

JACKSONVILLE COMMUNITY COUNCIL, INC.

Maintaining Nonpartisan Civic Engagement to Improve Quality of Life

INTRODUCTION

The Jacksonville Community Council Inc. (JCCI) developed this country's first community-based quality-of-life indicators assessment in 1985. The assessment, published annually as the *Quality of Life Progress Report*, uses indicators to measure and monitor factors that encompass the social determinants of health in Jacksonville and surrounding communities in northeast Florida. JCCI also produces two reports on public policy issues, which are selected for in-depth community study and action as part of the quality-of-life assessment process. Over the years, JCCI has received substantial national and international distinction, including recognition as a Best Practice by the United Nations and a Solution for America by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change.

JCCI, founded in 1975, provides the staff and coordination to produce these reports, and a structure and

forum for concerned citizens to become involved in and improve their communities. The open membership of more than 1,000 citizens is reviewed each year to ensure a diversity that reflects the larger community, and a similarly representative board of directors is elected annually. JCCI is particularly respected for the quality of its work unmarred by partisanship.

THE PLACE: JACKSONVILLE AND NORTHEAST FLORIDA

At 841 square miles, Jacksonville is the largest city in the United States in terms of land mass. It is the major urban center of a multi-county region comprising Northeast Florida, hosting a mix of industrial manufacturing, transportation, financial services, health care, and military employment. Because surrounding counties are more rural in nature, Jacksonville accounts for more than 62% of the region's population.

The city is a major insurance, banking, and shipping center, and is the employment hub for several communities in surrounding counties—especially in the services, retail trade, and government sectors. With Jacksonville as its hub, Northeast Florida covers 3,221 square miles, with 43% dedicated to agriculture, 2% to industry and commercial use, and 13% urbanized. The total population of the region is over 1.3 million, and Northeast Florida is diverse both racially and culturally. The population is 68% Caucasian, 22% African American, 5% Latino, 3% Asian American, 0.3% Native American, and 1% Other. The population of Northeast Florida is further distinguished by a larger percentage of youth than the national average (25% are 18 and



JCCI Code of the Street discussion, May 2008

under) and a growing elderly population (currently 11% are 65 or older).

THE PROBLEM

The country's first quality-of-life indicators assessment was developed through the union of complimentary interests within JCCI and the Jacksonville Regional Chamber of Commerce. For JCCI, existing economic indicators, often considered the singular measures of progress, were an insufficient and often inaccurate way of monitoring and measuring the quality of community life. Relying on the gross national product (GNP) as an indicator, for example, would count as "progress" the production of guns and other weapons, the sale of alcoholic beverages and tobacco, and pollution clean-up efforts, while completely omitting the unpaid labor of caretakers and the value of a pristine park. Meanwhile the Chamber of Commerce, in the course of its economic development activities, was finding that the CEOs of business prospects wanted additional information about the quality of educational facilities, race relations, and the environment as well as workforce capacity, investment opportunities, and infrastructure. At the time, quantifiable information about such indicators was simply not available.

THE PROJECT

Building on the identified needs, and with a focus on fostering a dialogue about important community issues across the geographic region, JCCI convened a large citizen-volunteer task force—with active participation and financial support from the Chamber of Commerce—to expand the existing economic indicators. The group identified a broader collection of progress indicators organized around nine elements of quality-of-life: education; economy; environment; social wellbeing; arts, culture and recreation; health; government; transportation; and safety.

Over the years, JCCI has updated its indicators annually, upgraded its indicator set several times, and expanded its indicator-related activities through a community-based review process overseen by the



JCCI Women in Leadership Forum, May 2008

incoming chair of the Chamber of Commerce. Each year, a *Quality of Life Progress Report* provides an ongoing analysis of the state of Northeast Florida, monitoring and helping to improve elements of the region which affect quality of life. For the purposes of the report, JCCI defines quality of life as "a feeling of well-being, fulfillment, or satisfaction resulting from factors in the external environment, examined from a community perspective." Approximately ten indicators are used to reflect each of the nine elements of the quality of life. Much of the indicator data is obtained from the records and documents of various public and private organizations. The remaining data is provided by an annual opinion survey, conducted each September since 1985, measuring citizen opinions and reported behaviors on various quality-of-life questions.

JCCI Deputy Director Ben Warner emphasizes that "The report has to come out every year to maintain momentum and to provide a consistent point of comparison. The indicators are explicitly designed to compare the community to itself, not to evaluate the community against the progress of other communities." This way, the focus remains improving issues that are important to local residents rather than not being as bad off as some other communities. Additionally, the indicators alone are not expected to explain why trends change or what should be done at a given point in time, but to provide the information needed to generate conversations and encourage community involvement to improve such trends.

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JCCI DEPUTY DIRECTOR BEN WARNER

THE PROCESS

The annual community review process, conducted by a diverse committee of community representatives and chaired by the Chamber of Commerce, examines the indicator data, challenges assumptions, and highlights successes as well as those areas requiring additional attention. The citizen-volunteer review committee assesses the entire report for accuracy, advises JCCI staff regarding format, makes recommendations for specific improvements, and develops a brief summary of report highlights. To the extent possible, indicators are retained unchanged, in order to maintain consistency over the years. However, selective changes are made each year due to, for example, inconsistencies in longitudinal data collection, unverifiable or unavailable data, and the emergence of new indicators or problems worthy of measurement and inclusion. Each indicator is assessed individually and retained or replaced according to the following criteria:

- **IMPORTANCE:** The indicator measures an aspect of the community’s quality of life which a diverse group of people in the community would agree is important, in relation to the community’s vision.
- **POLICY RELEVANCE:** The indicator measures an aspect of the community’s quality of life through which the community can achieve positive change by way of public decision making and policies at the community level.

STIMULATING ACTION, MAINTAINING OBJECTIVITY

Although JCCI is *not* an advocacy organization, the Council is still able to stimulate actions within other organizations and catalyze local policy changes based on the data and recommendations of an “objective” source. Former JCCI Executive Director Marian Chambers describes several key ways to stimulate actions and policy changes while still maintaining objectivity:

- Try to involve groups with a particular interest in an element. As an example, make a presentation to the Sierra Club about the natural environment. Get them to analyze and interpret the data, and suggest action steps that any citizen could undertake.
- Take the report to the members of your City Council and School Board. Enlist their help in understanding the data related to their interests. They, in turn, may suggest neighborhood associations or parent teacher associations which would like to hear your message.
- Try to get the newspaper to do a series, focusing on each element of the Quality of Life. Such a series will produce greater results than you could ever achieve on your own.
- Use the report as a tool for government accountability. Ask questions when the report is released and encourage government officials to disclose their plans for improvements.
- Urge institutions to use your product internally and as they exert influence on the community.
- Be patient but persistent and community change will evolve!

- **RESPONSIVENESS:** The indicator responds relatively quickly and noticeably to real changes in the quality of life, as revealed by changes in the direction or slope of the indicator’s trend line.
- **VALIDITY:** If the indicator’s trend line moves either upward or downward, a diverse group of people in the community would agree on whether the quality of life is improving or declining.
- **UNDERSTANDABILITY:** The indicator measures an aspect of the community’s quality of life in a way



Carol Brady, Director of the Healthy Start Coalition, explaining disparities in infant mortality rates at a JCCI meeting.

that most citizens can easily understand and interpret, in relation to their own lives.

- **CLARITY:** The indicator uses clear measures that filter out extraneous factors. For instance, dollar indicators are reported in deflated, constant dollars; per-person rates are used where appropriate to factor out population growth; and raw numbers are used where total magnitudes are important.
- **OUTCOME ORIENTATION:** Where possible, the indicator measures a community outcome—the actual condition of the quality of life (e.g., the crime rate). Alternatively, it measures an outcome of the community’s response to a quality-of-life issue (e.g., police response time) rather than the input of the response itself (e.g., number of police officers).
- **ASSET ORIENTATION:** Where possible, the indicator measures a positive aspect of the community’s quality of life (the community’s assets rather than its liabilities) so that an increase in the indicator’s trend line reveals community improvement (e.g., the high school graduation rate rather than the dropout rate).
- **ANTICIPATION:** The indicator anticipates future quality-of-life conditions rather than reacting to past trends. A “leading” indicator (e.g., cigarettes sold) is more useful than a “lagging” indicator (e.g., lung cancer deaths) because it allows a proactive community response.

- **AVAILABILITY, TIMELINESS, STABILITY, AND RELIABILITY:** Data for the indicator are readily available and affordably accessible annually from a credible public or private source. If the data come from multiple sources, staff can readily compile and calculate the indicator numbers. Data are consistently collected, compiled, and calculated in the same way each year.
- **REPRESENTATIVENESS:** Taken together, the indicator set covers the major factors determining the community’s quality of life.

Warner estimates that 3 to 5% of the indicators change each year based on community input. He also credits the review committee for acting as a “reality check”—*Does the trend in this indicator really reflect what is happening in the community?*—and characterizes it as an opportunity to insert notes of explanation. For example, an indicator measuring attendance at musical performances was dramatically influenced by a major storm during the city’s annual jazz festival. The storm’s negative impact on attendance became overwhelmingly clear during the review committee meetings, and a note of explanation was inserted within the report to qualify the indicator’s downward trend.

Throughout, JCCI has maintained its commitment to being a neutral convener and has given all major issues a fair hearing before making recommendations or decisions about changing processes or issues on which to focus. The assessment process is based on a decision-by-consensus approach, which is said to occur when each person in the group can say he or she has had a chance to speak, has spoken, and has been genuinely heard. As a result, the group’s decision is accepted, possibly with reservation, but always with commitment to the decision and its implementation. Clear ground rules and meeting practices are in place to facilitate such a process. Warner describes instances in which skeptics attend committee meetings either looking for bias or an ideological fight, but end up joining in the purposeful and methodical dialogue. Such a process furthers JCCI’s reputation for nonpartisan objectivity. Large numbers of people continue to have a hand in the development of the report, feel invested in it, and rely on its information.

Following the assessment process, JCCI publishes its annual *Quality of Life Progress Report*, providing an overview of each indicator, its trend and target, and outlining clear priorities for action for Jacksonville and Northeast Florida in the coming year. Additional background information, such as the source of each indicator and the calculations performed, is also made available. “Gold stars” are assigned by the review committee to highlight the areas of progress, while “red flags” are given to alert the community to issues which require community action. The report is publicly released at City Hall, and the Chamber of Commerce President personally delivers a copy to Jacksonville’s Mayor.

THE PEOPLE AND PARTNERS

The Chamber of Commerce has been the key institutional partner from the inception of the project. Having the Chamber as a lead partner has resulted in financial resources and broad connections to business and political leaders. This partnership has also resulted in a real and perceived balance of interests that supports the reports’ objectivity and diminishes the ability of critics to claim results reflect the interests of a narrow group. Citizen participation has been the critical element of the process. Although the Quality of Life project was conceived primarily as a planning and monitoring mechanism, it has ultimately become a venue for community members to define their vision and identify areas that need improvement. Because citizens must be the driving force behind implementation, their involvement in the planning process is essential. The report’s utility becomes a direct reflection of the amount and nature of community involvement. Warner emphasizes that the key to JCCI’s success is that the indicators are chosen by the community and not by “expert data people” (although they are at the table to provide input and respond to feasibility questions). Great effort and attention is paid to ensuring that the reporting process is completely transparent and Warner describes how they “invite anyone with questions to attend the review committee meetings for themselves.”

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THE RESULTS

The *Quality of Life Progress Report* was designed to provide an annual report card on community progress, a planning tool for government and private institutions, and an educational resource for residents about their community and important factors related to their health and well-being. It has been used by elected officials, the Chamber of Commerce, and citizens, with powerful results in the following health-related areas:

Lung Cancer

In response to Jacksonville’s unusually high level of lung cancer, health scientists designed an epidemiological study to pinpoint the locally relevant root causes. At least partially because of the evidence provided by the indicator reports, city planners were able to include funding for such a study as a part of the city’s comprehensive plan.

Environment

The Chamber of Commerce received an environmental award for its work in increasing public awareness of the plight of the St. Johns River, after examining water quality indicators and studying the causes of the declining water quality. A spin-off from their efforts was the formation of a grassroots citizen organization called the Stewards of the St. Johns River. The Stewards work for the restoration and preservation of the river. They have initiated a Riverwatch Hotline, sponsored a local Adopt-a-Shore program, stimulated the formation of a Water Quality Commission, and educated school children about the river.

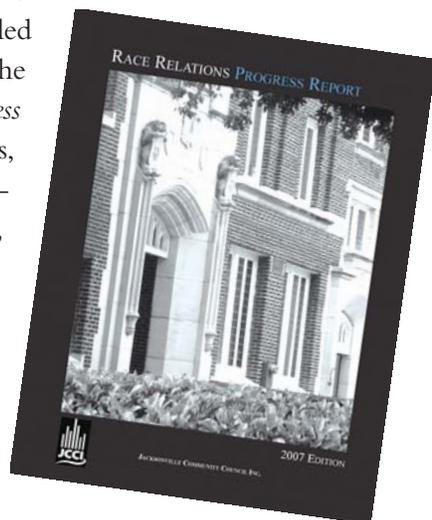
Reentry Services

In 2001, in response to concerns raised in the report about services for ex-offenders, the City of Jacksonville became the pilot site for the Department of Labor-funded “Ready 4 Work” program. JCCI’s study also revealed that when people get out of prison, the majority of them are released in the middle of the night. With no car, very little money, no family to meet them and no job prospects, the recidivism rate for ex-offenders was tremendous. As a result, the Jacksonville Sheriff’s office established a policy to release offenders in daylight hours, and plans are in the works to create a one-stop resource center near the jail.

Race relations

In 2002, race relations and disparities in health and social circumstances based on race in Jacksonville were selected as a topic for deep community-led study based on the *Quality of Life Progress Report*. This issue is, by nature, a potentially divisive one, and initial meetings were attended by many individuals who had played key roles on opposing sides in the region’s contentious history with civil rights.

The ability to move the discussion and process forward is a testament to JCCI’s method of inclusive, respectful participation and its reputation as a neutral convener. The resulting study documented that racial disparities were prevalent locally in six areas: education, income and employment, housing, health, criminal justice, and the political process. Following completion of the study, JCCI produced a report outlining 27 recommendations to improve race relations in Jacksonville and eliminate racial disparities. One of the primary recommendations stated that JCCI should convene citizens to create and distribute an annual report card on race relations in Jacksonville, modeled after JCCI’s



Quality of Life Progress Report. In 2005, JCCI released the first *Race Relations Progress Report* measuring race-based disparities as well as perceptions of racism and discrimination in the community. The report has since become an annual report card intended to help guide policy decisions and community work, identify priority areas of concern for further investigation and effort, and measure progress toward an inclusive community, free of race-based disparities or discrimination.

Although the report is not expected to be a community action plan, a number of community and policy changes have resulted through dedicated citizen action. JCCI does not offer to single-handedly ensure that community problems are adequately addressed, nor is the expectation that public policy changes will occur directly as a result of its publication. Nevertheless, Warner describes how no one likes to have an indicator “red flagged” two years running and how the Mayor announces that for every red flag, there is a public or private organization poised to address the conditions measured by that indicator.

WISDOM FROM EXPERIENCE

The Jacksonville quality-of-life assessment is one of the most successful and enduring projects of its kind in the country, driven in large part by JCCI’s objective leadership. The perception of objectivity is supported by consistent non-partisanship: As challenging as it may seem, conservatives and liberals serve together on JCCI’s committees and boards and reach consensus on report recommendations and conclusions. Several elements have been instrumental to maintaining JCCI’s objectivity, including:

- **PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGMENT:** JCCI has successfully branded itself as a nonpartisan civic organization whose explicit role in the community is to engage diverse citizens in open dialogue, research, consensus building, advocacy, and leadership development to improve quality of life and build a better community in Northeast Florida.
- **COLLECTIVE IDENTITY:** Participant investment is cultivated. While community participants are encouraged to express individual needs and interests,

building a common focus and commitment is considered essential. JCCI shares the limelight, allowing different members to represent the project at different venues and events and within their own workplaces.

- **FAIR DECISION MAKING:** The decision-making process is consistently applied and clearly stated. There is time for all members to discuss the impact of a potential decision and agreement on a recommendation is defined not as 100% consensus, but as majority support.
- **FLEXIBILITY:** JCCI creates an open environment where participants feel comfortable with diverse perspectives and constructive conflict. Meeting facilitators are honest, focused, decisive, flexible, and inclusive, and tough issues are openly discussed.
- **PARTNERSHIPS:** Partnering with the Chamber of Commerce has ensured the buy-in and support of a group of influential business and community leaders. Grounding the process in community wisdom has ensured broad community investment, and engaging the Mayor and the media has ensured public accountability beyond JCCI as a single entity.

CONCLUSION

Ben Warner declares that, “Community indicator reports are not about the indicators; they are about community change.” Quality data is one important piece of the puzzle. It can provide the building block for the breadth of action and change necessary to substantially move social determinants of health. What JCCI demonstrates is the power of a fully engaged organization that uses data as one piece of a comprehensive community change strategy. It is the integration of community organizing, data analysis, communications, and relationship building with policymakers and business leaders that enables the breadth of activity and success experienced in Jacksonville.