



Disparity issues extend beyond city limits and into county

By Blake Nelson

Columbia Missourian

Published Oct. 27, 2016

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second part of a three-part series about the Boone County Commission election.

COLUMBIA — Two of the commission's three seats are up for grabs. Through video interviews with candidates and profiles of citizens, this series will explore three major issues facing Boone County: growth, disparity and government accessibility. This second part will focus on county disparity.

In the Northern District, Democrat incumbent Janet Thompson is running against Republican Brenndan Riddles.

Video: Northern District on disparity from Columbia Missourian on Vimeo.

Racial disparities — both social and economic — have been a big point of discussion in Boone County over the past year. The Missouri's Attorney General reported this summer that, in Columbia and in the county, black drivers were pulled over far more than white drivers. The 2015 Community Health Improvement Plan, overseen by both city and county officials, found that Boone County had "multiple areas of disparity, with blacks faring worse than whites in income, graduation rates, and deaths from chronic disease."

Overall, almost one of every five people in Boone County lives in poverty, according to the U.S. Census. That's a higher rate than the state as a whole.

In the Southern District, Republican Fred Parry is running against Democrat Brianna Lennon.

Video: Southern District on disparity from Columbia Missourian on Vimeo.

One of the ways county government is trying to lift people up is through the Children's Services Fund. Voters approved a special tax to create the fund in 2012, which has since brought in millions of dollars to help kids in crisis.

The Boone County Children's Services Board, which is appointed by the county commission, decides which agencies to fund. One of those, Lutheran Family and Children's Services of Missouri, has received hundreds of thousands of dollars for both its Nurturing Network and its Maternal Mental Health programs, according to a 2015 report.

That money has helped people like Deborah Fristoe-Gaines.

"We're not poor," Fristoe-Gaines said recently, sitting at a cluttered kitchen table in her west-central Columbia home. "We're just struggling."

Fristoe-Gaines is the legal guardian for three children: a 10-year-old boy, a 9-year-old boy and an 8-year-old girl. Their names have been withheld to protect their identities.

One boy has post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of his parents' struggle with drug addiction. The other was diagnosed on the Asperger's spectrum, and Fristoe-Gaines said he has attempted suicide four times since she took him in. The younger two have both been homeless. All three have large plastic bags filled with medications.

Technically, the three children are Fristoe-Gaines' cousins. But they call her mom, and she calls them her kids.

At times, their home is peaceful. Oct. 14 was family night, and the kids were getting ready for pizza. The 9-year-old sat on the carpet by the kitchen, playing with his feet.

"So can we watch a movie tonight then?" he said.

Fristoe-Gaines' adult daughter, Tara Bailey, looked up from the refrigerator.

"I told you, we're going to watch a special movie!"

The boy was not appeased.

"What movie?" he said. Both Bailey and Fristoe-Gaines responded at the same time.

"A special movie!" they said.

"Just tell me!" the boy said.

Fristoe-Gaines held her ground. She knew they were going to watch the newest X-Men, but she wasn't about to surrender that secret before dinner.

"No, it wouldn't be special if she tell you!"

Other days, the tranquility collapses.

Sometimes, that's due to economic concerns. Fristoe-Gaines is retired and on a fixed income. Some months she has to make a choice between, for example, paying the electric bill or buying her kids new shoes.

"Nobody knows all of these struggles because nobody ever talks about it," Fristoe-Gaines said. "Some people are too prideful. And they're embarrassed that they don't have money. I'm not embarrassed."

Over the past year, two social workers named Shaileen Thompson and Ann Carlock from Lutheran Family and Children's Services have helped Fristoe-Gaines and her kids: buying them clothes, giving them rides, offering counseling and connecting them to other agencies.

The extra help is a huge burden lifted for Fristoe-Gaines, who has suffered her own history of abuse.

Years ago, she was a line supervisor for the Toastmaster plant in Macon. She was married to a man who was verbally and sexually abusive. One day, she remembered telling a colleague she needed to go the bathroom. She took off her gloves and placed them on a table.

Then her memory cuts out.

The next thing she remembered was slowly waking up, and wondering why she could hear a woman screaming.

"I just kept thinking in my head, 'I wish she would stop screaming, I wish she would stop screaming. I just wanna sleep,'" Fristoe-Gaines said.

"And when I woke up, I couldn't move. I was in a bed in a straight jacket, and it was me screaming."

She had suffered a nervous breakdown, and she spent several weeks in a hospital. She now has post-traumatic stress disorder, and she continues to struggle with depression.

"Sometimes I get so depressed, and I feel like the darkness is just gonna swallow me up, you know?" Fristoe-Gaines said. "And there come a text on my phone, from Ms. Anne, with a Scripture and: 'Thinking of you and continuing to pray for you.' And it lifts my spirits up!"

Fristoe-Gaines was unequivocal about where they would be without the help from Lutheran Family and Children's Services.

"Livin' in the streets. Homeless. Totally homeless."

Recently, her life just became even more complicated.

Fristoe-Gaines' health is deteriorating. She had an aneurysm that occurred several months ago, and two blood clots remain in her brain. Her oldest boy recently had a violent outburst, and all three children were taken into state custody.

Fristoe-Gaines now faces at least one charge of child abandonment. She vehemently disputes those charges, and appeared in court last Thursday to argue that she never abandoned anybody, that the children just need more help than she can provide right now.

Either way, Fristoe-Gaines knows she needs to improve her health, and that she can't do that alone. She was moved that several people showed up in court to offer her their support.

One of them, seated right next to her, was Ann Carlock from Lutheran Family and Children's Services.

Supervising editor is Scott Swafford.