



DBonnet Associates

evaluation for enlightened decision making

# *2007 Community Needs Assessment for Howard County, Indiana*

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*May 2007*

*Prepared for the  
4community Partners  
Howard County, Indiana*

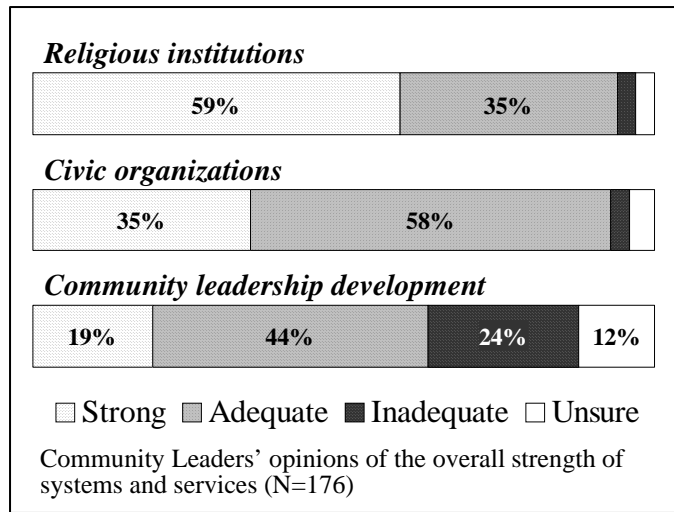
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- United Way of Howard County
- City of Kokomo
- Community Foundation of Howard County
- Howard County Health Department
- Howard Regional Hospital
- Ivy Tech Community College
- St. Joseph Hospital and Health Center

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## Leadership



This report began with the finding of resounding consensus around Howard County's most vital asset: its people – in particular, the community's spirit of generosity and willingness to pull together in times of need. We went on to spotlight a string of needs and problems – from new jobs to affordable childcare, from rising crime to falling donations. We conclude on the topic of leadership – the key to sorting through all this information, setting priorities, and garnering the community's assets in solving today's problems and creating a promising future.

The three key leadership institutions shown in the chart are regarded as among the community's strongest of 26 systems and services, and **religious institutions ranked number one**. Yet, when presented with these findings, a group of clergy begged to differ. Yes, Howard County has some 200 churches that serve their memberships reasonably well. *"But we could do better,"* they chimed, quickly reaching agreement with the following sentiment:

*"Churches need to be much more involved in the day to day life of the community in an organized manner. The real work of the church happens outside the building. Yet most of our churches are focused on themselves. There is so much that could be accomplished if they would work together to make the community better."*

Food pantries seem to be the instinctive community ministry. The focus group of clergy agreed that the least they could do is coordinate their food distribution.

We were told that Howard County's religious leaders hardly congregate, much less collaborate. Nobody in the focus group of clergy even knew of any sister-church relationships. Bridges and Urban Outreach are notable exceptions, sponsored by some 30 congregations – virtually the *same* 30 congregations. **Churches clearly have opportunities here – first, to rally the community spirit of their own congregations and second, to join together in focused interfaith ministries.**

Opportunities to improve the community through collaboration are not limited to the faith community. The theme of communication, cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and even consolidation also emerged in the areas of economic development, social services, arts and culture, and local government. Making this happen will take leadership.

*"Our community is not good at dealing with meaty issues. We need to find the gumption to bite into difficult problems and do some heavy lifting."*

**At this time, Howard County enjoys the benefits of a sizable assembly of civic leaders.** They head charitable organizations, commissions, and civic groups, and serve on boards, advisory panels, and task forces. Many work the front lines of community service as well. They are committed to the community and dedicated to its betterment. As one person put it, *“People are very vested here.”*

Howard County’s community leaders are energetic, but they are not tireless. The current lot consists largely of baby-boomers who are churned from one board to another, this fundraiser to that. *“No new leaders are either stepping up or being asked to serve. Each fundraiser, board meeting and community activity is led and attended by the same core group of people.”* **The ranks need refreshing.** Focus groups discussed at some length the need to get more young people involved in leadership.

There are challenges. Many executives and professionals reside outside the County, including about 2500 commuters from Hamilton County. Downsizing has cut into businesses’ flexibility to release employees from their regular duties to devote to community service. Young families are busy raising their children while working two or more jobs to stay afloat. Leadership Kokomo helps, but not enough to fill the need. **New approaches may be needed to engage today’s young adults in community service.**

In addition, **survey respondents urged looking beyond executives and professionals:**

*“We need to bring in more lower socio-economic people. It is the same professional people doing everything.”*

*“Not enough of the 'ordinary people' are invited to participate in local leadership. It's the same people and groups. We need to seek out and encourage more citizens to get involved in a variety of areas, not just political. Usually, when asked people participate.”*

*“Some of our greatest leaders are waiting to be given a chance to contribute. They may not always be the most obvious. Perhaps it's the C average student (it's not only the honor students who know best). Perhaps it's the business owner in a niche market that doesn't have a huge bank account. It's the ordinary citizens of our community who have the answers. Just ask them!”*

*“We have a window of opportunity, right now, to enlist those early retirees into volunteer service. But we need to move fast, before they move to Florida or decide to do something else.”*

**In conclusion, we hope that this needs assessment proves helpful in focusing Howard County’s strong community spirit on a better tomorrow.** We hope that due consideration is given to the assets and deficits, the pros and cons, and the statistics and gaps presented here – and that conversations push well past the current state of things. Finally, we endorse this advice offered by Howard County citizens:

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*“There is no bright **vision** for where this community needs to go. If there is no bright vision, it is almost impossible to get the energy needed to make the improvements that we want to make.”*

*“We could be so much more if we only believed in ourselves. We need higher expectations, and we need **vision**.”*

*“My hope is that we continue to improve in producing young leaders with **vision**, ambition, and gentleness.”*