



Eastside Story: The Changing Face of Need in East King County

Eastside Human Services Forum
Summer 2005



“When I was teaching, I found that I couldn’t be a good teacher if my kids weren’t ready to learn. Even then, I had students in my classroom who didn’t speak English, students who had problems at home, students who lacked adequate shelter and food. How can we help kids who have family issues succeed in school?”

Jan Woldseth, Issaquah School District Board Member and former public school teacher

Marta loves her job. But it doesn’t seem fair to work this hard and still worry about paying the rent every month.

Marta and her two daughters live near the child care center where she’s a teacher. She’s had the job for four years now, and has become an important part of the lives of many of the young children she’s cared for – in fact, it’s rare for her to go to the grocery store or neighborhood park without being greeted by a family with children eager to say hello to their teacher.

Unfortunately, her pay doesn’t reflect this role. She earns \$10 an hour with no benefits, only slightly more than minimum wage.

Marta would be indignant to hear herself called poor. But she knows that the \$21,000 she earns each year barely

gets her family from one paycheck to the next...with no room for bad luck.

She and her daughters share a one-bedroom apartment where Marta sleeps on a fold-out couch in the living room. The \$800 she pays in rent takes nearly half her \$1,733 before-tax income each month, but moving someplace smaller or less expensive seems impossible because she doesn’t have money to put down for a security deposit.

Marta’s not alone: 17% of all Eastside families now pay more than 30% of their income for housing each month. Like Marta, many of them are just barely hanging on. With housing alone taking such a significant part of their budgets, any emergency could upset the delicate balance of their lives.

Housing costs are too high for many families

Nearly 24,000 Eastside households (17% of all households) now pay more than the recommended 30% of their monthly income for rent or a mortgage. Nearly 12,000 Eastside households pay more than half their income for housing.¹ And Hopelink found that clients needing help with utility bills during the first half of 2005 were averaging 86% of their income for rent.²

The percentage of households who pay too much of their income for housing is higher on the Eastside than anywhere else in King County.

Not one of the Eastside's cities or towns has enough apartments affordable to low income families.³ The "living wage" needed for a single parent with two children to afford an apartment is \$20.97 an hour (\$43,608 annually), which is nearly three times Washington State's minimum wage.⁴

Too many Eastside children are being left behind

During the 2005-06 school year, 1,247 low income 3- and 4-year old Eastside children will be eligible for Head Start, a subsidized preschool program. But funding will allow only 30% of them to be enrolled, meaning that 879 children will not be served.⁵ Their families will have to find and pay for private child care.

Child care is more expensive in East King County than elsewhere in the county. Care for an infant averages \$253 a week, or more than \$1,000 a month.⁶

The poverty rate in our communities has doubled

The percentage of people living in poverty on the Eastside doubled between 1990 and 2000, from 2.16% to 4.68%. That means that nearly 7,000 Eastside households now live below the Federal poverty line.⁷

Over 40,000 Eastside families had to rely on food banks at some time during 2004.⁸ Crisis Clinic calls from Eastside residents increased 24% in 2004 over 2003.⁹

In the Bellevue and Lake Washington School Districts, 15% of students (5,700 out of a total of 38,000) are poor enough to qualify for the free or reduced lunch program. At 16 schools in those districts, more than 25% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch; at 7 schools, more than 40% of students qualify.¹⁰ These schools with "pockets" of poverty have correspondingly lower academic achievement levels than other Eastside schools.



“In just fifteen years, the Eastside will have 60% more senior citizens. Who’s going to help them as they get older? Who’s going to help me when I get to the point that I need more help?”

*Don Davidson, D.D.S.,
Councilmember,
Bellevue City Council*

Bob and Jean have lived on the Eastside for most of their lives. But they’re concerned that none of their children can afford to settle down here... and that lack of a family support network may force them to leave too.

Bob and Jean expected a comfortable life when they bought their Bellevue home in 1968. Bob had a good job with an engineering firm, and they loved the neighborhood and the local schools.

They had thought their retirement would be comfortable too, but then Bob had a series of heart attacks in his 50s. His poor health forced him to take an early retirement from his firm, before he had fully vested in the company’s pension plan.

Bob’s early retirement made it difficult for them to manage their home or afford its upkeep. They finally sold their home and have lived on the sale proceeds.

They would have preferred to sell their home to one of their children, but all three have moved out of the area. Their youngest, a third grade teacher, still works on the Eastside but commutes from the condo she’s purchased 30 miles away. She’d like to move closer to her parents, but her salary isn’t high enough to afford even a modest Eastside home.

Bob and Jean’s daughter is less anchored in the community and in the school where she teaches because she can’t afford to live nearby: she’s more likely to leave her school for one closer to home, and less likely to become involved in neighborhood activities. Bob and Jean are affected too. With all their children a long drive away, they’re forced to rely on outside agencies for more and more of their daily needs.

Our population is growing older and has more needs

By 2025, elderly residents (60 years old or older) will make up nearly a quarter of the Eastside's population, up from 13.5% in 2000. The number of very elderly residents (85 years and older) will make up nearly 2% of the population by 2025, up from 1.2%.¹¹

In Bellevue, 6.3% of seniors currently live below the Federal poverty level.¹² This number is likely to increase over the next decade as the many Eastern European and Asian immigrants who settled on the Eastside enter old age.

As the number of elderly residents on the Eastside nearly doubles in the next 20 years, services for seniors (including transportation, chore services, meal delivery, home health assistance, and caregiving) will need to be significantly expanded.

The Eastside is becoming more diverse

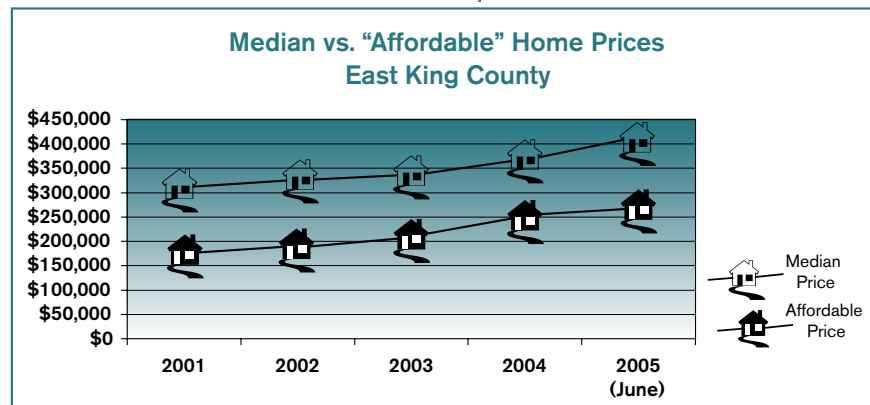
Redmond and Bellevue are among ten cities in the state with the largest increase in foreign-born residents between 1990 and 2000. The percentage of foreign-born residents doubled in both cities, to 25% in Bellevue and 21% in Redmond.¹³

The number of Asian and Hispanic residents in Bellevue doubled between 1990 and 2000 to 17.6% (Asian) and 5.3% (Hispanic). Bellevue now has a Latino population

Many who work here can't afford to live here

Median home and condo prices on the Eastside have increased by over \$100,000 since 2001, resulting in an "affordability gap" between median income and home prices.¹⁶

Schoolteachers, police officers, and others who earn below median income (\$77,900 for a family of four) find it almost impossible to buy a home.¹⁷



equal in size to Seattle's.¹⁴ Non-English speakers make up 22% of Bellevue's student population, with 61 "first languages."¹⁵



“The Eastside has changed so much in the last ten years. How do we keep our communities great places to live with this much change?”

*Jim Lauinger, Councilmember,
Kirkland City Council*

Mark and Janice, who live with their two teens, look like any other middle-class family. They don't look like they're in trouble. But then, that's often the case here on the Eastside: not all need is visible.

From a distance, life on the Eastside looks good. Our communities are home to some of the world's wealthiest people and most successful businesses. Our neighborhoods are attractive and well-maintained, our crime rates are low, our schools are good.

But not everyone has shared this success. In fact, even many people who look successful may be struggling with problems that aren't easily seen.

That's certainly the case for Mark and Janice. Janice worked in a local dentist's office while Mark commuted around the region for his job

as a project manager with a commercial design firm. With both of their kids in high school, they were starting to look toward college and an empty nest.

Their focus changed suddenly, however, when Mark's firm went out of business in early 2004. The family's health insurance ended when Mark lost his job, so they're now doing without insurance and hoping no one gets sick. They lived on savings for a while, but have since accumulated over \$50,000 in credit card and home equity debt.

Mark and Janice know they may have to sell their home to cut their expenses, and realize that if anyone in the family gets sick or injured they could face even more financial trouble. They know they need help climbing out of debt and finding a new job for Mark, but simply don't know where to turn.

Too many families are living without health insurance

Between 2000 and 2004, 7.2% of Eastside residents aged 18-64 said they had no medical insurance.¹⁸ In Bellevue in 2003, 19% of residents reported that they were unable to get or pay for health insurance, and 15% said they could not pay for doctor's appointments, prescriptions, or dental bills.¹⁹

In 2003 and 2004, Evergreen Hospital in Kirkland saw a doubling of requests for charity care for prescriptions and basic health needs, a phenomenon that cost the hospital over \$5 million in each of those years.²⁰ The Redmond Community Health Center, which provides health care to low income Eastside residents, reported that its patient load increased 16% from 2003 to 2004.²¹

A recent study by a group of Harvard economists concluded that half of all bankruptcies in America were caused by medical expenses.²²

Job growth is less robust than anticipated

King County lost more than 60,000 jobs during 2001 and 2002.²³ Nearly a quarter of King County's job loss came from the Eastside. Bellevue and Kirkland each lost more than 8% of their job base.²⁴

Although the recession formally ended several years ago, recent job growth on the Eastside has not yet been enough to replace the jobs that were lost, according to a mid-2005 economic report.²⁵

People who lose a job may also lose health insurance or a retirement plan in addition to income.

Not all need can be seen; some problems aren't visible

Eastside Domestic Violence Program reports that it served 6,211 victims of domestic violence from East or North King County in 2003, more than double the number it served just three years earlier.²⁶

Over 7,700 Eastside residents received county-administered mental health services in 2004, nearly double the number served in 2002.²⁷



“Three teens committed suicide on the Eastside just this spring. These issues don’t discriminate by income. How can we help kids in trouble before they turn to drugs, or alcohol, or worse?”

*Linda Larson,
Mercer Island parent*

Abby looks the epitome of the successful Eastside teenager. A good student and varsity-level tennis player, she has promising opportunities for her future.

But Abby isn’t enjoying high school. In fact, she hasn’t enjoyed life very much at all since her mother died of breast cancer two years ago. She feels pressured to excel in school – teachers are always telling her it’s what her mother would have wanted – and to push herself athletically so that she’ll be recruited by the “right” colleges and possibly win a sports scholarship.

But Abby doesn’t want to play tennis and doesn’t even want to go to school anymore. She’s been cutting classes and having her friends cover for her, but she knows it’s only a matter of time until her father finds out. She’s thinking about just dropping out.

In the meantime, she’s scared of her moods. She’s become paranoid and edgy, sometimes giddy but often lethargic and depressed. She drinks a lot on weekends, and has been taking some painkillers she bought from one of her friends. She heard recently that a couple of boys on the Eastside had killed themselves. Her friends said they thought it was scary, but Abby found the idea of suicide kind of peaceful. She sometimes thinks about suicide herself.

Abby wishes she had someone to talk to. Her dad’s still grieving over her mother’s death and doesn’t really seem to listen to her. And her teachers and friends can’t see past the image they have of her as a talented athlete and student who has life under control. She just wishes she knew where to turn.

Young people's mental health needs are increasing

Children make up about one-third of all those receiving mental health services in King County.²⁸ Youth Eastside Services reports that it is serving more clients and providing more hours of service during 2005 than ever before with a 20% increase in clients.²⁹

According to King County's 2004 Healthy Youth Survey, results for Eastside youth reveal that 12% of 8th graders and 15% of 10th graders contemplated suicide within the past year, and 6% of 8th graders and 7% of 10th graders attempted suicide.³⁰ Three Eastside high school students died by suicide in early 2005.

Dropping out of school can hurt for life

At commencement time this year some Eastside districts will be missing 20% or more of their senior class. Some of these students will graduate later; but most will have dropped out sometime between starting 9th grade and finishing 12th.³¹

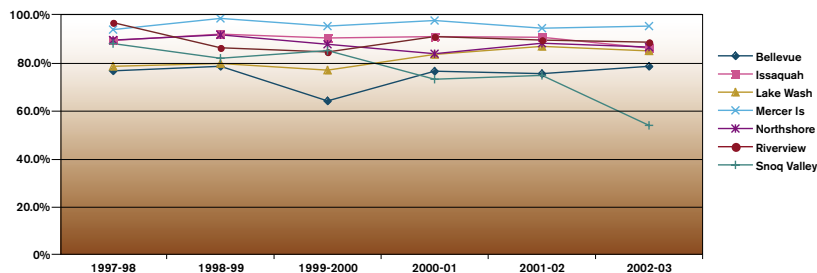
High school dropouts earn only about half as much as graduates do, are more likely to be unemployed, and are three times more likely to rely upon public assistance.³²

Substance abuse treatment is not always available

Ten percent of Eastside tenth graders have been drunk or high at school, and 5% of 8th graders and 12.5% of 10th graders said they had consumed 5 or more drinks in a row within the past two weeks.³³ Yet young people with substance abuse problems often have to wait up to four weeks for an appointment to see a counselor at an Eastside agency, and some teens are turned away altogether.

Youth Eastside Services reports that teenage girls are becoming more likely to experience substance abuse problems, making up nearly half the caseload. Hispanic youth and the children of immigrant and refugee families increasingly need mental health and substance abuse treatment. Agency staff also note that many teenagers now have multiple problems in addition to substance abuse, including depression, behavioral problems, or self-harm behavior such as cutting.

Graduation Rates - Eastside School Districts





The Eastside is changing. The Eastside is not the same place it was five or ten years ago. The population is changing, growing more diverse, poorer, and older. And there are fewer opportunities for people who live here – or who grew up here and would like to return – as housing prices increase faster than incomes.

We're not immune from problems here. Life on the Eastside looks good from a distance. But far too many people here are struggling with job loss, poverty, mental illness, and even homelessness. Their problems affect all of us, changing how our neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and even local businesses function.

Larger regional and national trends affect us as well here on the Eastside, setting conditions for our economy, our local governments, and the kind of help we can count on when people here are in need. Several of these larger trends have had significant impacts on people throughout the community.

A slow economic recovery

In 2001, the Puget Sound region entered what economists have labeled the worst recession in 30 years. King County lost more than 60,000 jobs during 2001 and 2002,³⁴ and several Eastside cities – including Bellevue and

Kirkland – lost nearly 10% of their job base.

The rest of the U.S. emerged from the recession in 2002, but in King County recovery has taken longer. Analysts note that job growth here did not resume until 2004, and that even by mid 2005 most Eastside communities had not been able to replace all the jobs they had lost. And the job growth that is occurring here, mostly in high tech, remains out of reach for people without the right training and experience.

More people looking for work combined with steadily rising prices means more crises with emergency needs for food, shelter, and heat. Hopelink, which serves people in North and East King County, reported a 63% increase in utility disconnections during the first few months of 2005 compared to all of 2004, and noted that food banks (on the Eastside as well as throughout the state) experienced their highest number of visits ever in 2004.³⁵

There is less government help for people in need

Federal assistance for housing has been cut. In May 2005, the King County Housing Authority removed more than 4,000 people from the waiting list for its Section 8 Housing Choice rent voucher program, and then permanently closed the waiting list. Of the people taken off the waiting list, 12.7%, or 508 families, currently live on the Eastside and are at risk of homelessness if they cannot find affordable housing. Most are “working poor,” earning less than what they need to afford rent along with the other necessities of life.

Another federal program, the Community Development Block Grant Program, has also been threatened with cutbacks. The program is used for low income housing and other capital projects for people in need, such as YWCA Family Village in Redmond, which provides

“Our workers are having more and more trouble buying homes here. You wouldn’t think Puget Sound Energy has anything to do with housing or homelessness, but we even have a few employees that found themselves unable to keep their homes and have ended up homeless. Housing prices can really hurt us, our employees and our customers. High housing prices on the Eastside also increase the transportation problems, since many people commute long distances just to afford a home for their families.”

Jerry Henry, Senior Vice President of Energy Efficiency and Customer Services, Puget Sound Energy

“Lack of affordable housing is going to cause more problems as time goes by. People generally like to live fairly close to where they work. But we have many people working in the Eastside economy – young working adults, immigrants, people in service jobs on whom we all depend – who find it very difficult to find housing here that they can afford. I’m concerned about what that means for our communities in terms of who gets to live, work and play here.”

Linda Holman, Manager –
Administrative Services and
Community Relations, Univar
USA, Inc.

transitional housing for homeless families; and assisted living units for seniors in Bellevue, Kirkland, Bothell, Woodinville, and other communities. Funding was proposed to be cut completely in 2006, taking away up to \$1.4 million a year from Eastside communities. Although bipartisan support from around the country is likely to restore the program in 2006, future budget cuts are likely.

Local funding for basic human needs has also been jeopardized in recent years. King County’s budget for health and human services has been threatened with significant cuts in each of the last three years, leaving agencies that provide these services – and the people they assist – unsure of their future. County leaders warn that human services funding may be cut entirely by 2008 because of the pressing need for additional funds for public safety and jails.

Homelessness is a symptom of larger needs

Increasingly expensive housing, a slow job market, and cutbacks in government help have pushed some of our neighbors into homelessness. The Eastside was included for the first time ever in fall 2004 in King County’s annual One Night Count of Homelessness, and 8% of the homeless people surveyed during that count gave an Eastside address as their last permanent home.³⁶

The Eastside Interfaith Social Concerns Council, which organizes nighttime shelter for homeless men, provided 42% more bed-nights in 2004 than in 2003.³⁷ In addition, a Tent City was established on the Eastside for the first time during 2004. A countywide plan released in early 2005 pledges to end homelessness in 10 years, but doing so will require a concerted effort.

What's Next?

We have strong communities here on the Eastside. We know our neighbors, care about our local schools, and have always reached out to those in need.

But the Eastside is not the same place it was five or ten years ago. Our communities are changing quickly, and the needs our neighbors face are changing too. It's up to all of us to do more to ensure that we continue to remain caring communities, committed to help those in our midst who are in need.

After all, we're all better off if everyone's better off. Businesses benefit when their employees can live nearby. Schools achieve more when fewer students are struggling with poverty. And hospitals can provide better care to everyone when they're not forced to absorb millions of dollars in unpaid bills.

What can we do? Here are three proposed actions. They apply to all of us, residents, business leaders, and elected officials alike.

- 1. Notice the changing face of need on the Eastside.** Need isn't always easy to see, but it's becoming more prevalent.
- 2. Advocate for Eastside needs.** A slow economic recovery and cutbacks in government funding have made times difficult for many families throughout the region. But the needs of people on the Eastside are just as crucial even when funding is tight.
- 3. Invest in the Eastside with your time, expertise, and charitable contributions.** Support local non-profit agencies that are making a difference in people's lives. Help them tell their stories and help them advocate for funding.

The mission of the Eastside Human Services Forum is to foster strong public and private partnerships to assure a stable network of health and human services for the benefit of all East King County residents.

Eastside Human Services Forum
425-452-6452
www.eastsideforum.org

EASTSIDE HUMAN SERVICES FORUM MEMBERS

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City of Bellevue
City of Issaquah
City of Kirkland
City of Mercer Island
City of Redmond
Eastside Human Services Alliance
Evergreen Health Care
Family Resource Center
Hopelink
King County
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Snoqualmie Valley Governments Association
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YWCA Family Village

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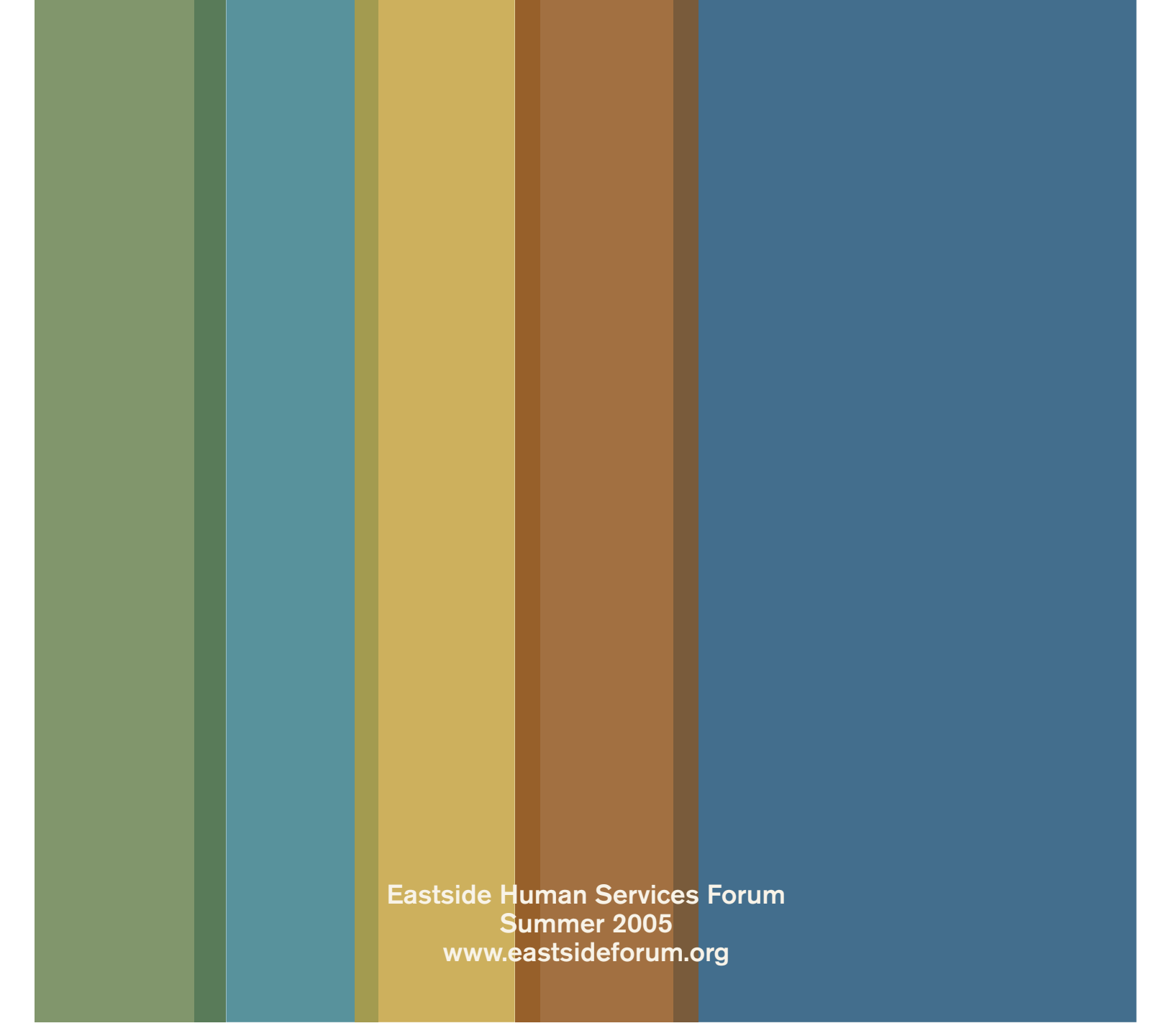
Joe Forkner
Jeanette Greenfield
David Irons
Jim Lauinger
Doreen Marchione
Margaret Moore
Phil Noble
Jackie Pendergrass
Kristy Sullivan
Pat Vache
Elizabeth Westburg

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Footnotes

- 1 King County Consortium Consolidated Housing & Community Development Plan for 2005-2009, Appendix A Needs Assessment, pp. 90-97.
- 2 Hopelink, data provided by Timothy Lockwood, June 2005.
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