Community Assets

The built environment, including local parks and outdoor spaces, was mentioned as a community asset that promotes physical activity. *"I would say the local parks, people can get fresh air outdoors, exercise."*

Community organizations provide needed resources that help reduce stress for families who lack basic needs, such as food and shelter. *"One of the things we see in the community, are multiple programs to help out families in need, such as food banks and things of that nature. So, that keeps them, hopefully, nutritionally healthy and also mentally healthy, alleviating some of the stress to try to provide food for their family."*

Community events, such as First Fridays, provide opportunities for area organizations to raise awareness about their programs and services, provide health and other information, and create a sense of community. *"There are a lot of community events that are really engaging families, but also the communities in general. A lot of the smaller local towns put good effort in to bringing people together. And often times, at these community events - they could be fairs or, in Oxford, there's a monthly First Friday event - a lot of healthcare providers and nonprofits go and make themselves known. You see different hospitals or medical centers going there quite often to just have a quick five-minute chat about any kind of health topic, behavioral or mental, physical, anything, just to catch the public up on where they are."* Another stressed that *"these programs help people to feel part of the community."*

Programs for youth offered by local organizations provide safe, fun opportunities for young people to engage with their community. *"I work with teenagers…there's local organizations and programs for them, too, like the Garage Community and Youth Center in West Grove and the Lighthouse in Oxford. [The Lighthouse is] a youth organization, it's faith based, it's kind of helping with mental health, gives the kids something fun to do after school, a place to let off some steam and be part of their community, and also be a part of a spiritual community as well. I see a lot of kids being involved in that, and it really is helping them out."*

Key Challenges

Major health concerns identified include kidney disease, diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia. Lack of time and lack of money for healthy food and medications were noted as challenges to maintaining health.
- *"If you walk into a dialysis clinic, the amount of people inside there on dialysis, you'd be surprised. And so you wonder why there is so much health challenges with kidneys."*
- *"In order to be healthy and stay healthy you can't because you can't afford the medicine you need. And you try to go around it by taking something else that probably is not as good."*
- *"I think diabetes and hypertension are easily the top two; cholesterol, hyperlipidemia is probably a close third. I think a lot of it comes with work hours. You come home, you don't have time to cook a good healthy meal or sometimes you may not have the money to buy good, healthy food. Instead, you go for something that's quick and easy… There's also been a lot of research that recent immigrants from Central America, Mexico, Guatemala, when they come and when they kind of adapt to the American culture and the American lifestyle, their*

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diet gets worse, it get more sugary, more carb-heavy. And then they become more sedentary… I think it's all related. I think it has a lot to do with stress too."

The majority of participants cited mental and behavioral health as a health priority for southern Chester County. Substance use was seen as a major problem among youth (vaping and alcohol use) and adults (drug use). Individuals and families in need of mental and behavioral health services face many challenges including lack of mental and behavioral health services available locally, lack of transportation, cultural and linguistic barriers, stigma, and lack of convenience in terms of location and time. Taking time off from work impacts family income for health and other basic needs.

- *"For a lot of the students that we serve and their families, my biggest concern is not only the cost, but the access to mental health services. Finding bilingual therapists and counselors is almost near impossible, or any that have availability to take on new clients or that understand the nuanced cultural needs of our students and families. So, we have many, many students and parents that are struggling with mental health issues that do not have access to any services."*
- *"The awareness of mental health is just not there, especially for certain cultural groups. It has a negative connotation. And so, I would think that there has to be a positive feel, because if you don't want it you won't access it, it can be there but you don't get to it because you don't think it is necessary."*
- *"I was also thinking about just the workplace situation in the area for a lot of our families who are in the mushroom industries, for example. A lot of those types of jobs, they pay by production, they don't pay hourly. So, if you take off work you lose a big chunk of your paycheck, and that's causing a lot of our families to avoid seeking medical care. "*
- *"Just meeting the cultural challenges and the linguistic challenges and things like that, breaking down those barriers, so everyone is getting equitable healthcare. And that is a big thing, and especially since the pandemic it's become more of a challenge."*
- *"I feel a lot of times that, out where we are in southern Chester County, we're often forgotten by a lot of organizations, and healthcare systems, because people have to travel far distances. But having availability to maybe mobile mental health or just general healthcare services…It would be great to have that available, to come to people, come out here for primary care or mental health. We even saw the same thing with vaccines, getting it to people out here. And getting resources, whether for a physical or mental health to people that meets their culture and meets their language…And just educating people to help address some of the stigma around mental health."*

Social Determinants of Health

The built environment, including housing and walkability, was highlighted by several participants. Lack of affordable housing and the impact on mental health was noted. In addition, in locations with limited walkability, or where walking to a park is not possible, opportunities to address stress through physical activity may be impacted.

- *"The lack of shelter available and the fact that these people keep returning to apartments that are in unsafe conditions and prone to flooding really was just very challenging, and it's an ongoing problem. And a big part of it is the lack of affordable housing in the area."*

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- *"Affordable housing…so many families live in physically unsafe housing...it's overcrowded, there is mold, it's just generally not safe. And that is not only a physical burden, but it is a mental burden when you don't have your own space it can be very stressful, it can cause a lot of anxiety to live in those situations. If you don't live in a walkable community, like the borough, and you can't walk to a park, then there really isn't a kind of an escape or access to an outdoor space that might help with your physical and mental health. So, it is really a lot of these like compounding and intersecting issues."*

The digital divide, particularly in more rural communities, was seen as impacting access to online schooling, as well as access to health care. Multiple participants identified access to and the ability to use technology as a barrier to health care and that some people need assistance in using technology.

- *"The only thing I can think that's preventing them from being healthy is maybe possibly the technology, like if you were to schedule a vaccine… Some had people help them, younger family members schedule the vaccine."*
- *"I'm thinking more the rural parts of the area, where we've had people struggle, like doing virtual schooling. We became very aware that there's a lot of technological issues or access to technology in certain parts of the area, and more the rural areas. So, anything technological involving the healthcare system, depending on the person…the ease of the technology, the ability to use it…We had a very significant amount of families who we had to loan out hotspots to so they could have internet because they didn't have broadband service. And even some of the broadband service that's out in Oxford and Nottingham, and out that way, isn't that reliable, even if they have it. So, that tends to be an issue for a big chunk of the population out here."*

As previously discussed, language and cultural challenges exist for immigrants seeking health care, including an influx of immigrants from Guatemala who experience difficulty accessing information in their native language. In addition, access to providers who understand these cultures or who are considered trusted peer messengers is limited.

- *"And getting resources, whether for a physical or mental health to people that meets their culture and meets their language. That's a struggle out in Oxford as well, just meeting that, the cultural challenge and the linguistic challenges."*
- *"I am a Black Jamaican, but I'm not talking about race. My culture is so different, so I do think that probably would be strange to someone else, and they would be trying to counsel me, and cannot relate to my norms and my customs. And it creates problems."*
- *"Over the past couple years, there has been an increase in immigrants, specifically from Guatemala. They may not speak English, and may not speak Spanish, where Spanish may be their second language. So, there are indigenous languages that very few people have mastered or who can interpret it, who can live in both worlds, very few people professionally can."*

Transportation, particularly in the more rural communities, poses barriers to care for those without a car or license. Public transportation is limited and private transportation can be expensive. In addition, patients who rely on public transportation may arrive late to scheduled healthcare appointments and need to reschedule, resulting in having to take another day off from work and additional lost income.

- *"I don't want to pigeonhole it specifically to mushroom workers, but that's the strong majority of those we see…who may not have a car, who may not have a license, who may not be eligible for a license. … They usually pay an arm and a leg to somebody who does have a car. And then hopefully they get there on time, they'll miss their appointment…The public bussing, it only goes along, basically, parallel to Route 1, so there's not much else in an easy way if you need to get to a specialist in Philly, it's just not easy."*
- A participant who works at a Federally Qualified Health Center shared: *"It's really a big priority for us to make sure that our patients are able to get to their specialist appointments on time, because we don't want them to pay way too much money to go to West Chester, to get there 16 minutes late and jeopardize their care. So, often times, they pay somebody else to drive them. And hopefully it works out."*

Children and Youth

As with adults, behavioral health issues are a priority concern for children and youth.
- *"Like with the kids that's more like vaping and drinking, that kind of typical teen stuff you'd see, and with drugs in there too. But I think with the adults it's more just drugs, like harder drugs. A lot of parents are involved with that as well, with different substance abuse. So, I think just overall, that it's pretty prevalent in the community."*
- *"I think there should be some education on mental awareness at the junior and high school level, so that people can access this help. They can understand that it's a natural part of life to get help when they have these challenges."*

According to participants, youth and their families are facing extraordinary stress. In addition to stressors at school, some youth take on caregiver responsibilities for younger siblings because parents need to work. Some youth, who are parenting their own children, need support resources and may not be aware of the existing resources and how to access them. More school-based mental and physical health education is needed.
- *"I think that there's a lot of stress put on kids outside of school just in their day-to-day life - - it's not every kid, but a lot of the kids from the families that we serve… Some of the older siblings have to be parents. They have to come home and take care of the little ones. And then they also have homework, and they get in trouble for not doing the homework, and then they're stressed at school, and school is a negative place to be then… We see youngsters all the time with their own kids or taking care of their siblings… I guess having to be a grownup when you're a kid, it leads to negative coping mechanisms, whether it's food or technology or substances."*
- *"At our pediatrics office, we do see parents who are also patients. And there are some stellar organizations in the area that work with mothers who are a little bit younger, and really kind of mentor them and boost them, and it's really a beautiful thing. There are a lot of different agencies, but you have to be connected, you have to know how to look for it too."*
- *"I know in our district we have a social-emotional learning program that we use that has some success, at least it gets them some exposure to that sort of thing."*

While some youth are physically active through sports, others are more sedentary, spending time on phones and playing video games. More constructive activities are needed

to discourage less healthy behaviors. In addition, younger children need more safe places for play to maintain physical and mental health.

- *"Children learn through play. And if there is no play space, there is no space for role play, they struggle. And the struggle can turn internal, external, they can implode, they can explode, and there is just not enough play spaces and spaces for them to role play in southern Chester County."*
- *"We have some involved with the sports and activities and being healthy that way, but we have some that are playing video games a lot and on their phone all the time…And so, they struggle because they need something to do. And so they turn to like sedentary lifestyles or not being healthy or vaping or drinking or stuff like that…"*
- There was a perceived lack of equity among some Chester County communities in terms of available resources and activities that support physical activity. *"We don't have access to as many resources or activities for our kids to be a well-rounded as, say, like a West Chester or a Unionville."*

Older Adults

Technology access is seen as an issue for the community as a whole, but is particularly challenging for older adults who often need assistance using technology to schedule appointments, obtain information, or use telehealth. An older adult participant commented: *"I really think older people…their grandchildren help them because when I don't know it, I give it to my nieces and nephew, and tell them to figure it out. And so, I think our grands and our great-grands figure it out for us."*

More co-located health and social services are needed for older adults to reduce transportation barriers and meet their social needs.

- *"They (older adults) struggle with transportation more than any other population. So, they use the TransNet… and still they are late. So, when it comes to transportation, the geriatrics people have that problem more than anyone else, a kid can walk, a middle-aged drive, elders don't,"* said a participant who works with older adults.
- Another commented on the need for centers that promote social connectedness among older adults: *"Centers that elders would go in, sit, play, noodle whatever…because as much as children need to play, adults need a social area - an area to express their pent-up emotions or desires - because most time they're alone. The one partner that they had for 62 years or 40 years is just getting sick, and they have to now be caring for somebody else, and they need a space just to vent, talk about it, share, and so, those kinds of places that they can go to and spend a day away from home, and then come back to responsibilities. I think their need is as unique as children."*

Other Groups

Individuals with disabilities, such as hearing or vision impairments, need information presented in ways that they can access and act on. This became even more apparent during the pandemic. *"They can't just listen or read necessarily, because even if they're reading, they may need an explanation…How can we, who don't have a challenge, easily access or learn their language [e.g., sign language, Braille]? Even at church now, we have to put the*

program in as many different languages we can, we have to be looking at having somebody sign the sermon. How do we cater to their needs in terms of putting information out there for them? COVID has just blown everything out, and so we have to be thinking of different ways of sending information out."

Other Impacts of the Pandemic

The pandemic has highlighted the need to address misinformation and identify better ways of communicating with the public about health concerns. *"We see it out this way, a lot of misinformation and reluctance around anything COVID-related or vaccine-related, that's a big thing out here. There's not much of a push from local healthcare providers or the school systems or anything like that to really push the positives of the vaccine and the steps to take against COVID. There's a lot of misinformation, they're not hearing a lot coming from healthcare, the health department and education side about real information. I think they could find different ways to reach out to people."*

Suggested Actions

Greater access to healthcare and mental health services, both crisis centers and outpatient care, is needed. Work with key mental health providers to develop more services in southern Chester County. A mobile van was suggested as a possible outreach strategy to bring needed health care, mental health, health education and information, and social services to the community. *"The access to mobile mental health is an idea for a potential solution, improving that, taking the services to the people in the community versus asking them to always come to where the services are."*

Increase opportunities to provide education about healthy behaviors and mental health in schools and other community venues. Integrate messaging into education that normalizes mental health among youth. Youth also need more access to constructive afterschool activities that promote physical activity and well-being, as well as aid with stress management.

Address communication barriers for those with hearing or vision impairments as well as cultural and language barriers for individuals with limited English proficiency. *"We need culturally sensitive, culturally aware organizations to be everywhere. And, of course, we focus on the Spanish and the English-speaking communities, but we also need to focus on the rural versus the urban communities, the lower income versus the sufficient. There needs to be general knowledge of who we're talking to and who we're working with, that sometimes I feel when you send somebody to one of the big-name specialty centers, they kind of talk to you as if you're just like them, but you may not be, and that can be off-putting."*

Address issues related to the digital divide, such as broadband access and assistance with navigating technology, particularly for older adults.

Expand centers geared to the needs of older adults as a means to provide health care, access to social services, and opportunities for social connection.

Improve public awareness about and access to accurate information about available community resources and services that support health and well-being, as well as public health-related issues, such as the pandemic and mental health. Participants suggested that the county health department, hospitals, and other healthcare organizations work with faith-based organizations, local leaders, and other trusted messengers to get accurate information to the community. "*I really think it would be a good way for the Chester community to penetrate the community with information. If they work with local leaders, not just to bring them into the hospital for the vaccine, but for them to come into the community, to talk to the community members…to bring it down to grassroots, use the clergy who are preaching to the people, work with them to bring it into the community.*"

Increase use of parks and other green space for community gardens, recreation for children and adults, and community engagement.