

## Bridges Out of Poverty assembling St. Lucie leadership

By Marsha Branch

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ST. LUCIE COUNTY — Understanding what motivates people living in poverty is key for communities tackling poverty reduction and for employers seeking to reduce employee turnover rates and increase productivity.

That's according to St. Lucie County resident Al Rivett, the newly appointed chairman of a national steering committee formed to support Bridges Out of Poverty communities.

"Businesses don't fully understand how they can benefit through participating in Bridges Out of Poverty," he said. "When you reduce a significant amount of turnover, there is a financial benefit to that."

To reduce poverty, Bridges Out of Poverty plans to work with local businesses to increase employee retention. The ability not only to get a job but to keep it is vital when tackling poverty reduction.

Rivett referenced a Michigan company that used Bridges Out of Poverty training to reduce its employee turnover rate from 17 percent to less than 2 percent, for a savings of more than \$300,000 in four years.

The nonprofit Roundtable of St. Lucie County in 2010 identified Bridges Out of Poverty as a means of addressing, in a community approach, what it considers a staggering increase in the county's poverty levels.

The 2012 St. Lucie County Poverty Report, which the roundtable presented at a public forum earlier this year, shows more than 15 percent of the population, or almost 50,000 people, are living in poverty — a 99 percent increase in just 10 years. More than a third are children and teens.

Rivett said those numbers are rising, which he attributed to the economy and population growth that has surpassed job creation. In 2010, St. Lucie's population grew 44 percent, more than double that of the state, making the county one of the fastest growing areas in America. County unemployment in 2011 was 13 percent, compared to 10.5 percent statewide.

Bridges Out of Poverty is assembling a leadership team to raise awareness of poverty in the county and establish goals for reducing it.

"The plan is to have a group that's going to take ownership and move this out into the

community," Rivett said. "The plan is for people to understand the issue of poverty. There are a lot of people in our community that don't understand, don't acknowledge, don't appreciate that we have a poverty problem."



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