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New Census Figures Show Poverty Rates Still High

New poverty statistics have been released by the federal census bureau, and the news – as expected – is still not good. In its annual accounting of poverty in the United States, the agency reported the federal poverty rate rose to 15.1 percent in 2010, up from 14.3 percent as reported in 2009. This means that 46.2 million Americans are living on about \$22,350 for a family of four.

Although the Great Recession officially ended last year, it is obvious that the economy continues to struggle as high levels of unemployment and lower wages are hitting middle and lower income families harder than ever. The median household income in the country declined 2.3 percent and the number of uninsured increased to 49.9 million people.

So what does this mean for Missouri? The localized data released in the American Community Survey this week shows that our state's poverty rate is 15.3 percent, representing 888,570 individuals. Of those, over 290,000 are children under the age of 18 who have no control over their situation. Disturbing research has shown strong correlation between childhood poverty and chronic developmental, educational, and health problems.

“With the economic problems continuing throughout the state, thousands of Missourians are finding it difficult to pay for food, housing, utilities or child care; or find a new job to replace lost income,” said Elaine West, executive director of the Missouri Association for Community Action. “A large number of individuals feel that their economic stability is threatened, many for the first time.”

So where's the silver lining? This year, there may not be one. Missouri's network of Community Action Agencies provide a variety of programs that are locally designed and administered within the community to reduce the effects of poverty. This year, however, the core funding of Community Action, the Community Services Block Grant, is being threatened with a 50% cut.

The threat of reduced funding and the uncertainty of the federal budget has forced many agencies to reduce staff hours, close outreach offices in rural counties, and reduce the level of services they are able to provide to low income families and the communities they serve. Historically, the Missouri Community Action Network was able to operate an outreach office in every county and the City of St. Louis. Currently, agencies have had to close some of these offices, making it more difficult for citizens with limited transportation, such as the elderly or the extremely poor, to access needed programs.

“As some Congressional leaders work to slash programs such as Medicaid, food stamps, and low-income tax credits for the working poor to try to reduce the deficit, we are trying to find ways to keep more families from falling into poverty,” said West. “We will keep advocating for the needs of low income Missourians to ensure that all families and communities have the opportunity to thrive.”