

OPINION

BUILDING LANE COUNTY'S WORK FORCE

Initiative aims to stabilize finances

By PRISCILLA GOULD

Throughout Lane County, hard-working people try to get ahead but continue to struggle financially. As Americans, we pride ourselves on the notion that hard work leads to financial stability. Yet for many of our neighbors, any unexpected expense — a car repair, a sick child — could push them into crisis.

In a recent United Way of Lane County survey, 70 percent of working households with children and an annual income of less than \$34,000 reported being unable to pay for a needed doctor or dentist visit. Nearly 60 percent were unable to pay their utility bills at some point during the year, and 55 percent were unable to buy needed clothing or shoes.

This is not just the story of unemployed, homeless, or welfare-dependent people. This is the experience of nearly half of all households in Lane County.

A significant proportion of the work force is barely getting by. That should concern us for many reasons:

Financial stability is essential to a decent quality of life.

Financial hardship drives a host of other problems — from poor school attendance and academic performance to crime, domestic violence, mental health issues and substance abuse. And that's just some of the problems.

Communities with a skilled, strong work force have a more viable economic environment. They attract desirable employers who value employees who have talents they need. A stronger economy results in more job opportunities and avenues for upward mobility. The financial stability of all workers affects us all.

Our community created a broad array of excellent safety net services to serve the truly vulnerable. Now, those organizations are being called upon to serve working families who cannot meet basic expenses. Our social service agencies are working hard to keep up but usually can't help all the families that need their services.

United Way of Lane County, together with Lane Work Force Partnership and a diverse group of community leaders, is exploring strategies to address the unique problems faced by working families. The initiative, "Healthy Economy, Healthy Families," poses two questions:

◆ Is there something we can do at the local level to create a healthy economy that advances all citizens?

◆ How can we ensure that economic opportunities exist for all members of our community?

While our project is in its infancy, two key ideas already have risen to the surface. The first is to better identify, align, publicize and support the resources that currently exist to assist working families in Lane County.

The second is to promote the financial stability of working families through coordinated efforts to help workers "earn it, keep it and grow it."

◆ "Earn it" emphasizes job readiness and career pathways that lead to good jobs with benefits. Skill development is essential to finding jobs that pay a family wage.

◆ "Keep it" builds financial literacy, expands affordable options for health care, housing and child care, and provides other support for working families. The transition from financial struggle to financial strength requires a variety of services, as people cope with issues created when they didn't have enough money to support their families.

◆ "Grow it" urges working families to accumulate assets such as savings, home ownership and education. Together, these increase family financial stability, allowing workers to begin to save money, train for a better job, buy a home and build a better future for themselves and their families.

Our culture rightfully promotes the idea that those who take responsibility for their lives and their families

will be rewarded economically and live with dignity. In Lane County, a family that works hard and plays by the rules should have a realistic opportunity to earn an income that puts a roof overhead and food on the table, and that pays most expenses.

Some 35 percent of working families in Lane County report not having enough money to pay for housing or food. There is lots of important work to do to provide greater economic opportunities for working families. They deserve the opportunity to achieve financial stability and well-being.

We can each help expand and shape educational opportunities, work force policies and practices, and basic family support such as health care and child care. Our voluntary action can make life better for our neighbors.

Together, we will enable more Lane County families to achieve the American Dream. Our responses to the "Healthy Economy, Healthy Families" questions will shape our community's character.

Priscilla Gould is executive director of United Way of Lane County. This is the fifth in a biweekly series of columns addressing work force-related issues in Lane County.