A young mom and her two children take refuge at Campbell Lodge, the only emergency homeless shelter in Naples.

“I am really impressed with the work of the whole individual or family, but the community as a support boosts the well-being of not just that person but also the old and the young. There are 330 nonprofits that focus on providing social services—programs and assistance for working-class, disenfranchised, low-income and vulnerable residents to help them meet their basic needs. Ensuring that the young and the old alike have enough food in the pantry, a roof overhead, basic physical and mental healthcare, and educational or job support boosts the well-being of not just that individual or family, but the community as a whole.

“The agencies talk to each other really well about who’s doing what, and if there’s a gap, one will step in to fill it. That’s as good as it gets. It impresses and inspires me.”

Homelessness and food insecurity are bound to remain chronic problems, she said. The causes of homelessness can be complex, yet anyone living paycheck-to-paycheck can wind up homeless or in need of food assistance in the drop of a hat: a car breakdown, illness, job loss or unexpected expense.

“We have a population of working poor that basically needs an additional supplement. There are a lot of people who are one incident away from a catastrophe,” said Eileen Connolly-Keesler, President/CEO of the Community Foundation of Collier County. “We have a lot of poverty here that’s not recognized by a portion of the community. The key is, we depend on philanthropy. We have to continue to educate the people with the ability to give to help meet those needs.”

During a recent grant cycle for the Angel Fund, the volume of applications from nonprofits focused on basic needs flooded in. “We definitely saw an uptick. It feels like Collier County keeps growing and growing, and nonprofits want to do more,” Connolly-Keesler said.

The human services safety net provided by local nonprofits was one topic investigated during extensive surveys for the Collier County Community Needs and Assets Assessment, funded by the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation. The assessment analyzes the community’s strengths and weaknesses across nine areas. The results have been shared with community leaders and residents so that priorities and strategies to address identified needs can be developed. Some of the findings:

- In Collier County, fewer than 40 percent of residents own or have access to liquid assets, such as savings, retirement accounts or rental income.
- There is a large income gap between the richest and poorest residents of the county. Approximately 28 percent of the population earns six-figures while 33 percent live below the federal poverty level. There are 16,192 children under the age of 18 living below the federal poverty level.
- The county’s population is aging. Over the next decade, the need for health and social services for the elderly will increase.
- Focus groups surveyed for the assessment felt services were insufficient for seniors and for adults with disabilities.

Do you want to learn more about the innovative work of social service nonprofits in the community? The public is invited to attend a free community forum hosted by the Schulze Family Foundation to discuss this topic on Tuesday, April 23, 2 p.m., at the Headquarters Library on Orange Blossom Drive in Naples.
The Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation has been hosting public forums to discuss significant topics raised in the Community Needs and Assets Assessment. Join us to share your ideas and hear from community leaders about how social services are being addressed and managed for current and future residents.

Where: Collier County Headquarters Library 2381 Old Collier Dr. Naples, FL 34109

When: Tuesday, April 23, 2019 2:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.

For more information: 239-263-9400

In partnership with the Collier County Public Library

O nly a 2.22 percent of Collier County’s budget is earmarked for human services, said Daniel Christenbury, a county public information officer. Much of it goes to the Collier County Public Health Division, but it also includes domestic animal services—so charity and philanthropy scrimp to fill the void.

In one eight will experience food insecurity this year, said Richard LeBer, President/CEO of the Harry Chapin Food Bank of Southwest Florida. There are an estimated 16,642 food insecure people in Collier County, which includes 15,000 children.

The food bank works with 29 organizations to distribute 3.1 million pounds of food through churches and nonprofits and “the largest group is working families,” said LeBer. Entry-level teachers and law enforcement officers earn about $40,000 annually, while other sectors, such as waitresses, farmers and waitresses, make much less, so “there really is a lot of margin for error. If anything goes wrong with the equation, they run into trouble,” LeBer said. Unlike a retail operation where one area of the budget people can skimp on, he said, “without someone knocking on your door.”

As a seasoned and agile operation, the Harry Chapin Food Bank converts $1 into $8 worth of food and reacts quickly to unfolding needs. It activated mobile pantries for federal Transportation Security Administration employees who weren’t paid during the recent federal shutdown, and for coastal employees who lost wages during last year’s red tide crisis. “We’re making progress and doing a pretty good job, but we’re long enough from adequate meeting the need. I don’t foresee the numbers of people in need dramatically decreasing until we fix the root causes: affordable medicine, healthcare and housing,” he said.

Meals of Hope strategizes its food pantry locations by mapping elementary schools with high populations of students who receive free and reduced breakfast and lunch based on their family’s financial status. In Collier County, 70 percent of all kids attending public schools participate in the free and reduced program. That is “an astronomical level,” said Meals of Hope President/CEO Stephen Poppner.

Meals of Hope serves 1,000 families each week. It recently opened a fourth pantry and has a goal of opening at least three more by the year’s end. A few years ago, his organization identified the unmet need for hygiene products—items such as tampons and adult diapers—because providers are covered by the Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (formerly called food stamps). A lack of feminine hygiene products triggers school absences. “There are costs to people to come to our pantries every week,” said Poppner, who estimates each family receives $95 worth of food, realizing a $450 monthly saving that “they are now able to use for other things, such as housing.”

The Harry Chapin Food Bank distributed more than 4,224 pounds of food to 178 families at the food pantry held at the Golden Gate Community Center in Naples.

Pinched Budgets, Empty Pantries

Community Forum: Join the Conversation

The Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation was created in 2004 by Best Buy founder, Dick Schulze, to give back to the communities where Dick and his family grew up—in Minnesota, where he built Best Buy to become the world’s largest consumer electronics retailer, and in Florida, where he now maintains a permanent residence. The Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation creates grant partnerships with organizations in the Twin Cities seven-county metropolitan area in Minnesota and in Lee and Collier counties that generate transformational results in human and social services, education, and health and medicine.

Find out more about the Foundation and the Collier County Community Needs and Assets Assessment: SchulzeFamilyFoundation.org

ABOUT THE RICHARD M. SCHULZE FAMILY FOUNDATION

The Schulze Family Foundation has been hosting public forums to discuss significant topics raised in the Community Needs and Assets Assessment. Join us to share your ideas and hear from community leaders about how social services are being addressed and managed for current and future residents.

Meeting Bare-Minimum Needs

While the average income in Collier is $53,758, the living wage for a family of four is $66,127, according to the Community Foundation’s 2018 Vital Signs report.

Currently, 3.2 percent or 44,446 people in Collier County are living below the poverty level. Households with incomes above the federal poverty level may struggle to meet basic necessities are identified as Asset Limited Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE). Almost 33,000 Collier households—33 percent—live in poverty or on an ALICE survival budget, able to meet bare-minimum needs, but not enough to save for college, emergencies or retirement.

Cost-burdened residents (paying more than 30 percent of their income for rent or mortgage) are at risk of homelessness. “Many ALICE households continue to face challenges from low wages, reduced work hours, depleted savings, and increasing costs. For the many households that earned just above the ALICE threshold in the past, the increases in the cost of living have pushed them below the threshold and into financial hardship,” according to the 2018 Florida ALICE report. The cost of living increased by 15 percent statewide from 2009-2016, compared to a 3 percent inflation nationally.

The working poor are “not getting the support they need to prosper. They make enough money to be rendered ineligible for social services but are experiencing economic instability,” said United Way of Collier County’s 2018 Vital Signs report.

The 211 hotline is manned 24/7 for callers of different backgrounds. “It doesn’t take a hurricane for the Salvation Army to rescue residents from the imminent danger of eviction or foreclosure. It has offered emergency rental and utility assistance (once per year per household) for a long time to prevent homelessness. We’ve not seen a decrease in that at all,” said Bridges.

The Salvation Army is slowly rolling out a new national initiative—Pathway of Hope—to help eligible clients rise above their situation with long-term holistic case management. “The rising tide of families falling victim to crisis tells us that this case management system is needed,” said the Salvation Army Director of Social Services and Disaster Recovery Ashley Jones. Pathway of Hope “provides targeted services to families with a desire to take action to break the cycle of crisis and enable a path out of intergenerational poverty. We believe that by shifting from a short-term social service model of assistance to a longer-term intervention, it helps clients identify barriers and create solutions to increase self-sufficiency.”
An Eye on Seniors and Veterans

If working professionals and laborers are scrambling to make ends meet, then so is a part of the county's largest segment of people who aren't typically in the workforce: seniors.

According to the Community Foundation's annual "Vital Signs" report, those 65-plus make up 33.5 percent of the population; it is expected to grow to 35 percent in 20 years. Many are on fixed incomes and, LaBer noted, some dipped into their retirement savings or home equity during the Great Recession, "and they're not getting that back." He recalled meeting a retired nurse who was cutting her blood pressure pills in half because the cost had tripled in recent years. "No one counted on that when they were planning their retirement," LaBer said.

Ellison said St. Matthew's House, which houses 2,500 a year, is seeing both younger and older people. He estimates there are 1,300 homeless in Collier County, and the prevalence of single mothers with children is rising. "Yesterday, we had 27 children in our care," he said. But seniors, who aren't likely to launch a new career, are "harder cases," he said. "It becomes hard at 65, 70 years old to get back on your feet." An estimated 6,520 living in poverty in Collier are 65 or over, according to the Community Foundation. Dr. Jacyn Faffer, President/CEO of Naples Senior Center at JFCS, has seen such a growing need for senior support services that the nonprofit is planning to build a new 26,000-square-foot center. There are only two senior centers in Collier, and the Naples Senior Center is the only one that provides wrap-around services, Faffer said, such as dementia respite, geriatric case management and intervention for homeless seniors, or those teetering on the edge of it.

More than 1,400 seniors receive services, including social programs that prevent isolation and a food pantry. It now hosts eight Dementia Respite Support Programs each week for individuals with early to mid-stage dementia in Naples and Marco Island—up from just one support meeting four years ago—and a quarterly boot camp for caregivers. "We really look at this need for a new building as the illustration of the need in this county for seniors," Faffer said.

People are often shocked when Faffer tells them how little of the county's budget is spent on human services. "Collier County is built on tourism and real estate, and that's where the efforts are placed," she said. However, she values the center's close partnerships with the Collier County Sheriff's Office and Collier Area Transit's paratransit service, which transports many participants door-to-door to the center. "I like to look at us as a resource for the county. I'm one of those people who would rather find solutions rather than complaining about the problem," Faffer said. "We are privileged because we have a very philanthropic community.

One of the challenges for low-income seniors at the Senior Friendship Health Center is the need for extensive medical treatment for serious chronic disease, said M.J. Scarpelli, the nonprofit's director of development and marketing. Diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, high blood pressure and congestive heart failure require more intensive clinical care, and have often been left untreated because the patient has no insurance or is underserved. The center serves patients 60 and older within 200 percent of the poverty level ($42,480 for a single person) on a sliding scale based on their ability to pay. Many of the center's 2,000 patients no longer work or have seasonal or part-time jobs.

"Most of our patients have to be really resourceful in terms of housing, transportation, food and clothing," said Scarpelli, who projects the patient load to increase this year. "Their income stretches only so far." Sixty percent of Senior Friendship's treatment service is for dental care, which is popular for military veterans who aren't eligible for dental benefits through the U.S. Department of Veterans Administration (V.A.) because they do not have a 300-percent service-connected disability.

Collier County Veterans Services, run by the county, helps veterans and their surviving spouses and dependents obtain benefits and file claims and appeals, and provides transportation to V.A. Bay Pines facilities in Cape Coral and Pinellas County, among others. It helped 3,413 vets last year. One local retired colonel who fought in the Korean War, and began losing his hearing in his 50s and was in his late 70s, is an advocate who channels the community into the center. "It was an uphill battle all the way," he explained. (The one-cent sales tax approved by voters in November will raise $40 million towards building a V.A. clinic in Collier.)

The rising cost of living and real estate prices are putting a squeeze on the county's budget to fund those minimum standards of living.

In Collier County, a group of local visionaries, who believed our community should come together to prepare for the immediate and future needs of the area, formed the Community Foundation of Collier County.

Since the Community Foundation was launched in 1985, we have distributed more than $137 million in grants. In our last fiscal year, $7 million went to 146 organizations that provide basic needs services such as The Salvation Army of Collier County, St. Matthew's House, the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation of Hope, United Way of Collier County, and Friends of Foster Children Forever.

Because we are like-minded about the needs in our community, our alliance with the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation is a perfect match. The Schulze Family Foundation and the Community Foundation are quick to not only raise awareness but to act to support services which are not covered by government funding. They are always looking for new ways to help.

Together, we have a thriving partnership that focuses on initiatives to generate awareness and change like the Schulze Food Drive, which helps stock the shelves of Collier County food pantries during the summer. Last year, we raised $4.1 million and collected 7,000 pounds of food. We are hoping to provide even more food for those in need during this year’s event (see “Help Satisfy the Hunger”).

Give Where You Live Collier, which is another labor of love between our foundations, raised $5.5 million for basic needs and education nonprofits in Collier County in February to help improve the quality of life in the community we all love.

The support of the Richard M. Schulze Foundation enables us to be proactive and forward-thinking in how to best serve Collier County, for good and forever.
Inching Forward on Affordable Housing

There is no plan for expanding St. Matthew's House because it obtained a conditional use permit when it opened in 1993, Ellison said, and it would need to seek another elsewhere, which would likely be opposed by residents with the "not in my back yard" plea. Though the problem isn't going away. "As the county grows, there are going to be more people who can't afford to build on their property," Ellison said. Another emergency shelter—The Shelter for Abused Women & Children—is expanding its capacity by building a new 25,000-square-foot shelter with 64 beds in Immokalee for victims of domestic violence and human trafficking. It will provide at least long-term therapeutic beds for young women who have experienced a range of traumas while being forced into the labor and sex trade, said Shelter Executive Director Linda Oberhaus. Florida has the third highest rate nationally of human trafficking, and Oberhaus said the sheriff's office has become proactive in identifying victims and traffickers.

The shelter's current 60-bed location in Naples is consistently at capacity, she said. Domestic abuse calls rose by 200 between 2016 and 2017, when dispatchers received 1,794. "These are the most dire situations," she said. "Half of all victims never call 911. These are the most severe cases." Battered women typically stay at the shelter for six to eight weeks, and can move into a transitional living program for up to two years. Emergency financial assistance is provided to women staying in the shelter to clothe their children, fix their car or prepare for employment.

The nonprofit social service organizations in Collier have a tight focus on their goals," Mahr said. "When they establish a trusting relationship they've never had with an adult, the healing begins and you see them turn around and focus on their goals." Mahr said.

One of Youth Haven's first teen clients graduated from college on scholarship and is applying to law school. Debbie Mahr, the director of Rob's Cottage for teens 16 to 18, was on the frontlines with an adult, the healing begins and you see them turn around and focus on their goals," Mahr said.

Rob's Cottage Manager Quentin Cotton is known as "Mr. Q" to teens who live in the Youth Haven house, where meal preparation is part of the daily mentoring program.