)
- Percentage of population age 65 or over in Woonsocket: 14.5% (compared to state percentage of 12.4%), yielding a growing service sector.
- Industries providing the majority of employment in Woonsocket:
 - Manufacturing (23.9%)
 - Education, health and social services (17.8%)
 - Retail trade (15.7%)

Source: U.S. Census 2000

□ **Education**

- Percent of adults graduated from high school: 63 %
- Number and percent of persons over 25 with bachelor's degree: 7% Source: U.S. Census 2000
- High School dropout rate (2010): 17% (fifth highest in state; statewide average dropout rate 14%)
- High School graduation rate Woonsocket (2010): 63% (fourth lowest in state; statewide rate – 76%) (Source: RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; RI Kids Count Fact book 2011.)
- Schools Making Insufficient Progress (2010) 13% of schools in Woonsocket were categorized as making insufficient progress (seventh highest in the state) as compared to 15% of schools in RI statewide categorized as making insufficient progress. (Source: RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2009-10 School year; RI Kids Count Factbook 2011.)
- Student Mobility and Stability Rate Woonsocket 2009-10 School Year - 21% (third highest in state as compared to 14% statewide average rate.) Student mobility is the number of students who either enrolled in or withdrew from RI public schools during the school year divided by the total school enrollment numbers. Student mobility is

associated with lower academic performance, social and psychological difficulties, lower levels of school engagement and behavioral problems. (Source: RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2009-10; RI Kids Count Fact book 2011.)

- College Preparation and Access – 33% of Woonsocket 12th graders took the SATs (second lowest percentage in the state) as compared to 55% statewide. 50% of Woonsocket 12th graders filled out the application for Federal Financial Aid (FAFSA); 70% of Woonsocket 12th graders reported they plan to attend college. Source: RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2009-10 School year; RI Kids Count Factbook 2011
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and unsure high school students had a greater risk for 27 of 30 behaviors and had similar risk for the other three categories when compared with their heterosexual peers. Source: 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey

B. Analysis of Needs Identified through the Community Participation Process

Community Need Surveys

Family Resources Community Action distributed and collected 205 completed surveys from residents of the city of Woonsocket. Surveys were distributed at FRCA’s Family Support Center, FRCA’s Employment & Training Center, The NRI Visitation Center and the Woonsocket Homeless Shelter as well as through the “Adopt a Family” program and Thundermist Health Center. The survey was available in English and Spanish. The needs of Woonsocket residents were represented in 7 major domains: Basic Needs, Education, Child, Youth and Teen services, Transportation, Employment, Housing, and Physical & Mental Health services. A question asking if services are available in a language respondent understands was also included. These domains were further broken down into domain specific needs. Responses to these needs were recorded and analyzed as yes, no and no response. The percentages of positive (yes responses) within each of these needs are as follows:

I. Basic needs:

Food assistance	77%
Clothing assistance	72%
Information about Social Service Programs	56%
Utility assistance	72%
Rent/ housing assistance	71%
How to fix legal issues to secure housing	52%

II. Education

English as a second language	30%
Life Skills (budgeting, household management)	46%
GED preparation	44%
Reading, Writing, Math	39%
Health/ Mental health education	42%

III. Child, Youth and Teen Services

Financial assistance for child care	40%
Respite day care for foster/special needs	29%
Parenting education & support	31%
Extended hours for child care	37%
Support groups for single parents	39%
Recreation available for me and my family	38%
Teen Pregnancy (prevention, care during pregnancy, and follow-up services)	31%
Children, Youth and Family Services	34%

IV. Transportation

Transportation to access/keep employment	45%
Transportation to medical appointments	43%
Bus routes near my home	36%
Routes/transportation to evening shift job	38%
Transportation to obtain basic needs	39%
Transportation to social service appointments (RI Works, WIC, etc)	38%

V. Employment

Job Training	46%
Help getting a job	51%
Support group for employment issues	35%
Assistance for work clothing	43%

VI. Housing

Affordable housing	59%
Safe housing	51%
Living independently	45%

VII. Physical and Mental health

Health insurance	39%
Better access to healthcare	33%
Information about nutrition	28%
Affording prescriptions	32%
Information about Drug/Alcohol addiction	26%
Services for victims of Domestic Violence	24%
Pregnancy education and support	25%
Counseling programs	32%
HIV/AIDS Support	32%

VIII. Language

Are services available in a language you understand?	77%
If no, primary language spoken: Spanish noted several times	

In addition to the quantitative community needs data, qualitative data was also collected in the form of an optional comments section on the FRCA community needs survey. Statements from the Comments Section of the surveys are as follows:

- *Interested in paid training programs*
- *Help paying oil bills*
- *VA assistance and support*
- *Support with finding jobs for single moms*
- *I think Family Resources is a big help and I hope they continue to get funding to help the people in need*
- *I think all the services are needed, because if they don't affect you they affect someone you know and some affect people you don't know one way or the other*
- *Help people with housing needs; affordable housing*
- *More assistance for the elderly, such as visiting nurses, meals on wheels, daycare*
- *Help with seasonal clothing for kids*
- *More equipped daycares for children with mental health diagnoses*

Focus Groups

To assist in the identification of Woonsocket resident's needs, FRCA conducted three focus groups in which a total of 35 Woonsocket residents participated. These groups were comprised of:

1. Participants in FRCA's YouthWorks411 Career Center (ages 14-24)

2. Participants in FRCA's Agape Program
3. Participants in Parent Support program through Woonsocket Head Start and Day Care

The groups were facilitated utilizing the following probes:

1. What do you feel are some challenges to families/ individuals in Woonsocket?
2. What do you think could help with these challenges and needs?
3. What ways could we help let people know about what services are here in Woonsocket?
4. Is there anything else you would like to say about the needs of Woonsocket residents?

A summary of issues raised and comments from focus group participants are listed below. Responses are organized by major issues.

What Do You Feel Are Some Challenges Faced by Families/Individuals in Woonsocket?

Employment & Education

- Finding a job is challenging. "90% of available jobs want five years' experience. If you get an education you still don't have experience, then you can't get a good paying job to get on your feet."
- It's difficult when you have only written experience or not enough experience
- Minimum wage jobs are not enough to live on
- Language is sometimes a barrier
- Help kids get high school education
- GED Support

Transportation

- Transportation is a huge concern; the number of people walking (to jobs, appointments, etc) has tripled over the last two years
- People are concerned about what will happen when winter comes and they have no transportation
- Lack of access to a vehicle
- FLEX bus availability is limited. Need to educate people about the process for accessing the FLEX bus; many do not understand how it works.
- Middle and High Schools have after-school programming that ends after 4pm and bus transportation is not available to those students.
- Limited lighting at bus stops; see this as dangerous
- No bus routes for Mt. Vernon Apartments, Bernon St. and Hamlet Ave
- Limited access to rip ticks
- No coverings at bus stops to protect from rain or snow

Basic Needs Support

- Most reported needing help with utility assistance especially heat and electric
- Rental assistance needed
- Food Assistance
- Need help with the cost of moving and expenses that go with this
- More information about accessing lower utility rates

- More information about tax credit programs for seniors and Veterans
- Property tax exemptions should be expanded to all disabled people (not just the blind)
- Difficult to save enough money for down payment on home.
- Issues with poor credit.
- Need more responsive services from DHS.
- More information on process for purchasing a home and support available to assist people
- Need help with improving credit scores.
- “Interest rates are low enough but no one can qualify.”
- Need assistance with acquiring furniture

Child Care

- Cost of care. It is expensive to have your children in day care and morning and afternoon are extra charges as well. Most day care costs \$400 a week for two children
- Not enough options for non-traditional hours for child care
- Quality of care is a concern- don't know or trust the day care providers with your children
- Limit as to after-school programming for kids because of cost-leaving them outside or on the street
- “When you work at night, the state won't pay for night child care. What if a night job is all you can get?”
- “All things you need to get a better life cost money.”

Safety

- 12 yr olds have to walk across town due to limited school bus stops – concern about safety.
- Children getting off the bus at times when it is dark outside creates concern
- Concern about sex offenders in the city. School recently sent home a ten page list to all students with information about offenders in Woonsocket

Health Care

- More health care insurance and information for people without children
- Some jobs that do provide healthcare provide a type of healthcare that not many accept or that you have to travel to receive
- Hard to afford out of pocket expenses not covered by Medicare
- Concerns regarding the cost of growing medicinal marijuana given the need for it.
- Lack of respect while in recovery by some city officials. Lack of respect and understanding of difficulties faced by people with addictions and those living with HIV/AIDS

What do you think could help families/individuals in Woonsocket with these challenges and needs? (services, programs, specific assistance)

- Cities should provide winterizing/weatherization assistance for all owners and renters
- Tips on how to save on utility bills
- More programs to help people with utility bills

- More organized programs for students to walk in groups to bus stops for safety
- More responsive state employees at DHS
- More evening hour child care
- Job training in field of human services to help with access to entry level jobs
- Interest expressed in upcoming Homemaker Training classes at FRCA
- Expansion of bus routes
- More bus passes to offset cost
- Free transportation to appointments and clinic visits
- Better shelter and lighting at bus stops
- More utility/heating assistance
- Information from Legal Aid Services to provide information on tenants' rights, taxes.
- Assistance with money management, improving credit scores, etc.
- Information and financial assistance to help with purchasing own home (down payments, closing costs)
- Access to a furniture bank
- ESL classes onsite at the Agape Center – more comfortable for clients
- More help with medical expenses not covered by Medicare
- “Sensitivity Training” for police officers/other city personnel to help them better understand the needs and concerns of people living with HIV/AIDS.

Other/Youth Leadership Activity Ideas:

- Working together to get more peers to come to the Youth Center
- Having fundraisers or bake sales to raise money to take more field trip or have more programming
- Peer mentoring or dissuading peers from making bad decisions
- A nicer space for the Youth Center; having pool tables and a better hang-out space
- Learning about other cultures/peer exchange
- More hands-on work experiences
- Open a youth-led business, e.g. coffee shop or arts/music space
- Teach and learn about carpentry and construction skills
- Doing more community service activities

In what ways could we help let people know about services currently available in Woonsocket to assist individuals and families?

- Statewide newsletter
- Posting list of local food pantries
- Postings in community of available jobs
- Promote UnitedWay 211
- Monthly Program newsletters & fliers posted at FRCA and in community
- Valley Breeze newspaper listings

3. Summary and Analysis of Critical Community Needs

The most critical needs to residents of Woonsocket, RI continue to be in the areas of unemployment, education, homelessness, access to healthcare, child abuse and neglect, transportation and challenges related to basic needs access. The impact these challenges have on Woonsocket residents is evident in the city's continued economic challenges reported by a significant number of its families. Woonsocket's median income has remained the third lowest of all Rhode Island cities and towns and has continued to decline in comparison to other communities over the past ten years. In 2000 31.8% of families with children under 18 that lived in Woonsocket had incomes below the poverty level, as compared with 16.9% of families statewide. The most salient of the poverty related problems is evident in Woonsocket's continued rating as the community with the highest level of child abuse and neglect in the state. The child abuse and neglect indicated victims' rate was 27.3 per 1,000 children in Woonsocket, as compared to 13.3 per 1,000 statewide averages, underscoring the significant impact of these critical needs to residents of Woonsocket, RI. The long term implications of this level of poverty and reported critical needs on the residents of Woonsocket are seen in the increased likelihood of health and behavioral related problems, difficulty in schools, increased risks of teen pregnancy, increased potential to earn less or experience employment problems as well as increased indices of legal and judicial problems. *(Source of above information: 2011 Rhode Island Kids Count Fact book).*

a. Unemployment, Education and Job Skills among Older Youth and Adults

Unemployment and lack of jobs continue to be a major concern for the citizens of Woonsocket. According to the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training statistics, Woonsocket's unemployment rate averaged 13.2% in 2010, the third highest in the state and well above the state average of 11.6%. Woonsocket's unemployment rate has continued to be higher than the state average; Woonsocket's September 2011 unemployment rate was 11.9% as compared to statewide average of 10%. Of those responding to the 2011 Community Needs Survey, 51% indicated a need for help getting a job, and 46% indicated a need for job training. Connecting people to jobs and job training, building basic skills and improving work supports such as child care and transportation were priorities outlined in the "Our Neighborhoods-Woonsocket" community contract. *(LISC Rhode Island/NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley, March 2010).*

This continued challenge for Woonsocket's residents is most evident in the residents' income levels. According to census figures, Woonsocket's median income has remained the third lowest in the state (\$30,819) and the fourth lowest with family income for families with children under 18 (\$34,465). This disparity is compounded by the fact there has been a decline in the real median wage from 2000-2006 leaving Rhode Island to be the fifth highest rate of growth in wage inequality in the country (State of Working Rhode Island, 2007). Despite the decline in wages, the cost of living has continued to steadily rise, significantly impacting Woonsocket residents.

Lower educational levels have remained a significant challenge to a family's ability to sustain a living wage in Woonsocket. In 2010, Woonsocket had a high school graduation rate of 63% as compared to 76% statewide. Woonsocket's high school drop-out rate in 2010 was the fifth highest in the state (17% as compared to a rate of 14% statewide.) It was also found that from

2005-2009, 24% of new mothers that reside in Woonsocket had less than a high school diploma, as compared to the statewide average of 16%. The proportion of new mothers with a bachelor's degree or above is significantly smaller in Woonsocket (14%) than in the state as a whole (35%). Research shows strong links between parental education levels and a child's school readiness, health and ultimate level of child education. (*Source of above information: 2011 Rhode Island Kids Count Fact book; RI Department of Health*).

The challenges relative to educational attainment and employment are significant. An individual without a high school diploma earns two thirds of the earnings of a high school graduate and a little more than one third of the earnings of an individual with a bachelor's degree (*Source: US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, 2002*). The impact of this lack of education goes beyond a person's earning potential; it also affects employment opportunities on a larger scale. With such a high percentage of residents lacking a high school education, new businesses requiring a skilled workforce tend to be reluctant to establish in the community. This impact is further compounded by the local culture's tendency to either not look out of the geographical area for employment or have to rely on an inadequate transportation system to access employment opportunities outside of the city.

This challenge to employment is also evident in Woonsocket's immigrant population. As the number of Woonsocket's immigrant population increases, the needs related to English speaking and reading skills relative to employment also increase. Nine percent of the people living in Woonsocket in 2006-2008 were foreign born. Among people at least five years old living in Woonsocket in 2006-2008, 24% spoke a language other than English at home. Of those speaking a language other than English at home, 35% spoke Spanish and 65% spoke some other language; 31% reported that they did not speak English "very well." (*Source: U.S. Census 2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-year estimates.*)

In the FY 2011 community needs assessment survey, 30% of respondents cited a need for English as a second language support. This lack of English speaking skills not only makes job hunting difficult, it hampers work-related interpersonal interactions and knowledge of safety requirements of the job. RI Poverty Institute reports that a person's ability to speak English is directly tied to the income they may earn. Lack of English literacy is a barrier to enrollment and completion of occupational training programs that require 6th grade or higher tests scores in reading. As a result those with low levels of proficiency in reading and speaking qualify for only the lowest paid jobs or no jobs at all.

The challenge relative to English speaking skills is further compounded by the tendency of these groups to be isolated by both a culture and language. Visible community leaders within these groups are just beginning to emerge and the lack of recognized leadership continues to hamper efforts to organize services to address the myriad of employment and basic family needs.

To date, efforts to address these employment related challenges in the city of Woonsocket have been limited. While the Department of Labor and Training (DLT), now a netWORKri "One Stop" Center, provides job search skills, training, workshops and a job bank, it primarily serves those that are more easily employed as opposed to the chronically unemployed or underemployed worker in need of additional services and supports. These programs typically do

not provide the intensive case management services these Woonsocket residents need as a result of past educational barriers.

In 2008 this state's implementation of the federal Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) changed to a "work first" model (called RI Works) to reduce the number of families with children receiving public assistance. Fortunately, in the last several months, the legislature and DHS has reversed this stance and has widened the options for work preparation prior to employment as a key strategy to reduce public assistance rolls. Even so, the work activity requirements related to the Rhode Island Works Program can often be confusing and result in benefit sanctions due to a client's difficulty in comprehending program guidelines. Clients are challenged by a complex program needed to secure employment and training services. State personnel are dealing with an array of client needs (housing, child care, counseling, substance abuse) in the midst of a system that is fragmented and rapidly changing. This is further compounded as a result of the tremendous level of information and support-related needs clients report. The continued DHS and DLT case personnel shortages and turnover at the Northern Regional offices present further challenges to continuity of service and keeping personnel with a deep knowledge of training and other resources in the region. When a client is working to comply with program guidelines, such tasks as day care coordination, securing child care subsidies, identifying health insurance services and complying with welfare income reporting guidelines are all difficulties that must be simultaneously addressed. The resulting confusion and lack of support from an already taxed social service system can have devastating effects on a family. DHS has recently added 5 case workers to work with some of the most complex families. At present these workers are based in Providence, so it is not clear if this increase in staffing will benefit Woonsocket residents. While the change in regulations and philosophy will better serve the lowest skilled persons, new paradigms for delivery of education, job training, employment transportation and support services need to be developed. The low income low skilled workforce needs access to a continuum of education and job preparation opportunities, so that there is a path to employment for everyone, no matter what the level of his or her academic/literacy skills.

FRCA believes the cyclical challenges related to education and unemployment require a comprehensive approach to employment and training. As a result FRCA has been advocating for a regional system of workforce development services. This system provide a continuum of education and training opportunities, which would provide a collaborative and integrated adult education, training and employment system that includes employer participation and benefits and offers comprehensive services that meet low-skilled workers' unique learning, support service and employment needs. FRCA intends to continue to convene representatives of DHS, DLT, ORS and others interested in workforce development to generate a more coordinated approach to the issue given reductions in resources faced by all entities.

One additional note regarding workforce development concerns the younger youth who are or will be entering the world of work over the next 5 years. As a result of the economic crises nationally and locally over the past three years, the first time job opportunities that prepare youth for the adult work force have been vastly reduced. The jobs traditionally held by youth (grocery and cashiering jobs, for instance) are now held by adults who were displaced from their jobs. Summer youth employment, the mainstay of youth workforce development for the past 30 years, has been reduced so much at the federal level as to be near elimination. As a result we as a

community are raising a generation of youth who will enter the job market as adults with no “practice” in holding a job or understanding the world of work. FRCA staff have been raising this issue in a number of forums with the intent of sparking interest in DLT, DCYF and DHS to find resources to give first time jobs to youth, especially in the summer when they need constructive activities.

b. Homelessness

FRCA has been serving homeless individuals and families for over 20 years. FRCA’s Woonsocket Emergency Shelter at present serves 27 families with children in its primary facility and emergency apartments. Every day the Woonsocket Emergency Shelter serves nearly 40 homeless children, including newborn infants. In the last fiscal year ending June 30th 2011, the agency provided 24,339 bed nights of shelter to 341 residents. This number reflects 97 families with 188 children and 40 single females. There is a continuing wait list for shelter services.

While statewide there has been a reduction in the total number of individuals experiencing homelessness between 2007 and 2008 (from 3,290 in 2006 to 2,288 in 2008), the number of homeless children and families increased during this time period (28% and 8%, respectively). – The number of homeless children grew from 1,378 in 2006 to 1,770 in 2008; the number of homeless families grew from 882 in 2006 to 953 in 2008. (*Source: RI Emergency Food and Shelter Board, Annual Shelter Reports 2007-2008*). A more recent trend shows that shelter use was 43% higher in February 2009 than in February, 2008. Reasons given for shelter use reflect the impact of the economic crisis—higher unemployment and foreclosure rates. The extent of the foreclosure crisis in Woonsocket is seen in the 2009 Federal Reserve Bank of Boston study that noted Woonsocket has the 7th highest foreclosure rate in Rhode Island.

When not including utilities, 2010 rent for a standard two bedroom apartment in Woonsocket is \$974.00 requiring a family’s income to be approximately \$38,960 annually to afford housing and basic needs such as heat, electricity, food and clothing (*Sources: RI Housing 2010 Rent Survey; RI Housing Factbook 2011.*) Housing is considered affordable if it consumes 30% or less of a family’s income. A family of three living at the poverty level in Woonsocket would have to devote 64% of their household income to the cost of rent. (*Sources: RI Housing 2010 Rent Survey; RI Kids Count Factbook 2011*). The concern about affordable housing is also seen in the 2011 Community Needs survey, in which 59% of respondents noted the need for affordable housing.

Homeless individuals and families have a variety of needs that range from healthcare and mental health needs to substance abuse challenges and safety concerns. The risk of homelessness to children presents the greatest concern. These risk factors include problems associated with inconsistent pediatric care, poor developmental outcomes, a decline in academic performance and interpersonal challenges associated with the emotional trauma of homelessness and living in a shelter.

In the past several years, the state’s housing crisis has brought diverse groups of social service, business and public interests together to address the issue of housing, especially affordable housing. Highly visible advocacy efforts within the non-profit, public and for profit arenas resulted in the passage of a \$50 million state housing bond during the general election of 2006.

Unfortunately, the Neighborhood Opportunities Program (NOP) fights for continued life and funding every budget year, and RI still invests far less in affordable housing than neighboring states. While some progress has been made, it will still take time to resolve the housing and homelessness problems faced in this state. The State's recent fiscal problems have endangered funding for various housing programs while contributing to job loss and homelessness. Advocates will need to continue highly visible strategies to maintain gains made and prevent the issue from losing ground.

FRCA remains committed to meeting the needs of the homeless individuals and families of Woonsocket through its comprehensive network of programs. Employment and training programs, life skills seminars, access to counseling programs and access to the Woonsocket Shelter after school program serving children in the shelter ages 3 through 12. FRCA also works to assist in meeting the needs of those homeless individuals not accessing services at FRCA. Through an active coordination with Harvest Community Church, a faith based shelter program in Woonsocket, Family Resources Community Action works to ensure that all homeless persons have an opportunity to receive shelter from November – April, the most crucial months of the year. In addition, FRCA has been working with faith-based and community development organizations to develop permanent supportive housing for single homeless men who do not have access to year round shelter in this region. In 2008, FRCA began a new program to provide housing and case management support services to homeless individuals living with HIV/AIDS through the HOPWA (Housing Opportunities for People With AIDS) and Shelter Plus Care programs. FRCA has been able to tap the experience of our Agape Center to support people living with HIV/AIDS, as well as the agency's experience operating permanent supportive housing to homeless persons with disabilities, to provide this service.

Two major programs to prevent homelessness and assist families to obtain housing are available through Family Resources. The Road Home Emergency Housing Assistance Program assists families in crisis with a one time rent and/or security deposit payment. A new federal stimulus initiative called Homelessness Prevention/Rapid Re-Housing will serve another 20 Woonsocket families through June of 2012 with one-time or repeating financial assistance toward rent, security and utility costs and provide case management and financial counseling. These are both important programs but the criteria for eligibility is both strict and narrow, thus they will not serve all the households in need of this assistance.

c. Healthcare

In 2010, the number of uninsured non-elderly Americans had increased 12.9 million since 2000, which is an increase of 18.4%. This does not include the elderly community due to an increase in Medicaid coverage in the last two years. (*Source: State of Working America 2010*). As of 2007, approximately 23.7% of Rhode Islanders who were below the federal poverty level reported no access to health insurance (*Source: RI Department of Health Center for Health Data and Analysis, 2007*).

This lack of insurance is often the result of individuals being rationed out of the healthcare market. Quite often people report lacking healthcare due to an inability to meet guidelines for government subsidy insurances and/or are unable access it through their employers due to high cost or limited work hours. In the 2011 Community Needs Assessment Survey, 39% of

respondents reported health insurance as a need, and 33% noted the need for better access to healthcare. The concern about the cost and availability of healthcare was also noted in focus groups. Healthcare priorities and issues outlined in the “Our Neighborhoods Woonsocket” community plan included improving access to healthcare, addressing high rates of teen pregnancy, increasing prenatal care and addressing substance abuse. *(Source: LISC Rhode Island/NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley, March 2010).*

The risks associated with this lack of health care include higher mortality rates, higher rates of women seeking prenatal care later into their pregnancy, higher treatment costs incurred through emergency room visits and higher medical care costs due to an increase in the number of people who are unable to pay. Woonsocket’s low-income residents are often those most vulnerable to these risks, particularly those families with children. Of the estimated 19,675 uninsured children under age 19 in Rhode Island in 2009, approximately 73% (14,457) were income-eligible for Rite Care but were not enrolled. In Rhode Island, the recent increase in the rise of uninsured children is partly due to a decline in employer-sponsored insurance and more stringent requirements for Rite Care coverage, including increased premiums for those with higher incomes. The long term implications for this lack of health care are significant. Children who lack health care risk poor school attendance, lower school achievement and long term health related issues as a result of limited preventative treatment. *(Source: 2011 RI Kids Count Factbook).*

In an effort to address this underlying cause of poverty in Woonsocket, Thundermist Health Associate’s Healthcare for the Homeless grant provides resources for outreach and coordination among agencies on the behalf of homeless persons. As a part of this program they facilitate access to their clinic for persons living in the Woonsocket Shelter or other homeless individuals and families. However, given the continuing rise in homelessness, these resources may soon be surpassed by the need. Family Resources Community Action is therefore committed to a continued effort to help meet the basic needs of Woonsocket’s low income families in efforts to mitigate the rising costs associated with lack of healthcare, a significant contributory factor to homelessness. There can be no doubt that the inability to afford appropriate healthcare is a significant factor contributing to poverty. Poor health has a direct negative impact on employability and learning.

Early prenatal care is critical to identifying and treating health problems and behaviors that can affect fetal development and infant and maternal health. With a delayed prenatal care rate of 16.8%, Woonsocket had the fourth highest rate of delayed prenatal care in the state between 2005 and 2009. The Woonsocket infant mortality rate of 4.8 per 1,000 births (between 2005-2009) is down from a reported 5.1% from the 2004-2008 reporting period. However, at 10.3%, Woonsocket’s rate for infants with low birth weight remains the highest in the state. *(Source: 2011 RI Kids Count Factbook.)*

In 2008, FRCA began a new program to support mothers and their infant children. The First Connections Infant and Toddler Home Visiting Program helps to improve the health and development of young children through home based outreach, screening, assessment, referral and follow-up. This program has now developed a strong linkage with FRCA’s Early Intervention Program to assure that children experiencing delays and their parents receive supports to help these children achieve their potential.

In addition, Woonsocket had the second highest teen birth rate in Rhode Island for teens ages 15-19. The teen birth rate in Woonsocket (66.6 births per 1,000 girls ages 15-19) is more than double the state rate of 30.1 births per 1,000 girls ages 15-19. (Source: Rhode Island Department of Public Health 2005-2009; 2011 Kids Count Factbook). Teen mothers are less likely to have financial resources, social supports and parenting skills for healthy child development.

Challenges relative to rising healthcare costs clearly impact a large number of Woonsocket residents, especially those residents living with HIV/AIDS. It is estimated that over 3,000 persons living with HIV/AIDS are Rhode Islanders, and 22% of these people reside in the Northern region of the state. Woonsocket is one of five core cities that include Providence, Central Falls, Pawtucket and Newport that are particularly susceptible to the disease due to the high rate of intravenous drug use where syringes can be passed among multiple users thereby spreading the virus. FRCA has worked to help meet the varied needs of these residents through the Agape Center, an HIV/AIDS drop-in center committed to assistance with basic needs, education about the disease, peer support and other health related supports. The Agape Center is committed to enhancing the quality of life of those persons living with HIV/AIDS.

d. Child Abuse and Neglect

Woonsocket has had the highest rate of child abuse and neglect in Rhode Island for the past eleven years. Woonsocket's 2010 child abuse and neglected indicated victims rate of 27.3 per 1,000 children was the highest in the state by far and double the statewide average of 13.3 per 1,000 children. (Source: RI Kids Count Factbook 2011). According to the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, poverty is the single most consistent indicator for this social problem. In relation to Woonsocket, poverty indicators that contribute to this phenomenon include:

- Rate of teen pregnancy (117 per 1,000 births, girls ages 18-19, second highest in the state as compared to 42.8 per 1,000 statewide rate; 33 per 1,000 births, girls ages 15-17, fourth highest in the state as compared to 18.9 per 1,000 births statewide rate.)
- Low high school graduation rate (63% as compared to 76% statewide; fourth lowest in state)
- Percentage of children being raised by a single parent (46%; second highest in state)
- Children of incarcerated parents (rate of 19.6 per 1,000 children as compared to 10.4 statewide; second highest in the state.)
- Decline in available affordable housing
- Incidence of homelessness (second in the state)

(Source: 2011 RI Kids Count Factbook)

This data overall underscores the long term multigenerational impact of poverty and child abuse and neglect and the reality that in urban centers such as Woonsocket this problem is deepened by harsh economic circumstances. The lack of affordable housing inevitably leads to greater homelessness, and this creates the conditions for children to enter the child welfare system. As low income single parents (generally women) lose custody of their children, they also forfeit their access to Rhode Island Works, thereby creating an economic and emotional spiral and nightmare for children and parents.

The State of Rhode Island and its surrogate, the Department of Children, Youth and Families, have viewed the issue of child abuse and neglect from a traditional protective services perspective. This means that the primary tool DCYF has employed to manage risk has been removing children from their homes and placing them in foster homes. The result of this long standing practice has been a dearth of community based resources designed to strengthen families and look past the significant impact poverty has on creating the conditions for child abuse and neglect. Only recently has this practice been re-examined to better address the complex effects of poverty.

In February 2008, the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families awarded a contract for the Northern Region Family Care and Community Partnership (FCCP) project. This initiative established FRCA as the lead agency for a network of community based services some of which are provided by the agency and others by partner organizations subcontracting with FRCA. In addition, FCCP has over \$100,000 in flexible wrap-around funds through which more non-traditional supports (e.g., respite, mentors, crisis daycare, etc.) can be developed to address specific and unique needs. Relative to this initiative, FRCA will also map the array of human services throughout the region to leverage these resources on behalf of vulnerable families. While providing a comprehensive array of services, FCCP is also a community framework through which to identify needs, customize services, and collaborate with families and focus resources strategically in order to achieve the outcomes relevant to children and families.

Lastly, due to high levels of substance abuse and incarceration among parents in Woonsocket, it is estimated that 265 grandparents have assumed the care and financial responsibility of one or more of their grandchildren (*Source: 2000 U.S. Census data*). While it is a positive that grandparents assuming this care affords children the opportunity to remain connected to family and remain with siblings, it also creates an enormous strain for retired persons on fixed incomes that may be struggling with health and economic challenges.

e. Transportation

Transportation has been one of the most often cited needs for low-income individuals and families in the community participation components of the needs assessment process for over a decade. While there is public transportation through the main routes of town, residents complain that buses do not come frequently enough and that routes and available hours of operation do not get them to personal appointments, potential jobs, or colleges/training programs for classes in a reasonable amount of time.

The reliance on RI public transportation for the low income family and incumbent worker is a significant challenge when considering the local job market. This impact is most evident in the 2005 American Community Survey which reports that 46% of RI workers aged 25 to 44 years of age relied on their own transportation to access employment; and 42.9 % relied on public transportation as their primary means of access to work (*Source: <http://factfinder.census.gov>*). This need is magnified in Woonsocket, as the majority of job opportunities available to unskilled workers in this area occur during second or third shift; and workers have consistently reported their most significant challenge to securing employment during these 2nd and 3rd shift hours is the

limited public transportation options. Without access to a car or carpooling options, residents will continue to find it difficult to secure these jobs.

In the transportation needs survey targeting those working or looking for work conducted by FRCA in June, 2008, 17% of respondents reported they do not own a car. Fourteen percent of respondents reported they can't afford a car, 16 % reported they can't afford gas and 12% reported they can't afford car insurance. The lack of car ownership was seen in respondents' reports about the transportation they rely on to get to work to seek employment; while 49% noted they used their own car to get to work or seek employment, 17% noted they rely on a regular bus route, 16% noted they walked to work, and 10% noted they rely on a ride with friends and family. Concerns with transportation were also widely reported in the 2011 Community Needs Survey and in focus groups. Forty-five percent of respondents noted a need for transportation to access and keep employment. Transportation has continued to remain a barrier to employment opportunities both in the city of Woonsocket as well outside of the city. Current Federal restrictions on interstate travel using federal funding pose a major barrier for Woonsocket residents needing public or other modes of transportation to get to work out of state.

Transportation is a barrier not only to jobs, but also to obtaining healthcare, accessing educational opportunities at institutions of higher education and other services. Forty-Three percent of respondents in the 2011 Community Needs Survey noted a need for transportation to make medical appointments. Mothers often have no alternative but to walk with child or children in a stroller, even in inclement weather. Often they "no show" because of the weather, or a sick child who cannot go out, or the extraordinary effort it takes to get several children ready to walk a mile and a half to the clinic or the bus and get there on time. Transportation is also a barrier to parents and children participating in school events and volunteer activities. Many Woonsocket residents rely on public transportation to get to and from classes at local colleges. Continued access to buses that offer evening hours is critical to residents' ability to access educational opportunities that will promote increased economic opportunities.

In addition, transportation challenges significantly affect elderly residents of Woonsocket. Elderly patients report significant difficulty in accessing subsidized transportation resources to attend medical appointments, as they must schedule their ride weeks in advance. In addition, they cannot rely on subsidized transportation after 2:00 p.m., the time when most doctors see their non-hospitalized patients. To make matters worse, many doctors serving the needs of the elderly are located outside of Woonsocket. Beginning October 2008, the RI Department of Elderly Affairs, which funds the (formerly free) Ride van program that transports seniors to such places as the Senior Center lunch sites and medical appointments, implemented a \$2 fee each way. This change places an additional burden on low income elderly residents, potentially affecting their access to services and increasing isolation.

FRCA has worked in the past with community organizations to try to address some of these transportation barriers through the Way to Work program. Due to a lack of continued funding, the program has been scaled back, and now serves primarily as a resource hub to provide information about public and private transportation to assist people with getting to work, job training and college. FRCA will continue efforts to advocate for the need for improved

transportation resources in northern RI that can lead to increased economic opportunity for low income families.

f. Basic Needs, Service Linkage and Coordination

An analysis of poverty statistics and community input indicates that challenges in relation to poverty are still a factor of every day life for many Woonsocket residents. (See Appendix A) Issues of basic human needs: food, shelter, and healthcare continue to be dominant in surveys of the community. Low-income families live financially “close to the edge” knowing that the slightest unexpected or unplanned expense can cause a crisis. The high cost of food, gas and home heating oil and other living expenses has placed significant strain on many families, as has the soaring unemployment rate (11.6% in Woonsocket, September, 2011, as compared to 10% statewide rate) and rising number of foreclosures, placing many at risk for homelessness. Families are becoming increasingly dependent on emergency food programs as an ongoing means of support, a situation that causes a strain on local food cupboards. From July, 2010 through June, 2011, the Family Support Center at FRCA served over served 3,995 households representing 6,885 individuals on a drop-in basis by addressing an array of needs including housing, utilities, food, parenting and other crisis concerns. Due to the high unemployment, the number of families served in the Family Support Center who had not sought service in over two years grew significantly.

The stress experienced by many low income individuals make them especially vulnerable to financial misinformation, which can lead to choices that push them further into poverty. Through the United-Way funded Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program (VITA), FRCA helps low income individuals access tax credits for which they are eligible and help people retain more income by avoiding costly rapid-tax return services. In 2011, FRCA assisted over 1,200 low income individuals with tax preparation last year, returning over \$1.8 million to the local community, \$730,000 of which was from Earned Income Tax Credits. The need for services to increase the economic stability of individuals is seen in the 300% increase over the past five years in the numbers of individuals seeking assistance through FRCA’s VITA program.

In 2010, with funding from the United Way of Rhode Island and in partnership with NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley (NWBRV), FRCA launched a new financial stability program to provide low and moderate income individuals with additional financial education and training and 1:1 financial coaching to assist with increasing income, reducing debt and growing assets. In 2011, FRCA received a grant from the Local Initiatives Support Coalition (LISC) to create the Woonsocket Financial Opportunity Center, in partnership with NWBRV, building on the current employment, education and financial literacy programs. The Financial Opportunity Center, located in downtown Woonsocket, assists individual with identifying and removing barriers to financial success. Wraparound support is provided in three key areas: 1) financial stability; 2) education & employment; and 3) income support challenges such as child care, transportation and basic needs.

In addition to basic need challenges, the existing fragmented and confusing social service system causes significant strain on low income families and individuals. Moreover, human service agencies have become overly specialized and have difficulty working with families and

individuals in a holistic or comprehensive manner. Examples include mental health or substance abuse organizations that fail to recognize the economic, healthcare and other challenges facing low income families by not fostering collaboration or links to agencies that might complement their efforts. Families receiving services from the Department of Human Services and DCYF also experience this within the context of having a mandate to adhere to two different and perhaps contradictory service plans. In an era of shrinking state and federal human service financing, the need to use resources in an effective and efficient manner through improved systems planning, coordination and collaboration is critical, especially in urban settings such as Woonsocket.