

United Way launches program for babies

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Beverly Weber wants the community to go beyond the meaning behind the saying, "It takes a village to raise a child."

"I've always felt it falls a little short," said the president and CEO of United Way of Benton and Franklin Counties. "If that village doesn't take that responsibility ... it doesn't matter if it's there or not. We want to create a sense of urgency (so) people take ownership of our kids."

United Way is embarking on a community awareness campaign about its first initiative for Community Solutions, a long-term campaign to improve Benton and Franklin county residents' lives by creating change in community conditions.

The first priority in the multi-goal campaign is "Our Babies Can't Wait," which ultimately aims to prepare today's newborns for success by the time they're 20.

"We'd like to start when the parents are expecting, when they're pregnant," said Sandy Owen, the leader of Community Solutions' health initiative and director of preventive health services at the Benton-Franklin Health District.

Between now and Jan. 1, when the "Our Babies Can't Wait" initiative launches as

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a pilot program in east Kennewick, United Way plans to engage community members and organizations to rally behind the plan, United Way announced Thursday.

"When we get our babies off to a good start, we get our whole plan off to a good start," Weber said. "(Children) are the people who are going to be the leaders in our community tomorrow."

The short-term goal of the initiative is to prepare children for kindergarten, Owen said.

The pilot program in east Kennewick — from the river to 20th Avenue and Vancouver Street to the Benton-Franklin Fairgrounds — will use existing resources to educate parents and connect them to services.

Some of the programs already in place include a Kennewick General Hospital free clinic for parents with 4-day-old babies, mentoring services that promote family connection and engagement, services that connect low-income families to resources and workshops that prepare children for school.

Community Solutions leadership will track families in east Kennewick and measure the success of the initiative by child abuse and neglect rates, immunization rates and the number of children entering kindergarten.

"Initially we thought of Our Babies Can't Wait as just a health initiative," Owen said. "But we determined it really went across all areas."

Owen says if communities don't invest in children from an early age, it affects nearly everything in a community — from the number of jails needed to graduation rates to economic success.

"That's going to affect everybody," she said. "Everybody's a stakeholder when it comes to babies and children."

► On the web: www.unitedway-bfco.com/communitiesolutions.htm

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