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# Vero Beach

AUGUST 2021

*Magazine*®

*Collectors consider shells works of natural art*

## Jewels of the Sea





BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

# Economic Opportunity

JEFF PICKERING, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE INDIAN RIVER COMMUNITY FOUNDATION, DIVES INTO THE DATA

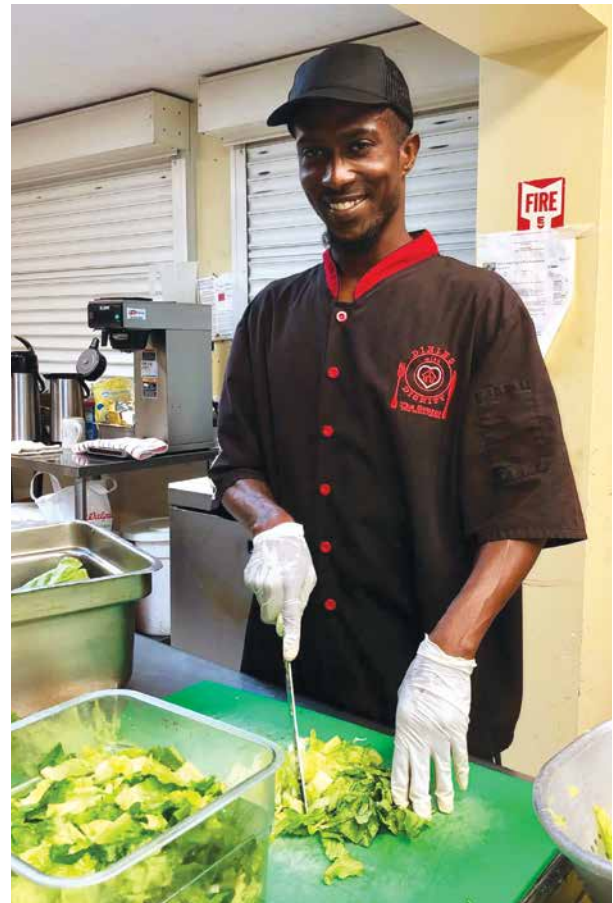
**F**riendly, special, a great place to raise a family or spend the best years of your life – these are just a few of the words I have heard people use when describing our community to others, and I couldn't agree more.

I would also add that Indian River County is exceptional in our desire to keep improving the lives of everyone who lives here. To that end, a group comprised of community leaders, funding organizations, donor groups and government officials came together in 2019 to take an honest look at the lives of county residents. The group worked with an independent consultant for a year to gather, review and analyze information. More than 50 nonprofit organizations participated, and individuals

provided information directly through surveys and focus groups.

The work resulted in the Community Needs Assessment, which you can find on the Community Foundation's website. The report celebrates several recent improvements while highlighting areas where substantial problems persist. It offers us a baseline against which to measure progress and a lens to focus our efforts on specific areas where we can make an impact on people's lives.

Economic opportunity is arguably one of the most significant of those areas. Put simply, opportunity is an antidote to poverty. People with an income that can meet basic needs can make better choices about housing, education, childcare, food, medical care and more. Employ-



The Source's Dining with Dignity program offers participants the opportunity to prepare for careers in the culinary arts.





Indian River State College and Piper Aircraft collaborate in an apprenticeship program in which students shadow skilled aircraft assembly workers while completing related coursework.

## The MIT living wage calculator estimated that it cost a family of four \$63,145 to live in our community (in 2019).

ment can also give people access to benefits such as health insurance. Not surprisingly, people who earn enough money to afford essentials live healthier, more prosperous lives.

### SO HOW ARE WE DOING?

While Indian River County is one of the top 10 richest counties in Florida, it has also been ranked as having the 10th largest income gap, the difference between the earnings of the top 1% and the bottom 99%, out of over three thousand counties nationwide. The needs

assessment concludes that close to half of all county residents are living in poverty or are one paycheck away from it.

Data from the census helps put this information in perspective. The poorest of our residents live in census tracts that have an average life expectancy of 75 years, while our more affluent areas show an average life expectancy of 87 years. That 12-year gap occurs between neighborhoods that are in some cases only four miles apart.

Last year, 11% of Indian River County's total population lived

in poverty, and another 33% earned income above the federal poverty level (currently \$26,500 for a family of four) but not high enough to afford basic necessities. This group of residents, what the United Way refers to as the ALICE population (asset-limited, income-constrained, employed), includes housekeepers, waiters, landscapers and laborers. It also includes many of Indian River County's 3,000 teachers. The average annual income for this group was \$43,094 in 2019. During the same year, the MIT living wage calculator estimated that it cost a family of four \$63,145 to live in our community.

Unfortunately, the 10-year job growth projections for our area have tended to be highest in these lower paying categories, a trend that favors

single individuals but does not do much to help working families striving to get ahead.

Unlike surrounding counties, Indian River County is nowhere close to the list of Florida's fastest growing counties when it comes to development or economic opportunity. While none of us wants to see the sort of unplanned growth that changes the very things that keep our county special, we still have work to do to ensure that all our residents can live healthy, prosperous lives.

### ARE WAGES HELPING WORKERS KEEP UP IN OUR COMMUNITY?

Historically, many of Indian River County's

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Students completing the welding program at Treasure Coast Technical College can find well-paying jobs right out of school.

jobs have represented low-wage opportunities in agriculture, tourism and other service sectors. In 2019, many of these jobs paid a minimum wage of \$8.56 per hour or \$17,805 per year. In recent years, though, the economy has improved as more skilled labor opportunities emerge in fields such as health care, information technology, light manufacturing, and wholesale and retail trade. As a result, the average annual wage has increased to \$20.10 per hour or \$41,808 per year. Single individuals are faring better, although families are still struggling.

Credit for some of

the increased prosperity among Indian River County residents can be attributed to the principal employers, where 14% of Indian River County's 60,000 jobs are located: Cleveland Clinic Indian River Hospital, School District of Indian River County, Indian River County government, Publix supermarkets and Piper Aircraft. These companies tend to pay higher-than-average wages, even for entry-level positions. They also tend to hire and retain employees from higher income households, whose tax dollars and consumer spending bolster the local economy

## Several programs are in place to prepare our teens and young adults for higher paying careers.

year-round.

Other credit for wage and job growth can be attributed to forward-thinking policies such as Indian River County's tax abatement program, which allows an existing business to expand or make capital improvements without increasing taxes assessed by the county's general fund. Businesses can use these savings to create new jobs, increase wages or make improvements to their overall working conditions.

One of the first beneficiaries of this renewed program in 2021 was the construction of a new facility in Gifford for a defense contractor. The facility led to 22 new jobs that are expected to pay more than 115% of the county's average annual wage. These sorts of high-skilled jobs and the new spending they enable lead to exponential growth in the local economy.

Finally, for the large number of Indian River County residents who still earn a living working entry-level jobs, more opportunities exist with

the recent passage of Florida's Amendment 2. This new law passed by voters in November 2020 will raise Florida's minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2026. Aside from the recent uptick tied to the global pandemic, these combined changes are expected to continue pushing local unemployment levels to their lowest in more than a decade.

### WHO IS LENDING A HAND UP?

Despite the progress we have made in recent years, data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey reveals persistent concerns: Almost 6% of Indian River County's youth aged 16 to 19 are neither working or in school, the average annual income of Blacks is approximately \$27,000 less than that of whites, and women are earning approximately \$7,000 less than the median earnings of men. Fortunately, organizations and programs exist in Indian River County that are working to address these dispari-



Award-winning foods from the talented chefs in the Dining with Dignity program are available around town from the Dignity Food Truck.

ties to promote prosperity for all.

Several programs are in place to prepare our teens and young adults for higher-paying careers. In partnership with Indian River State College, the School District of Indian River County provides high school students with opportunities to learn skills, gain industry certifications, and begin earning college credits. These programs launch students on a path toward an associate or bachelor's degree, a first step toward a well-paying career. Certificates are available in fields such as aerospace technologies, applied cybersecurity, auto maintenance, avionics, business management, culinary arts, digital video technology,

drafting, industrial biotechnology, entrepreneurship, nursing and web development.

For students interested in pursuing employment immediately following high school, Treasure Coast Technical College offers programs for teens and young adults to gain hands-on experience in jobs that pay well above the minimum wage. Graduates gain employment as medical and nursing assistants, pharmacy technicians, phlebotomists and welders.

Florida Institute of Technology operates the WeVenture Women's Business Center to provide education, mentoring and other support to women entrepreneurs and business owners.

“More women thriving in the workforce is our goal,” says executive director Kathryn Rudloff.

Finally, local non-profit organizations also run programs geared toward helping people who have experienced difficulties finding or keeping a good job. United Against Poverty operates the Success Training Employment Program – otherwise known as STEP. Participants spend 120 hours learning emotional intelligence, workplace skills and job acquisition. They have helped hundreds of people find a path out of poverty.

Camp Haven provides homeless men with the care, guidance and accountability they need to heal physically, mentally and spiritually

in order to become contributing members of the community around them. One successful participant describes his journey this way: “About two years ago, I had a job making more than \$60,000 per year. I thought it would be the last job I ever had, but some things happened in my life that led to some serious problems with anxiety. I lost my job, ended up homeless, and Camp Haven helped me to get back on my feet. I’ve got my bills paid off, I own a truck, I’m reconnected with my family. I’m better off now than I have ever been.”

## ACHIEVING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

As you can see, although we're faced with challenges, it is possible to imagine a future for our community in which all families have the resources they need to breathe a little easier. In the meantime, I invite you to explore the Community Needs Assessment and the other resources available on our website at [ircommunityfoundation.org](http://ircommunityfoundation.org). I hope they will encourage you to continue to learn about our community and the things you can do to help all our residents thrive and prosper. ☀