

Recession May be Adding to Florida's Civic Weakness

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2009 Study by Frey Institute & Graham Center Shows Most Floridians are Cutting Back on Civic Involvement

MIAMI (Oct. 14, 2009) – A new report released today by the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship shows that Florida's civic culture is in failing health, indicates that tough economic times are making the illness worse, and highlights the need for immediate action to treat the malady, said former U. S. Congressman Lou Frey, former Florida Governor and U. S. Senator Bob Graham and Michael Weiser, the chairman of the National Conference on Citizenship.

The report, prepared by the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship, found that the state has one of the worst civic cultures in the country, ranking 46th in the nation. It ranked Florida 34th in average voter turnout, 49th in percentage of citizens who volunteer, 48th in percentage of citizens attending a public meeting and 37th in percentage of citizens who worked with others to address a community issue.

"If this report doesn't demonstrate the need to help Floridians, particularly our youngest generation, better understand the importance of active citizenship, nothing ever will," said Senator Graham. "The Legislature is to be commended for recently requiring that middle schools teach civics, but we need to take the additional step of making civics a subject that is taught and tested."

Florida Representative Charles McBurney (R-Jacksonville) has introduced legislation, known as the "Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act," to add social studies, including civics, to the list of subjects tested in the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Also, the Joint Center, in partnership with Leon County Schools and the Florida Law Related Education Association, has launched a newly-developed civics curriculum in Tallahassee schools that it hopes to spread to other districts.

The 2009 survey, funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, indicated that the state's collapsing housing market and impacts of the world-wide recession may be having negative impacts on citizens' engagement, as well with 70 percent saying they have cut back on civic activities in the past year.

Equally troubling in this time of recession is a preliminary estimate in the study that puts Florida at 44th in the nation in the percentage of citizens who contributed at least \$25 to charity in 2008.

"Simply put, Florida has a weak civic culture, one of the worst in the nation," Congressman Frey observed, "But that doesn't have to be the state's future."

Even in the midst of economic pain, weak citizenship is a statewide problem with a statewide solution, said Michael Weiser, chair of the National Conference on Citizenship, which helped develop the study as part of a national effort to measure the country's civic health.

"Florida's leaders need to focus on such basics as civic education, teaching Florida history and encouraging Floridians to volunteer in their communities. These initiatives cost little but can yield highly leveraged results in terms of the future health of Florida's citizenship," Weiser said.

Some Florida communities – notably Palm Bay–Melbourne and Tampa–St. Petersburg – were found to have developed stronger civic cultures. And, the study shows, many who are already engaged in their community are doing more, with 46% of those who were highly engaged in the past year reporting that they are expanding involvement.

But overall, the report said, communities in Florida fall well below national averages and far from benchmarks set by communities like Minneapolis, Seattle and Provo, Utah.

Ranking at the bottom of the list in Florida are the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale and Sarasota-Bradenton

areas. In fact, Miami-Ft. Lauderdale ranked 50th among the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas on three key civic indicators: volunteering, public meeting attendance and collaboration with others on local issues.

“Despite some bright spots and evidence of personal compassion among many of our citizens, the report makes it clear that community leaders throughout Florida face a significant challenge to not only improve the state of their civic health, but also to find ways to avoid further deterioration in these times of economic difficulty,” said Senator Graham.

The Florida Joint Center for Citizenship is a joint venture of The Lou Frey Institute at the University of Central Florida and The Bob Graham Center for Public Service at the University of Florida. The full study may be found at www.loufrey.org.

About the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship

The Florida Joint Center for Citizenship is a partnership between the Lou Frey Institute of Politics and Government at the University of Central Florida and the Bob Graham Center for Public Service at the University of Florida. Established in 2007, the Joint Center works on a variety of initiatives intended to strengthen civic education and improve the condition of Florida's civic health

About the National Conference on Citizenship

Founded in 1946 and Chartered by Congress in 1953, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) is a leader in strengthening our nation's civic life. In partnership with over 250 organizations, NCoC tracks, measures and promotes civic participation. Through this work, NCoC helps define modern citizenship in America. More information can be found at www.ncoc.net.

About the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation advances journalism in the digital age and invests in the vitality of communities where the Knight brothers owned newspapers. Knight Foundation focuses on projects that promote community engagement and lead to transformational change. For more, visit www.knightfoundation.org.

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