

A Universal Indicator

By Steve Brown, Barnstable County Department of Human Services

The concept of a universal indicator is based on “Mind the Gap”, an idea that grew out of work on community sustainability by Diana Pearce, Ph.D. at the University of Washington in Seattle, leading to her “Self Sufficiency Standard.” In Massachusetts, this “Self Sufficiency Standard” has been used to evaluate many towns and regions, and has become a central component to measure the progress of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, a long-term success story which chronicles a community’s journey toward economic, environmental, and social health.

Research conducted over the past decade by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Barnstable County Department of Human Services and The Women’s Union documents that health corresponds with a person’s or household’s capacity for economic self-sufficiency. Thus, we believe “Mind the Gap” can be applied in a similar way on Cape Cod as in Boston, Seattle, and hundreds of other communities.

A Universal Indicator could address this fundamental question: “Are Cape Cod residents and households able to sustain their health and security with the economic, social and environmental resources available to them?” The ideal is no gap at all - a “positive” number. The larger the number (i.e. the smaller the gap), the healthier the community. The Universal Indicator could derive this number using three measures:

1. *Economic*: The ratio of the % of households earning less than \$15,000 annually to the % of households earning more than \$150,000 annually.
2. *Social*: The difference between the County’s median household income and the cost of living for a specific type of household (for example, two adults, one school age child, and one pre-school child).

Environmental: We might employ the concept of an “ecological footprint” for Cape Cod. The size of this foot print incorporates a composite of the ecological impact of individuals’ on Cape Cod’s use of food, mobility (transportation), shelter, and goods/services. An example of an ecological footprint “quiz” may be found online at <http://www.earthday.net/footprint/index.asp>.