

**2022 Regional Community Health Needs Assessment:
Geographic Community Conversation Summary: North Philadelphia-West
[Philadelphia County]**

Community Assets

Participants said several community resources help them stay healthy. **Access to green space** was cited by one: *“The proximity to Fairmount Park is something that promotes health in our neighborhoods, because you can spend time outside, and it also gives shade in the summer.”*

Several other assets were mentioned, with some caveats. For **healthy food access**, several said local nonprofits had stepped up donations of fresh produce and pantry staples during the pandemic, but more local food retailers selling healthy, fresh, affordable food were needed.

Recreation centers are an asset for youth and older adults, but expanded hours are needed, one participant said. **Neighborhood social capital** also was cited: *“Seniors are the most civically engaged folks in the community. Most block captains are older folks.”*

Key Challenges

Obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes are common chronic conditions and can exacerbate other health issues. Lack of knowledge to prevent and manage chronic health conditions was noted, as was the need for more education on prevention and related resources. *“I mean, grass- [roots] level programs that teach the community and people about healthy eating and healthy lifestyles would be very beneficial,”* one participant said. Another commented: *“Like, if we spend more time actually combatting those things before people get sick, instead of when they are sick. So we need programs for once they are sick, but there are certain things we can do to help prevent them from getting there in the first place. I think a big part of that is education.”*

Mental health, including substance use, is a priority concern. Trauma from exposure to violence and substance use, including drug use and dealing, is exacerbated by limited access to resources and reluctance to discuss or report these activities, which are often linked to family and friends. Increased support from a variety of sources (such as police), as well as other services that help people to “de-stress,” are needed to address these issues.

- *“And there is a lot of murders committed in our area, and it’s trauma there, children experience it, they see it, ... but there’s no resources out there for them. But generally in their families, it’s just something that you go through and you keep quiet about it. So a lot of them go through this trauma and they can’t speak up.”*
- *“We see the drug dealers, they’re out there every day, and people don’t report them because many of them are family members or friends.”*
- *“We don’t have the police and political support we need to address these issues.”*
- *“You deal with a lot of trauma in our neighborhood, and there’s a lot of dots that aren’t connecting.”*

Stigma around mental health issues is another barrier to care. As one participant put it: *“I think one of the biggest things in our community is being fearful of saying that you need help. People don’t like to admit to it, I guess because it is being judged or that they feel they’re inadequate. People are afraid to speak up and say ‘I need help’ or ‘Something’s wrong, like I’m not stable.’”*

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Insurance was cited by several as a major challenge to accessing health care. These challenges include access to needed services based on type of insurance, perceived inequities in the quality of care based on insurance status and type, understanding and navigating health insurance plans, and out-of-pocket costs. Stigma, related to how individuals are treated based on their insurance status, was also raised as a concern. In addition, participants highlighted the need for insurance to provide coverage for more “holistic” health care services and resources, in addition to prescription medications.

- *“I think we’ve seen problems with this even throughout the pandemic—people who didn’t have insurance through a job and then were looking and trying to figure it out. ‘OK, well where do I go? What’s actually available?’ So I think, often you get information about Medicare and Medicaid, but you don’t really hear about all of the other things that are also out there.”*
- *“Lack of medical coverage is one thing, but a lot of times it’s the stereotypes and the stigmas that people experience because they don’t have that coverage.”*
- *“Some people feel embarrassed or as if where they’re going, they don’t care about them because they don’t have the money or the type of insurance they accept, so they are pretty much put on the back burner. And they can’t receive the help they need quality-wise.”*

Navigating health and social service resources can pose problems, particularly for caregivers and older adults. While making an appointment with a healthcare provider by telephone is fairly straightforward, it can be difficult to access needed wrap-around health and social services, particularly in cases that are complex. In addition, it can be difficult to find individuals who can assist with navigating these complicated systems.

Healthcare centers are available and located close to each other in certain areas, but for those who do not live in proximity to one of them, access to care can be challenging.

Social Determinants of Health

Poverty and racism were cited as root causes of health disparities. *“I think racism is the underlying disease that causes many of the health issues—especially given that the life expectancy here can be 20 years less than in other parts of the city.”*

Participants highlighted the **need for clean, safe, green public spaces** for recreation, socializing, and physical activity to help relieve stress.

Improved access to healthier, affordable food was another chief concern. Participants described the community as a **food desert with minimal access to fresh produce**, and an overabundance of less healthy fast food options. *“We really don’t have access to healthy eating, fresh produce. The accessibility for a hoagie, cheesesteaks, french fries, and pizza is on every corner,”* one said. Other challenges include **lack of transportation to supermarkets** and high cost of food at corner stores.

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Housing and habitability issues were highlighted, including lack of needed kitchen equipment (e.g., working stove or refrigerator), leaky roofs, and confusion over a home's legal ownership title [tangled title]. *"And many people need to have their homes repaired but there is also a lot of tangled title issues which prevent people from accessing resources to repair their homes,"* one noted.

Children and Youth

The impact of ongoing **trauma for youth due to exposure to violence and substance use** was a major concern. Also, more **programs are needed to promote health and physical activity for youth and families**. The pandemic has reduced access to recreation centers, and youth are spending more time on devices playing video games, socializing on their devices, and attending school online. The **impact of social media** on body image and depression in youth was noted.

- *"So a lot of them [youth] go through this trauma and they feel like they can't speak up."*
- *"What I'm noticing is a lot of the kids now are not being active because they are playing those video games, where they used to go out and play, now most of them got their heads down in their phones or either on the computers or their Xboxes."*
- *"And so, I think that just how much kids are on these devices ... especially at such young ages, it can have a detrimental effect on their mental health, which can affect their physical health as well."*
- *"So it [programs related to healthy eating, stress management and physical activity] could be taught in the home with parents and children. We have to get the parents involved in order to ensure some of this stuff is being implemented."*

Older Adults

The pandemic has **limited opportunities for older adults to participate in healthy activities**, such as Zumba classes at senior centers, because of reduced hours. **Access to healthy affordable food** within walking distance was highlighted as another challenge. In addition, issues related to transportation foster **social isolation**, which can result in declines in both mental and physical health.

The pandemic has also highlighted concerns related to the **digital divide for older adults**, including challenges using technology to schedule appointments and communicate with healthcare providers. Having to use a computer to schedule an appointment, being placed "on hold" for extended periods of time, and complicated telephone directions were cited as problematic for some older adults.

- *"But they expect for senior citizens to use the computer to make their appointments, to make a phone call to speak to someone in the doctor's office, and you're on the line for like an hour-and-a-half or more. And, of course, the senior citizen then forgets what they wanted by the time they answer the phone. And then they have to redirect them to where they want to be. So it's very difficult for them to communicate with their doctor."*

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- *“For me it was easy when I had to make appointments digitally. I was helping people in my community, especially seniors. If I hadn’t been tech-savvy, it would have created a lot of obstacles for them scheduling appointments.”*
- *“I think when a lot of seniors can no longer get around like they used to because they are having health challenges or they don’t have the correct accessible means of transportation, then they start to stay in the house more often. I think that this can cause them to decline faster than they usually would.”*

Other Impacts of the Pandemic

Several participants cited the **difficulty of obtaining basic COVID-protective items**, especially early in the pandemic. *“In the beginning, one could not even buy those masks or hand sanitizers or alcohol,”* one said. Another added: *“In some stores, they actually raised the prices ridiculously high where you really could not afford it—and it was something that was really needed.”*

Access to physical activity has been negatively impacted by the pandemic due to closing of facilities or reduced hours of operation. *“They seem to be cutting the days [at the senior center], it’s not as many as it used to be.”* On the plus side, transportation to vaccination sites for individuals with mobility issues was noted as a benefit.

Suggested Actions

Develop more career pathways for youth, especially for employable skills such as carpentry, home repairs, or exercise instruction. A career pipeline program to introduce youth to careers in health care also was mentioned (as an example of a model program, this participant cited the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania’s collaboration with high schools in West Philadelphia). Scholarships could be offered to encourage high school students to go into health-related professions, *“so that, someday, our kids in North Philly and West Philly don’t just become the object of researchers ... no, that they become the doctors, they become the health professionals, they become the researchers and the policymakers,”* a participant said.

Provide better transportation options for older adults, especially those who are homebound. A related need: more home-based services, including food delivery and other forms of assistance to better enable older adults to age in place.

Expand school, community, and home-based educational programs on healthy lifestyles to prevent chronic diseases, including culturally appropriate nutrition education, physical activity, and stress management—for both youth and their parents. One participant noted: *“Sometimes it’s the kids who influence the parents to have healthier lifestyles, to eat more vegetables, and to recycle their garbage.”*

Increase collaboration between hospitals and community-based organizations that serve local residents. *“I think that it’s necessary for the [healthcare] institutions to collaborate, like*

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an effective partnership with the community organizations that are rooted in the community, to be able to connect the people to the resources appropriately,” one participant stated. Another noted the need for more funding and resources to support community organizations, including sharing of relevant professional expertise and job creation.

Use community health fairs to offer better access to follow-up care and resources. One participant noted that local health fairs need to do more than just hand out resources and provide on-site screenings. These events also need to connect individuals at risk with relevant health or social services.

Develop a more robust communication system in the neighborhood. *“Currently, word of mouth appears to be the way most people get their info,”* one participant commented.

Improve access to healthy, affordable food with accessible transportation and more quality supermarkets. In addition, improve the nutritional quality of food programs in afterschool settings and other venues.