

**2022 Regional Community Health Needs Assessment:
Geographic Community Conversation Summary: Central Bucks [Bucks County]**

Community Assets

Participants discussed **an abundance of assets in their community, including faith-based organizations, as well as places to buy fresh, healthy food and enjoy indoor or outdoor recreation.**

- *“We’ve so many churches, religious institutions, you know, a stone’s throw from everything pretty much ... And I think that really was something that carried a lot of our community-- probably like a lot of other communities across the country--through the pandemic, especially. So, I think there’s definitely a really large faith-based aspect to things that benefits the community.”*
- *“Places like Peace Valley Park. I know through this pandemic just being able to go there, and just look at the water and just look at nature having open spaces, that is so important. That’s why I moved here.”*
- *“We’ve got the YMCA ... [and] there’s a good number of parks in the community, and also some different family-friendly activities, and museums. ... Culturally I think there’s a lot of opportunities.”*

Several participants commented on **convenient access to grocery stores and local produce**, such as a farmers market that’s *“extremely popular,”* local food co-ops, and Community-Supported Agriculture programs (CSAs), where people can buy shares of a farm’s harvest for a membership fee and receive fresh-picked produce during the growing season.

Good health care in the area is another asset. *“We’re fortunate that around us there’s so many doctors right within a couple of miles,”* one shared. Another also commented on the *“abundance of healthcare providers in the Central Bucks area,”* including facilities for people in need of addiction treatment and recovery support.

Public transportation, such as SEPTA trains and Doylestown DART buses, is a valued resource, several participants said. *“There’s a lot of good public transportation. We have a lot of nearby train stations that can get you to different areas pretty quickly, pretty efficiently.”*

One participant mentioned the **strong sense of community** in her senior (age 55+) residential development. *“We always have something going on, and we always have someone to talk to and interact with. And I think the social aspect of it helps an awful lot to keep people younger at mind and also healthier.”*

Key Challenges

A pandemic-related surge in behavioral health issues, including substance use, among youth and adults was a top concern for nearly all participants.

- *“I can see mental health issues in both my mom and my son,”* said a participant who parents a teenager and also cares for an older adult parent.
- *“I totally agree with mental health [as a key issue], including alcohol abuse, and substance abuse as coping mechanisms.”*
- *“I think something needs to be done about mental health. It’s an access issue to getting them*

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help, because you can't ... get through telephone lines, you can't get appointments with therapists. And it's not something that can always be put off for weeks, when you're feeling like you need help."

Several participants briefly added that **cardiovascular disease and diabetes** are major health concerns in the community. *"Women do not understand how heart disease is the number one killer, not breast cancer like they think. But it's heart disease, and we should just do better again with the education of those things,"* said one participant. Another, commenting on diabetes, said: *"People, you know, are not eating healthy and ... eating a lot of canned foods and processed foods, and all of these things ... are probably contributing to it."*

Participants discussed **a number of barriers to health care access, including difficulty navigating insurance policies and lack of sufficient coverage for one's health needs.**

- *"I think insurance ... is a really big barrier for people because [people] can't tell if something's going to be included or not. There's so many variables now with insurance that you might think that you're going to have something covered, and then it's not. And then you show up, and then you find out that you don't have coverage."* The participant added that many people need help to understand their insurance benefits. *"If you don't have somebody to advocate for yourself, you could end up either not getting the health care you need or being in debt from ending up needing some kind of service and not having coverage."*
- *"A lot of the doctors in the area don't take Medicaid; they take insurance companies like Aetna and Blue Cross,"* said a mother whose child is covered by Medicaid.
- Another participant commented that **health insurance policies often fail to adequately cover behavioral health care.** *"Insurance is, you know, it's not good [adequate] for mental health, it's very much lacking in the health system. It's never been a priority, and right now, it needs to be more of a priority than anything."*

Staffing shortages in the healthcare system are delaying medical appointments amid the pandemic.

- *"I don't think this is just specific to the Doylestown community or the Central Bucks community, but it is sometimes difficult to get in with specialists. I mean I think that's just something that's a problem across the board. It's really hard to, to do that. ... I don't think it's specific to this community, but I know ... people have struggled with that, just trying to get appointments."*
- A participant who works in health care said: *"As many healthcare providers are encountering, it's very difficult to attract and keep healthcare workers. Folks are leaving. You know, pay is increasing, which is a good thing, but it is very difficult. Turnover has increased, I think across the board, and it's just hard to maintain access and services when you are constantly struggling with staffing."*

Stigma associated with mental health issues is another barrier that prevents some from seeking care, said a participant who works for a behavioral health organization. *"Part of our mission is to try to reduce stigma around substance use, but also mental health. ... That's a tough nut to crack, but I think that it's really something that should be addressed. And it can be, it just needs work and reframing."*

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The **shift toward telehealth during the pandemic has both advantages and drawbacks**, participants said.

- *“I think telehealth does have its strong points, I do think it's very good in mental health, because you can actually speak to somebody and not have to get out for the appointments.”*
- On the other hand, while telehealth can be a convenient option for people who are tech-savvy, virtual health care is a barrier for many older adults and others who lack computer equipment or skills. *“I don't think that it's limited to older folks or younger folks: if you're not tech-savvy, you're not tech-savvy, and that's a barrier.”*
- Some people with digital access simply prefer in-person visits with their health providers. *“The first time I did it was over video chat, and it was nice, because I could do it from home. ... But I prefer to go in person to everything. I like to be able to speak face to face with someone ... just like that human interaction and stuff like that.”*
- One participant, a healthcare professional, mentioned that emergency department visits have increased as an unintended consequence of the shift to telehealth. With in-person appointments limited, many who lack digital capability or want in-person care are *“coming to the ERs and they're overwhelming the healthcare system, because nobody can get into an office [visit] anymore.”*

Growing reliance on the internet to obtain health information or schedule COVID-19 vaccine appointments also has its downside. A participant who works in health care commented that *“people now are demanding things because they read it on the internet,”* such as requesting ivermectin, an unproven COVID treatment. *“All of a sudden they're questioning everything the doctor does, and know more than the doctor does.”*

Participants also recalled the **difficulty of scheduling online COVID-19 vaccine appointments**, especially in the initial phases of vaccine distribution in early 2020. *“It was like trying to get concert tickets in 1990,”* said one participant, who noted that many of these early vaccine appointments went to *“somebody that had more time and more technical experience [to find an online appointment] versus somebody that maybe needed it more and didn't have access to do that.”*

Several participants spoke about the **need for clearer public health communications as guidelines change during the pandemic**. One participant shared: *“Once the [COVID vaccine] booster started rolling out, I heard a lot of people say like, ‘Oh, I didn't even realize that they were available that I could get them yet.’ ... I think that's important, too, just the communication there and how information is disseminated, especially when it's such important health information.”*

For people with hearing impairment who rely on lip reading, mask-wearing during the pandemic has made it difficult to read lips or interpret facial expressions. *“You now realize how many people don't hear well, and were actually reading lips, and with masks on, they're really having a problem,”* one participant observed.

Social Determinants of Health

Food insecurity. While food insecurity exists in the area, stigma may keep some from accessing

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help and with low awareness of local food pantries, the problem is often hidden from view, several participants said. *“Central Bucks ... does appear to be more affluent, but there's definitely pockets that ... are struggling. And I do think that sometimes people are not aware of that. I think it's hard for, especially, children, going to school in the district who may have food insecurity.”* Another shared: *“[Food] prices even pre-COVID have gone through the roof. And, you know, to feed a family is not cheap, especially if you want to give them access to good fruits and vegetables, quality meats, things of that nature. So, I think that's really important, too, that people know that there's a resource if ... they are food insecure and they can't source those things on their own.”*

Transportation. *“Transportation is always an issue, being able to have public transportation to places that patients need to go,”* said one participant, who works in health care. Another noted the need for **more accommodations to enable people with mobility limitations to use local trails and parks.** *“I go to the Peace Valley [Park]. I can drive there and I'm very blessed to be able to do that, but I can't walk the trails like I used to. Having some wheelchair access, or to be able to use a walker on those areas, [and] to have some paths that are user-friendly for those kind of devices, would be wonderful.”*

Children and Youth

Behavioral health issues, including vaping and other substance use problems, were cited as key concerns for children and youth. *“I just wanted to echo what everybody is saying about mental health, and especially among young people and teens,”* said a participant who works for a behavioral health organization. *“There are many referrals for mental health concerns, and also co-occurring substance use and mental health [problems]. The coping skills [are] definitely an issue [for youth].”*

The same participant cited data from the 2019 Pennsylvania Youth Survey, showing that more than 30% of surveyed Bucks County youth reported that they felt depressed all or most days. *“We may see those numbers go up,”* she predicted, when the updated survey data are released in 2022. She also spoke about the growing issue of youth vaping, not only among high school students, but also *“we're even seeing it as young as elementary school, but middle school, definitely. And even older teens are expressing concern about their younger peers in middle school that are vaping.”*

“The problem is kids are really becoming addicted to this,” she added, explaining that flavored vaping products with nicotine are more addictive than cigarettes, so users can continue to vape for longer periods without throat irritation. *“It doesn't have the same shut off in the brain that smoking does. ... There was one kid who couldn't make it through the night without getting up in the middle night and vaping. And that's not unusual, because the brain is so susceptible to addiction at that age.”*

Access to vaping products is too easy for young people, she stressed. *“Even though now you have to be technically 21 to buy products, there are certain stores that sell to minors and kids know that. ... They'll also get things from peers or share it with their friends, or they'll get people*

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to buy it for them. ... And a lot of them get it online, including ... the cartridges for marijuana. A lot of these devices are interchangeable, you can use them for vaping either one, so it's easy to access."

Increasing use of social media and other forms of screen time also is harmful for young people's health and social development, a number of participants said.

- *"I think cell phones and tablets are addictive for young kids,"* said a participant who has several young grandchildren. *"When we were kids, it was go outside and play and come home. ... Right now, kids won't get off the tablets, the phones. I think cutting out Wi-Fi for so many hours a day is something we as parents and grandparents need to do, and make the kids go outside and play."*
- *"I think all these Facebook and social media [are] really, really causing an issue with jealousy [among children], and all kinds of things with our children that they just don't know how to cope with. And it's becoming a problem because, again, they don't know how to socialize."*
- *"We haven't had any of that drama related to social media [in my family], but I do see how detrimental it is and how addictive, even just gaming is addictive, and you're not getting physical exercise."*
- *"I agree with everyone on concerns about screen time and social media regarding youth. We see a correlation with the uptick in reported mental health concerns, which have increased since smart phones became largely available. Smart phones also contribute to very easy access to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Kids can easily acquire drugs like marijuana in about 15-30 minutes by simply using their phones. In addition, screen time is interfering with sufficient sleep, which is so important for teens. Teens are not getting nearly the amount of sleep they should have to ensure healthy development,"* shared a participant who works for a behavioral health organization.

Older Adults

For many older adults, social isolation during the pandemic has taken a toll on their mental and physical health. A participant who regularly helps her elderly mother shared: *"I do her bills ... everything for her now. I didn't use to, but you know, through the pandemic, I've just seen her decline and decline. She's not remembering things, because she was like isolated for so long. So, I think our elderly that that do not have family are just very, very vulnerable right now."*

Several participants emphasized the **need for more services in the community—and better awareness of existing services—to help older people age in place**, so they can stay in their homes. *"A lot of people don't even know that there is the [Bucks County] Area Agency on Aging, and I've worked with some of those people in the past, and they're a great resource, and they want to help people, and they're really strong advocates. ... That's a big thing, too--not only having people that can provide those services, but also knowing that those services are available,"* said one participant.

Several expressed concern about the **lack of affordability of many nursing homes and other senior care facilities**. *"It's very expensive to go into these places, your money will go very, very*

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fast if you're in a situation, especially [in] assisted living or nursing ... or memory care."
Another added: *"When it comes to my husband and I, we're not going to ever be able to move into one of those kind of facilities either. None of us have pensions anymore. So, it's just Social Security, and is that going to be there? It's very stressful even thinking about getting older, so you just kind of live in the day, and just get through one day at a time."*

Several participants who care for their elderly parents commented on **caregiver stress**, especially for those in the "sandwich generation" who care for both children and older adult parents.

Concerns also were raised about the use of same-day surgery for older adults, increasing their risk of returning home before they are able to function safely, either on their own or with an older adult spouse unable to care for them. One participant commented that many older residents in her 55+ development have had same-day orthopedic surgery. *"Some of the problem right now with the orthopedic is they have this 'fast track,' or whatever you want to call it. And they take the patient in, they do the surgery, and they send them home the same day. ... It's very problematic, yes, and dangerous too, because they still have the anesthesia in them, and they're on pain meds. And if they don't have anybody at home, or if they have a spouse that's about the same age, it really causes a problem."*

Another participant, who works in health care, commented that medical care for older patients is sometimes rushed: *"We have patients come in, get sedation, get a ride home from their spouse who's just as old as they are. It's difficult thinking these two people, or this one person, is going to go home and take care of themselves. ... I feel bad when we have to rush patients. And, you know, sometimes they're not always sure why they're there, but it's a very 'get them in and get them out' kind of [care delivery], and it's because of the cost of health care, I think."*

Other Groups

Two participants spoke about the **needs of adults who are neurodivergent, such as those with autism or Down's syndrome**. *"Adults with neurodiverse issues are the most likely population to be homeless and jobless,"* one participant commented. *"Most neurodiverse adults live with their aging parents, and when those parents go, there's [not] a place where these adults can go. They typically go with another family member. ... There's just not a lot of options."* A nonprofit was mentioned, [Neuro Diverse Living](#), that provides neuro-inclusive cohousing in Bucks, Lehigh, and other surrounding counties to help individuals who are neurodivergent gain independence and integrate more fully into society.

Suggested Actions

Provide more education to promote health and improve detection and prevention of common diseases. *"Some people just don't have the knowledge to know how to take care of themselves,"* commented one participant. *"I just think there's so much that we in the community can do, and maybe through the hospitals, explain how just five small things can help keep you healthy. ... Education I think is, is key for the community. [For example], to know what the risk*

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factors are for heart disease, to know about a stroke, what are the signs and symptoms?” To help fund more health education, another suggested “focused partnerships with pharma and insurance companies in the area to invest more in community health and health outcomes.”

Raise awareness of community health and social services. One participant suggested increasing publicity of support groups in the community, such as the new mothers group she attended at a local hospital, which helped her overcome postpartum depression. *“It got me out of the house, it made me feel like I wasn't alone, that there's other people going through the same thing,”* she said. *“And the nurses there who helped just give suggestions and tips, and those made me feel like, it's okay and everything is alright, it's going to get better.”* Another suggestion was to create and distribute a booklet listing available resources. A participant pointed out that the Direct Services Coalition in Bucks County has a resource [directory](#), *“but I don't think many people know about it unless they are providers.”*

Increase access to behavioral health services. While participants were unsure how to address this challenging issue, one mentioned the need to reduce stigma as a barrier to seeking mental health care—for example, through education and support to encourage people to talk about their mental health issues. Another discussed the need to raise awareness of existing resources in the community, such as the [Pennsylvania Student Assistance Program](#), a free, state-mandated program in schools to help students with substance use or other mental health issues. *“I don't think a lot of people are aware of it, and we do get a lot of referrals for mental health, also substance use, but other issues too,”* said a participant whose organization works with the program. *“It's basically anything that interferes with academic success, so any kind of observable behaviors or barriers to success, but it's just a really good [program] as far as the youth population goes. So, it is something that works and has successful outcomes, but [it's] something to expand upon.”*

Expand social and emotional learning programs in schools to improve students' social development and mental health. *“There's more of a need for social emotional learning in schools [amid the pandemic]. I mean, there are programs going on, but I think that there needs to be a little bit more attention to that, especially now with COVID.”* Another participant suggested *“more opportunities for youth to volunteer and this way they could be less on their devices and socialize more.”*

Provide more structured activities for children and youth to be physically active, indoors or out. One participant commented on the value of her son's involvement in a local karate program in a nearby park, while another said her son benefited from a karate program done at home on Zoom.

Provide trained advocates to help people who are uninsured or under-insured apply for Medicaid or other subsidized health insurance, such as through [Pennie](#), the state's health insurance exchange website.