PROMOTING THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES IN THE ST. LOUIS REGION: THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

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CHILD WELL-BEING: FIVE KEY ISSUES

1. Goal – Promoting the well-being of every child
2. Current landscape - Stark disparities in the status of St. Louis area children
3. Reducing risk factors that imperil children
4. Promoting protective factors for child well-being
5. Establishing governmental and community capacity to promote the well-being of children, youth, families and communities
WHAT CONSTITUTES CHILD WELL-BEING?

In October 2014 The St. Louis Child Well-Being Symposium steering committee asserted that children have achieved well-being when the following are accomplished:

• Attaining all relevant and appropriate developmental milestones
• Displaying capacities that we know are associated with future success. These capacities are both internal to the child (such as resiliency) and external to the child (such as a secure attachment)
• Relating to themselves, their peers, and to the world around them as children

This definition also recognizes that each child has a right to well-being, and that it is the responsibility of the child’s community to create those circumstances that best allow each child to flourish. This definition recognizes that children in different emotional, cultural, and social environments may be constrained in achieving well-being. The purpose of this definition is not to identify children at a well-being deficit but, instead, to identify targets in the child’s environment or community that could be strengthened or changed in order to promote the well-being of every child.

In summary, children at moving toward a state of well-being when they:

1. Are growing and developing as kids their age should.
2. Have what they need to be successful as adults.
3. Are able to enjoy being kids.
On average children in St. Louis are about average, but we get there the ugliest possible way – large numbers of kids who do both very well and very poorly.

- Stark disparities in child well-being are often along racial lines.
- Poverty is the primary factor undermining well-being; it is worsening.

Many children in our community are at risk due to poverty, unstable families, poor schools, inadequate health care and other needs and challenges.

- Disparities in St. Louis are long-standing and persistent
- Areas where disparities and inequities exist are mobile and expanding.
- Governmental proliferation and fragmentation make it difficult to address problems related to the well-being of children, youth and families equitably and at scale
• Zip code data on the number of children living in poverty runs as high as 46.3%. There are nine St. Louis area ZIP codes with child poverty rates above 30 percent.

• More than 1 in 5 children live in 21 area ZIP codes identified by Vision for Children at Risk research as having the most severe risks to child well-being. In these areas, an average of 23% of families live in poverty.

• According to the 2010 U.S. Census, nearly 150,000 young St. Louisans from birth to age 17 live in neighborhoods with high levels of multiple risks that contribute to and increase the likelihood of youth violence. In the City of St. Louis, 85.5 percent of young people live in such circumstances. In St. Louis County, 31.3 percent of children and youth live in communities where risk factors that contribute to violent behavior are high to severe. Overall, the 15-county St. Louis metropolitan area ranks ninth among metropolitan areas in the U.S. for the number of youth murdered with guns.

• In impoverished high-risk areas, school achievement test results are typically 15-20 percentage points below state and local averages.
ST. LOUIS AREA ZIP CODES WHERE RISK TO CHILD WELL-BEING OR HIGH
STRATEGIC APPROACH

- Reduce Childhood Risk Factors
- Promote Child Protective Factors
The National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) identifies several key risk factors for children:

- Poverty
- Single parenthood
- Four or more children living in the child's household,
- The lack of a high school diploma or GED by the child's parent, and
- Engaging in risky behaviors (crime, violence, gangs, drug abuse, etc.)

Other key risk factors that have been identified include:

- Community disorganization
- Exposure to trauma and resultant toxic stress that prevents children from developing, thriving and relating successfully to the world in which they live
PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR CHILD WELL-BEING

- Economic opportunity
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Nurturing and attachment
- Parental resilience
- Social and emotional competence
- Concrete support in times of need (food, housing, transportation, clothing etc.)
- Social connections – community support
- In addition, the importance of culture is recognized. As systems of shared actions, values and beliefs that guide behavior, cultural norms support families and communities, and help them to flourish.
1. Focus on reducing racial and socio-economic disparities
2. Strengthen family functioning (address, poverty, life skills, etc.)
3. Address children’s critical, early developmental needs
4. Ensure quality educational opportunities
5. Provide economic opportunity
6. Put vital community supports in place
7. Establish the link between child well-being and overall community and economic development.
8. Link the policy and program agenda for children, youth and families to the broader community and economic development agenda of the St. Louis region
OUR COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENTAL CAPACITY TO PROMOTE CHILD WELL-BEING IS LOW

1. Civic cultural is historically segmented and fragmented. Little sense of common community good and shared interests (e.g. “my” children and “your” children, not “our” children.)

2. Formal local governmental structure is fragmented and directed primarily to promoting local interests. Uneven collection of “have” and “have not” jurisdictions, many without the capacity to deliver adequate professional services. Services such as police and schools rather than supporting local communities may undermine them. Contrived financing mechanisms produce and exacerbate racial inequities.

3. State of Missouri exhibits little interest in providing needed services or investing to promote child, youth and family well-being:
   + Weak social service supports (e.g. child care subsidy, etc.)
   + Very low investment in early childhood education
   + Underfunded school foundation formula
   + So far, no Medicaid expansion
   + Missouri simply doesn’t do what many other states do to promote the well-being of children, youth and families.
While recent events and the long-standing issues that undergird them are in every sense a tragedy, they also provide a very real opportunity and challenge to change the trajectory of the St. Louis region and the life prospects of many of our fellow citizens.

Initiatives such as the work of this Commission, Ready by 21 St. Louis, For the Sake of All, My Brothers Keeper and, as of last Friday, the Northside Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant. Louis provide mechanism through which needed change can – and must -- be effectuated.

Vision for Children at Risk and the some 400 child and youth serving agencies with whom we work will contribute in anyway we can to achieving critically needed changes by:

- Providing research and analysis
- Building partnerships to implement needed strategies
- Advocating to promote the well-being of the St. Louis region and ALL of its residents