

**2022 Regional Community Health Needs Assessment:  
Geographic Community Conversation Summary: Central-East Chester [Chester County]**

## **Community Assets**

**Access to community spaces, including open green space and parks, that promote physical activity and mental health were highlighted as assets in the community.** *“Easy access, and availability to open space. I think accessibility to a variety of parks, trails, open space, outdoor places to be active,”* one participant said. In contrast, another noted the use of the mall as an opportunity for free physical activity. *“The mall, they actually have signs up on the doors for the mall walkers program.”*

**Access to healthy food was also noted by participants as promoting health in the community.** One shared that gluten-free and dairy-free products are easier to obtain and *“just a lot of healthy options in stores as well and restaurants.”* Another said: *“Farmers markets around here where small businesses come and sell their fruits and veggies.”*

## **Key Challenges**

**Navigating the health care, mental health, and insurance systems is considered challenging for some.**

- *“I think overall, the system needs to be easier to navigate. Because it's overwhelming trying to figure it out... Finding a provider that does not have a long wait of many months. Finding a provider, a good provider that takes your insurance. Many providers, we have found don't take insurance and we pay out of pocket.”*
- *“We've had to navigate that whole process... We didn't finally get on the right path until maybe a year or two into the whole fiasco. Which is, if you ask me, way too long to finally have a doctor say to you, by the way, if you have a mental health diagnosis, you're qualified for XY and Z? And we're like, why wasn't this shared with us? You know, a year or two ago, why are we being bounced around? It's not an easy process. And, you know, when time is of the essence, and you're trying to get your kids through school – that's important.”*

**Participants agreed that getting timely appointments with specialists is problematic and can impact both physical and mental health care.** *“Just access to care, if I have to see an endocrinologist to check my thyroid, I hopefully can get in quickly and not wait a few months. The same thing with mental health, just having the specialties available.”*

**Concerns were noted about extended delays in accessing needed medication due to inability to schedule timely appointments with specialists.** *“To have somebody wait three months to get in for med management is unacceptable for me. ... If you're on some sort of anti-anxiety or medication or whatever the medication may be, you have to be under the care of a healthcare practitioner, a psychiatrist or whoever's writing that to you.”*

**Transitioning the care of adolescents from pediatric to adult health services can delay needed care,** according to some participants who are parents.

- *“And from our personal experience, for my daughter, for example, she was in someplace that only saw children under 18. And now that she's 18, she has to go somewhere else. So, you call around, oh, we can't get her in until ... you got to wait three months, because that's just how it is with new patients, right? I don't think that's appropriate to make somebody wait*

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*that long when they're on medication and need that management in order to keep up with the prescriptions and making sure that the dosing and everything is okay.”*

- **This transition time for young adults also has implications for the parental role and family support.** *“When your teen turns 18 and they're young adult, the parent role is completely closed. So, providers don't want to talk to you. I understand that they're an adult, and you want to encourage that independence. I don't know if there's some way to include the family somehow because especially with mental health, if there's someone in the family that does have a mental health issue, it's going to impact the family and to include the family as much as possible in the treatment ... I mean, of course, we want to respect the privacy of our family member. But there needs to be a balance.”*

**Increased awareness about community resources and services, particularly mental health and substance use services, is needed.** As one participant put it: *“Knowing what's out there, what's available and how to access it. For many things, substance abuse programs have been one of them. Compiling services that are available in Chester County with the focus on the mental health and maybe substance abuse programs.”*

**Apprehension about the closing of two local hospitals (Tower Health’s Jennersville and Brandywine Hospitals) was voiced.** *“Don't close area hospitals, we need them. People shouldn't have to drive 30 minutes if they have an emergency. Like, that's a scary thought. We need to find a way to keep hospitals open in the communities.”*

## **Social Determinants of Health**

**According to a few participants, the availability of open, green space in the county is an asset; however, much of the open land is being developed.** *“The green space when it's available, promotes calm. That's why we moved out here for the open space, which is disappearing. So, I think there's something to be said about preserving unused land. Being out in the open undeveloped areas, it just promotes calm.”*

**As a result of this development, traffic is increasing, causing additional stress for individuals in the community.** *“The traffic volume in the area has greatly increased... You might have the best laid plans to go somewhere and then something's five miles away, but it takes you 25 minutes to get there. ... I feel like it could affect your mental health, especially if you work outside of the home and you need to drive places... Sitting in traffic that causes people stress, right? Blood pressure increase all that stuff.”*

**Transportation for older adults through Rover Community Transportation was identified as providing access to grocery stores and health-related appointments, but awareness about these services may not be widespread and, in some cases, not affordable.** One participant said: *“There's something called Rover. It's like a little minibus.... I see senior citizens in the Giant grocery store that take this Rover transportation. And I guess that it would take them to grocery stores or appointments. I'm not sure how that works. ... I don't know how to access it right now.”* Another knew about Rover but noted being told it was expensive: *“First of all, it's not cheap—that is a roadblock if you have to take it.”*

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**Recent economic challenges have created obstacles for some community residents to sustain healthy lifestyle behaviors such as eating healthy and being physically active.**

Despite the availability of healthy food, the rise in prices has limited the ability of some to purchase fresh produce or join a gym.

- *“Housing, food, gas, everything, it's more expensive this year. That's a barrier to health.”*
- *“I used to love going to those farmers markets, but I have found myself in a less than desirable situation, which prevents me from spending that kind of money. ... So, that could be a barrier for not only myself, but other families in the community. Some things are free, like the trails and the parks. But a gym is not typically free and I would love to be able to go back and exercise, but just the prices of things have just increased...So, that's one barrier that I see.”*

**The digital divide is an equity issue. Access to and ability to use technology was cited as a challenge for some, particularly older adults.**

A caregiver for an older adult stated: *“My father is in his 70s. And he has no internet. You know no fancy phone, none of that stuff, no computer. We need a way for people who are not into technology to make it a little bit more simple for them to apply or get the access that they might need.”* Another participant linked technology to access to insurance, saying: *“We were talking about insurance and making it easier for people who don't have technology to still get the same type of benefits as somebody else.”*

## **Children and Youth**

**Vaping was identified as a common behavior among youth and questions were raised about how youth are obtaining it, given age-limit regulations.**

*“There's a lot of vaping...it's widespread and common. How do they get this? Isn't there an age limit? Why are stores selling these things to our teens? I don't know how it's available to them, but they're getting it easily.”*

**The impact of chronic sleep deprivation on adolescents' mental health was noted.**

One participant shared: *“According to the Pediatric Association, teens need to start school at 8:30 or later. ... I've been advocating for this, at least with Downingtown. And I know some districts in Chester County have moved to a later school start, but not all of them. But I do think it has a negative impact on the mental health of our teenagers.”*

**Social media, described as addicting by participants, was felt to have a negative impact on youth mental health and substance use. Social media was seen as promoting online**

**“sharing of despair” and decreasing youth's sense of belonging.** *“This isn't a substance, but social media, I feel like is addicting for a lot of the kids. And there's a place for it. But I feel that's a large reason why kids are becoming depressed and despair, like compare and despair. ... They feel like they're failures, because they can see everybody else's life. ... Why does Sally have a brand new Mercedes with a bow in her driveway for Christmas and I got this 1980 Volkswagen van? And then just seeing other kids like they are showing their bodies off, one might be thinner than the other, heavier than the other. You know, those types of things...I definitely think that plays a big role in the kids – their mental state.”*

**Social media was also negatively viewed in relationship to youth sexuality.**

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- *“Kids and problems with the use of phones, social media, the sexting thing, the inappropriate pictures, access to porn that I've noticed, it's a problem, obviously made possible by technology. I know kids are texting pictures that they should not be back and forth. Like inappropriate stuff. I don't think kids realize the dangers that they get themselves into. And it's out there forever. And who are they showing? I think we need to have more education for families and kids about what's appropriate, what's not appropriate.”*
- *“Even TikTok. There's like these TikTok things that they see and they bring the TikTok challenge to school...Maybe TikTok needs to have a regulation as to what's allowed on TikTok... The whole social media piece – just complicates things especially for our teens.”*

**Youth who experience feelings of social isolation or exclusion often require counseling and support.** *“My experience is with the kids and the teens. Kids in our county, who are on the fringes, like maybe the lesbian – gay population, like the kids who are kind of not always feeling like they're included, who are trying to find their paths, their space, their niche. Maybe there's programs available for these kids just to help guide them along, so they can find their way, so they're not feeling like an outcast. There's a lot of kids that are on the fringes, I think, and they just need help in some way.”*

**Suicide among county teenagers was discussed as a critical issue associated with the pressure to succeed, feelings of not belonging, and youth impulsivity.**

- *“The biggest thing from my perspective is mental health, and especially in our school district...just losing the children by horrible means, by their own hands. I feel like it's getting out of control.”* Another participant agreed: *“I'm in the Downingtown district, and it's a huge, huge issue.”*
- *“It (suicide) is definitely complex. But I also think kids are impulsive. I don't think they understand the finality of it.”*
- Parental and school pressure was cited by participants. One shared that *“a lot of kids may feel pressure from their family.”* Another commented: *“There's a lot of pressure to achieve at least in the Downingtown District...There's a lot of pressure to succeed on our students in general.”*

**Increased access to a variety of health education and promotion programs for youth that focus on the consequences of their decisions and are provided by individuals with lived experience was suggested.**

- *“Can we create programs where kids go to a hospital or see videos of if you do X this is what the consequence could be? ... I just feel if you show kids the consequences, and if you have speakers...whatever the issues are that we're talking about- come into the schools and just talk about their experience ... ‘When you smoke two packs a day,’ this person wants to talk to you about why maybe you should not do that because now they're on oxygen 24 hours a day, those types of things. Like they need to see the consequences of the choices that they're making.”*
- Another person agreed and suggested that the existing speaker series at Downingtown be varied to include additional topics. *“They have a speaker series, maybe one program a month ... perhaps they could vary them.”*

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## **Older Adults**

**Participants questioned the existence of county plans to support current and future aging in place and other services for older adults.** *“I’m in my 50s. But I’m thinking, what’s gonna happen in 10 to 20 years ... was the county preparing for the aging population? You know, services available for older folks, whether it’s in-home supports or assisted living, or just assisting older people. ... I don’t know how well the county’s prepared or what’s out there and what’s available.”*

**Lack of some health services, such as availability of specialists, within close proximity to certain neighborhoods, was noted as an access to care barrier for older adults.** *“My dad’s experience, he needs certain specialists. ... For a couple of different specialists he needs to see – he’s got to drive a good distance. So, it would be nice to have things closer to people, in communities where you don’t have to drive an hour away. ... I’ve seen my dad struggle with it ... What if I have those issues, when I’m his age? I don’t want to have to be trying to figure out where I’m going, driving an hour away, or having my kid drive me.”*

**Increased availability of local safe and home-like community centers that provide socialization opportunities for older adults was identified as important to healthy aging.**

- One participant shared that with aging, friendships were often lost and ways to “*stay active and connected*” are needed. *“My friends are going away. So, I have to figure out how to meet new people in my life as I get older and it becomes more difficult. I think keeping those connections are vital to our health and mental health. In addition to lifestyle choices, staying physically active, and you know, eating healthy, all of that, but definitely socialization is huge.”*
- Another stressed the need for more senior centers that “*feel like home*” and are convenient to local neighborhoods. *“I would love to see every community have its own little senior center. I know, there’s one in West Chester, but that doesn’t help people that live in the county, but not local to that. You want to come and feel uplifted and happy, not walk into a dirty place. It’s for people that we love and care about ... make it homey, not like a hospital. People are coming there to enjoy their day.”*

## **Other Impacts of the Pandemic**

**Delayed preventive care and difficulty in being able to get timely appointments were cited as pandemic related.** One participant shared that, personally: *“A lot of things were put on hold during the shutdown. For a whole year I didn’t go to the dentist, I did not get a mammogram. So, everything that was on hold for that year I’m doing this year. Like now, I’m catching up on the healthcare that I was behind on during COVID. So, I’m trying to catch up on things and procedures that were delayed during the shutdown. Just getting an appointment, waiting for an appointment. ... I guess they’re backed up. Everything ... just seems to take longer.”*

Another noted that **health care seems to be COVID-focused, despite the health concern that may have prompted the visit.** *“You go to the doctors and they’re so COVID focused– they just test you for COVID and you’re negative... Well, what about strep or flu or do I have pneumonia without COVID? They don’t check your ears like they used to. ... Why aren’t they doing that when they used to do that when we come in sick? I’ve noticed that.”*

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**Telehealth visits during the pandemic were seen as beneficial, but not necessarily appropriate for everyone.** One participant who experienced several telehealth visits during the pandemic said: *“I don't remember telehealth before COVID, but I think it's a good option to have. But I think in all situations and cases, maybe it's not okay. I do think it is one way to provide service ... especially if you're elderly or if you can't get out or if you're in a rural area. I do think it's a way of making sure that healthcare is available to everyone even if it's on Zoom.”* Another agreed, stating: *“I think that I like the telehealth, but there's a time and place for it.”*

**The Chester County Health Department was recognized for providing vaccinations in the community, but participants were unsure if the information about vaccination and other services provided by the health department was available on the website.** Use of fliers and other means to promote community awareness about COVID related services was suggested: *“I do know that the Chester County Health Department did provide vaccinations or scheduling for them. ... I imagine I can find all their services on their website, if I go in, right?”*

### **Suggested Actions**

**To promote health and well-being of older adults, increase access to local, safe, and home-like community centers for older adults to access services and socialize.**

**Provide health education programs for students and parents that address the impact of social media and the internet on the health of children and adolescents.**

**Hospitals and physicians should advocate for later high school start times to prevent the onset of mental and behavioral health issues linked to sleep deprivation.**

**Hospitals and other community organizations can provide health education and promotion programs for youth that focus on the consequences of their decisions and are provided by individuals with lived experience.**

**Increase access to mental health care providers, particularly for young adults, and simplify the navigation system to obtain mental health services, including access to insurance and medication.** *“Having access to psychiatrists - in the hospitals there's not to many people available for young adults.”*

**Increase assistance for youth transitioning from pediatric to adult health care.**

**Create volunteer and mentorship opportunities for youth at hospitals and other community sites to serve others.** *“Have kids come and serve or do something at hospitals or some sort of a care facility, just to get them exposed... Maybe, they could have a mentorship, some sort of peer mentor... match young adults or older teens with a peer mentor, someone else who's similar in age or maybe slightly older can be a partner.”*

**Preserve open green spaces.** *“So, I think there's something to be said about preserving unused land. Being out in the open undeveloped areas, it just promotes calm.”*