

Tahoe poverty forum to tackle stemming the downward slide

By Kathryn Reed

Poverty with a view has never been more accurate than now.

Though the powers that be would like to remove the phrase from the vernacular of South Shore locals, the truth is the phrase cannot be disputed. Tahoe has gorgeous views and the people living among the pines at 6,200 feet are poorer today than anytime in recent memory.

When organizers and others gather Oct. 8 in South Lake Tahoe for an all-day summit dubbed Poverty to Prosperity, they will be tasked with coping with the reality of a city whose unemployment rate is at nearly 18 percent, whose permanent residency is stagnant with 70 percent of housing belonging to second homeowners, and a school district with nearly 70 percent of its elementary students qualifying for free or reduced lunches.



Scott Lukas, LTCC professor, is the keynote speaker Oct. 8 at the S. Tahoe poverty forum.

Homelessness in Tahoe isn't unusual. It's just a bit invisible. Lake Tahoe Unified School District reports of its 3,993 students 250 are homeless. Some live in motels. Some in cars. Some couch surf. Those 250 don't live in a traditional home and therefore are considered homeless.

Wendy David, one of the forum's organizers, sees the increasing destituteness of those living in South Lake Tahoe through a variety of volunteer efforts mostly involving children, as well as being president of the LTUSD school board. That is why she wants to bring people together to begin a dialog of what can be done to reverse the poverty trend.

Alissa Nourse, Carl Ribaud, Arturo Rangel, Cindy Hannah and Michael Ward (who will be the facilitator) have been instrumental in making next Friday's event a reality.

South Lake Tahoe is not unique in its financial struggles.

In data just released by the U.S. Census Bureau from 2009 stats, not the ones taken earlier this year, it shows the income gap between the richest and poorest in the United States grew last year by the widest amount on record. Children were a large segment of that number.

The figures show most people taking a hit during the recession last year, but the poor being the worst off.

Some stats from the report:

- U.S. residents below half the poverty line – \$10,977 for a family of four – rose from 5.7 percent in 2008 to 6.3 percent in 2009. This is the highest level since 1975 when this statistic was first recorded. The 2009 poverty level was \$21,954 for a family of four.
- The 2009 poverty rate in the U.S. was at 14.3 percent – the highest since 1994. (It was at 13.2 percent in 2008.) That's 43.6 million people or nearly 1 in 7. This is the highest

since poverty figures began being kept in 1959.

- In the four county region of El Dorado, Placer, Yolo and Sacramento counties the poverty rate in 2009 was 13.4 percent in 2009, 12.1 percent in 2008 and 11.1 percent on 2007.
- Child poverty is at 20.7 percent, up from 19 percent in 2008.
- People with employer-provided health plans declined from 176.3 million to 169.7 million in 2009.
- 2009 was the largest single-year increase in U.S. residents without health insurance since the government began tracking the figures in 1987.

At the forum in South Tahoe, which is open to the public, the day will begin with El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Suzanne Kingsbury providing opening comments at 9am. In her work she has seen plenty of changes and is in constant contact with those considered impoverished.

Scott Lukas, a cultural anthropologist at Lake Tahoe Community College, will provide the keynote address. He will delve into the differences of generational and situational poverty – both of which exist locally.

After lunch a panel discussion with representatives from the business community, education, health care and others will take on the poverty topic. The public will be able to weigh-in before the day wraps up at 4pm.

“Why it’s important to have a community forum is it’s not one sector that will change things. It will take all sectors of the community,” David said.

The simple goals are for this to begin a dialog, for forum attendees to take it upon themselves to derive achievable goals, and for collaboration among concerned parties to be realized.

David anticipates tourism will be a component of the discussion because it is the chief employment sector.

If people are not coming to the area, it means businesses have fewer hours to give to workers, which means they have less money to spend, which in turn puts them on or past the brink of being able to pay their bills. This means downstream the businesses the tourism workers go to are being frequented less or not at all, and potentially service oriented businesses are not getting paid. It also means social agencies being tapped when resources to give are dwindling because fewer have the means to give.

“We need leaders to say it is a concern that so many are on the edge, that we are losing families, that we want kids to have jobs,” David said.

Poverty to Prosperity Forum details:

- Oct. 8
- 9am-4pm
- Embassy Suites Lake Tahoe, 4130 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe
- RSVP to Lori Blackburn at (530) 295.2403
- Sponsors – Child Abuse Prevention Council, El Dorado Community Foundation, Lake Tahoe Gaming Alliance, First 5 El Dorado, Tahoe Youth & Family Services, El Dorado County Office of Education