

LIFESTYLE > HEALTH

## Community Assessment Project focuses on quality of life using 25 years of data



Watsonville High senior Vianey Villanueva meets Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Carmel Valley, on Monday as she and other members of Jovenes Sanos talked to the Congressman about the work they are doing to encourage local youth to make healthy food choices. (Shmuel Thaler — Santa Cruz Sentinel)

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WATSONVILLE — After 25 years of the Santa Cruz County Community Assessment Project, leaders are still calling the community to “achieve well-being for all.”

The city of Watsonville hosted a conference Monday to discuss data from the 25th Community Assessment Project, an annual report by United Way of Santa Cruz County that highlights multiple factors that improve or worsen the quality of life for county residents.

Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Carmel Valley, who is running for reelection, spoke at the conference.



Rep. Jimmy Panetta tours El Valle Produce in Watsonville with members of Jovenes Sanos on Monday. Jovenes Sanos means “healthy youth” in Spanish. (Shmuel Thaler — Santa Cruz Sentinel)

Panetta said the report allows Congress to build policy that changes people’s lives. He discussed certain areas that affect quality of life, including the need for affordable and accessible health care, a decrease in students going to college because of lack of funds for their basic needs and a decrease in qualifying residents using federal benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Prior to the conference, Panetta met with a group of Watsonville High School students from United Way's Jovenes SANOS, or Healthy Youth, program, at El Valle Product Market in Watsonville. The students shared their project with the "healthy corner market" to incorporate healthy food options.

"These young men and women are trying to empower their peers, empower their fellow students, educate them and raise awareness about some of the important issues here in our community, especially when it comes to childhood obesity within our community," Panetta said.

Data for the report came from 861 residents surveyed countywide, according to the methodology of the report. This is a larger number of participants than years past, according to Susan Brutschy, president of Applied Survey Research, the social research firm that partnered with United Way on this study.

Of those who responded, 36% or about 310 people, said the cost of living is a factor that takes away from their quality of life, and 22% or nearly 190 people said homelessness takes away from their quality of life.

At the conference, community experts in the six focus areas shared key findings from the report: economy, education, health, public safety, social environment and natural environment.

Community Action Board Project Director Paulina Moreno led the discussion in Economy Findings. She said more DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, recipients are disenrolling from public benefits out of fear of being deported.

Of survey respondents, 20.7% or about 178 people, said they went without one or more basic needs at any time in the past 12 months, according to the report. More Latinos went without basic needs: 26.2% Latinos compared to 17.3% whites.

In education, the county is seeing a drop in chronic absenteeism, or students missing 10% or more of their education, but there is an increase in suspensions and expulsions, said Farris Sabbah, superintendent of the County Office of Education.

The county is also seeing a decrease in the number of English learners and an increase in the number of students with disabilities who qualify for special

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In higher education, enrollment at Cabrillo College is dropping, but the student body is seeing an increase in diversity, with more than 50% being Latino, according to Sabbah.

“Broken down by zip code, broken down by race, broken down by socioeconomics, nearly every single measure of success in our community has an achievement gap and we need to address this achievement gap,” Sabbah said.

Stephen Gray, chief administrator and operations executive with Sutter Health/Palo Alto Medical Foundation, spoke about health and health care. He said the number of teen moms is at a record low, from 93 births by adolescents in 2017 to 89 births in 2018. Latino teen moms make up 90% of all teen births, according to the report. The Latino population also has the highest rate of obesity, 76.3% in 2019 compared to 53.7% of the white population being obese. Of all survey respondents, 61.7% were overweight or obese based on their Body Mass Index, the report showed.

Gray said 38 people died by suicide in 2018. The suicide death rate, adjusted by age, shows about 16 people per 100,000 died in 2016, compared to about 15 in 2015, according to the report.

In health care, 89.7% of adults ages 18-64 years old are insured, but the number of residents with health insurance has been declining since 2013, Gray said.

In the natural environment category, water pollution and litter are the county's top concerns, according to Rachel Kippen, executive director of O'Neill Sea Odyssey. She said car emissions cause high concentrations of carbon dioxide, which has caused ocean acidification, meaning the ocean is becoming more acidic, to increase by 20%. In 2018, 194 days of swim advisories were issued in the county, according to the report.

The report also showed concerns in public safety. Captain Jorge Zamora of the Watsonville Police Department said it is important for the community to see how connected it is, encouraging collective thinking and collective action in keeping the county safe.

About 86% of survey respondents said they trusted local law enforcement, according to the report. Zamora said the incarceration of youth has decreased, from about 35 juveniles per 1,000 arrested in 2012 to nearly 17 per 1,000

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In the social and community category, discrimination is increasing, according to Aimee Mangan, executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters Santa Cruz County. In the last 12 months, 16.4% of survey respondents felt discriminated against, for reasons including socio-economic status, appearance, age, ethnicity/race, sexual orientation and language, the report showed.

In the wake of rising discrimination, Big Brothers Big Sisters Santa Cruz County is starting the first TransMentoring Program, which matches a transgender youth with a transgender adult. Mangan said this is the first of its kind in the nation.

The city of Watsonville also recognized community “heroes and sheroes” at the event. The Lifetime Achievement Award was given to Sister Michaella Siplak of Adrian Dominican Sisters, for her work with Dignity Health Dominican Hospital, and Ellen Timberlake, director of County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department.

To learn more about the Community Assessment Project, visit [unitedwaysc.org](http://unitedwaysc.org).



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