

King County Children and Family Commission  
Irreducible Needs of Families in King County  
**Report from Focus Group conducted with Families living on Vashon Island  
District 8**

**Leader:** Yvonne Pitrof, Executive Director, Vashon Maury Community Food Bank

**Host agency:** Vashon Maury Community Food Bank

**Location of the focus group:** PlaySpace, Vashon Youth & Family Services (located at the intersection of Gorsuch Road and Vashon Highway)

**Date:** Sunday, Sept. 12, 2010      **Time** 1:00-2:30 p.m.

**Number of People who attended** 10 Women 1 Man

**Setting the Context for the Focus Group**



- The Vashon Maury Community Food Bank serves up to 200 families a week, which is 10% of the Island's population. Approximately 180 families regularly use the food bank.
- The food bank saw a 30-35% increase in the number of families seeking services starting in the fall of 2008.

In May 2009 with help from a grant from the Rotary, community volunteers planted a produce garden in a plot just north of the food bank as a source of fresh produce for food bank clients. In June 2010 a group of mothers and daughters volunteered to harvest the beans, broccoli and other vegetables they had planted for the food bank on a donated half-acre on Wax Orchard farm. United Way had provided a \$10,000 grant and later \$25,000 to support the expanded farming effort as part of their Response for Basic Needs Program. The food bank staff and volunteers were able to share some of their produce with other South King County food banks.

Local residents referred to their preferred rural lifestyle and most residents are familiar with growing or obtaining fresh produce grown locally. Vashon Public Schools is implementing a new school lunch program with healthier options for students that will include more vegetables and fruits.

The selected facts below highlight some unique dimensions of residents on Vashon Island. These facts illustrate the contrasts that island residents often cite that while wealthy people live on Vashon, there are also families living in poverty.

- 6% of the population on Vashon in 2008 lived below the Federal Poverty level, compared to a state average of 10.6%.
- 92% of the population reported race as white in 2000 census

Vashon residents also refer positively to their schools and cite the quality of the schools as a good reason for living on the island.

- 95% of the population ages 25 years or older graduated from high school.

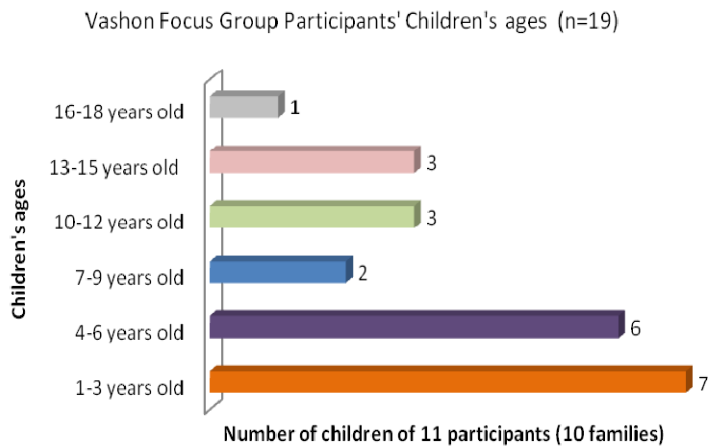
- 1,500 students are served by the Vashon School District
- 130 students commute to the island to attend Vashon schools
- In 2008, Vashon Island High School (VHS) was named a national Blue Ribbon School and a Washington State School of Distinction.
- For the past five years, McMurray Middle School's and Chautauqua Elementary School's Math is Cool teams have consistently placed in the top three at the annual state tournament.

**Introduction of services available to focus group participants**

The parents in the focus group were familiar with PlaySpace where the focus group was held. Vashon Youth and Family Services offers 12 groups and programs at PlaySpace including a play time for young children, a foster parent group, a support group for parents of children with special needs, an art session for 3-6 year olds, a group for young moms, and a group for parents of infants. Vashon Youth and Family Services also offers additional counseling and family support services at their primary location. These services include a prevention program of Parent Consultations where parents can receive personalized assistance to resolve everyday challenges and build parenting skills.

**Notes about the group participants**

The 11 participants were current or past food bank clients or food bank volunteers who have been Vashon residents for varying lengths of time from less than a year to more than 20 years. Participants included a single parent who has lost her employment due to not being able to work shifts since her primary child care provider can not provide child care, a mother providing child care for a neighbor in exchange for a room, two parent families with one employed adult, and a two parent family in transition after moving to Vashon with one adult now starting employment. Child care was offered on site during the focus group. Four parents chose to have their children remain with them during the group.



Parents attending the group had toddlers, pre-school, and school age children. Collectively, the participants had 19 children and the age ranges of the children are shown in the graph.

## **The following introduction was read to the group**

Many families have essential needs that need to be met so they have well-being and their children thrive. These are the needs that were identified by the Commission that may be the needs of all families in King County: a safe neighborhood, adequate nutritious food, affordable wellness care, livable wage, access to education and learning through life, affordable housing, stable and secure relationships, and a supportive resource network. The questions in our discussion will ask if you identify these needs for your family or if other needs are relevant for your family.

## **Key Points emerging from the group**

- The group discussion is summarized in the pages that follow, but members of the focus group were very adamant that their priority was to have a DSHS office on Vashon or a DSHS van regularly servicing the Island residents. A fully equipped DSHS van was on Vashon on Wednesday, September 8 for eight hours to assist residents in applying for benefits including food stamps (called EBT cards), income assistance or medical care coverage. The three DSHS workers staffing the van processed applications to reduce the delays often experienced by applicants and the presence of the van removed the transportation barrier encountered by many families who have to leave the island to go to a DSHS office. Prior to the van there was a DSHS worker who came once a month to Vashon but that was perceived as being too limited by the focus group participants.
- At the conclusion of the discussion, the participants were asked to rank the needs they felt were the highest, next highest and third highest unmet needs for the families that they knew. The results were that the most frequently ranked area of need was affordable health care with sufficient income being ranked as a nearly equal area of unmet need. The participants also placed affordable housing as a high unmet need along with opportunities for education that included affordable and accessible child care. The group participants less often ranked three areas indicating lower unmet needs among families: nutritious food, a culturally responsive network, and safe and secure relationships. The group participants did not refer to or give any ranking to safe neighborhoods so this conveys it is a met need among the group participants.

### **1. For the families that you know, what is one thing that families need?**

The group participants readily listed many needs that they feel families on Vashon require to be met so they will thrive. The comments are clustered in three topics that are explained below: child care, housing, and health care.

The group participants initially expressed many concerns about the lack of child care they experienced and they identified several requests to develop child care resources:

- Community support for affordable and accessible child care on evenings, nights, weekends for emergencies and for parents who work non-traditional hours. One working mother shared her experiences that when her mother became incapacitated and could no longer provide child care the working parent lost her job because she could not find anyone to care for her child during the evening or night shifts that she was required to work.
- Respite care for parents who have children with special needs, including young adults who have special needs.
- Affordable child care for parents who make minimum wage. Child care cost \$9 an hour and that is more than a parent can make at a minimum wage job.
- Networking for parents including single parents to help them set up child care co-operatives where parents trade time caring for another parent's child and earning time for their own child care. Parents accrue hours by caring for someone else's children and there is a system for tracking hours. Participants thought that an agency could help take the lead to get parents to set about organizing a child care network.
- DSHS is only an option for a child care subsidy for a parent working at least 30 hours a week. In the current market parents can't find full time work and may work less 20 hours a week which means they are not eligible for a subsidy.
- Two parent families with low paying or minimum wage jobs felt they can't both afford to work because the cost of child care to cover their working hours would exceed what they can afford to pay for child care.

In addition to the high needs for child care in order for some parents to be able to work, the group participants listed other needs experienced by poor and low-income families living on Vashon. A high priority need was for affordable housing and there were several conditions that should be met for housing to be affordable and accessible for families:

- The participants referred to only a limited number of low income housing units near the Post Office.<sup>1</sup>
- Rental housing was perceived to be very costly. One participant explained that paying \$1325 for a three bedroom house was excessive. Typically, there are more

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- <sup>1</sup> Vashon Household, a non-profit housing resource, did refurbish five units in the Mukai Commons in April 2010 that have been occupied by low-income families that had unstable housing or had been homeless. In 2008 Vashon Household also built five houses for income qualified low income first time home buyers as part of 18 houses in a co-housing community. In 2003 Vashon Household had refurbished 21 units and 9 units in two buildings to ensure that low income seniors were not displaced from their neighborhoods.

listings for vacation home rentals on Vashon than for long term rentals so finding family housing on a budget can be challenging.

- Housing is not available for families that have a pet. Several focus group participants experienced not being able to get housing because they had a dog which seemed out of place on an island with plenty of space for dogs.
- There is no space to live in a recreational vehicle that has electricity and water hook-ups. The water district was perceived to have placed restrictions limiting water hook-ups.<sup>2</sup>
- There is a need for a low-cost hotel for temporary or short-term housing but this was not seen as a possibility due to restrictions on any new construction as understood by the group participants.
- There are summer homes that are left unoccupied for months during the year. These homes were perceived to be extravagant and they took away space that might have been used for smaller affordable homes that could have been made available to low income families. The group participants were provoked by the gap between the housing for high income level residents who reside only seasonally on the island in contrast to low income families struggling to find adequate housing when they live on the island year round.

The group participants also identified that affordable health care was another high priority. The participants wanted several resources for primary care, community based care, and dental care for their family members.

- Families lack health care coverage and mothers in the group referred to only having health care coverage when they were pregnant. The parents did not have employee paid health care benefits and one family indicated they have Basic Health coverage.
- Applying for health care coverage through DSHS was perceived to be difficult. Participants expressed several reasons why this was not easy: there is no DSHS office on the island, it is \$20 for the ferry ride to go to Seattle to try and apply, if a DSHS worker came to the island the wait was too long and the worker was not perceived to be effective in getting benefits for a resident.
- The group participants did not know of a source on the island that accepted medical coupons for dental care. They understood they would have to take the

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<sup>2</sup> The Vashon Water District does have a one meter per building policy which would limit multiple living units in buildings. The District also has a moratorium on new water shares that would restrict a development such as an R-V park or motel from building as there would be no certainty of acquiring a water share for water access and supply.

ferry to West Seattle to find a dentist. Group participants referred to a mobile dental van that would only provide treatment and not preventive care. There is a dental clinic recreational vehicle with a team from Medical Teams International that has been coming monthly for the past year. Residents are eligible for the mobile dental care if their income is below the federal poverty level and they do not have dental insurance.

- Several families stated that they thought the clinic would provide emergent care to anyone on the island. They thought income from a second hand store was to cover costs for uncompensated care at the clinic. However, a recent episode when a child with a possible broken arm was not seen due to the family lacking health insurance caused the focus group members to state that families without any insurance would have to leave the island for health care.
- Several group members also identified the gap that exists for some working families that can't afford health care insurance and do not qualify for state medical assistance.

## **2. What are families' other additional areas of need?**

*Sufficient income* The group participants identified that they needed sufficient income for their families. They would like to see that the minimum wage is raised to a livable wage for island residents. One group participant referred to a movement that had developed to make Vashon currency that would be based on a living wage for local Vashon residents citing the higher cost of living on the island.

Families need income to cover the costs of items including diapers and cleaning supplies that are necessary and are not allowable when using food stamps. The participants were rather outraged that non-nutritious items such as chocolate and soft drinks could be purchased with EBT (food stamps) but not diapers.

*Adequate, affordable nutritious food* Several group participants cited the high cost of food on the island and they explained several situations that contribute to families facing challenges to afford food. Many food items cost more on the island but it is also costly for a mother and two children to take the ferry off the island to buy groceries. One family received only six dollars a month in food stamps leading families to think that the time and effort to apply for and meet eligibility for benefits was not worth it. One family in the focus group had experienced a loss of \$641 a year in food stamps when the wage earner in the household received a 25 cents an hour pay increase. Experiences such as that prompted the group participants to complain about the injustices of trying to work for a living and being denied necessary benefits. Several group participants indicated that on the island they can actually find low cost produce through relationships with local growers or farmers.

The focus group participants identified two other areas they would like to see developed for Vashon families:

- Community resource for adult day care also an adult family home appropriate for young adults with special needs
- Advanced educational opportunities such as distance learning or a satellite campus of a community college

### **3. What would you most like to have for your family?**

The focus group participants reflected their different priorities when they expressed what they needed for their own families to thrive and have well being. The needs listed below were expressed by one or two participants and they got a response but did not evoke wide spread agreement among all the participants.

- Access to affordable holistic health care and preventive care to stay healthy. Resources for people to take care of themselves, eat well and maintain their health so they did not need to access health care providers.
- Affordable health care for families that have some income
- Parenting classes should be offered more often and on a range of topics for parents of pre-teens and adolescents.
- Free all day kindergarten since families are required to pay \$300 a month per one of the focus group participants
- Covered outdoor play area suitable for young children to play. PlaySpace was acknowledged as a resource but some parents found the hours to not be convenient.
- Improved public transportation including buses on the weekend. Currently the Metro bus does not service the island on the weekends.
- Clothing bank- possibly the food bank expands to also take clothing or another resource is developed so that residents can recycle and re-use clothing through a clothing bank.
- Low cost pet clinic that can provide affordable preventive care, check-ups, and required shots.

### **4. What resource or support would help the families to get what they need?**

Several group participants were very vocal in their need to have a DSHS office or at least a DSHS van regularly visiting the island. They felt the experience of applying for benefits could be degrading and they would like to see that the mobile DSHS services are respectful of local residents. The DSHS mobile van was on the island for a day in the week before the focus group but apparently there was not sufficient advance notice for some residents nor was there an indication of a regular schedule for the mobile services

to return to the island. Prior to the van, the previous schedule was to have a DSHS staff member come to Vashon once a month. The group participants referred to this as inadequate because the wait to see the worker was too long and it was perceived as degrading or stigmatizing.

**5. What are the barriers or reasons that families do not get the support or help they need?**

The focus group participants identified several different explanations as to why Vashon families may not access the support or services they need. One explanation is that families are not aware they could meet eligibility for benefits. This was reiterated by John McGill, the DSHS mobile van representative who was cited in the Vashon Maury Island Beachcomber who explained that the income eligibility levels in some of the state aid programs have increased and people may not realize they are eligible. Another explanation on why families may not access the support they need is that they perceive it to be too problematic or too costly to apply if it involved travel off the island to apply at a DSHS office. Another explanation is that families feel degraded in applying for and meeting eligibility for benefits so they would rather go without benefits. The Food Bank Executive Director explained that some families will be very creative to meet their basic needs such as bartering rather than to seek and apply for benefits or services. A related explanation is that families may feel embarrassed to use resources or receive benefits when they live in a relatively small community. They may feel or they feel their children will be identified to be low-income or “needy families” and they prefer to avoid this identification or what some referred to as social stigma.

**6. What could be done so resources or sources are culturally responsive?**

The focus group participants explained that a general perception among island residents and off island residents is that “everyone on Vashon is wealthy.” The focus group participants explained their lifestyles are not those of wealthy families and they struggle to afford health care, housing, food, and transportation. The focus group participants would like to see that more services are made readily accessible to Vashon residents by having the services offered on Vashon (and not off the island). Group participants also feel that they face long delays on the phone when trying to get information from DSHS and other sources. Other group participants have felt that DSHS workers who are not native English speakers are hard to understand and they would prefer to have improved telephone access and service.

There is a small but growing group of Latino families on Vashon as evident in families accessing the food bank so the food bank now seeks a Spanish speaking volunteer to assist families. One focus group participant spoke on behalf of Spanish speaking Latino families and felt the families were challenged to learn about resources and to apply for services. Several participants felt that Latino families were accessing and using limited community resources more readily than were non-Latino families so there was obvious

disagreement among the participants. It is possible that some Latino families are limited in learning about new resources if announcements are not translated into Spanish while these families may learn of resources through other means such as word of mouth information sharing so then there are members of the Latino community who are seen by the non-Latino families to be gaining access to services or resources. Several group participants voiced their overall concerns that while there are limited resources and services for low-income families on occasion the local community does respond to meet emergent needs.