

Numbers can add up to action

Decision-makers introduced to power of 'community indicators'

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Collecting and interpreting clean, defensible data is one of the best ways to drive public policy decisions, experts from around the nation told some 260 Inland Northwest decision-makers at a conference Wednesday.

The conference introduced the region's leaders to the power of "community indicators" – a buzz word for the practice of examining and applying widely accepted statistics to identify and track trends. Eastern Washington University's Institute for Public Policy & Economic Analysis hosted the conference in Spokane.

Participants heard from a variety of specialists, including those who focus on community development, environmental health, government, health care and early learning.

In one session especially poignant for this region, participants learned how numbers are used to hone in on deficiencies and successes in the childcare system.

Providing high-quality childcare accessible to all families is "critical to the health of our society," Elizabeth Bonbright-Thompson of the Washington State Child Care Research and Referral Network told scores of child advocates at a panel discussion.

Presenters used statistics to draw attention to some of the more startling aspects of the region's childcare network.

These are among the findings, provided by both the research and referral network and the North Idaho College Head Start program:

- More than 49,000 Spokane County children live in either single-parent families or families in which both parents work. However, Head Start and state-operated childcare facilities had only 1,150 slots in 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available.
- The cost of full-time care for an infant represents 16 to 18 percent of a Spokane family's median income; add a preschooler to the mix and expenses shoot up to 29 to 32 percent.
- In Kootenai County, 1,364 children under the age of 5 live below the poverty line. Meanwhile, the North Idaho College Head Start program had room for only 178 kids.

- Of 382 childcare providers in a five-county North Idaho area, 57 percent, or 218, are unlicensed.

- In North Idaho, annual turnover among childcare center teachers is 40 percent.

"I think using indicators is the best opportunity for building bridges," said Doug Fagerness, director of the North Idaho College Head Start program.

On the positive side, these statistics can inform those in leadership roles, who can enact policies which can also be measured to provide accountability, said Christopher Blodgett, head of the Washington State University Child and Family Research Unit.

Patrick Jones, primary organizer of the EWU conference, said he was "thrilled" to see the meeting attracted hundreds of influential people from the region's communities. Jones said the sessions illustrated what a "powerful tool" community indicators can be.

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