

Shasta County group emerging as voice for economic vitality

By Jenny Espino

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REDDING, California - A new group wanting to build up Redding has stepped forward.

This one is called the Prosperity Initiative, and it is being steered by United Way of Northern California and Shasta County Health and Human Services. A band of community leaders, hand-picked by the agencies, is studying how to “move the needle” on economic mobility. What that entails is identifying opportunities that will help those trying to make ends meet, rise from lower rungs.

Groundwork for the study on the North State’s social issues has been in the planning for a year, said Wendy Zanotelli, president and chief executive officer of the United Way office in Redding. She compared its purposes to pep talk from a friend.

“We need to be Redding’s confidant in saying, ‘No, you’re beautiful. Look at all the positives that you have and let’s come together to help you overcome your negatives and grow, improve and thrive,” she said.

So what does that look like?

Zanotelli and Charlene Ramont, a county public health and policy analyst, for guidance tapped into other cities in California and across the rest of the country that took on similar initiatives and are having success breathing new life into its people and improving their mobility. As part of their research, they also mapped out this area’s assets and its resources.

It’s a bit of challenge for the North State. It lacks those large corporations, like Google or Intel, for financial backing.

But that the proposal, which is data-driven, has merit is indisputable. The Sierra Health Foundation in Sacramento awarded it a \$15,000 grant and is serving as a partner. The Maryland-based Harwood Institute for Public Innovation — its founder and president, Rich Harwood, traveled to Newtown, Connecticut, to bring the community together after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting — is coming to Redding next spring for a summit.

The visit is made possible through a competitive grant from the National Association of Counties. Of the 45 applicants, Shasta County and three others were selected for the Prosperity community convening. Helping organize it is WealthWorks, a national organization whose focus is economic development.

Even multi-state United Ways, responsible for reports that provide a picture of financial needs in their respective states, is doing its part.

Zanotelli and Ramont have seen their fair share of health and socio-economic statistics that place Shasta County at or near the bottom in the state. But it's difficult to drill down on that information to identify the areas with the greatest hardship.

So, to that end, the California ALICE report (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) to be released by year's end will break down the data by ZIP code for the entire North State.

"It's really going to help us start making changes," Zanotelli said.

The group also awaits the findings of a quality of life metrics report that will give everyone a sound understanding of local health, education and income. The Measure of America study by the Brooklyn, New York-based Social Science Research Council also is due out by the end of the year.

Because the local United Way and other United Ways in California are underwriting the ALICE report, Zanotelli said Redding will have a speaker come and present the findings.

The initiative's first meeting was last Tuesday and drew about 30 movers and shakers to the table by invitation only. Each one was given homework, to identify other people who need to be part of the conversation and recommend potential solutions.

"In January, we're going to bring that group back together and then we're going to decide really at that point on that common agenda," Ramont said. "What is it that we're going to address? Where are we going to move the needle?"

One of the subcommittees that has grown out of the core group will help put on the summit.

The organizers say the approach they are taking is long term and unlike what Redding is seeing from groups trying to tackle current issues, such as the Safe City Project headed by April LaFrance.

"We also need those things. What the Safe City Project proposed is 'how do we deal with the crime that we have today?' While they are working on that, Prosperity can start moving up the stream and saying, 'OK, how did we get here and how do we stop criminals or the after-effect of this from even getting into the pipeline in our community?'" Zanotelli said.

That said, Zanotelli plans to draw LaFrance into Prosperity's work.

For perspective on the long-term vision Prosperity has, Ramont provided an example of a possible solution for the Redding area. It is a program called Bank On, which breaks down barriers to banking and provides a financial literacy component.

Those who do traditional banking know they can be assessed penalties if their balance drops below the minimum limit.

In Redding and the North State, that affects many, they said.

“It’s the result of poor management of an original banking account,” Ramont said. “Or it could be that some folks just never learned or have never known the traditional banking sector. My grandma used to have a jar of money.”

The problem is compounded by the fact that it means someone is being held back from building credit or assets.

Under the Bank On program, banks connected to the social service world waive those fees.

Zanotelli also noted the need for education on resources, such as the earned income tax bracket.

“We haven’t chosen the solutions because we want the community to do that,” Ramont said. “But we will bring evidence-based solutions to the group.”

On jobs, the two women late Friday afternoon bounced questions around about the North State’s economic prospects.

The area can honor its logging history, Ramont said. Other questions could be: What about sustainable forestry, which offers an array of jobs? How can Redding harness growth from the Sacramento River and its trail systems?

Redding is one of the sunniest places in the country. Can this area become the solar capital and produce specialist in that field?

“We have so much capacity in our community to invent ourselves and be whatever we want to be,” Ramont said.

Take action

Visit United Way of Northern California at www.norcalunitedway.org/ and click on the Volunteer tab. In the free form box, interested volunteers can type that they want to get involved with the Prosperity Initiative. Organizers will call interested volunteers for an intake interview and determine where to place them. Because Prosperity has numerous activities merging, organizers say they are confident about volunteer placement.

Read up

United Way ALICE Report: unitedwayalice.org/

Measures of America: measureofamerica.org/

WealthWorks: wealthworks.org/

Bank On: joinbankon.org/