

DRAFT Chapter Synopses

Housing:

Lack of affordable housing is a growing problem in Latah County, as it is across the country. Solving it will require action from federal, state and local governments, educational institutions, communities of faith, service organizations, and others. The numbers tell the story: Moscow would need over 100 living units every year for 10 years to fill the need today. At the same time, the need continues to grow, along with inflation, political conflict, and climate disasters. Those trying to build affordable housing face inflated costs for materials and land. Sometimes, their efforts are stalled by zoning codes, including things like allowable lot sizes, density restrictions, and setback requirements. Moscow Affordable Housing Trust Executive Director Nils Peterson is working with the University of Idaho Architecture Department, in cooperation with local governments and the private sector, to build affordable homes. As of this writing, two small houses of around 500 square feet have been completed, but that pace and scale won't alleviate the shortage of affordable homes. Solutions will require more monetary participation by public and private sectors, more education about the need for such housing and building practices to keep them affordable, and legislative interventions to remove unnecessary obstacles to their construction. Some deficiencies identified in the original LWV-M poverty report have been remedied, or at least improved, including a desire for a single point of entry. Since then, the North Central Idaho Health District has designated Sojourners as the access point for anyone in the district seeking housing assistance. The need for temporary housing for homeless families is only partially addressed by Family Promise, because the number of unsheltered families exceeds local capacity to house them. Affordable workforce housing for people at or near the poverty level remains a significant problem. A regional housing assessment estimated that the region was short of affordable single-family homes by roughly 340 units, and that from 2017 to 2027, an additional 2,600 single-family units (roughly 270 per year) will be needed. Given the high cost of building materials and financing, it is unlikely that need will be met anytime soon. There is also a need for emergency shelter, especially in dangerously harsh weather.

Food:

In general, people in poverty spend a greater portion of their incomes on food and other necessities than do people with higher incomes. They are immediately affected by food prices, which have increased steadily since the great recession. In 2022, prices for food constituted the highest year-over-year increase since 1979. Food prices from grocery stores increased 11.4% in 2021 and 10.2% in 2022, and were predicted to increase by an additional 7.8% in 2023. At the time of the League's original study, the food insecurity rate in Latah County was 17.6% (6,557 individuals). For children, that figure was 20.7% (1,380 individuals). By 2020, the percentage of food-insecure residents overall dropped to 10.5% (4,200 people), and the rate of food-insecure children dropped to 10.6%, or 780 individuals. Some measures of food insecurity improved as a result of assistance programs during the pandemic and recent economic flux. Some of that

assistance has ended. Federal aid programs, local foodbanks, and community donations eased the crisis, and temporarily caused food insecurity figures to look better than they might have looked otherwise. Nevertheless, the demand for food assistance has continued to grow. In 2022, the West Side Food Pantry averaged 500 visits per month by adults, plus 300 visits by seniors and children. Use in Jan/Feb 2023 was double that of the same time period in 2022. In 2022, Moscow Food Bank had 18,000 customer visits, including about 650 family visits per month. They are on-pace to exceed those numbers in 2023. Variable assistance program eligibility and durations of coverage have contributed to a sense of insecurity and uncertainty over what would happen when those resources dry up before circumstances improve. That's where we are now.

Education and Job Training:

Educational attainment and poverty are negatively correlated. College graduation rates in Moscow and Latah County remain comparatively high. However, the region's largest employer, the University of Idaho, has encountered challenges relating to Legislative appropriations, enrollment numbers, and continuity of operations during the pandemic. Demand is growing for career-technical training and apprenticeships in skilled trades, and opportunities exist for collaboration among secondary education providers and workforce training partners to expand offerings and create well-paying jobs. Access to healthcare remains difficult, particularly for low-income households. In 2022, Idaho ranked 51st nationally in physicians per capita. Recent Legislative changes are causing some from those ranks to leave, and prospective new physicians to look elsewhere to practice. Without supplemental education, Idaho medical students will not be trained to provide comprehensive reproductive care, which is especially problematic in low-resourced rural areas.

Employment and Economy:

Poverty is still largely invisible here. Funding for social services has varied wildly during the pandemic and economic volatility that ensued, and low-income households can't rely on resources they've grown to count on, including their jobs and limited-duration government subsidies. The economic base here remains relatively narrow, and opportunities to broaden it could grow jobs, boost the economy, expand offerings of goods and service, and elevate people out of poverty. Meanwhile, Idaho's minimum wage has been the same \$7.25 per hour since 2009, far below livable wage measures.

Childcare:

The childcare industry in Latah County is insufficient to meet the needs of families, children, and caregivers.

- The number of placement spots available for 0-6-year-olds is insufficient.
- That deficiency has adverse impacts for Idaho's economy.
- In response to the shortage, the City of Moscow increased student-to-caregiver ratios, to allow for higher enrollments at facilities licensed by the City.

- The Idaho Child Care Program is intended to pay for a portion of child care services for working parents who meet eligibility criteria for work or schooling. A ‘donut’ leaves some earning too much to qualify for assistance, but too little to afford child care without it.
- At the same time, early childhood care workers are, themselves, economically distressed, earning an average of \$13 per hour in Idaho.
- Federal COVID relief funding provided a lifeline to struggling day care providers and early childhood learning centers. However, Idaho’s Child Care Stabilization and Wage Enhancement grants ended in June, and facility closures are expected as a result.

Healthcare and Eldercare:

The reciprocal relationship between healthcare and poverty poses complex challenges to addressing the root causes of poverty. An individual’s underlying health and lifestyle choices impact health status and, in combination with costs and access to medical resources, these all affect and are affected by poverty. Latah County has experienced positive changes in health care service availability with the opening of a satellite office of CHAS (Community Health Association of Spokane), a federally qualified health center (2013), and the Latah Recovery Center (2015). CHAS provides medical, dental, and behavioral health services and, significantly, provides these services to, among others, low-income individuals on a sliding scale or free. The Latah Recovery Center provides mental health and behavioral health services to individuals from Latah County. While these service providers have helped Latah County residents gain access to physical, mental, and behavioral health services, significant challenges to accessing and affording health care remain. The COVID-19 epidemic and recent and potential legislation (i.e., reproductive health and Medicaid expansion) may have a detrimental impact on the retention of healthcare providers and insurance coverage. In addition, a shortage of transportation services and in-home care, essential components in the complex healthcare system, may exacerbate the challenges for those living in poverty.

Transportation:

Transportation costs aren’t routinely calculated into measures of poverty, and in rural areas like ours, where housing costs are generally lower in outlying areas and where commutes may be longer, those costs add up. People with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. In Latah County in 2019, an estimated 33.5% of people aged 18-64 with disabilities were living in poverty, and accessible transportation services are limited. There is still no reliable and comprehensive single point of access for information on transportation resources. Moscow’s population and municipal footprint have grown since the LWVM Poverty Report in 2012, but transit resources have not expanded proportionately. Bus service is still unavailable between Moscow and Pullman, and in under-resourced areas of Moscow for which a third fixed route has been long sought. Challenges include funding and variable demands for transit services (and therefore, unreliable work hours for employees).