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Cassidy: Silicon Valley's haves could save have-nots

By **Mike Cassidy**
Mercury News Columnist
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If you're going to go into the business of helping the most vulnerable among us, it helps to be able to see the good news even when it's slathered with bad news.

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And so rather than look at a recent report on the range of the human condition in California as a discouraging description of the chasm between the fabulously wealthy and those who sometimes go to bed hungry, Carole Leigh Hutton sees the analysis, in part, as a sign that there is plenty of potential for the haves to help the have-nots.

Hutton runs United Way Silicon Valley. The other day she handed me a report, "A Portrait of California," that breaks state's residents into demographic chunks based on well-being. While the report by the American Human Development Project was packed with conclusions drawn from Census Bureau and public health data, what interested me most was the way it illustrated the vast differences in the quality of life enjoyed or endured by different segments of Silicon Valley.

Take a group the project dubbed "Silicon Valley Shangri-La." These residents of Cupertino, Saratoga, Los Gatos, Los Altos, Mountain View and Palo Alto as a whole enjoy the highest standard of living in the state. Statistically speaking they live long lives, are extremely well educated, tend to work in high tech and have median incomes of \$63,000 -- twice the statewide median. But the survey acknowledges there are plenty in the same series of mini-census tracts who are

struggling -- relying on food stamps and earning a fraction of Shangri-La's median income.

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The report spells out the problems that come with poverty -- high dropout rates, shorter life spans, dependency on government programs and a lack of opportunity that causes the cycle to repeat.

"You look at Silicon Valley and we should absolutely have the capacity to solve these problems," says Hutton, who is United Way's CEO. "We're not a community that lacks innovation or smarts or energy. We're a community that's known for all these."

Hutton used data from the report, which you can find at www.measureofamerica.org, to break out her own study of disparities in Santa Clara County. For instance, while the median personal income for the census area including Cupertino, Saratoga and Los Gatos is \$73,000, the median figure for East San Jose, grouped with "Struggling California," is \$25,000.

Silicon Valley Shangri-La scored a perfect 10 on the project's education index, which looks at school-age enrollment

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and degrees held by adult residents. The figure in East San Jose was 2.8. Only 2.4 percent of the children in Cupertino, Saratoga and Los Gatos live in poverty. In East San Jose, it's more than 22 percent.

That there are rich people and poor people is hardly news. Anyone who scans the real estate ads understands that there are wealthy neighborhoods and poor neighborhoods, neighborhoods with good schools and neighborhoods with lousy schools. But Silicon Valley is a place where the rich and poor live side by side -- while at the same time living in different worlds.

Tom Myers, executive director of the Community Services Agency, which provides emergency food and shelter in Mountain View, knows the Peninsula city is not all Shangri-La. "You find great disparity within this one community," he says. "What I tell everybody is you have a lot of wealth that is literally, often times very literally, right next door to poverty."

Myers says demand for his agency's help has risen steadily since the start of the recession. He's heard the stories of big tech companies competing to hire programmers. He's heard the anxious chatter about whether the valley is entering another economic bubble. "If you're not in demand for those kinds of jobs," he says, "there is no economic bubble going on here. There is no hiring bubble going on here if you're a person who works in a fast-food restaurant if you're a person trying to make ends meet as a gardener."

Neither Myers nor Hutton begrudge those who are in demand or doing well. In fact, the wealth and developed skills the haves are just the thing organizations like the Community Services Agency and the United Way need to help raise up the have-nots. Those who truly are living in Shangri-La are the ones Myers, Hutton and other social service providers are calling on to contribute money or to volunteer as financial literacy coaches, or as people to read to children or as office help or food bank workers. They are the solution.

"The question is," Myers says, "do you feel like it's important to do something about it? Do you feel like it's important help your neighbors in need?"

He and Hutton are both hoping that the American Human Development Project's work will at least start the discussion.

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