

**2022 Regional Community Health Needs Assessment:
Geographic Community Conversation Summary: Far Northeast Philadelphia
[Philadelphia County]**

Community Assets

The built environment, including parks, playgrounds, and school and recreational facilities, provides opportunities for physical activity and socialization. In addition, the community was noted as walkable, particularly along Germantown Avenue, providing access to food, pharmacies, and other basic needs.

- *“I was just thinking about all the pharmacies that are popping up in the area, which is a good thing, people can get their medication, vitamins. Anything that’s going to help them with their health or hygiene.”*
- *“There’s a playground, we have a track. A lot of parents and kids when they’re up there for different activities, take time to walk the track.”*
- *“There’s a number of sports that have started up again: soccer, basketball, track, swimming. When COVID hit, a lot of children were in the house and there were no activities for them to be involved in. So that has started up again, and so we’re seeing children becoming more healthy.”*

Access to healthy food, particularly along Germantown Avenue, was noted as a community asset by several participants. However, available food resources may not be affordable for some. During the pandemic, the community worked together to provide food for youth.

- *“We’re not in a food desert. We have the ACME shop - so we have access to fresh food and produce.”*
- *“So, access to healthy foods, [for example]. We have our supermarkets, but we don't have any type of co-op for people that have financial issues, and maybe can't afford to shop in the local supermarket, so we probably could have more of that.”*
- *“At the school, especially during COVID, they had meal programs that were set up by the government through the Archdiocese. We also offer snacks for the children after school. I believe the Y also offers a meal program for their children.”*

Organizations in the community (such as the YMCA, Caring for Friends, faith-based organizations, and the library) were cited as community hubs where people could come together for physical activity, socialization, and assistance for those in need.

- *“The Y is a great community hub for people to maintain a healthy lifestyle, both mentally and physically, where people can have an active social life basically.”*
- *“Caring for Friends donates meals to people that are isolated in their homes. You have your local churches that have senior programs and you have your libraries.”*
- *“We’re having a lot of our group exercise classes outside so people feel safer returning. We have a giant yard out back that we're able to access for the children for the group exercise classes, people go out there and walk. So, that really helps people to feel safer returning. Our seniors were the first ones to come back they, they couldn't wait to come back.”*

Key Challenges

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Major health concerns identified include heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Lack of proper nutrition and physical activity, as well as stress were identified as contributing factors.

- *“Heart disease and high blood pressure and an overwhelming amount of stress. Diabetes definitely as well, with lack of movement, lack of proper nutrition, eating too much food on the go.”*
- *“It’s so important to have had your finances in order when this pandemic hit. This was the rainy day that you need to save for, and for some families unfortunately, it put a lot of stress on them. And individuals not taking time for themselves, and just being too busy and overwhelmed with family, and maybe not having enough resources to help them out with all the things on their plate.”*

The majority of participants shared that mental and behavioral health are priority health concerns for both adults and youth. Lack of available providers, cost of care, and stigma were noted as barriers to care. Concerns about substance use were shared and the association with increased homelessness and crime was noted. Increasing awareness about the availability of local mental health providers was recommended.

- *“Just breaking the stigma of mental health, treating it just like you would diabetes or high blood pressure or heart disease. I think people are more reluctant to ask for help because of the stigma, they’re ashamed or embarrassed. We need to make them understand that there’s nothing to be ashamed about. We need to make it feel more normal to have those things.”*
- *“There’s help, but it’s very difficult to get help. There are not enough doctors, counselors to see people who are suffering and then the cost of healthcare. Because of COVID, there’s so many more cases of depression and anxiety and the suicide rate has increased, because they can’t get in to see anybody. There’s such a backlog of patients.”*
- *“I think it’s substance as well as mental health, because usually people who are on drugs have some type of mental health issues. We’ve been seeing an increase of homelessness around here and a lot of the homeless have mental illness.”*
- *“The drug epidemic is something that we should definitely be concerned about on the street. The guns, you know, we’re starting to work on anti-gun violence.”*
- *“Maybe hospitals or pharmacies could have a display of mental health facilitators [practitioners available] in the area because we have a lot more low-income people coming into the neighborhood. If they [community residents] can’t travel because they have no car, but there’s somebody [a mental health practitioner] in the neighborhood they could walk to, or maybe take a short bus ride to for help, because no one wants to travel miles just to see a doctor.”*

Social Determinants of Health

Housing and homelessness were identified as important issues in the community. In addition, knowledge about healthy lifestyles and awareness of available resources and services were cited as opportunities for development. Challenges associated with access to food, transportation, technology, and health insurance, as well as issues related to the built environment were discussed elsewhere in this document.

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Housing quality and increasing homelessness in the community were areas of concern.

- *“We’re seeing more people out and about with homelessness now.”*
- *“There’s a lot more renters popping up in the area. And in some, the houses are not kept up, and the property is not kept up. Then there’s also a number of houses that are empty. And that can lead to problems in the community, for example, in terms of safety.”*

Knowledge about healthy lifestyles is important to maintain health throughout the life cycle. Access to this information is lacking or may be from sources that promote misinformation. Increased awareness of community resource and service options is needed.

- *“Living a healthy lifestyle is getting adequate sleep, adequate nutrition, hydration, vitamin D, getting outside and movement. Whatever we have that contributes to that is good, and whatever we're missing we need more of. There’s a lot of misinformation out there.”*
- *“There's not a lot of options in the Northeast, or if there are, people don't know about them.”*

Children and Youth

All participants expressed concerns about mental health and substance use among youth.

Youth are experiencing increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide. Use of substances, particularly marijuana, alcohol, and vaping, was highlighted as a major health concern. Lack of mental health professionals to provide counseling and support was mentioned as a barrier to care. The impact of social media on the mental wellness of youth was seen as another challenge. More preventive education and school-based counseling services were recommended.

- *“There’s not enough doctors or counselors available, especially with what these kids are going through, with the depression and anxiety.”*
- *“These kids are experiencing more depression, more anxiety. The suicide rate is climbing, drug use is climbing, especially with marijuana. They feel it’s legal, everyone’s doing it, the government’s allowed it. ... They’re trying to run away from their problems and using drugs. I don’t see enough resources, there’s not enough doctors around to handle this problem. With parents, I don’t think there’s enough information on where you can get help.”*
- *“There were children that were very fearful coming back to school. School anxiety was through the roof.”*
- *“I believe social media plays a huge part. Teenagers, especially the females, are in constant contact with people. If it’s bullying, if it’s trying to keep up with the others, it’s 24/7, they’re up in the middle of the night, they’re just literally addicted to this. ... Social media draws them in how many likes you get, that’s what keeps them going. They keep trying to do these videos, so they get more and more likes. They feel like they’re winning, and if they don’t get their likes, they’re losing, so they get depressed.”*
- *“Those who are 18 or younger are able to get their hands on vapes, or tobacco products, which is causing a problem with our youth right now. Just from a personal experience, my daughter, she’s a freshman in high school, said the vaping is terrible in school. They can’t even go to the bathrooms without the girls vaping. Whether they’re vaping tobacco, or marijuana, the vaping is unbelievable.”*

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- *“Professional mental health advocates are needed in the schools so youth can feel safe and go to that person and talk. These kids don’t know where to go to for help. It’s hard for parents, working maybe a full-time-and-a-half job, they’re not there for the kids, because they’re trying to put food on the table. Teachers are overwhelmed trying to teach, and do test scores, and state testing. They don’t have time to counsel these kids.”*
- Prevention education seems to be effective, according to a teacher whose students received education about vaping: *“I think it was eye-opening because they received information like ‘a pack of cigarettes is equivalent to one vaping.’”* However, the pandemic is limiting programs allowed into schools at this time.

Older Adults

Mental health and social determinants of health (including transportation, access to healthy affordable food, and medication affordability) are concerns for older adults, especially those living on a fixed income. In addition, understanding Medicare, telehealth, and how to access services and resources that promote aging in place were described as challenging for some older adults.

- *“The concern would be financial. Being able to afford the medications they need and not trying to cut corners like breaking medications in half or taking them every other day. Or being able to get to a doctor, or to a hospital, because as they get older, a lot stop driving, or should.”*
- *“If they are already low income, and now they’re retired and they’re not bringing in any income, a lot of them are afraid to go to the doctors because they’re afraid to get that bill, they’re afraid to spend money on medication. Is it medication, or is it food, or heat in the house? So, they have to make these decisions, and it’s awful, they shouldn’t have to go through this.”*
- *“My husband is reaching 65 and looking for Medicare and supplemental insurance. He’s an intelligent gentleman, but he found it to be extremely confusing trying to figure out the right supplement and supplemental insurance to go with it. What was needed, what wasn’t needed, based on his health problems, or his medications? One person would tell him one thing, somebody else would tell him something else. So that was a little confusing.”*
- *“Knowing they could stay in their homes, that they don’t have to go to a nursing home if they don’t need to. That they could have a service that will come in and help them age in place, that’s important. That helps a senior citizen in their journey as they’re aging, knowing that they can stay in their own home. It alleviates a lot of anxiety and stress of having to go to a nursing home, if it can be avoided. More services are needed to assist with that.”*

The need for socializing is paramount for mental health.

- *“My mother is 88 years old, and she has a lot of friends that are in that range and some of them have not come out of the house. They don’t go out anywhere, they’re afraid. It’s mentally not good.”*
- A participant said, about the YMCA: *“The first thing for older adults is definitely keeping the mind healthy with social interaction. Sometimes they come in and they don’t even touch a piece of equipment. They’re there just for social interaction and their mental health. Isolation*

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is something that's definitely a concern of ours, a detriment to their mental health, and their physical health. Movement is important, definitely keeping them moving in some way. Making sure that they have what they need at home."

- *"My mother lives over in Christ the King Parish. ... Recently, she started going with a friend to Christ the King. They play bingo, and they had dinners, and it's a social event every week. It's just with women. She has been so happy lately—I just think that's a positive. Other parishes or community centers might have that as well."*

Telehealth and the use of technology were seen as helpful but also challenging. While it improves access to care, access to the technology and understanding how to use it can pose barriers for some older adults.

- *"A plus is telemedicine, but I'm not sure about the seniors, if they have access to computers, but for those who have access to a computer, I think the telehealth is an asset."*
- *"I think telehealth is a good thing, especially when you have a sore throat, common cold, and you can talk to a doctor. ... As far as seniors, I think telehealth is good, because if they can't get out to the doctor's, at least they could talk to somebody, and I think a lot of seniors, just want to talk to somebody for a little while about their health, or their conditions. At least they're getting some type of a care."*
- *"Speaking personally, it's not good, because they [older adults] don't have access to a computer, or don't know how to use a computer. So, it wouldn't work."*
- *"Most of our seniors were okay with the access, they just were confused with how to use it. And they weren't crazy about having a virtual call with their doctor as opposed to a physical one. We did have a few ask us to show them on their phone different ways to take a video call, so yes, we did help them with simple steps."*

Other Impacts of the Pandemic

The pandemic increased isolation and mental health issues in the community. In addition, it impacted physical activity and nutrition.

- *"People weren't moving as much, they were sitting around, they were eating more, they were snacking and binging. ... We just need to get people active again and back to a healthier lifestyle."*
- In terms of mental health, one participant who works in a community recreation center said: *"Since COVID, people were isolated, and tied to their homes, and not having interaction. When they first came back, a lot of people were a little more irritable than they were in the past, because they didn't have that release or that outlet. When we first came back and opened, we were masked, we were social distanced, and we were following all the precautions. Staff were policing basically, and they were getting a lot of negative feedback first time around. But when masks were required the second time people just realized how much happier they were to be back in the facility. We had no issues at all, people just put their mask on, and they were happy to be there."*

The pandemic has delayed access to care due to staffing shortages, COVID testing that is sometimes required prior to an office visit, and perceptions that the system is backed up.

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- *“The pandemic’s made it more difficult, because if you have a cold, which could be bronchitis, you’re coughing, they won’t see you unless you get a test. So now your care is being put on hold until you’re able to go get tested, wait for those results to come in, and then it could evolve into something more serious.”*
- *“The pandemic has made things worse in the health field. The hospital staffing is short and overwhelmed, so you’re not getting the care that you should be in the hospitals.”*
- *“I put off a procedure because of COVID because I figure I could wait another year because they’re so backed up, and I figure some other person needs it more than I do. So I put it off for a year.”*

Use of technology and telehealth visits have expanded during the pandemic. Access to and ability to use technology can vary across populations based on socioeconomic status and age. Preferences for using technology versus human interaction also varies. *“It’s hard to get people on the phone anymore when you want a doctor. Everything’s always done through these portals, where you have to message everybody. Sometimes it’s nice just to talk to a human, interact that way, instead of doing everything through the computer. Everything’s done through these portals, and if you don’t know your passwords, then everything else is hard to get a hold of and access.”*

Suggested Actions

Provide more preventive education and school-based counseling services that also use peer supports. *“A lot of stuff that youth are getting on social media is a lot of false information. They need to hear from a professional, and it doesn’t have to be in person. They could do large Zoom classes, and just watch a monitor and listen to other kids, or people their age about what they went through. I did a couple seminars with young teenagers, girls who were caught in domestic abuse, and the girls who watched this, they connected, and they were able to open up and speak more freely about what they endured, and to seek help.”*

Increase awareness about the availability of local mental health providers to reduce barriers to care.

Support the mental health needs of health care and mental health professionals to retain professionals in hospitals and the community.

Increase access to affordable, fresh produce through the creation of food co-ops and local farmers markets.

Increase awareness of community resources and service options among health professionals, community organizations, and community residents.

Increase community and health care provider awareness about effective health support programs, such as the YMCA’s “Live Strong at the Y” for cancer survivors and their free membership program for 7th graders.