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Life

Making a difference

Luncheon attendees get preview of Chester County Fund for Women and Girls' Blueprint Report

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By PHYLLIS ROWAN, Staff Writer

Chester County Fund for Women and Girls will be releasing its Blueprint Report next month, but those attending the organization's annual Make a Difference luncheon on May 14 got a preview of the report.

According to its Web site, www.ccwomenandgirls.org, the Chester County Fund for Women and Girls, is "dedicated to improving the lives of all women and girls, and thereby all members of the Chester County community, through education, grant-making and community collaboration." Since it was created in 1996, the fund has awarded more than \$1 million in grants to more than 45 organizations addressing issues affecting women and children. This spring, it will award an additional \$200,000.

"While the county is considered one of the wealthiest counties in the country, (the Blueprint Report) shows us our hidden needs," said Heidi McPherson, CCFWG president.

The information for the report was gathered from numerous data sources with the help of the West Chester University Research Center, the fund's research partner. The report, McPherson noted, will be about 300

pages, but will be available on the Internet in June. The report provides information about women and girls in the county regarding such issues as poverty, housing, access to health care and substance abuse.

"This is the only comprehensive study that looks at women and girls in the county ... through a gender lens," McPherson said.

There are positive and negative trends in the report.

On the positive side, Chester County was deemed the healthiest county in the state. Also, 27 percent of businesses in the county are owner by women, higher than anywhere else in the state and the surrounding counties.

But there are many trends of concern.

While the economy is hitting hard all over the United States, it is especially difficult for women and children, according to McPherson, who cited the statistic that in 2009, 90 percent of the women in shelters were single mothers with children. She noted that 24 percent of single women with children live in poverty in the county -- that's earning \$18,310 or less for a family of three -- up from 20.4 percent in 2004, when statistics were compiled for the last Blueprint Report released in 2005. And, a higher percentage of Chester County women age 65 and older live in poverty -- 13.7 percent -- than nationwide with only 11.3 percent.

The news on other fronts is not good either. The report also details the increasing demand for free or reduced lunches as school, substance abuse among female teenagers, an increase in mental and emotional health needs and a sex offense rate higher than any other regional county.

And while the poor economy has hit businesses and individuals hard, reducing their ability to contribute to funds, nonprofit organizations funded by CCFWC and similar organizations are reporting a 50 percent increase in demand for services.

Now that the statistics are available, the next thing to determine is the why behind them.

The Blueprint Report will be accessible to everyone and used to determine the issues that need to be addressed in the county.

"We want it to be used as a community resource," McPherson said. "We will spend the next year talking about the needs and what we can do."

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