**A Wealth of Information: the United Way’s Interactive Indicators Dashboard**

**By the United Way of Southeast Alaska**

Housing, food security, financial stability, healthcare, education, substance abuse, the environment, gender/ethnic/socioeconomic equality… with so many issues facing our society, even the most well-intentioned, public service-minded citizen can feel overmatched.

After all, one person alone couldn’t possibly take on all these challenges. Nor can the government by itself. Schools and non-profits have limited resources; the business world can only write so many checks.

How, then, can we chip away at—and eventually overcome—the seemingly insurmountable task of creating vibrant neighborhoods, vital landscapes and a healthy quality of life for everyone?

The answer: individuals, organizations, agencies and business leaders all working together to effect positive change.

But how do we know we’re making a measurable impact?

Enter the United Way of Southeast Alaska.

“Many people think of us in terms of fundraising, which, of course, is a big part of our work,” says United Way President and CEO Wayne Stevens. “But more than that, we strive to be a wealth of information and community resources for all of Southeast Alaska, Metlakatla to Yakutat.”

In addition to supporting 36 non-profit partner agencies across the region through volunteer coordination and financial contributions—most notably, project-specific Community Impact Grants—the United Way has also embarked on a major initiative to provide the community with a wealth of useful data.

This past year, it launched the “Interactive Indicators Dashboard,” provided by the McDowell Group and accessible for free at <http://www.mcdowellgroupdashboard.net/united_way/>; there’s also a link on the United Way of Southeast Alaska website (http://www.unitedwayseak.org/community-indicators).

Made possible by funding from BP Alaska, the Juneau Assembly and the Rasmuson Foundation, the United Way partnered with McDowell to determine a variety of community indicators: information about important and timely issues reflecting broad public priorities. Both the funding and project occurred incrementally over a period of six to eight years, beginning with the COMPASS community building assessment report, which led to further rounds of data gathering, updated information and ultimately a broader online presence.

Generally speaking, community indicators reveal economic, environmental and social trends—all harbingers of positive change. These metrics help communities recognize areas for effective public engagement, and provide essential guidance for action. In other words, community indicators help answer the basic questions: are we there yet, and if not, how much further do we need to go?

“Community indicators, and the Interactive Indicator Dashboard, are highly effective tools for informing and mobilizing citizens and policy makers—bits of information that highlight what’s happening in a large system,” says Stevens.

“They’re like gauges on a machine,” he explains, “or the headline of a news story.”

The United Way’s Interactive Indicators Dashboard is divided into three categories: Education, Health and Income, which have been identified by the United Way as the three building blocks for a good life. Each of these categories features an overview, along with a more detailed breakdown.

The Education section includes five years worth of graduation rates for Juneau, Sitka and Ketchikan; as well as the percentage of math and reading proficiency for eighth graders and third graders in those same communities, as well as in comparison to the state as a whole.

Health indicators include population percentage without health insurance, ratio of population to primary care physicians and prevalence of diagnosed diabetes, as well as rates of smoking and obesity. The breakdown also covers issues such as access to dentists and mental health providers, plus the number of mental health clients.

The Income Stability category covers the most ground, from licensed childcare slots to unemployment rates, housing costs to percentage of students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch, teen pregnancy to domestic violence cases.

Obviously, community indicators don’t tell us everything we need to know to understand every issue in its entirety. They do, however, spotlight key information in hopes of mobilizing public involvement.

“The idea is that these indicators will be a touchstone for the people of Southeast Alaska, with the potential to serve as a call to action,” Stevens says.

Here, the United Way aims for collective impact, facilitating community agreement on a position, and then coordinating joint efforts to further that position.

Stevens describes a multi-fold intention. First, the United Way seeks to create a collaborative, as opposed to contentious, environment for local public service actors. Especially when it comes to grant funding and attracting volunteers, non-profits can sometimes feel like they’re competing against each other, as opposed to working together. Moreover, such coordinated coalitions can develop lifelong community programs, which have the potential for far greater, longer-lasting results than separate shorter-term projects.

“The Interactive Indicators Dashboard should really help the United Way and our partners create real, lasting change,” he says. “That’s living united: reaching out a hand to one, improving conditions for all.

*“A Wealth of Information: The United Way’s Interactive Indicators Dashboard” appears courtesy of the United Way of Southeast Alaska. To view the dashboard or learn more about “Living United,” the United Way of Southeast Alaska or any of its partner agencies visit www.unitedwayseak.org.*