

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

Community Assets

The importance of **organizations serving the community** was highlighted, including a **local food pantry** and **ACLAMO**, a nonprofit that provides educational programs, social services, and access to health and wellness programs for Latinos and other community members. *“The community has organization like ACLAMO that provide good information for the people,”* said one participant. She also noted the need to raise awareness of community programs and resources in the area. *“I think there's a problem [that] many people of our community don't have the information, the right information for some topics.”*

Churches and other community organizations offer opportunities for social engagement and volunteering. With recent easing of pandemic restrictions, one participant expressed gratitude for being able to join more such activities outside the home. *“Now we are engaged with so much of community activities, get-togethers, and in church we have so many things to involve, and we are volunteering,”* she said. Compared with her family’s experience earlier in the pandemic, *“I am seeing that difference, and we are having a positive atmosphere at home.”*

Another shared: *“one of the beautiful things that I love more about Norristown is that we have such a beautiful diversity of businesses, and all of that.”*

Key Challenges

Diabetes, high blood pressure, and asthma were mentioned as important health concerns. **Mental health issues**, especially, were top of mind for several participants:

- *“I want to say mental health, and when I say mental health, underneath there comes the various abuses, I say substance [misuse], it could be either food, drug, alcohol. So, I see a lot of that.”*
- *“I was going to say the same thing ... I think mental health, anxiety, we're seeing a lot of within our clients with new babies. They're anxious, a lot of them don't want to leave the house to bring the baby out. So, I would agree with the mental health that [another participant] had mentioned.”*
- *“I would definitely say substance abuse is a big challenge,”* said a participant whose nonprofit organization provides behavioral health services, including care for people experiencing homelessness. *“Unfortunately, substance abuse is a big contributor to that [homelessness] and goes along with mental health.”*

Social isolation during the pandemic worsened mental health for many, especially among new mothers and older adults, said a participant who works for a local community organization. She added that community service providers are often not equipped to address the needs of people needing professional support for mental health concerns: *“You help people that may be feeling lonely or sad or isolated, but if you're [the client] is clinically depressed, you really have to go to a doctor, and we are not it, right?”*

Grieving and bereavement, due to lives lost during the pandemic, also have taken a toll on mental health for many. Others, have recovered from COVID but have long-term complications and are unable to work, causing families to lose crucial income. *“We lost a lot of our clients, and*

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the parents of our kids,” said a participant who works at a social services organization. “From March to May last year, we lost 15 parents. So many of them got sick and they were in the hospital for three, four, five, six weeks. ... It’s just been very challenging.”

Participants discussed **several barriers to health care access, including lack of affordability, fear of unanticipated (or unknown) medical costs, and a shortage of bilingual providers to serve the area’s Latino community.**

A participant who works for a local social services organization commented: *“Clients are always concerned about the price of health care [and] cost [of] medicines.”* She also shared that many are **fearful of the costs they could incur for hospital care and other medical services:** *“[Clients] have told us ‘well, you go to the hospital and they charge you whatever they want, they never have prices they will tell you, this is how much it’s gonna cost you.’ If they go to an appointment, they never know, ‘people charge you whatever they want.’ I don’t understand why everywhere that our price is posted, except in medicine. ... That’s one of the reasons why we had a lot of Latinos get very, very sick with COVID or die from COVID, because they were avoiding ... going to the hospital.”*

Language barriers are another obstacle to mental health and other care in the Hispanic/Latino community. *“I think there are two therapists right in Norristown who speak Spanish and that’s it—no more, that’s it, and you have waiting list like forever, so it’s terrible,”* shared one participant.

For some, access to affordable primary care has been reduced by physicians shifting into concierge practices, which one participant recounted was happening to her primary care practice. To continue receiving care from her doctor, she was asked to pay a significant new annual fee, which she found disheartening and discouraging. *“I just got a letter from my doctor saying that they’re becoming concierge practice. So basically, they’re opting to have less patients, and [now] I have to pay to be a member to access my primary care physician for \$1,800 a year, on top of my regular insurance. [It’s] so frustrating that they’re continuing to widen the gap of availability [of] general practitioners, by saying, we can give you the quality of care that you’re seeking for this fee, so basically, it’s like a VIP.”*

She added: *“I’m just thinking of all the people that can’t get in to see their doctor regularly now, and now that’s three less doctors out there ... That’s not going to impact me as much as somebody who is on Medicaid”* or others who cannot afford concierge services and would need to find another doctor.

Children and Youth

For children and youth, **access to mental health care is very limited,** due to staffing shortages among providers and other capacity issues:

- *“Having families that can’t get the proper services that they need for their children is very distressing and puts a lot of responsibility on us as a community as to how we’re going to help these children and these families, especially with the mental health needs increasing since COVID had started.”*

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- *“There's just so many times that you call to get a family support, and they're like, ‘well, we don't have the resources, we don't have the team, we've had so much turnover.’”*
- *“Montgomery County has a lot of good resources, and yet, right now, the accessibility to these resources is very, very limited, especially within the behavioral health system.”*
- A participant who had just come from a work meeting with a local insurer said that, at the time of the meeting, there were *“22 children that are under 18 in emergency rooms waiting for mental health hospitalization.”*

Bullying and the threat of violence add to the mental health burden for youth. *“So, the parents don't want to send them to extracurricular activities or leave them in the school or even let them go to school, so that has been an issue because there is a lot of bullying and violence,”* one shared.

Another participant commented on **the need for families to spend more quality time together**, *“so kids aren't spending so much time on their electronic devices and accessing technology that maybe they shouldn't be accessing or websites that perhaps are not appropriate for them.”*

The community also lacks enough **safe places for children to play and participate in healthy organized activities**. One participant mentioned the closure of the Carver Community Center, which previously had provided youth activities. Although Norristown has a city-run recreation center, she added that *“they charge for activities. And now half of the time, it's closed and after COVID, of course, it's closed.”* Another participant commented on the **need for more community programs and resources for children with physical disabilities or other special needs**, such as autism or mental health challenges.

In addition, fewer youth than usual are signing up for school sports teams, a participant said, even though participation in these activities is free. Outside youth leagues are available but may charge significant fees, she added, making them unaffordable for some.

While the Norristown Area School District is open again for on-site learning, **many students have found the transition back to school challenging**. *“I don't think it helped that they [students] were completely virtual all last year, and many are having a very hard time adjusting to get back into school, and a lot of students have opted to stay virtual.”*

Older Adults

For older adults in the community, common issues affecting their health include **social isolation, often compounded by lack of transportation, as well as difficulty accessing healthy food or using technology to connect to health care and other services**. *“The building I live in [has] a lot of seniors ... they don't have transportation, and they don't have knowledge about what's going on in the community, or how since [the pandemic] the world is changing, is becoming more computerized,”* said one participant.

The **need to improve access to healthy food** also was noted. Some older adults in Norristown have *“only one small market”* within walking distance of where they live. *“That's the only*

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market—anything else they will have to use transportation to get to the shop, or any other markets that's in the area,” a participant shared.

Social Determinants of Health

In addition to transportation barriers, participants mentioned several other social determinants that adversely affect community health:

Lack of safe open space for recreation. *“My concern in Norristown, many times, is that we don't have enough safe green spaces for people to exercise or to go out ... We have trails, and now they're doing this study on trails that are gonna connect everywhere, but this is the problem, the trails are [not marked], there are [no] spaces where people can park ... they are not safe ... there are no lights, there are no signs, it's scary like crazy.”*

Uptick in community violence. *“In Norristown, we all kind of know that there's been a very big increase in violence, and especially gun violence, and so how are we going to address that? We can't just keep saying, ‘oh, well that's a city thing.’ It's moving into our areas, it's in Norristown, it's in Pottstown, all of these things are impacting it. Another participant added: “we can build as many green spaces as we want, but ... if those spaces aren't properly maintained, and they're not safe, and it's not a safe community to go out into, then that doesn't make a difference as to how we're helping the community.”*

Lack of access to healthy food and nutrition education. *“Norristown is a what we call ... a food desert; it's recognized as a food desert, shared one participant. Especially in small food stores, such as bodegas, the food “is not really appealing to anyone. They normally have like [bananas with] black spots like they're not fresh, so people tend to eat bread and soda because it's less expensive too.” Another commented: “There is not much healthy food, and even the food that is healthy, that is in the supermarkets.” Another challenge for some, especially those without cars, is the ability to carry food home: “I think that that's challenging when you can only go to one place [e.g., a pantry] to get one food, and you can only take two bags, because you cannot carry more.”*

Lack of knowledge about healthy food choices is another factor, a participant said: *“People don't always either ... know how to use [healthy food], or they're scared to use it, they have no idea how to do it, so I think it's challenging.”*

Transportation. While Norristown is a regional hub for public transit, **using local buses is another challenge for some older adults**, which further limits their access to groceries and other resources. Also, with regard to the paratransit system, a participant commented: *“We also see people waiting for very long time, some days to be picked up. So, I do think transportation is an issue there. Even if there's a million programs to help, it's not helpful if they can't get there, so I do think that transportation is a real challenge.”*

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Suggested Actions

- **Improve access to healthy food and safe spaces for physical activity for youth and adults.** Suggestions included opening farmers markets in Norristown, with produce from local farms; increasing public safety on trails and other open space; and providing more free or affordable access to recreation centers for youth to play basketball or other activities. *“I don't understand how we as adults are going to close these places [recreation centers] that are going to eliminate options for the kids to go, and be kids and be safe and play and participate in activities that are healthy,”* said one participant.
- **Increase affordability and capacity for culturally and linguistically competent health care, especially for mental health services.** One participant suggested *“investing in mental health structure and equitable pay for people that are working in that field, and also giving them things that are more valuable, in terms of more pay, time off, more time off for them to spend and have family time with their children would help promote a healthier community.”*
- **Increase education on good nutrition and other preventive care practices.** Education also is needed on home safety, a participant added, such as *“is there mold in your home, is that affecting some of your health? ... [Also] how to prevent falls when you're older, which is like the number one cause of disability and death in older people, and those types of programs. ... How do you keep your home safe for your family?”*