

Low-Income Needs Assessment lists county shortfalls

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Health care, dental care, housing, utilities and employment all topped the list of unmet needs for the county's low-income families in a recent study sponsored by several public and nonprofit agencies and private companies around Skagit County.

The Skagit Low-Income Needs Assessment is published every four years by the Skagit County Community Action Agency. The \$11,000 study surveys about 660 low-income households on their needs and what services they utilize in the area.

Community Action presented a summary of the study to area public and nonprofit agencies Thursday afternoon, including those that helped fund the study, such as United Way of Skagit County, the Economic Development Association of Skagit County, WorkSource Skagit, Puget Sound Energy and area hospitals.

This year's assessment, based on data collected in October, showed that most low-income families have the same problems as four years ago — availability of housing, medical care, jobs and utilities.

Seniors listed those same needs, which is a change from the last study. In 2005, seniors were primarily concerned with housing and dental care. This year, seniors' top needs were housing, medical care and jobs.

"I thought it was interesting that jobs suddenly popped up on the senior radar," said Community Action Executive Director Bill Henkel. "That's never been there before."

Housing issues have also risen for low-income families, particularly for homeowners. In 2005, the median monthly cost of owning a home was \$710. That cost has risen 33.4 percent since 2005 with a median cost of \$947.

Henkel suspect much of the problem can be attributed to communication. He said many families may be unaware of safety net services available in the county.

"It might be that we have a lot more resources in our community than we give ourselves credit for," Henkel said.

Greg Winter, research director for Cornerstone Strategies, the company that conducted the study, said these issues are affecting mostly permanent county residents. Winter said 77 percent have lived in Skagit County for more than four years. Half of those people surveyed have lived in the county for at least 15 years.

"These are your people, this is your community, these are your residents," Winter said.

Community Action board member and Swinomish Tribe program administrator John Stephens said this refutes any concerns that outsiders are taking advan-

tage of local safety nets.

"Most people, for lack of knowledge, assume that these aren't home-grown problems, and they really are," Stephens said.

Community Action and other agencies will use this information to profile the county to potential donors and foundations. The information can also inform new programs or redirect the focus of existing programs.