



EDITORIAL: Use index as guide for solving problems

Our community has received its first complete social health checkup, and the results show that while no terminal condition exists, the patient is far from robust.

The new Community Development Initiative at Angelo State University has produced the first San Angelo Health Index. Using statistical data from 2000 through 2007, the program, led by Kenneth L. Stewart and Casey Jones, focused on 18 categories to create an assessment of the overall quality of life in San Angelo and Tom Green County.

In a recent series of articles in the Standard-Times, Stewart and Jones revealed a picture of a community that reached a social health peak in 2002, declined precipitously until 2005 and then began to rebound. Many areas of greatest concern have long been known even if local residents couldn't cite official figures. For example, local wages continue to be too low. In 2006, the average San Angelo worker earned \$30,615, 27 percent below the statewide average. Between 2004 and 2006, wage growth averaged 10.3 percent in Texas, but in San Angelo the increase was just 4.5 percent.

Among the troubling results of that economic reality is that 10.6 percent of county residents relied on food stamps in 2007, although that number was down from 13.2 percent in 2004. Also long recognized is that too many local residents - 22 percent - do not have health insurance, resulting in nearly \$47 million in unrecuperated health care costs at San Angelo hospitals in 2006, 42 percent more than just three years earlier.

Most San Angeloans already knew that too many students leave school without earning a diploma, but they may be unaware that the local dropout rate is 31 percent higher than the statewide average. Other problem areas identified included instances where the severity of the situation was alarming and far worse than in most Texas communities:

* The infant mortality rate in Tom Green County is 40 percent higher than the statewide average.

* While the level of child abuse in Tom Green County declined from 16.4 victims per 1,000 children in 2006 to 13.8 the following year, the rate is still 23 percent higher than the rest of Texas.

* Elder abuse was measured at 34.4 victims per 1,000 residents in 2007, more than triple the statewide rate.

* Drug arrests in Tom Green County more than doubled from 2003 to 2005.

* While divorces declined since 2000, the rate in Tom Green County remains 25 percent higher than in the rest of the state.

The study produced a few heartening statistics. For example, the violent crime rate declined from 471 incidents per 100,000 people in 2003 to 403 in 2007, a rate 21 percent below the state average. Also, the local unemployment rate of 3.7 percent in 2007 was lower than in most Texas cities.

Still, the index shows that for too much of this decade, the city and county have been in what the report's authors called a "social recession."

Too many of residents experience dire conditions daily. The good news is local political leaders and social service agencies now have a clear picture of the extent of the problems faced by the people they serve and have a better understanding of where to direct resources and attention. Their challenge, and the challenge facing all of us, is to make sure this valuable information isn't forgotten but rather used as a springboard to produce a better quality of life for all residents.