

**2022 Regional Community Health Needs Assessment:
Geographic Community Conversation Summary: Pottstown [Montgomery County]**

Community Assets

In the Pottstown area, participants value having a **strong sense of community**, as well as **local faith-based institutions and other organizations** that serve people in need and provide meaningful opportunities for volunteering:

- A Latina participant, who attends Spanish mass at a local church, commented: *“It’s a really nice sense of community of togetherness, everybody comes together. When somebody is going through a rough time, I see people genuinely caring about the people that attend there. ... It makes me feel like it’s my happy place, right, like on Sundays I look forward to, even though it’s a really early mass.”*
- In Pottstown borough, community events and resources such as a local **farmers market** help to reinforce social connections and promote health. *“There’s a lot of things that the town has to offer that focus around your well-being overall.”*
- Another added that for retirees or those who are not working, *“it’s good to have something to do during the day, and volunteerism fits into that and provides ... something to look forward to when you wake up, and somebody’s counting on you to show up, and there’s a lot of that in Pottstown.”*
- A resident of a senior community mentioned the importance of local services such as **Meals on Wheels** and the **Tri County Senior Center**, and noted how her community provides *“anything from transportation, to sitting with somebody to being concerned to hospital and nursing home visits, [to] really support the health of this ... aging community.”*
- A surge in **volunteers who are helping to support older adults during the pandemic** also was noted. *“We had a lot of people from the community step up to the plate, some teachers who weren’t teaching through the end of the year, and other businesses who went remote. So, it was kind of uplifting that we saw a bunch of new faces.”*

Opportunities for **outdoor activity**, such as the Schuylkill River Trail, are abundant. *“Pottstown is very outdoors friendly ... there’s a lot of things to do, like the trail, that’s something that a lot of my friends do. ... It’s a good opportunity to kind of stay healthy, right, like exercise or whatever, take walks with your children and stuff with your dogs.”*

While **Pottstown borough is a walkable community**, where children walk to school, nearby areas may not be as walkable. *“In Lower Pottsgrove, there are few if any sidewalks. So, it makes some of the walking very difficult. You really have to drive someplace or take a bus someplace in order to utilize the outdoor space.”*

Key Challenges

Heart disease and diabetes are common, participants said. *“Diabetes is something that is huge. ... that is something that is really present in the community, said a participant who works with the Hispanic/Latino community. She added that she sees many cases of high blood pressure and that “there’s so many things that high blood pressure contributes to, and people take [it] for granted. People don’t think that’s a chronic illness, like that’s nothing serious, but it is. High blood pressure can lead to having a stroke or having a heart attack. ... I feel that that’s something that I’ve seen in the Hispanic community, but I’m sure that it’s something that the*

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whole community is going through.”

Behavioral health issues are a major concern, as is accessing care for these needs. *“There’s a lack of availability for mental services 100%, here in Pottstown, I’ve had a really rough time finding mental health services for children especially,”* said a participant from a social services agency. *“It’s just such a lack of services for mental health for children, especially, [and for] adults ... Like a lot of adults don’t have health insurance, and so covering a therapist or any kind of mental health help anywhere, it’s just close to impossible for a lot of people that I serve specifically.”*

Drug use is also a major behavioral health issue. *“A lot of substance abuse cases in Pottstown are very overlooked,”* said one participant, who added that many with substance use issues are at risk of homelessness, which poses challenges for local emergency shelters.

Access to care for behavioral health, as well as other health and social service needs, is especially difficult for immigrants, particularly those who lack transportation or who do not speak English as their first language. *“I work with the Hispanic community, and transportation is a huge deal with our community, because there are a lot of undocumented families in Pottstown ... I guess that’s something that not everybody thinks about, but it’s something that I think about every day, because I’m an immigrant, and then the community that I serve is a community of immigrants,”* shared one participant. She noted that many immigrants lack a driver’s license, which creates barriers not only for accessing health care but other essential activities as well.

Language barriers are another challenge for the area’s diverse immigrant population. *“The first thing that stood out to me when I arrived to Pottstown was the lack of bilingual staff in everywhere, like the hospital, the clinics, the police station,”* commented the participant who works with the Hispanic/Latino community. *“If there’s one thing I feel really strongly about [it’s] access to translation services, because I feel that sometimes you cannot get the whole picture of what’s going on with your child, with your parent, with your grandparent, whoever is in trouble or need, if you can’t understand what they’re saying.”* She added: *“Quality interpretation is important too. A lot of times, interpreting is not just between one language and the other. It’s about making sure that the person that you’re speaking to and the words that you’re using are adequate for their level.”*

Another participant agreed that *“language barriers can be a significant challenge. ... Whether that’s the police department or the hospital, there’s always some form of a language barrier, for a variety of reasons, I would say. [It] can mean that maybe people are understaffed, or they don’t have bilingual bicultural staff, [or] maybe not enough resources to pay for ... a certified interpreter. I think it goes beyond Spanish speakers as well, I’ve encountered those who speak Chinese Mandarin, those who are Korean-speaking, and so I think language overall can be a challenge.”*

As a result of the pandemic, agencies that provide services for behavioral health and other health issues are increasingly short-staffed. *“Recently, that has been a big issue for everyone, right, not having enough staff members to attend to the needs of everybody. And even like the staff that you already have, and I say this openly, because it’s something that everybody knows is*

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going on, ... we are understaffed. So what happens is that each staff member ends up taking up more roles and more responsibilities, and that is a burden, as an employee, as a provider for services—you want to be able to put your full attention and be there 100% for the client that you're assisting. ... It's ridiculous, because there's so much work, and then there's [so few] people that are available to work, and I feel that before it was a lack of jobs, and now it's a lack of employees.”

Another pandemic-related issue: confusion and distress over COVID-related medical bills for those whose illness required hospitalization. *“A lot of people are getting stuck with bills that are related to COVID hospitalizations,”* shared a participant, who attributed the problem to patients’ lack of awareness about emergency medical assistance and health system delays in processing assistance applications.

Children and Youth

For children and youth with mental health issues, accessing care is very difficult—and even more so for immigrant families. *“A lot of times it requires for us to do a lot of searching and like looking into things and calling different agencies, trying to figure out what services they provide, but when it comes to children and mental health issues, ... they never have availability for new patients. ... And when the family doesn't speak English, or doesn't have an interpreter, then they choose to move the child to a waitlist.”*

A few participants also discussed a **lack of affordable extracurricular activities** for children. *“I'm a single parent, and I can't afford to pay for my son to be doing sports,”* one participant said. Another added: *“if you don't have the money ... for the sport the child's interested in, and you don't have the transportation to be able to get there, it becomes an issue of opportunity.”* While the area has a number of free out-of-school time enrichment programs, lack of awareness and communication about their availability can limit their use.

Older Adults

The pandemic has increased **social isolation** for many older adults, as senior centers closed or limited activities. **Heart disease**, often as a complication of **diabetes**, remains common, as is **dementia** among aging adults.

Participants discussed numerous challenges with navigating and affording health care under Medicare policies:

- *“It's hard for people to decide what's best for them. I was a social worker for years and years and years, and [choosing] the appropriate Medicare plan is very, very difficult. It's not just you look at a chart and say, oh, this one fits me. It doesn't work that way at all.”*
- *“It was like there's Medicare A, B, C, and D, and you have to have A and B to get C and then there's a D, that is optional but then it comes with C or it comes with A. ... It's so complicated.”*
- *“Medicare doesn't cover hearing aids—well, how do you function now in society, when a hearing aid can cost \$5,000 and the visits to the audiologist are not covered either? I mean,*

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there are all these things that people cannot afford dental care, appropriate dental care, vision, getting glasses.”

Lack of transportation to health care and other services is difficult for many.

“Transportation is a big barrier for seniors. I know that you can get a bus pass; I think it's over 65 you ride the bus for free, which is great. Not everybody can get to the bus,” shared one participant. She added that TransNet, a service that provides seniors and others with rides to essential services, is available, *“but that is really difficult to manage for a lot of seniors.”*

Seniors living on fixed or limited incomes are often forced to choose whether to pay for food, rent, utilities, medicine, or other essential needs.

- *“The medication issue is a nightmare, how much people are asked to pay towards their medication, once they reach a certain point, it's an outrageous amount of money. And people who are deciding to use less medication, or no medication or less food or less heat.”*
- *“I see a lot of people that live alone, and then they have to decide where their money goes, if it goes towards groceries, or if it goes towards medical bills, and so that's something that I don't think should happen, but that's the U.S. right, like, that's the way that the health insurance is set up for seniors.”*
- *“I see a lot of seniors working part time at like Giant and Walmart and like different places that do minimum wage because they need the money. ... Because they won't qualify for Medicaid anyway, because their Social Security income is too high already, and so they have to compensate by working. And when you're 75-80 years old, the last thing you want to do is be working at Walmart to make ends meet.”*

Suggested Actions

- **Develop a coalition to increase communication and coordination among community groups to address common challenges.** One participant spoke to the need to *“get everyone in the same room so that those client needs can get addressed in a more holistic sort of way.”* Another suggested reconvening the Tri County Network, which had previously met periodically to improve coordination among agencies. Also suggested was a related need to increase communication to the public about existing community services, some of which may be under-utilized due to lack of awareness.
- **Increase provision of aging and adult services in the community.**
- **Improve the patient care experience in local healthcare settings,** especially for those who have a variety of health literacy needs, ranging from language interpretation to accommodations for hearing or vision impairment. In these settings, participants also stressed the need for quality interpretation services to be available to all who need them.
- **As a longer-term solution, develop career pipelines to train more health and social service providers to address staffing shortages,** including training and employing more bilingual staff.