

Isabella County  
Community Assessment Team Report  
April 8-10, 2003

Sponsored by:  
Michigan State University Extension  
and  
United Way of Isabella County

United Way of Isabella County, Isabella County Health and Human Services Collaborative Council, and Michigan State University Extension are pleased to present the following report for the benefit of the people of Isabella County.

**Isabella County, Michigan**  
**Community Assessment Team Report**  
**Michigan State University Extension**  
**June 16, 2003**

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## **Description of Isabella County**

Isabella County is located close to the geographic center of Michigan's lower peninsula. Its major city, Mt. Pleasant, is the county seat and home of Central Michigan University (CMU). Prior to the mid-1990s, the University was perhaps the most prominent and well-known of the county's employers. However, today CMU shares that position with the Soaring Eagle Casino which has become a major statewide attraction, drawing visitors from a wide area. Oil and gas production also contribute to the county's economy. Manufacturing includes machinery for industry and food service as well as wood products.

Beyond the city of Mt. Pleasant and its immediate surroundings, the county takes on a distinctly rural character. Scattered single family homes dot many of the mile roads, as is typical throughout Michigan, but population and housing density are very low. A few isolated "settlements" are found in the midst of otherwise rural expanses and some of the county's larger inland lakes are ringed by homes on relatively small lots.

Overall, the county has grown at a rate substantially higher than the State of Michigan's 6.9 percent over the last decade. However, several individual communities have substantially outpaced the county growth rate, some more than tripling that rate. Still, most of the county continues to retain the rural agricultural character which is prized by residents and non-residents. Expansive farm fields can be found across the county. Farmers produce dry beans, dairy products, poultry, cattle, wheat, and corn. Agriculture has been and continues to be a significant part of the Isabella County economy.

The 576 square miles that comprise the county contain 16 townships. At its center is the city of Mt. Pleasant where approximately 42 percent of the entire county population resides. Other towns and villages include: Beal City, Rosebush, Shepherd, Weidman, and Winn. The Chippewa, Pine, and Salt Rivers flow through the county.

Isabella County enjoys excellent transportation accessibility from its central location. M-20 runs east-west through the county while US-27 runs north-south. To the south are Michigan's large cities and centers of employment and entertainment, while to the north are the many vacation and recreational destinations.

The population of Isabella County has grown from 44,594 in 1970 to 63,351 in 2000.

Sources: Isabella County Master Land Use Plan adopted December 13, 2001  
Michigan Economic Development Corporation profile of Isabella County, 2002

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## **I. Introduction**

This report is designed to provide feedback on the Isabella County assessment conducted April 8 – 10, 2003 by Michigan State University Extension. The report is written for the citizens of Isabella County and presented to the Isabella County Health and Human Services Collaborative Council and United Way of Isabella County. The three day visit by the Community Assessment Team (CAT) of outside experts focused on five elements of community development: Quality of life, public awareness of existing human services, barriers to using available human services, dealing with poverty, and opportunities for economic development. This report is by no means a complete view of the situation, but rather a "snapshot" of the big picture as seen through the eyes of the CAT Team. The report's conclusion listed on page 23 highlights the Team's overall observations and summarizes the suggestions for action.

## **II. Background**

CAT stands for Community Assessment Team. The Team consists of MSU campus and field staff with expertise matched to the key issues of the host community. The CAT is designed to be a short term, intense process to help Michigan communities assess challenges and strengths and begin to consider and formulate appropriate community development programs and activities.

The goal of the CAT process is not to dictate specific policies or complete action plans. Rather, the goal of this process is to provide communities with a tailored outline of alternatives for community development through an assessment process.

The CAT Team provides a snapshot of the community by:

- Examining whether a community's current services and programs are making a difference in the lives of its citizens, and, if so, which citizens?
- Finding out how a community's present services and programs can be improved, if necessary, and examine how these current services are affecting stakeholders from their point of view.

Based on its observations, the CAT Team offers options and recommendations for the local steering committee to consider for further study of implementation.

The CAT Team process has three basic parts: pre-CAT assimilation of data and information, the CAT visit to the county, and the post-CAT presentation of findings and suggestions to the citizens of the county. Isabella County was selected for a Community Assessment Team visit because the county and its communities were in need of an outside opinion regarding the organizational issues and approaches surrounding human services and community development.

### **III. Procedure**

This section of the report outlines the CAT process followed in Isabella County. The initial step occurred when Paul Gross, County Extension Director, expressed an interest in having the Isabella County Health and Human Services Collaborative Council participate in the process. A local Steering Committee consisting of members of the HHSCC and other concerned citizens was formed to make preparations for a CAT visit (Appendix D). United Way of Isabella County provided funding for this project. The Steering Committee generated the following five issues for the Community Assessment Team to explore.

**Issue 1 – Quality of life: Describe quality of life in a healthy community. What does Isabella County now have? What is missing?**

**Issue 2 – Awareness: Sometimes people are not aware of available services. How do people learn about human services in Isabella County? What are some ideas to increase public awareness of these services?**

**Issue 3 – Barriers: Even if people know something is available, they might not use it. What might prevent people from using human services? What could be done to make it more convenient / appealing to use available services?**

**Issue 4 – Poverty: How can the community help people who are in poverty? How many people are living in poverty? What's the trend?**

**Issue 5 – Economic Development: How can the community help create jobs that pay a living wage?**

The local Steering Committee gathered pertinent data and information (Appendix E). Michigan State University Extension CAT Coordinator, Phil Alexander, identified the Community Assessment Team members based on their backgrounds and experiences (Appendix B) that could address the challenges presented by the Steering Committee in Isabella County.

The Steering Committee and CAT Coordinator designed an itinerary for the three-day visit (see Appendix A) that would allow the Team to travel throughout the county, talk with a variety of people, and hear from concerned residents attending the public forum. The Team met with over 100 community members including elected officials, educators, farmers, health care providers, senior citizens, college students, and youth, as well as representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, human services, tourism, and industry sectors.

The County Assessment Team discussed findings and formulated strategies. The site visit ended with a verbal and computer generated exit report to the local Steering Committee.

**Issue 1 – Quality of Life: What is Quality of life? Describe quality of life in a healthy community. What does Isabella County now have? What's missing?**

Quality of life means different things to different people. There does not appear to be a universally accepted definition. It is a subjective term that generally describes an individual's perception of things such as happiness, fulfillment, and optimism for a bright future.

A healthy community, according to Alan Anderson, director of the University of Wisconsin-Extension's Center for Community Economic Development, has three dimensions. It is a place where:

- Residents hold a common vision of their collective future which challenges, motivates and unites them;
- Leaders identify and resolve issues; and
- Organizations and institutions anticipate and adapt to an ever-changing environment.

Anderson further lists eight resources that are needed to build healthy communities.

- Human Resources
- Physical Infrastructure
- Financial Capital
- Technology Innovation Capital
- Capacity to Change
- Business Environment
- Natural and Environmental Resources
- Quality of Life

While all eight of these factors are needed and are interrelated, it is interesting to note that the first and last items on Anderson's list relate directly to the focus of the Isabella County CAT. These are very similar to what residents of Mt. Pleasant identified in their 1995 report entitled *Community Futuring and Strategic Planning Project*. The residents explored key aspects of their daily lives and determined that these factors would have to be maintained and enhanced if Mt. Pleasant was to achieve the quality of life they wanted for themselves, their children and their grandchildren. The seven areas they identified were:

- Economic Viability
- Human Services
- Intergovernmental Cooperation
- Leisure and Cultural Activities and Facilities
- Neighborhoods
- Public Facilities and Services
- Public Safety

One more glimpse of defining quality of life can be found in the Sustainable Community Handbook prepared by the Michigan Partnership for Economic Development Assistance which is part of the MSU Center for Urban Affairs. The seven components for quality of life include: people, economy, environment, neighborhoods, schools, infrastructure, and housing. An exercise of five questions will help the community define quality of life.

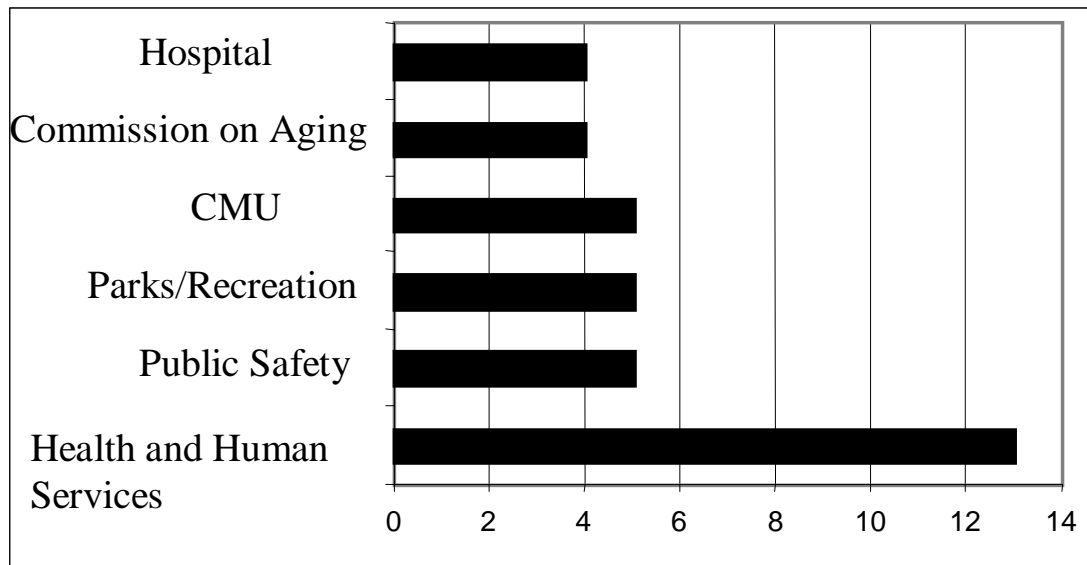
1. How do you describe your community?
2. What makes your community livable
3. What does quality of life mean to you?
4. What do you love about your community?
5. What do you want to sustain or improve?

Similar questions were asked by the CAT Team members as they met with residents of Isabella County. At the public forum on April 8, a modified version of SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) was used to solicit audience participation. Participants were asked "What should we do to make Isabella County a better place to live, work, or visit?" Specifically,

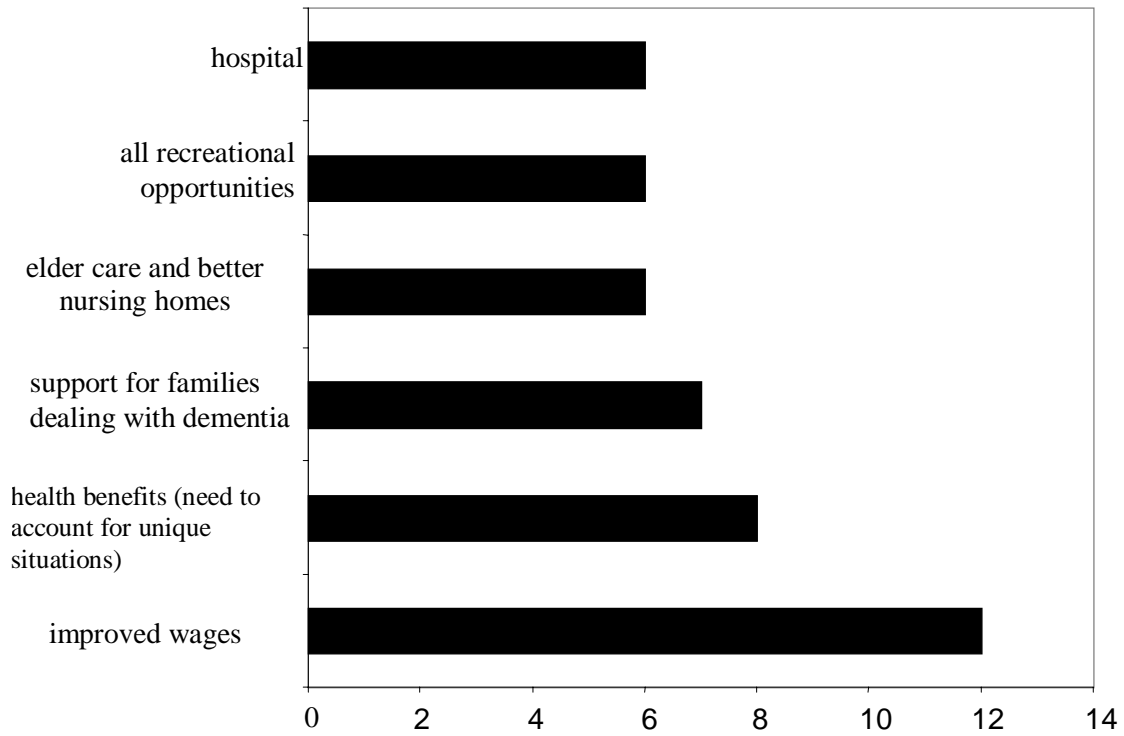
- What do we have and want to keep/enhance?
- What do we have but need to improve upon?
- What we don't have now but want in the future?

The following charts summarize the responses to those three issues and level of priority given by the group attending the forum. A complete list of the responses are presented in Appendix G.

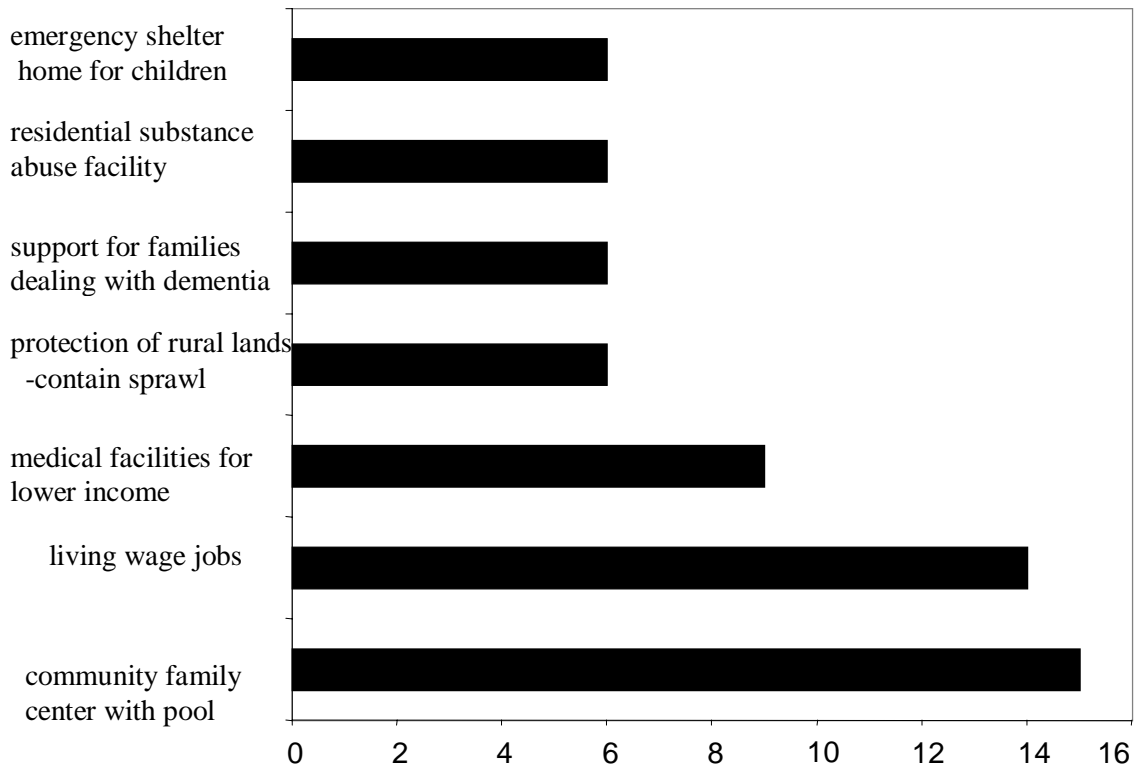
Programs to Continue



### Need to Improve



### Future Wants



### **Limitations**

Caution must be taken when reviewing these charts. Keep in mind the opinions expressed are from 25 people who attended the public forum. While this input is valuable to the CAT as one source of input, the results of this small group should not be interpreted as reflecting the attitudes of the general public. Even though the forum was open to the public, many of those in attendance who participated in this activity were connected with the HHSCC. This bias may have skewed the results if compared to conducting this same exercise with a random sample of county residents.

Community members living in the city of Mt. Pleasant had a different view of Quality of Life than those living in rural, out-county areas. Overall, community members looked at recreational activities to define Quality of Life rather than a broad spectrum of community attributes.

### **Recommendations**

- Create a shared vision for the future by comparing the individual visions of key stakeholders (city, county, townships, CMU, Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, Chamber of Commerce, HHSCC, etc.) See Appendix H for an example from Kalkaska County of a shared vision statement.
- Leadership development and nonprofit board training to provide a pool of leaders to serve on civic and agency boards and commissions
- Evaluate the individual human service agencies effectiveness and accomplishments as well as the synergistic impact of the collaborative efforts of the HHSCC
- Encourage agencies to share information with constituents from other human service agencies to expand the communication channels such as the Wise Township newsletter article describing the services of the Commission On Aging
- Increase communication to build trust and help narrow the “Perception vs. Reality” situation as described in the “Taj Ma-Hockey Palace” example and the perception that poverty in Isabella County is rampant

### **Issue 2 - Awareness: How do people learn about human services available in Isabella County? What are some ideas to increase public awareness of these services?**

Isabella County residents learn about human services in a variety of ways. The most common awareness channels appear to be a) informal communication between peer groups and other community members, b) referral from one service provider to another, c) agency outreach efforts, and d) by necessity during moments of personal crisis or need.

### **Strengths**

Isabella County has several significant assets that contribute to people’s awareness of and access to human services. It is important to acknowledge the following strengths, as identified by community members during CAT interviews and meetings:

- Good working relationships and communication between service providers promoting efficient referrals and collaborative servicing. This service provider network was consistently cited as a major strength in the county's human services sector.
- Listening Ear provides a valuable referral function as a fall back contact whenever someone does not know who to call to receive a given service.
- Churches are very supportive and provide key services such as health screenings and senior meals. Members of individual congregations are very aware of the services provided by their respective churches.
- The Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe contributes significant financial resources to Mt. Pleasant and out-county service providers and also provides extensive human services to tribal and non-tribal members.
- ICTC provides valuable public transportation services to residents in Mt. Pleasant and out-county communities.

### **Challenges**

Having listed the above strengths, there are also significant gaps in county residents' awareness of services. First, people often have an incomplete knowledge of available services. For example, someone may be aware of a particular provider's main programs but not know all of the specialty services available through that provider. Similarly, a person may know that certain programs exist, but not understand the eligibility criteria.

Other challenges facing county residents include:

- Lack of an up-to-date service directory.
- Poor off-campus advertising for CMU events and services.

### **Recommendations**

Several ideas and potential solutions to service awareness issues were generated during the CAT process. Here are some of the ideas that were generated as well as recommendations for addressing the challenges presented above.

#### **CHALLENGE: Lack of an up-to-date service directory**

**IDEA:** Develop and maintain a service provider directory. Distribute paper copies and make electronic version available on several websites.

**RECOMMENDATION:** This type of resource is very helpful, but is expensive and time consuming to maintain. How often would it be reprinted? Who would incur the printing and maintenance costs? Who would manage the directory? It may be easier to purchase several pages of the local phone book and require agencies to submit current contact information annually. However, if a particular organization or agency is willing to maintain an Isabella County human services directory, it will be very important that they update the directory on a regular basis.

**IDEA:** Run a recurring advertisement in the local newspapers that lists key contact information for human service providers.

**RECOMMENDATION:** This would be a relatively low-cost, easy, and effective way to disseminate current contact information. The advertisement should have a consistent format and

be consistently located in a visible area of the news-paper(s). The Morning Sun, Tribal Observer, township newsletters, and senior citizen newsletters could be effective venues for such an advertisement.

IDEA: Set up a 211 telephone service directory. This service would provide directory information about human services for Isabella County and those surrounding areas that share the “989” area code.

RECOMMENDATION: Listening Ear is currently looking into the possibility of operating a 211 directory assistance program. There are significant challenges such as securing ongoing funding, however, if funding is secured, a 211 program would benefit the regional awareness and access to human services.

**CHALLENGE: Incomplete knowledge about program offerings and eligibility**

IDEA: Hold information sessions at local soup kitchen, and other venues.

RECOMMENDATION: This could be an effective mechanism if you can get people to show up to the information sessions. Moderate participation could have a ripple effect if participants share information garnered at the meetings with their family, peers, and neighbors. This type of event may have to be held on a recurring basis at multiple locations across the county in order to reach a diverse audience.

**CHALLENGE: Poor off-campus advertising for CMU events and services**

RECOMMENDATION: It is important for university campuses to be connected to their surrounding communities. Those not affiliated with CMU could benefit from increased access to University events such as speakers, concerts, trainings, and conferences. Events should be advertised at times and in locations that encourage participation by people not affiliated with CMU.

**Issue 3 - Barriers: What might prevent people from using those human services that they do know about? What could be done to make it more convenient and/or appealing to use available services?**

There are instances when a person may need a particular service and know who to contact, but they choose not to or are unable to utilize a given service. These barriers can differ depending on age, gender, race, finances or other personal circumstances. It is important to identify the barriers that are specifically affecting Isabella County residents. The following service barriers were identified by several different community members throughout the CAT process:

- **Procedures are prohibitively complicated-** many services require extensive procedural “red tape” including travel between multiple agencies to acquire appropriate forms and signatures in order to receive one service. Travel between multiple agencies can be prohibitively difficult for citizens dealing with transportation issues. Also, the time that it takes to visit multiple agencies may prohibit people from

- accessing service on their lunch hour or after work. One example is if a person goes to the Salvation Army to receive assistance, they may have to travel to FIA for a referral and then travel back to Salvation Army for the intended assistance.
- **Lack of coverage-** many people are uninsured or do not qualify to receive services. The number of uninsured young people is escalating nationally as well as locally.
  - **Pride-** some service providers require clients to provide personal information about finances, etc. Some citizens are uncomfortable sharing financial and other types of information and choose not to apply for services or assistance as a result.
  - **Lack of affordable housing-** there is apparently an ongoing waiting list for affordable housing in Isabella County, indicating that demand exceeds supply for this service.
  - **Inadequate transportation-** many people do not have vehicles, do not have reliable vehicles, and/or can not afford the gasoline required to drive to service providers. There is a public bus system in the county, however there are several factors that create difficulty in using this form of public transportation:
    - Buses do not run often enough, making it impractical for certain users, particularly in out-county areas.
    - Bus tickets are too expensive for some citizens, and these people may not know about available financial assistance.
    - Bus routes to out-county areas are cut during inclement weather.
    - Bus routes can be prohibitively time consuming.

Those items listed above represent concerns that were expressed throughout our visits around Isabella County. The following barriers were also identified by one or more interviewees:

- Unfamiliarity with or lack of access to digital information formats - some citizens are not comfortable accessing web-based information and although most public libraries have web-ready computers, people with mobility issues may have a difficult time accessing the libraries.
- Fear of discrimination- there are stigmas associated with mental illness and disabilities. Some people may fear that use of certain services could result in negative personal or professional repercussions.
- CMU communicates unwelcoming messages to community members by not providing adequate parking.
- Desire for self-determination - Some people will avoid services that they are told they need. These individuals take pride in their independence and do not want to be told what to do. It is important that the right person approach these individuals in the right way. The appropriate person and approach may be different in every situation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This section of the CAT report provides an indication of what barriers limit Isabella County residents' ability to access human services. One approach to overcoming these barriers is to build off of some of the community strengths identified in the "Awareness" section. For example, a major strength in Isabella County is the open, communicative relationships between service providers. The collaborative-oriented efforts of the Isabella HHSCC have a greater chance of success due to this community strength. This is a critical point that can not be over-

emphasized. Each of the barriers listed above is more likely to be surmounted if service providers work collaboratively with one another, and with county residents to seek solutions.

Each of the above barriers represents a complicated issue with no easy solution. However, in each example, lasting solutions are more likely to come out of a collective, community-based effort. As an example, we could look at the “**complicated procedures**” barrier. The problem that some residents are experiencing could be alleviated by reducing the number of agencies that they are required to visit in order to receive services. This particular solution would require restructuring the operating procedures of the involved agencies. Any restructuring plan would have to involve each of the applicable agencies working together to devise a new system. Furthermore, service providers could limit future barriers by involving service recipients in the planning/restructuring process.

#### **Issue 4 – Poverty: How can the community help people who are in poverty? How many people are living in poverty? What 's the trend?**

Several factors must be taken into account when identifying poverty trends in a community. While census data may provide a black and white snapshot of the impact of poverty on a community, it does not address the community response to poverty and the repercussions that result. Availability of housing, adequate paying jobs, appropriate and affordable health care services, and referral routes and resources are all indicators of community response to poverty, and provide insight into how a community addresses an issue that affects the population at large.

During our visit, community leaders, members and service providers were asked about poverty, based on their perceptions as well as access to factual information. During the community forum, members were specifically asked about the financial requirements for a single mother with two children to provide for her family. The conversation that ensued demonstrated that participants did not have an accurate assessment of poverty within the community, and further, were not aware of available services to an impoverished family outside of food stamps and Medicaid.

In nearly every discussion with members of the community, an inflated poverty rate and anecdotal evidence were utilized to demonstrate need, but without the actual presentation of factual evidence. Community members cited poverty rates at 70%, with 35-40% of children being poor. Actual 2000 census data indicates the poverty levels in Isabella County have declined 41.3% since 1990, with the individual poverty rate at 20.4%, 7.4% of families were considered poor, and 11.3% of children were poor. Female-headed households were in the most danger of being impoverished at 23.5%, but the majority of available services in Isabella County did not seem to be targeted toward this demographic.

A discrepancy between perceptions of poverty in the rural areas of the community compared to the urban areas was also evident during our visit. Community members residing in the city of Mt. Pleasant were more likely to inflate poverty levels and the issues within the community

related to poverty. Rural community members often commented on “taking care of their own”, and indicated that they would not necessarily describe their community as poor, rather it was a blend of economic backgrounds. Citizens in the outlying townships and rural areas also indicated that they were less likely to utilize public assistance.

One perspective on poverty that we felt was missing from our visit was the youth population, particularly high school-aged students. Often youth can provide a different view on poverty in the community, based on their experiences with family, schools, and the community at large. Students from two Isabella county high schools (Beal City and Mt. Pleasant high schools) completed a confidential survey to provide feedback about the community they live in. Students were asked to respond to a variety of questions based on the following scale: 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-agree, and 5-strongly agree. 74 students (29 from Beal City and 55 from Mt. Pleasant) completed surveys. While students agreed that Isabella County was a poor community, students from Beal City were less likely to regard it so. Students also tended to agree that Isabella County had homelessness, but that most jobs paid enough for a family of four to live. Based on the survey results however, students rated remaining in the community after graduating as a 2.41 (2-agree), with less Mt. Pleasant High School students intending to remain in the area.

Question	Beal City	Mt. Pleasant	
1. Isabella County is a good place to live.	4.17	3.69	4.37
2. Everyone is treated the same in Isabella County.	3.17	2.78	3.31
3. There are enough activities for youth after school.	3.24	2.65	3.24
4. Isabella County is a poor community.	1.79	2.58	3.97
5. Isabella County has people who are homeless.	3.10	3.40	3.74
6. I plan to live and work in Isabella County after graduating.	2.43	1.97	2.41
7. There are ample employment opportunities in Isabella County.	3.51	2.96	3.58
8. Most jobs pay enough for a family of four to live on.	3.34	2.93	3.49
9. Isabella County has adequate health care services.	3.53	3.72	4.15
10. I would know where to go for help if I needed it. (For food, shelter, clothing, electricity, counseling, health care, etc.)	3.90	3.52	4.15

Community members and providers agreed that those living in poverty were only able to access services once they reached a crisis point, whether homeless, victimized by domestic violence, critically ill, without food, or a combination of factors. Adequate resources simply did not seem to exist for the “working poor”. One community member described the situation as “treading water”, with assistance available only “when your head slips under the water”. Furthermore, while providers indicated they were effectively marketing services and utilizing a referral network, it was evident that they were often unaware of other services and programs, or simply unable to identify additional services for a family in poverty.

Lack of living wage jobs was cited as a primary factor for poverty, despite the recent employment growth stimulated by the casino. Employment for citizens without a college degree is mostly service-oriented, with few jobs paying the necessary \$17 an hour for a single mother with two children to keep above water in Isabella County. An increasing number of Isabella County residents require emergency assistance as a result of lack of living wage jobs. Many County residents that utilize emergency services require these services on a recurrent basis, and find themselves unable to climb out the poverty cycle.

Health care costs were also listed as a critical influence on poverty levels, particularly by providers. Community members are forced to choose between health care (either coverage or services, including prescription drugs), or food and shelter. Community members are meeting their basic needs before engaging in preventive health care, which is creating a strain on the community. Furthermore, fewer providers are accepting Medicaid, and the county does not have any type of countywide or community based health care plan to cover those residents neither covered by Medicaid nor through an employer. Several health care representatives provided anecdotal evidence of families foregoing immunizations and other preventive health services due to high costs, learning upon school-entry that their children must be vaccinated or they will not be able to attend school. Providing these immunizations as out-of-pocket expenses can devastate a family's budget, but failure to immunize can also result in exorbitant medical bills due to preventable illnesses.

Affordable housing was another concern, particularly the availability of clean, safe and functional affordable family housing beyond apartments. Despite the influx of luxury apartments, feedback from forum participants and interviews indicated a lack of single-family housing in neighborhoods. Public housing consisted mainly of Section 8 apartments or mobile home parks. None of the providers visited could identify appropriate services for housing assistance beyond FIA or the Listening Ear.

**Possible Action:**

Several providers identified potential mechanisms to streamline services to accommodate participants, while simultaneously identifying “turf issues” and budget concerns as reasons for lack of collaboration. With recent budget cuts and economic strains, providers envisioned difficult times ahead, which indicates a further need to collaborate to avoid duplication of services and identify community needs.

Community members and service organizations need accurate information related to poverty, particularly poverty indicators. Publication of recent data in the local newspaper or via web access is crucial to lessening the divide between perception and reality of poverty in Isabella County.

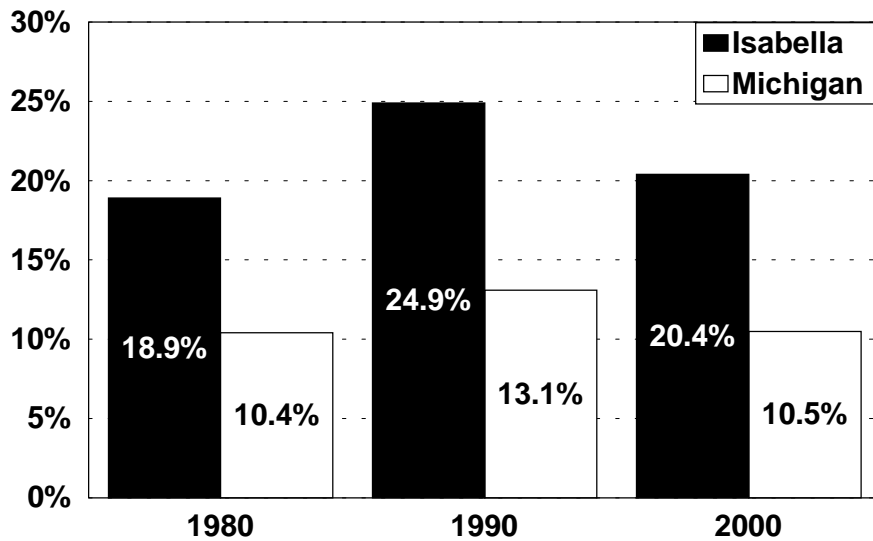
Despite the potential for changing organizations, a comprehensive list of non-emergency based services could be published and/or web accessible for community members. This could include information and eligibility criteria for Medicaid, MI Child, Healthy Kids, immunizations, WIC, food stamps, MSHDA housing, Indoor Air Quality and others programs determined by availability of services. A community resource guide and appropriate marketing to county

residents could potentially enable residents to “stay above water” and reduce the need for emergency services, lessening the economic burden on the community.

Increasing the number of health care providers accepting Medicaid could drastically affect the health care status of impoverished citizens within the community, particularly children. Exploring opportunities in reference to a county-based insurance plan, including prescriptions and immunizations, dental and optical might allow for more preventive services, rather than the more costly option of treatment services.

We would encourage the collaborative council to look beyond local agency territory to identify how they can truly operate as a collaborative council to positively impact families in need in Isabella County. The creation and marketing of a mission statement, as well as a detailed listing of priorities and goals could effectively mobilize the council. Additionally, utilization of the Michigan State University Extension’s services to provide education to families, including family resource management, food and nutrition, parenting and housing can be a vital component of the council’s mission, particularly in aiding families in poverty.

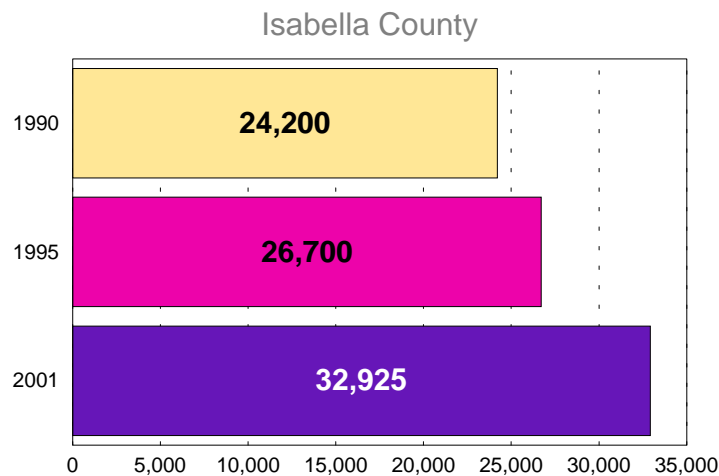
## Poverty Rates of All Persons



## Issue 5 – Economic Development: How can the community help create jobs that pay a living wage?

With the economy in Michigan struggling and once prosperous regions within the state experiencing an economic shift, communities are increasingly seeking opportunities to enhance their economic base. The presence of a university, and the accompanying service-oriented businesses which serve the student population dominating the business landscape of Isabella County, community leaders are seeking answers on how the community can assist in creating jobs that pay a living wage.

### Total Number of Persons Employed



In simplest terms, economic development can be defined as a process that strives for the accumulation of wealth, i.e., providing a living wage. This simple definition essentially identifies virtually everybody in the community as having a stake in the economic development process. From a pragmatic standpoint, the process centers around three types of activities:

- Retention of existing business and industry;
- Expansion of existing business and industry;
- Attraction of new business and industry in a coordinated and complimentary fashion.

Inherent to the above activities is business counseling, troubleshooting, and a structure whereby the community can identify new opportunities and/or challenges, and assign follow-through responsibility. As in any strategic planning process, a crucial starting place is an examination of the existing environmental strengths accompanied by the identification of relevant persistent issues as expressed by the entire range of stakeholders in the county. Only then can a shared community vision be created that guides the community towards its goal of creating jobs which pay a living wage.

### **Current Successes**

From both the CAT Team's observations and information shared during our visit, Isabella County has a number of elements that are successfully enhancing the community's economic development prospects. Among them are:

- Mid Michigan Development Corporation (MMDC). This private, non-profit economic development agency has developed an impressive track record in working with clientele at various levels to enhance the economic environment of the community.
- The existence of a "Smart Zone" within the community which affords prospective business intelligence and life-sciences based firms the opportunity to link with CMU researchers while achieving tax and other benefits. Located within the Smart Zone is a technology business incubator that allows smaller high-tech businesses to achieve cost-savings through shared resources during the critical formative years of a business.
- The LaBelle Entrepreneurial Center. This endowment-supported unit within the CMU College of Business provides training and support for existing and future entrepreneurs on a variety of levels, including the Small Business Institute whereby a team of graduate and undergraduate business students and faculty advisors provide consulting services to businesses.
- A base of stable institutions and employers that provide a firm underpinning to the local economy, including Central Michigan University (2,600 employees), Soaring Eagle (4,000 employees), Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe (3,900 employees) Morbark Industries (750 employees) and Central Michigan Healthcare System (708 employees).

### **Community Concerns and Challenges**

Successful economic development efforts oftentimes hinge on overall quality of life issues as much as traditional elements, such as infrastructure availability, workforce readiness, and governmental abatement programs. On various instances during the CAT Team's interactions, concerns were expressed that "CMU and high school grads are not staying in Isabella County." The community "experiences difficulties in attracting engineers." Our students "simply are not aware of the local opportunities which exist."

The comments were contrary to conventional opinions, where oftentimes university communities excel in quality-of-life features that retain local and attract outside talent. Consequently, the diversity within the community, with the exception of the large Native American population, is surprisingly limited. For those minorities who reside in the community, there are limited, if any, ethnic services and/or retail establishments serving their respective needs.

Additionally, quality-of-life considerations became apparent in community leaders' comparisons when benchmarking Mt. Pleasant and Isabella County to other university communities, such as Ann Arbor and East Lansing. A number of individuals within the business community commented on the lack of diverse, and perhaps more upscale retail offerings, as compared to other university settings. The creative class that the community is seeking to attract enjoys a mix

of influences from eating different foods and listening to different music to meeting new people and sparring over issues. In his book "The Rise of the Creative Class," author Richard Florida talks about the importance of communities attracting the economically lucrative and highly mobile 25-34-year-olds. This sector has the money to sustain a local economy, innovation to create and grow businesses, and a skilled work force to draw new companies. The average salary in 1999 for individuals of this class was \$48,752, compared with roughly \$28,000 for a working-class member and \$22,000 for a service-class worker in the community.

Concurrently, one prominent local businessman mentioned that Isabella County also "lacks a community-wide festival which brings both the university and community leaders together for a common community event." Successful communities celebrate their heritage, their achievements and their successes. And it is these celebrations which oftentimes serve as a marketing tool for the community.

As noted previously, Isabella County has experienced tremendous growth during the last decade. Concerns were expressed by a number of individuals at the rate of growth, and perhaps the adoption of a "growth vs. development" mentality. In a growth mentality, growth represents jobs, and more jobs; growth represents an increased tax base; and any growth is good. In a development mentality, the community desires a higher quality of life, economic security, and balanced growth. While a number of agencies and community leaders have a vision for the "development" of Isabella County, they have not adequately shared that vision with the broader community, who is largely unaware of the proactive initiatives being pursued.

Other challenges that exist include concerns relative to workforce readiness, the lack of telecommunications infrastructure in rural areas of the county (which stifles business, particularly entrepreneurial development), and an "us verses them" mentality between Mt. Pleasant and the outlying townships and villages.

### **Next Steps**

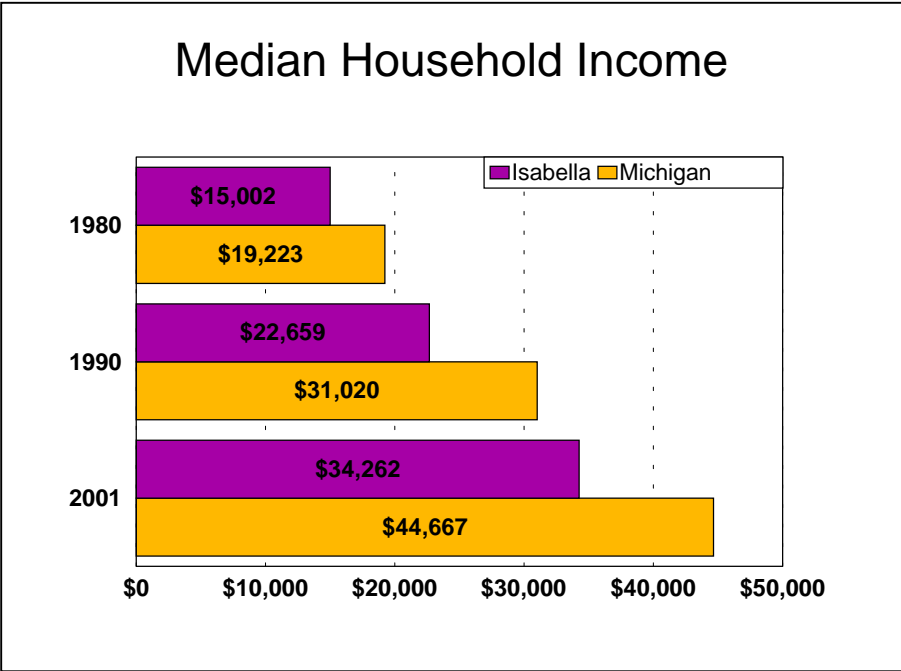
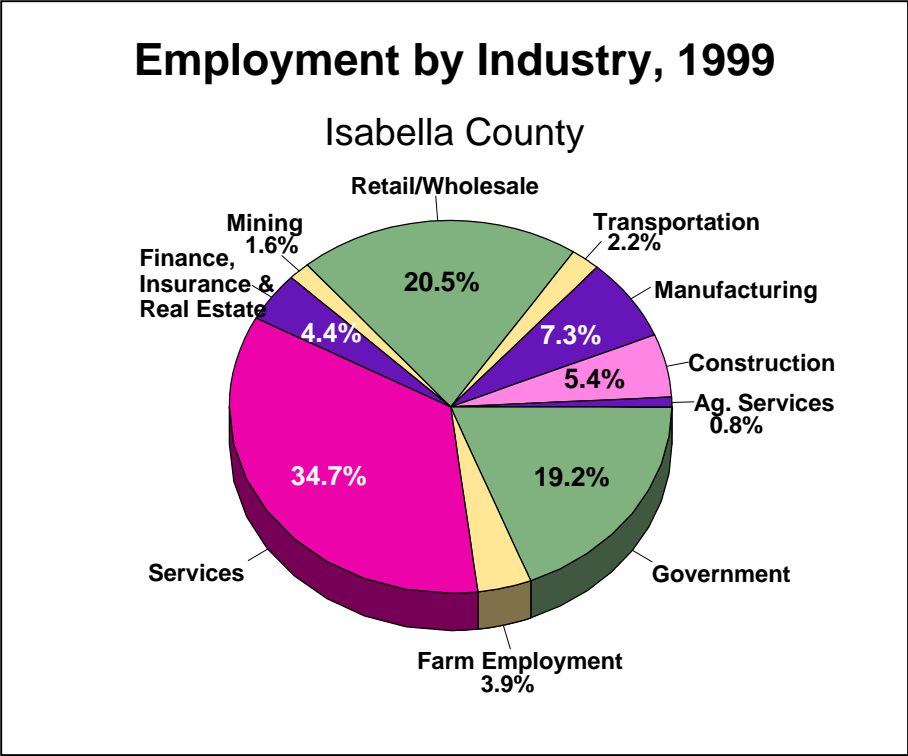
The economic development assets of the Isabella County community far out-weigh the challenges the community identified. But progressive communities continually seek improvement. As such, the CAT Team offers the following suggestions:

- Continue to support, and seek opportunities to enhance the activities of Mid Michigan Development Corporation. This organization has developed a statewide reputation for excellence. Increased resources would allow the organization to more aggressively pursue marketing opportunities to lure advanced manufacturing and high tech firms to the Smart Zone within the community. Recruit employers that pay higher than average wages and also provide employee benefits such as health care insurance.
- As the business intelligence and life sciences sector grows within the community, workforce development leaders, including MichiganWorks!, the intermediate and public school districts, CMU, Mid-Michigan Community College, and others must seek collaborations which collectively prepare and re-train the workforce for these higher-paying careers.

- While considerable entrepreneurial support is provided through the LaBelle Center, the community must continue to be vigilant in supporting entrepreneurial development. The community should examine its local zoning ordinances to ensure that they do not undermine the opportunities for home-based businesses; Youth entrepreneurship programs should be pursued within the schools and through 4-H, and youth mentoring encouraged at all levels.
- As the community "competes" with other Smart Zones throughout Michigan, and university communities throughout the nation, the establishment of a high-risk revolving loan fund offers the potential to attract targeted businesses who otherwise may not select mid-Michigan. While risky, such a fund offers the potential to distinguish the community from others.
- While the community's economic development efforts are correctly focused on business intelligence and life science industries, some attention must continue to be placed on the more traditional manufacturing segment. The establishment of a CEO Forum can provide an opportunity for manufacturing executives to express concerns and exchange ideas. A manufacturing incubator (similar to the technology incubator) could provide the assistance start-up manufacturing interests desperately need to be successful. The existing space available in the industrial parks provides a natural, seamless placement for those firms who outgrow the incubator.
- Consider more aggressive use of existing economic development tools, such as brownfield redevelopment. Although a Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (BRA) exists within the county, their efforts have focused primarily on contaminated sites. Aggressive communities have taken advantage of the broad definition of brownfields (including designating entire communities as brownfields), and as such, have utilized the tools to quickly address blighted areas.
- Continue to seek broader, regional economic development collaborations. Although some initial partnerships have been pursued by MMDC with Saginaw and Midland, the future will increasingly be driven by regional collaborations versus local economic development efforts.
- With much of Isabella County remaining agricultural, continue to explore value-added opportunities that enhance the economic base of the agricultural community. Some initial training programs have been conducted to encourage value-added ventures. Opportunities may exist to connect students from the LaBelle Entrepreneurial Center with value-added farm operations. Students could assist farmers with market research and refinement of business plans.

As the largest employer in the county, and the primary source of the tourism within the community, coordination and collaboration must occur with the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. The Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe has and will continue to develop new business enterprises within Isabella County. One significant way to increase employment opportunities and attract new business development is by supporting local economic ventures of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe.

As mentioned previously, there are a number of proactive, aggressive initiatives underway within the county. This fact is recognized by many community members including those in leadership roles. Our final recommendation is to develop a formal reporting system to the community that recognizes the accomplishments, and outlines future goals. A successful economic development process requires “owned participation” by elected officials, governmental staff, private sector executives and owners, school boards and administrators, financial institutions, professionals, community-based organizations, and citizens in general. Owned participation starts with enhanced communication and reporting.



## Conclusion

The Community Assessment Team is one piece of the overall community development plan for Isabella County. The team focused on specific issues and concerns presented by the Health and Human Services Collaborative Council, but community input and further discussion is crucial for the resolution of the issues discussed. The observations and recommendations of the CAT report are intended to be reviewed by local residents to determine if and how the information will be used.

In the short time the CAT Team spent in Isabella County, we were impressed with the commitment each member of the collaborative council and staff in surrounding agencies demonstrated to improving the lives of the citizens of Isabella County. The beginnings of a strong collaboration are in place, and the community has tremendous potential for growth and development.

Quality of life is dependent on a multitude of factors that contribute to the integrity of a community. Ideally, achieving an acceptable level for quality of life includes promoting mechanisms for people to live in their environment in the ways that are best for them. The lives of community members must be enriched with meaningful community experiences, and the community must be willing to invest its resources to assure these experiences exist.

Continue to ask residents and business owners for their input regarding human services in Isabella County. Include a cross section of the citizens for an accurate picture of the situation. The CAT Team was given several surveys, reports, and plans to review. Utilize these existing studies and monitor changes related to the five issues discussed in this CAT report.

Effective communication is hard work and requires both asking the right questions and truly listening to all of the responses. Two-way communication will help build trust, keep residents informed of the available services, and identify opportunities for improvement.

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Chippewa River District Library Community Development Plan 2002 – 2006, April 2002.

A Final Report to the Stakeholders of the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe Gaming Expansion Evaluation Project, CMU, 1996.

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Listening Ear Crisis Center brochure, 2002

Mt. Pleasant Area Community Foundation 2001 Annual Report, Community Foundation, 2001

Mt. Pleasant – Beyond 2000, Mt. Pleasant City Commission, 1996.

Neighborhood Wellness Report of Census and Survey Results, Kulick, Nichola, and Fitzpatrick, 1998.

Profiles from the 2000 and 1990 Decennial Censuses for Isabella County, Michigan, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000.

Update on Our Children, a Status report produced by Action for our Kids, AOK Committee 2000

## Appendix A

### Itinerary Isabella County Community Assessment Team April 7, 8, 9 and 10, 2003

#### Monday, April 7, 2003

5:30 PM	CAT arrive at Hampton Inn of Mt. Pleasant	CAT
6:30 PM	Team Dinner	CAT/IPSC
8:30 PM	CAT Meeting: Overview and Expectations	CAT

#### Tuesday, April 8, 2003

AM	Continental Breakfast at Hampton Inn	CAT
9:00 AM	Windshield Tour w/stops	CAT/IPSC
11:00 AM	Saginaw Chippewa Reservation Tour	CAT/IPSC
12:00 Noon	Lunch with Planning	CAT/IPSC
1:00 PM	Health Fair at Reservation	CAT/IPSC
1:30-5:30 PM	Scatter Visits to Individual Sites	CAT/IPSC Hosts

#### **Issue 1: Quality of Life - Phil**

Central Michigan University  
County Commissioner  
Veteran' Memorial Library  
Community Foundation  
City Planner

#### **Issue 2 & 3: Awareness and Barriers - Nick**

Community Mental Health  
Listening Ear  
Ministerial Association  
Salvation Army

#### **Issue 4: Poverty - Meagan**

Family Independent Agency  
County Courthouse  
County Sheriff's Office  
Health Department

#### **Issue 5: Economic Development - Dave**

Middle Michigan Development Corporation  
Mt. Pleasant Area Chamber of Commerce  
Isabella Bank and Trust  
LaBelle Entrepreneurial Institute  
Michigan Works

**Tuesday, April 8, 2003 Continued**

7:00-9:00 PM            Dinner  
                              Public Forum at Isabella County Building

**Wednesday April 9, 2003**

9:00 AM            Depart for Community Input Meetings            CAT  
                              • 9:30 AM   Rosebush/Isabella Township Hall  
                              • 11:00 AM Weidman/Library  
                              • 12:30 PM Weidman/Senior Meal Site  
                              • 2:00 PM   Winn/TBD  
                              • 3:30 PM   Shepherd/Coe Township Hall  
5:00 PM            CAT Dinner Meeting at CMU                        CAT  
7:00 PM            Team works on Exit Report / Presentation        CAT

**Thursday, April 10, 2003**

                              AM                        Breakfast/Team Meeting                            CAT  
12 Noon              Lunch with HHSCC                                CAT/HHSCC  
                              1 PM                     Exit Report                                        CAT/HHSCC  
                              2 PM                     Adjourn

CAT = Community Assessment Team  
IPSC = Isabella Planning Steering Committee  
HHSCC = Health and Human Services Collaborative Council

## Appendix B

### Isabella County Community Assessment Team

**Phil Alexander** is the District Extension Agent for community and economic development in the northern twenty counties of Michigan's lower peninsula. During the past nineteen years with Extension, he has conducted a wide range of workshops on topics such as customer service training, strategic planning, festival management, and nonprofit board training. Phil is a member of three Area of Expertise Teams – Tourism, Community Development, and Leadership Development and the author of five Extension publications. He has a B.S. in Business Administration and a Masters of Science in Administration Degree from Central Michigan University. Phil's prior CAT experience includes being the team leader for the CATs in Ionia County and Presque Isle County as well as serving on the MEDC's first CAT, which was held in Chesaning.

**Dave Ivan**, a native of Mid-Michigan, is the County Extension Director for Clinton County/MSU Extension. As part of his Extension responsibilities, Dave serves on the MSUE Land Use and Economic Development Area of Expertise Teams. He is a certified instructor for the Citizen Planner statewide education program for land use decision makers, and has conducted numerous courses on small business development and entrepreneurship. He recently completed an extensive research and outreach program entitled "Small Town Success Strategies" which profiled successful small communities throughout Michigan. Dave received a B.S. degree in journalism from Michigan State University, and a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from Penn State University. He resides in St. Johns, with his wife and two children.

**Nick Reo** was recently hired into MSU Extension as the American Indian Liaison. Nick is a member of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians and a long time resident of Washtenaw County. He received a Master's degree in conservation planning from the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment. Nick has a background in forest ecology, field botany, and rural land use planning and is very interested in Anishnaabek land and water rights issues.

**Meagan Shedd** is an Associate Program Leader with Michigan State University Extension based on campus. Currently, she serves as the project manager for *Pyramids Between the Pages*, a program linking literacy with nutrition education and physical activity for children in kindergarten through third grade, with a planned expansion for preschoolers scheduled for 2004. She provides leadership for the Farmer's Market Nutrition Program, known in Michigan as Project FRESH, and a variety of other nutrition education programs for MSUE. Prior to joining MSU Extension in 2001, Meagan worked as a nutrition educator for the Ingham County WIC program, providing innovative nutrition education for more than 6400 families in Ingham County. Meagan obtained a B.S. degree in Dietetics with a Specialization in Health Promotion from MSU, and is pursuing a Master's degree in Community Services as well.

## Appendix C

### Isabella County CAT Team Members



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## Appendix D

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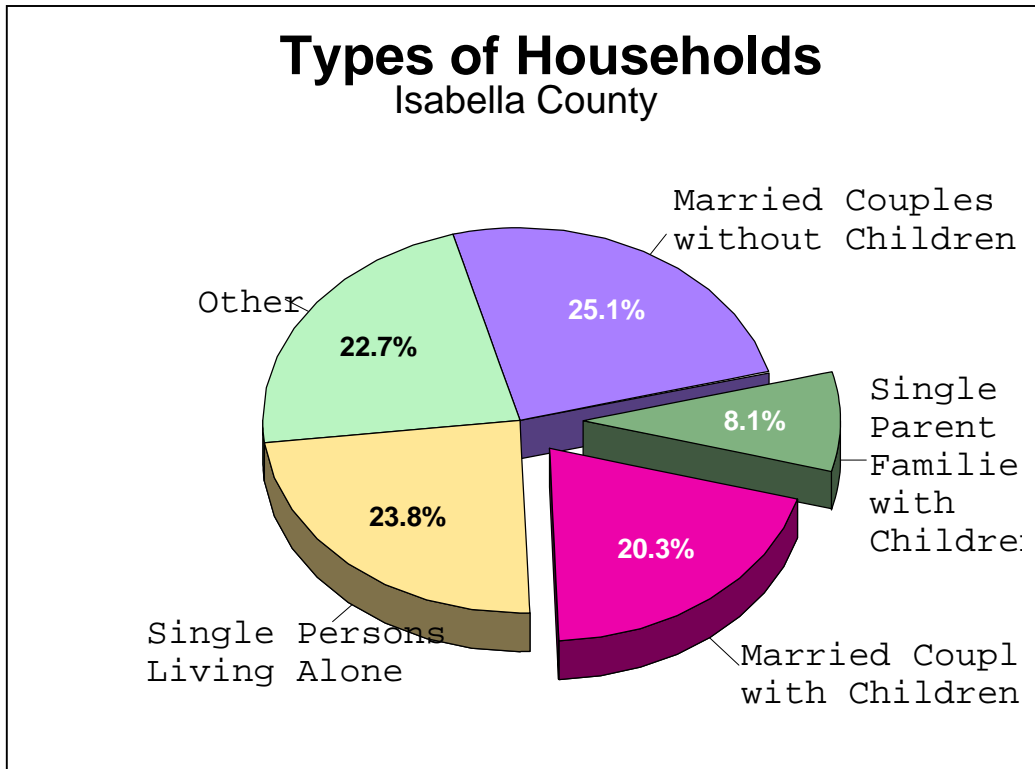
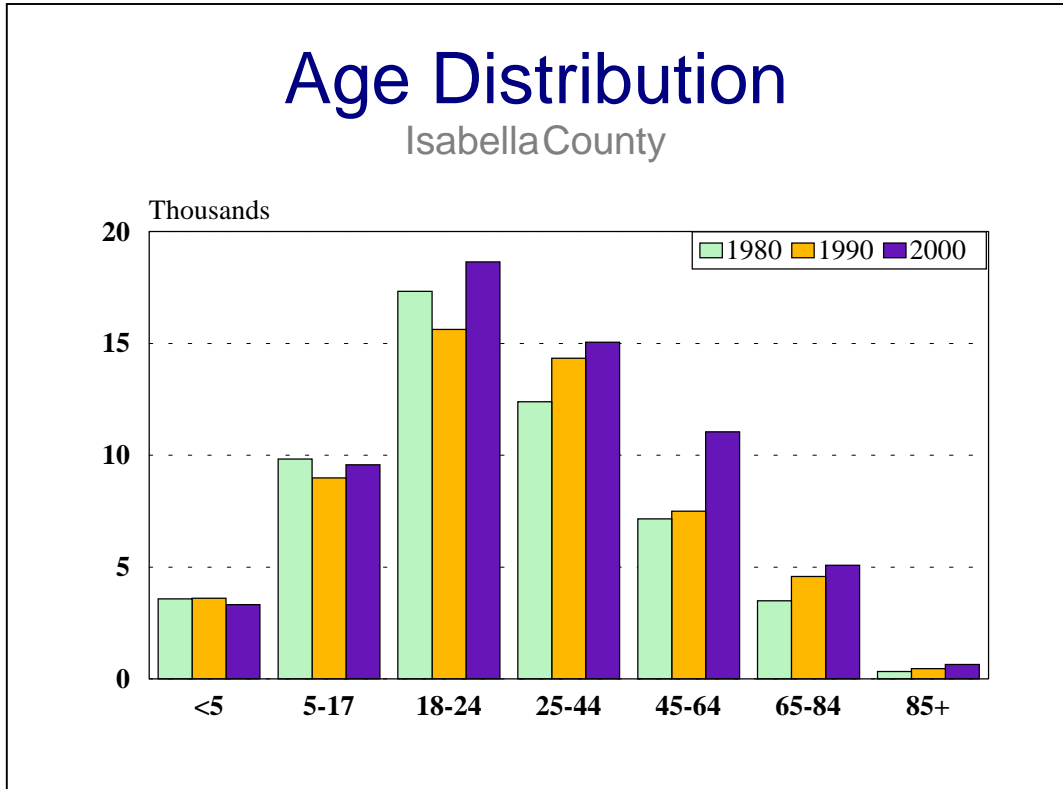
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Appendix E Selected Charts from the County Profile



## Appendix F

### Pre-Survey for Providers Results February 2003

1. What human services should our community provide to help residents be healthy? When defining health, this includes physical and emotional health, as well as a healthy community with a good quality of life. Please rank the following in order of importance, with 1 being the most important to provide:

	Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Access to health care		13	7	9	4	7	4	2	2	1	1
Recreational opportunities		2	3	1	0	2	3	5	5	18	2
Prevention Services		2	3	6	4	3	4	10	6	3	1
Jobs that provide a living wage		15	9	8	4	1	2	1	0	2	0
Adequate health care coverage		3	12	5	11	3	2	1	2	3	0
Affordable housing		5	3	12	10	5	3	1	3	0	0
Mental Health Counseling		0	3	1	4	10	5	11	5	3	0
Public Transportation		1	1	2	1	7	8	6	8	8	0
Substance abuse treatment		1	2	1	2	2	10	6	13	4	1

Comments:

- All are very important
- There needs to be a way to make non-profit function more effectively, e.g. following best practice in governance of agencies, eliminate lame duck boards.
- Mental health counseling needs to be available to everyone.

Access to healthcare is dependent on adequate health care coverage in most cases...can't have one without the other.

2. What are strengths in Isabella County? Please rank the following in order of importance, with 1 being the most important strength:

	Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Access to Health Care		8	4	5	1	7	4	2	2	1	0
Recreational Opportunities		6	7	5	5	3	2	2	0	3	0
Prevention Services		1	7	4	6	3	4	7	1	6	0
Jobs that provide a living wage		2	3	2	5	4	5	3	6	8	1
Adequate health care coverage		0	2	1	2	2	7	7	6	10	0
Affordable housing		5	0	7	4	2	4	7	9	4	0
Mental Health counseling		1	7	8	6	6	4	2	3	3	1
Public Transportation		18	11	5	3	2	1	1	2	3	0
Substance Abuse Treatment		1	4	9	4	5	4	3	6	5	0

Comments:

- Besides affordable housing and recreational opportunities the rest listed are inadequate.
- Isabella County is strong in the things that are least important to a human beings well being as to needs!

- Recreation is well covered but I would rate it least in order of importance.

3. What is Isabella County missing? Please rank the following in order of need, with 1 being the most needed:

	Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Access to health care		5	5	6	10	3	0	6	4	1	0
Recreational opportunities		3	4	1	2	1	3	4	6	12	1
Prevention Services		5	2	4	3	4	7	8	6	1	2
Jobs that provide a living wage		16	10	3	3	0	4	2	2	5	0
Adequate health care coverage		9	10	8	2	5	2	3	0	2	1
Affordable housing		6	6	9	6	5	1	1	2	0	0
Mental health counseling		2	3	5	7	11	6	3	3	0	0
Public Transportation		2	3	2	2	3	2	1	10	10	2
Substance Abuse Treatment		0	1	6	3	6	8	6	2	4	1

Comments:

- All are needed
- Not enough consumer input driving human service program development, unsupervised malfunctioning non-profits.
- Basic needs, shelter for children from FIA

4. What strategies do you use to inform the community of the services your agency provides?

Check all that apply:

Print Advertising	35
Flyers	35
Website	23
Outreach	30
Radio	15
Billboards	5
Provider Panel	10
Public Service Announcement	20
Television Advertising	7
Through referral sources	38
Phone Directory	29

Comments:

- Word of mouth when agency members are down for services suspect something is wrong
- Community job fair, youth forum
- We are a public elementary school, we are pretty much mandated by law to attend

5. What have been your most successful strategies? Check all that apply:

Print Advertising	12
Flyers	13
Website	8
Outreach	16
Radio	4
Billboards	0
Provider Panel	6
Public Service Announcement	10
Television Advertising	5
Through referral sources	29
Phone Directory	11

Comments:

- Phone calls from parents
- Word of mouth is impeccable
- Pens and logos
- Special events

6. What are the barriers to getting information about your services out to the community?

1. Lack of PR expertise within the agency.
2. Time constraints of clinical staff needed to do outreach.
3. Marketing knowledge and skills
4. Lack of funds
5. Our lack of staff, time, and resources
6. People who are scrambling just to make ends meet can't make an extra effort to find out or participate in services
7. Lack of reliable funding sources, lack of staff knowledge on how to utilize "Guerilla Marketing Concepts" to get the word out to customers
8. Public education opportunities
9. Frustration arises when PSA's do not get airplay or printed even when provided to the newspapers, radio stations, etc. in a timely manner
10. Referral sources do not want to listen, expensive, and not enough time
11. Lack of money for larger ad budgets
12. Reaching people who lack transportation and those who live in isolation
13. Cost, constant changes in staff at agencies, always needing to inform agencies and other referral sources about our service.
14. The cost to non-profit
15. Personnel and finances
16. Support needed for press releases from local newspapers (especially Morning Sun) Community calendars and things to do should be a printing.
17. Funding barriers

7. What prevents people from accessing services in the community? Check all that apply:

Consumers lack knowledge of services	38
Stigma of using services	26
Lack of insurance coverage	33
Cost of services	32
Transportation	21
Referral sources lack of knowledge services	22

Comments:

- Funding sources
- Lack of quality providers and providers that don't stay in position very long.
- Multiple family problems related to poverty and family dysfunction
- Having dealt with rude service providers who hang on to old models of pathologies, makes potential customers of services rather do without. Move all agency people to strong-based practices.
- Cost of immunizations due to recent change in interpretation by MDCH on who is considered underinsured- some families have to pay.

8. What facilitates use of services in the community? Check all that apply:

Question 8

Consumers knowledge of services	31
Support for seeking help	35
Adequate insurance coverage	20
Cost of services	20
Transportation	25
Referral sources knowledge of services	29

Comments:

- Transportation is a huge issue for people in poverty. Their needs to be a single point of entry and good PR. Cutting down on paper work...how many forms to fill out for each agency.
- Constant follow ups and home visits

9. How can we, as a community and employers, help those with limited resources? Check all that apply:

Question 9

Provide job training	25
Ensure a living wage	37
Connect to services	24
Enhance childcare	32
Provide employment with benefits	29
Provide educational opportunities	31
Provide health care coverage for employees	33

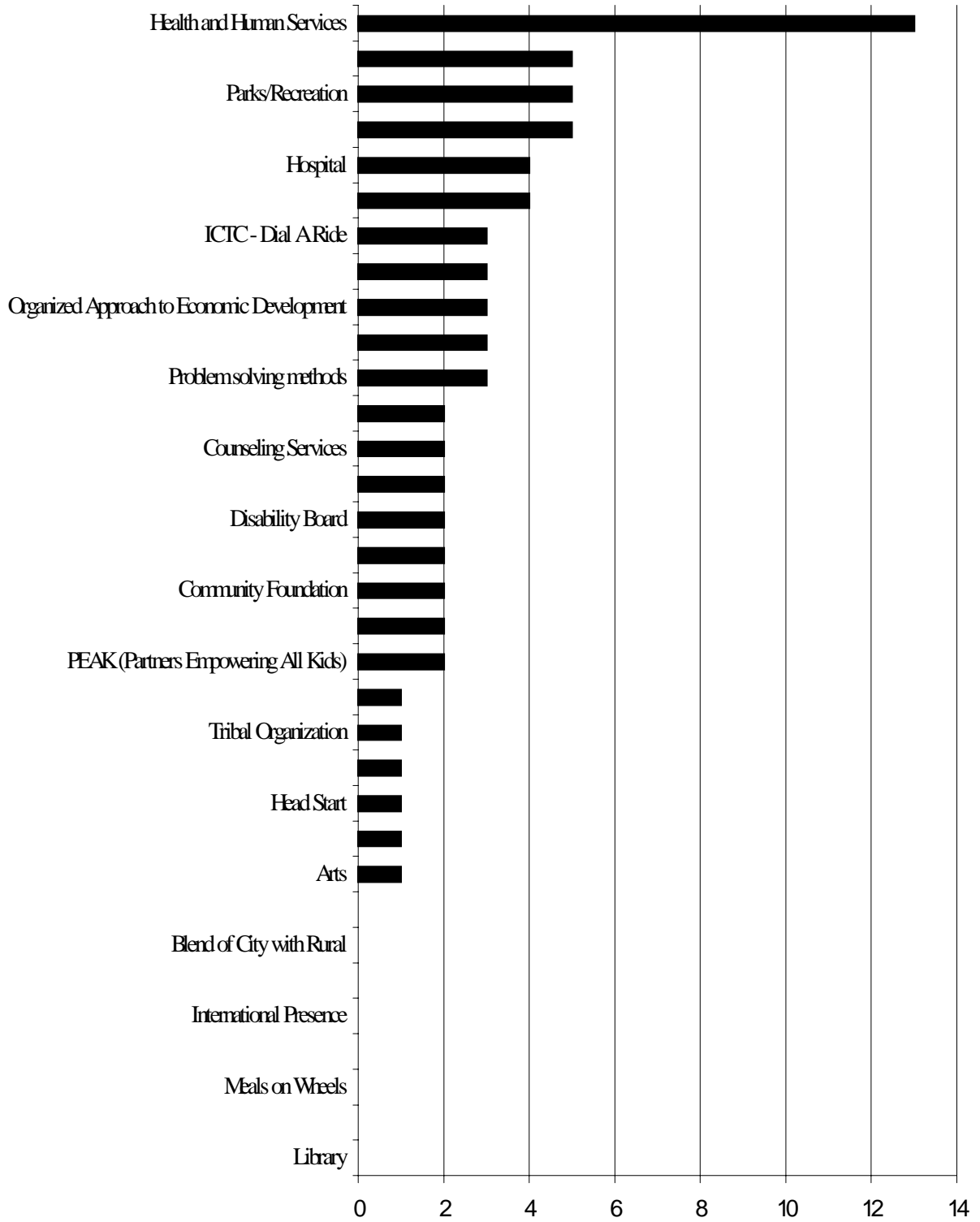
Comments:

- This Community thinks \$21,000 is a good living wage. We have the college here that ups the educated personnel pool, which in turn lowers wages. All the “good” people and resources end up leaving Mt. Pleasant for better wages.
- Provide more home based and outreach services.
- Help women with families stay together. Let single parent women stay home with their kids until they are of school age. These women are indentured servants!

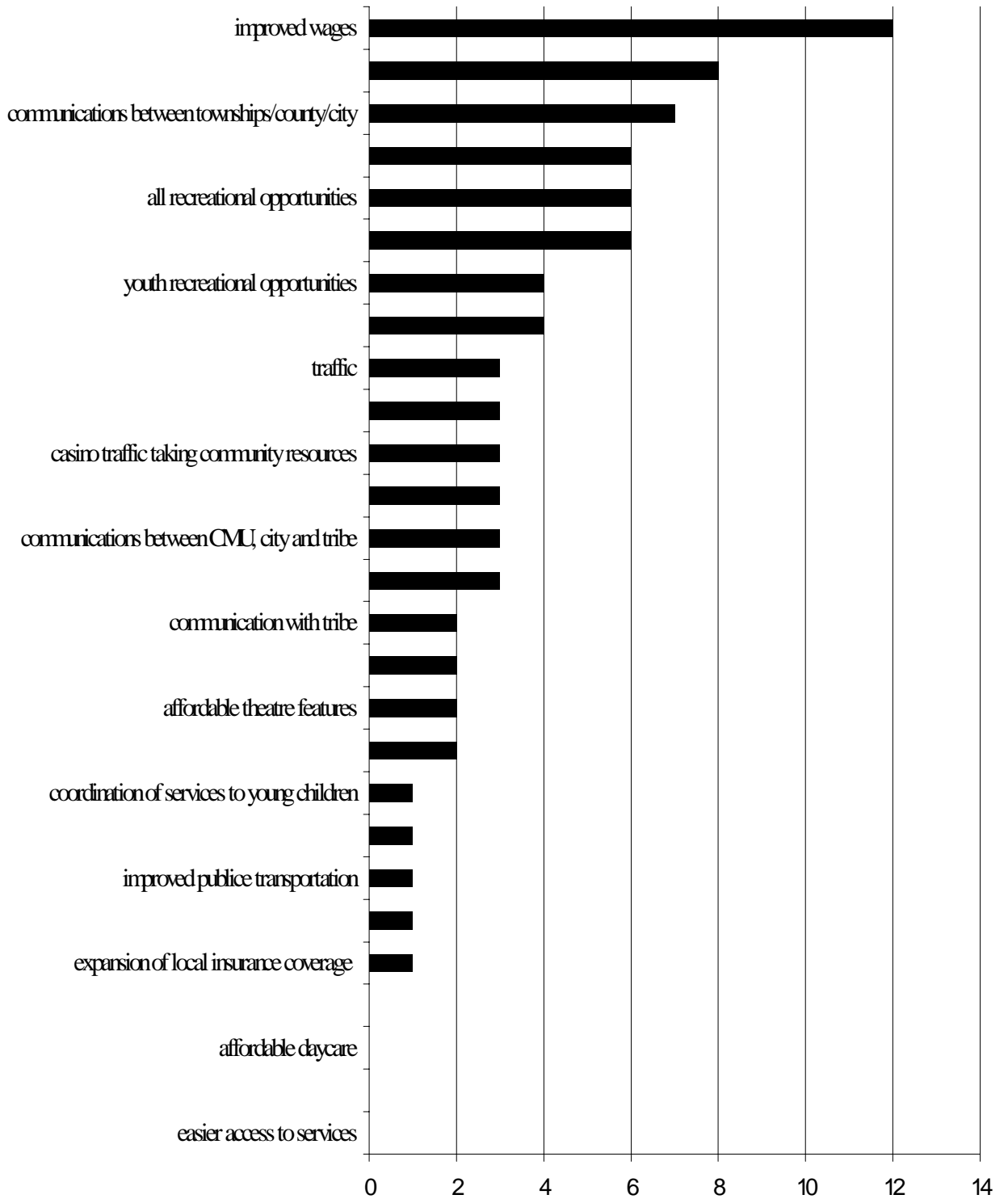
Please add additional comments here:

- Most of my practice is with court ordered clients and probationers and parolees. Some of these contacts are subsidized through state contracts but most are not. Because of state budget problems, the contracts may be suspended again as they were in 2002.
- Don't see how the questions you ask in this survey will help you understand community needs? They are too broad.
- It was difficult to rank order, much of this as one thing hinges on another and all are so important for comprehensive human services to people.
- When we know agencies are failing consumers, what do we do to effect change? When directors have no management/people skills our agencies suffer, consequently our people suffer.
- I think this effort you are doing will result in good things.
- I am a well-educated person who has some basic information about service but to get what I need I sill call at least 3 or 4 places and get several different answers before I find what I need.
- We see numerous people and families who lack the ability to come to us because of transportation, poverty, illness, and family dysfunction.
- There aren't enough white-collar jobs; also there is a large gaping hole in support services for young adults (18-21) and for the mentally disabled.

## Appendix G Programs To Continue

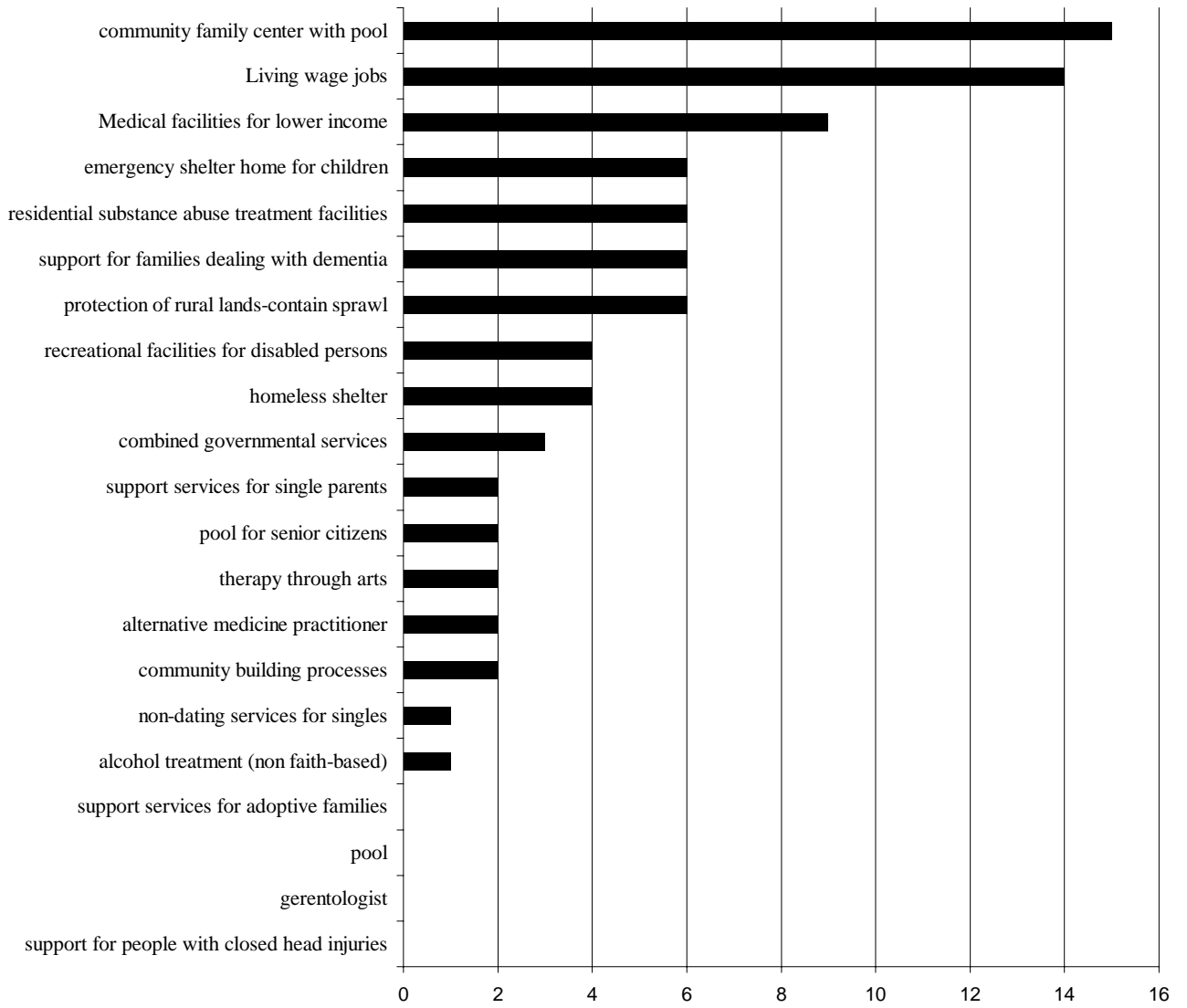


## Appendix G Need To Improve



**Appendix G**

**Future Wants**



## **County of Kalkaska** *Vision Statement*

- ***Kalkaska County*** will be a positive, proud, safe community, which encourages managed growth.
  
- ***Kalkaska County*** will provide an attractive business climate that will promote a prosperous economy while maintaining the rural character of the community.
  
- ***Kalkaska County*** will provide recreational and cultural activities for all while protecting and maintaining the natural resources and green spaces.
  
- ***Kalkaska County*** will have access to high quality health care and healthy lifestyles, creating and expanding programs to meet the needs of everyone.
  
- ***Kalkaska County*** will provide quality educational opportunities for youth and adults to insure the skills necessary to effectively compete in a global society.

Accepted by the Kalkaska County Board of Commissioners, the Multi Purpose Collaborative Body of Kalkaska County, the Greater Kalkaska Area Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Development Authority, the Industrial Development Corporation, the Kalkaska Superboard, the Economic Development Corporation and civic-minded individuals of Kalkaska County.