

Tri-City leaders to identify issues facing community

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By Sara Schilling, Herald staff writer

Three groups of local leaders will begin meeting next year to identify problems that face specific parts of the community and brainstorm solutions.

What they come up with will go into a regional plan aimed at bolstering the area's health and human services system by improving communication and efficiency.

"This is about providing services in a way that will ensure we're really having measurable impact on the reduction of community problems," said Beverly Weber, president of United Way of Benton and Franklin Counties, which is acting as facilitator.

"Ultimately, that translates into improving people's lives," she said. "That's what it's really all about."

The formation of the groups, called "community solutions teams" -- made up of service providers and customers, experts and decision-makers -- comes after an October leaders summit in Kennewick that drew more than 100 people to talk about human services.

Eight major themes emerged during the summit, including the need for a regional plan to increase coordination and so "funders will know who's funding what and will be able to identify what's missing and how to fill the gaps more effectively," Weber said.

That's where the three teams come in. Each one will focus on issues that face a different population -- likely kids, families and communities, though the topics haven't officially been settled upon, Weber said.

"I think it's a great idea. (The community) has worked hard on economic development. We've worked incredibly hard on the whole education agenda. Probably the area we've traditionally done the least ... is social and health services," said Mike Schwenk, chairman of Three Rivers Community Round Table and summit attendee.

The groups will start being formed in January. Weber emphasized there won't be any quick or easy answers because issues that take years to create take time to solve.

"This is not a process that happens overnight," added Kris Johnson, president of the Tri-City Regional Chamber of Commerce and a United Way board member. "It takes a lot of dedication and hard work, and will require hard work going forward. But the starting of the process is asking people, 'What do you think?'"