

**2022 Regional Community Health Needs Assessment:
Geographic Community Conversation Summary: River Wards [Philadelphia County]**

Community Assets

The **built environment, specifically, walkability**, was mentioned as an important community asset. *“Walkability—just being able to get out, take a break or a breath of fresh air, it’s really nice to be able to just walk places and be able to get my needs met within a pretty good square radius.”*

A **strong sense of community and social connectedness with neighbors and family** were also highlighted by the majority of participants as important community assets. One shared that: *“Seeing people around and just getting to talk with people is really good for mental health. My neighbors and people around me are really helping.”* Other comments included: *“loving and caring friends and relations”* and *“tranquility, love, unity, and harmony within the neighborhood.”*

Access to healthy affordable food, particularly during the pandemic, was cited as an example of the community working together to address needs. One participant shared: *“Our church continues with the farmers market, and that made it more accessible for a lot of the residents ... so that was a blessing.”* Another stated: *“There was different types of food that was being brought into the neighborhood that wasn’t available at our local supermarket. And it was available to everybody, and everybody was finding use for it. It even created a sense of sharing. If there was more [food than needed], they passed it along to their neighbors, even the elderly neighbors that couldn’t get out.”*

Key Challenges

Physical health concerns included high rates of cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and potential links to the environment.

- *“There’s a high rate of cancer in our area. It was reported nationally at one point because of previous manufacturers that used to be here. And now, it’s all hush-hush...and now, the grounds that were contaminated, they’re building houses on and digging up the dirt. And all of this is being re-exposed even more so than it was 40 years ago. ... There’s no one overseeing the health of the people while all this is being dug up.”*
- Another shared that COPD and other respiratory conditions are prevalent among older adults and suggested that poor air quality within homes is impacting these conditions. The challenges people face in fixing housing due to the cost burden was also stressed: *“COPD, a lot of seniors suffer with it. ... And I feel like in homes, sometimes the air quality isn’t right. ... A lot of people in my community live in old houses, and they’re unable to have the money to fix it up. It’s a real big issue.”*

Mental health, substance use, homelessness, and the need for behavioral health counseling services and expanded rehabilitation services were identified as major health issues by several participants.

- *“It’s frustrating to see people who have been there for decades and who are impacted by drug use and mental health. Instead of setting up places that are going to help those people, like behavioral health or counseling centers, we’re getting restaurants and small businesses. It’s been really sad to see people who are really desperate for help, like we could be using*

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that space for better uses. ... I think it would be cool to see a community where there's both. It feels really unfair to push people out just to make the neighborhood look nicer."

- A participant commented on a former manufacturing site in the community: *"It's a really big facility ... that would have been a perfect opportunity for our city to handle homelessness, the addicted, and mental health. They could have had an intake center, a living facility, their grounds were huge ... and it was sold to developers. ... People with mental health [challenges] in the city of Philadelphia need help more than 72 hours and then put out on the street because their family can't help them with their medication. We need them living in a facility. ... And even with drugs, they need more than what they're getting. They need to stay in there, get rehabilitated, and leave when they have proper housing, and not put back out on the street, and then what else do they have but the drugs?"*

Several participants shared that while urgent care centers were supposed to alleviate emergency department use for non-emergent health issues, **access to urgent care was seen as challenging due to insurance eligibility and out-of-pocket expenses**. One participant stated: *"I think the urgent care centers were something that was supposed to kind of help in our communities. But then when you actually need to go to them there's some kind of criteria that you must meet in order to be seen."* Another agreed, adding: *"When some people go, it's their insurance that's not being accepted."*

Social Determinants of Health

Transportation and "alarming rates of violence" were mentioned as problematic, especially for older adults, by the majority of participants. While public transportation and paratransit are available, safety concerns in terms of mobility and violence, as well as long wait times, all pose access issues to health care and services like pharmacies and supermarkets.

- *"SEPTA transit [paratransit] is supposed to come pick them up. But they end up waiting an hour, like sometimes on the curb and it's cold. And sometimes they don't make their appointments on time because SEPTA was late."*
- *"It's sad to see that seniors can't go and get their medications because of this issue of transportation, and I hear that a lot in my community. I have volunteered to actually take seniors to these places, but I'm only one person and there should be a spectrum of available transportation for seniors."*

Lack of awareness about available community resources was raised as a challenge. As one participant stated: *"I think if people aren't getting out of their homes, especially now with COVID, or like seniors being homebound or folks with disabilities, just letting them know what is out there, especially if they're not able to look it up on a computer—if they don't know it's there, they're not going to go."*

Children and Youth

Participants focused on the need for increased availability of positive activities and opportunities for youth. The need for safe schools that are academically challenging was

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raised. *“Schools, making sure they are safe, and that they’re doing everything that they possibly can to challenge them academically.”*

Another participant highlighted that four of the recreation centers in the community are currently closed or about to be closed due to needed renovations and environmental lead exposure.

Concerns were shared about the impact that closing these neighborhood recreation centers all at the same time would have on area youth. Frustration was also expressed about the lack of transparent communication on the timing of the renovations and when the centers would reopen, as well as concerns that the properties might be sold for redevelopment. **Safety of the recreation areas was also raised due to drug activity in the area.**

- *“To me the timing was terrible. Someone from a political office told me, ‘Well, we can bus them (children) to another one.’ That doesn’t work for a child that wants to be able to walk two blocks and get on the swings or run in the field or have access to the inside after school. They’re not thinking of the children in many ways. ... Children need accessibility in order to interact.”*
- *“I watched the kids during COVID, they were in the streets playing basketball, but they needed more to do, it wasn’t enough, you know.”*
- *“But then the needles from the people at night, when they [children] go in to play during the day.”*

Older Adults

Concerns related to the health of older adults and their access to care were identified as a priority issue. In addition to transportation challenges discussed previously, concerns about the closing of the area recreation centers and the neighborhood senior center were shared.

Participants also disclosed their distress about the quality of care provided by caregivers who are family or friends, as well as caregiving provided through home health care agencies.

- A participant who is a community health worker said, with regard to caregiving provided by family or friends: *“A lot of the caregiving programs are awesome, but who actually governs these programs? I would like to see better goals or management over these types of programs. How often do homecare agencies really check up on these caregivers to see if they’re doing the right thing for seniors? I know that there is some type of stipend ... so is it really adequately being used the right way, and in some cases it’s not. I’m pulled into a lot of situations where seniors have caregivers but they’re not receiving the type of care that they need.”*
- Another participant shared a similar experience with home health aides. *“I went to a senior’s home who receives health aides. Each time I go, the health aide is sitting there on their phone and this is also true for others that I’ve seen.”* This participant, based on perceptions of food availability when visiting older adults, also shared concerns that food available in the household was inadequate or spoiled. Possible misappropriation of food by caregivers was also noted. *“But – it’s very strange that there’s no money left on the food stamp card and yet their refrigerator and cabinets are bare and no one checked the refrigerator, but they [caregivers] take a lot from the older adults too, sadly.”*

Use of technology, even phone systems, was seen as “extremely difficult” for older adults,

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especially if dementia is present. *“It’s not a simple process—press this or do this—and then they wait on hold, and they get confused, ‘Did I miss something?’ Then end up giving up. And then days go by before they try to call again, then they miss their appointments. ... They cannot just call and leave a message for the doctor. It’s not simple anymore. So they obviously need help with something as simple as that or the technology.”*

Other Impacts of the Pandemic

COVID vaccination was discussed from both positive and negative perspectives.

While some participants felt that vaccination should be required and a high priority for workers, others cited the stigma of being unvaccinated and supported the importance of choice.

- *“To be vaccinated or unvaccinated, that’s been a real big challenge. For the ones that choose not to be vaccinated, they’re kind of cast out against the ones that are vaccinated. I’ve seen it right in my own church as well, so that’s been a big issue and problem. And when you say it’s your choice, it should be your choice.”*
- *“It’s causing a lot of division throughout the city, and let alone in neighborhoods with neighbors, which causes stress and stress is—it’s just so unnecessary and so harmful to all.”*

Several participants disclosed the negative impact of vaccination requirements on employment. *“I know people that are on the verge of losing their job that they’ve been at for 20 years—it’s horrible. Who is going to ask who is vaccinated [at large gatherings where] it’s going to be thousands of people? But yet they’re interfering with businesses and people working, their livelihood, really makes no sense.”* Another heard that **street outreach to those experiencing homelessness may have decreased because outreach workers were concerned about becoming infected or unknowingly infecting vulnerable individuals.**

Suggested Actions

Increase opportunities for small transportation businesses to work with larger companies to meet the needs of older adults, such as by providing transport to health care and related errands, such as trips to pharmacies for medications.

Provide training for older adults in the use of technology and navigation support.

Create a large centrally located intake center to help those with mental health or addiction issues, as well as homelessness. *“All these people need to and should have a path to getting a roof over their head and getting medical attention. ... It would solve so much.”*

Increase awareness about available community services and resources through regular distribution of flyers and mailings to homes.

Increase utilization of community health workers in the community.