

IPRC Provides Assistance to Elkhart County's Prevention Efforts

When President Obama visited Elkhart, Indiana for a town hall meeting on February 9, 2009 he found a county with the worst unemployment rate in the country. Unemployment, stress, and despair can lead to a host of problems, including problem drinking and substance abuse. Long-term unemployment is associated with depression and with frequent intoxication. In December of 2007, Elkhart County had almost 30,000 enrolled in Medicaid and only 800 of those were in nursing facilities. The state FSSA's Division of Mental Health and Addiction served over 2,000 adults and children in fiscal year 2007 with chronic addictions (including gambling) and serious mental illnesses. In December, 2008, the unemployment rate for Elkhart County was 15.3%, an increase from the previous month's rate of 12.4%, and almost quadrupling the rate from the previous year's 4.7% unemployment rate. The Bureau of Labor Statistics gives the national unemployment rate for January, 2009 as 7.6% and Indiana's rate higher, at 8.2%.

Once renowned as the "band instrument capital of the world," for the factories of C.G. Conn (who also owned the local newspaper, the *Elkhart Truth*), Buescher, and others, later as the largest trailer and recreational vehicle manufacturing center, Elkhart, Indiana and the surrounding county have fallen on hard times during the past year. Situated on the St. Joseph River, the city of Elkhart boasted an abundant source of inexpensive hydroelectric energy which powered factories for diverse industries and mills, and also provided electricity for an extensive trolley system. Elkhart is perfectly suited to take up the President's challenge of investing in

clean energy sources with the river to create hydroelectric power, and flat areas to situate wind turbines.

Passenger rail service once moved through Elkhart to Chicago, Toledo and all points, many times per day, making it easy to conduct business in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio or New York. Even today, Amtrak still serves Elkhart, and many freight rail lines have offices and depots in Elkhart, thus making shipment of manufacturing and farm products efficient and cost-effective.

The downturn in the local or national economy was not anticipated by Indiana business analysts. As recently as January of 2008, an analyst with the Kelley School of Business described the Elkhart-Goshen metropolitan area as being in the upper 50 of national metropolitan areas in terms of gross domestic product with an annual growth rate of 6.1% between 2001 and 2005—largely driven by the county and region’s recreational vehicle industries. The per capita GDP of Elkhart-Goshen was \$48,091 and the metropolitan area’s GDP was over \$9 million. Slightly over 50% of the metropolitan area’s GDP was from manufacturing.

The national recession and the rise in gasoline prices have badly hurt the recreational vehicle, trailer, and manufactured homes industries. These factories are not stand-alone operations—a factory depends upon local, regional, national, and sometimes international suppliers to provide components and raw materials to build vehicles, trailers and homes. Smaller family-owned machine shops, mills, wood shops, and tool-and-die factories will make these components. The

RV maker does not make the vehicle that pulls the RV, but may adapt the van that is part of a self-propelled motor home, and does not build their own assembly line. The major employers in the county are recreational vehicle makers, cabinet makers, and the Elkhart and Goshen hospital systems. The skilled workers who made trailers, recreational vehicles and manufactured homes are well-positioned to respond to the President's suggestion of weatherizing homes and installing energy-saving systems in houses, offices, and schools.

The President was well-acquainted with the loss of manufacturing jobs, but did not have time during his visit to learn about the rich cultural heritage or diversity of the region during his visit. Originally the home of the Miami, Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Ottawas, the area was visited by French missionaries and explorers in the late 1600s. The current population is of Elkhart County 86.2% White, 13.1% Hispanic, and 6.3% African-American, with smaller numbers of Native Americans (0.7%) and Asians or Asian-Americans (1.4%). Twenty-nine percent of the population claims a German heritage, 9.9% are of Irish descent, 3.7% Swiss, 2.5% are French, and 2.9% are of Polish ancestry. 18.5% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (of that, 12.4 % speak Spanish). The county is home to many Mennonites, with two Mennonite-owned colleges (Goshen College, and the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary), and numerous Amish families and communities.

Non-smoking Mennonite and Amish citizens are at very low risk for developing lung cancer. Some of the lower smoking rate among pregnant women in Elkhart County than in many other areas may be attributed to a percentage of the women being Amish. Communities of Amish

contribute farming, woodworking, farm auction houses, foods, and crafts to the local community and tourists. Some Amish worked in the now-closed or downsized recreational vehicle industry and only kept small farms, not self-sustaining agribusinesses.

Farming is an important part of the economy of Elkhart County—surprisingly, there are more cattle than any other county in the state (including beef and dairy cattle, over 45,000 animals in 2008). Broiler chickens and turkeys are raised in high numbers, and wheat, corn, and soy are harvested in varying amounts per acre, but toward the mean production of other counties.

Minorities in Elkhart County suffer disparities as do minorities elsewhere in Indiana and the nation. Asian and Pacific Islanders, African-American, and Hispanic/Latino populations all exhibit higher rates of negative birth-related complications (viz., low birth weight babies, early preterm birth, smoking or using alcohol while pregnant, and lack of prenatal care). African-Americans in Elkhart have a higher age-related death rate than in other parts of Indiana with the leading cause of death being heart disease. Between 9 and 13% of members of these minority groups surveyed reported needing hospitalization during the previous 12 months.

Elkhart County has not been spared methamphetamine trafficking from Mexican drug cartel sources. Law enforcement officers recently discovered an Elkhart dealer with a package of methamphetamine in his home with a street value of \$1.8 million dollars. Two twin sisters who

taught in the Elkhart community school system were recently arrested for selling methamphetamine within 1,000 feet of a South Bend elementary school.

Depressed economic circumstances, addiction, and interdiction of methamphetamine trafficking from Mexico are contributing factors to increasing numbers of methamphetamine-making operations being found in the county. The State Police indicate that more meth cooks are using the “one pot” method, which requires small containers, such as two liter soda bottles and not complicated chemical apparatuses. One man in Warsaw was apprehended while cooking meth in a container on his moped, another lab in Elkhart was discovered when a 51 year old woman reported her son to police for breaking in to her house--and they found methamphetamine "cooking" in the basement.

The Indiana State Police discovered 39 meth-making laboratories in 2007 and in 2008, 65 methamphetamine operations were down. The number of clandestine methamphetamine manufacturing sites discovered by the Indiana State Police rose, state-wide from 820 in 2007 to 1059 in 2008. Methamphetamine-making produces toxic waste as byproducts and can result in fires. The area where methamphetamine is “cooked” will need to be decontaminated with costs accruing to the county. Children who live in these environments will be removed from the homes of perpetrators and placed into foster care. Those injured in fires and explosions, whether first responder, criminal, or child will be treated by local health providers—who will usually have to absorb the cost.

The State of Indiana is an active drug transportation and distribution area. The Drug Enforcement Agency identifies Northern Indiana's access to Lake Michigan as a possible international drug shipping route through major waterway within the St. Lawrence Seaway system. The DEA notes the seven interstate highway systems and twenty highways providing links for drug trafficking, especially with the southwest border and California. Highway (automobile and trucking) and airline trafficking are the primary means of drug importation, with busing systems as a secondary means. Mexican criminal groups are the primary wholesale distributors of marijuana, powdered cocaine, and methamphetamine within Indiana.

Elkhart County includes public, parochial, and an Amish school system within its borders. These schools are impacted by the presence and needs of the children of the unemployed, the under-employed, problem gamblers, of methamphetamine users/makers or others who become addicted to drugs or alcohol. The county's 111 schools fall under a number of different systems, including the Amish Parochial Schools of Indiana, three schools belonging to the Diocese of Fort Wayne, unaffiliated private secular and religious schools, and the community schools of Elkhart, Fairfield, Baugo, Concord, Middlebury, Wa-Nee, and Goshen.

The IPRC recently awarded the Elkhart County Drug-Free Partnership a Needs Assessment and Planning Grant to help the Partnership better understand the prevention needs of their community and make informed decisions as to where to concentrate their efforts. The Partnership is a vibrant group of youth-serving, elder-serving, mental health, working person assisting, faith-based, county government, medical, and other public and private agencies located in the communities of Goshen, Elkhart, Nappanee, and Bristol. Many of the partners in Goshen

are within close physical proximity which will make collaboration and organizing less difficult. Analyzing public and private health, criminal justice, and statistical information, the IPRC will help the Partnership plan fund allocation and effective substance abuse prevention programs. The many talents of members of the Partnership will combine to form a critical mass of expertise and assistance to their fellow community members.

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Note: Anderson, Columbus, Kokomo and Michigan City Metropolitan Statistical Areas are currently published as unofficial/Non-BLS area estimates. Bureau of Labor Statistics funding for these MSAs was suspended for 2008 but Indiana will continue to estimate for these areas.

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