

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

Community Assets

Participants mentioned several community assets, including the **built environment, such as sidewalks and open space**. *“Walkability is, to me, very important,”* said one. *“I can walk in town, I can walk to post office, I can walk pretty much anywhere as opposed to have to drive all the time. I think that makes it a healthier place to live.”* Participants also value the **strong social connections and sense of community** where they live. *“I live in a neighborhood where it's not unusual to stop and talk to my neighbors on my way in and out. So, that provides that social aspect. Especially for my neighbor who's like 90 years old, you know, to be able to talk and knock on our door and make sure they're okay, especially coming through COVID.”*

Access to healthy food is an asset in more populated areas. *“Up in the Quakertown area, you're able to get ... foods from farmer's markets, from grocery stores, that we ... do have an abundance. It's not difficult to get to places.”* However, in more rural areas of the county, healthy food is less accessible. *“When you get over towards Ottsville and Riegelsville ... there really aren't a whole lot of resources up there for food,”* one said. Lower-income families may struggle to afford healthy food. *“I think access to good food, depending on your income ... may still be a challenge,”* said one participant, who noted that a recent event to donate fresh produce at a local elementary school drew more than 200 people.

Key Challenges

Mental and behavioral health issues were top of mind for participants, who noted difficulties for both accessing and affording care, especially during the pandemic, as well as ongoing stigma associated with these issues. One who works in health care said: *“I can tell you that the people that need mental health that come into the ER can sit in that ER for days on end, waiting ... to be moved to a facility that can take care of their mental health needs.”*

Inadequate insurance for behavioral health care is another issue. *“There's just so little [coverage] for it under people's insurance plans. ... I mean, if you're looking at ... an out of pocket of \$100 a session, and that maybe they need a session every week ... it becomes a big stumbling block.”* In addition, concern was raised that insurance may not adequately cover inpatient care for substance use, increasing risk of relapse. *“So, for example, if there is someone struggling with severe addiction, they should probably be going to inpatient for three months, not 30 days and then they're cutting down to 20, ...and they come out and they relapse.”*

Several participants who work in health care expressed concern about **delays in preventive care** due to the pandemic, as many put off scheduling checkups and other routine preventive care visits. One predicted that patients are going to *“be at least two, three years into this now before they even get in for their routine yearly exams, which is scary because what's gonna happen next year when everybody decides to come back?”*

Social Determinants of Health

Low-to-moderate income residents often face financial stress, leading to difficult choices paying for health care versus other essential services, such as food and housing. Participants commented

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on increased development of luxury apartment buildings in the area with high rents and **few options for affordable or subsidized housing**, along with a **growing homeless population** in the county. Housing safety and habitability issues also were brought up, in regard to a boarding house that had recently been condemned for health and safety violations, causing residents to be displaced. **Lack of reliable and affordable transportation, as well as the distance to primary and specialty health care services**, are other barriers for some, especially for older adults.

Children and Youth

Mental health and substance use also are top concerns for this population. A young adult said: *“I know numerous people .. that have overdosed, died, that I just graduated with [from high school a few years ago]. I feel like in some spots, like there's not enough awareness about mental health and about getting help for like issues like that.”*

Adding to these concerns are **low awareness** among youth and parents on how and where to seek care for behavioral health and **lack of affordable care, including inadequate insurance**. The same young adult said: *“I feel like some, they just don't know where to turn to. ... Like, we're young. We don't have a lot of money. ... They need more affordable options.”* Another participant said: *“Younger kids, do they even know who to reach out, who to pick up the phone, how to call, how to find help?”* Another added: *“I think [there is] also a disconnect with maybe the parents ... in terms of identifying their kids, whether they're teens or adult kids, that might need help [to] identify the issue and try to get them help.”*

Because of remote learning during the pandemic, **schools have had less capacity** to detect and support youth with behavioral health issues. **Lack of capacity to treat youth** is another concern:

- *“The lack of beds for mental health patients is problematic, especially for pediatric psychiatric care.”*
- *“With COVID, there's just been experience after experience after experience that I've heard firsthand where ... parents picking up the phone to call for a teenager or for somebody in their 20s cannot get anybody to call them back ... but when you're not getting an answer, there's discouragement and that doesn't help people that are facing mental issues that are finally putting their hand up and saying that they need help.”*
- One participant knew a young boy who had to travel to Florida to get treatment for depression. *“Like, that's how far he had to go to try to get the help that he needs--which is really sad, because you should be able to stay with your family or close to your family. There's just not enough resources.”*

Issues with bullying in schools, including of LGBTQ+ youth, were briefly noted.

Older Adults

Chief concerns for older adults include **social isolation, challenges with accessing local health care, and housing issues**. Several participants said the pandemic created obstacles for older adults to use their local hospital, which many prefer. As beds filled with COVID-19 patients, some older adults had to travel to distant hospitals for care or to visit hospitalized family

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members. Along with transportation challenges, pandemic-related limits on hospital visitors meant that some older adults did not have a family member or friend present to help them understand their health issues and care plans. The importance of older adults having an advocate who can be their *“eyes and ears and listening and answering questions and asking questions”* was shared.

As the county’s older adult population grows, a participant raised concern about the availability and reliability of local resources to help older adults **age in place in their homes**. These aging in place concerns include the risk of older adults falling and not being found quickly because of social isolation. *“I think that we, as a county, need to be really prepared for this. ... As the numbers [of seniors] increase, are we going to have enough county services to provide ... for the needs of these people who choose to age in place?”*

Other Impacts of the Pandemic

Participants emphasized the **stress of dealing with the pandemic and its adverse impact on community cohesion**. Several who work in health care mentioned the stress of enforcing a mandatory mask-wearing policy among some patients and employees who do not want to comply. *“You have patients who come in and who honestly are yelling at you on the phone saying, ‘I had my shot,’ or ‘I’m coming in and I don’t wanna wear a mask,’”* one said. Patients who refuse to wear masks may not be able to seek care. Adding to mental health concerns, masks pose communication barriers to people who have difficulty hearing and need to read lips or see facial expressions to fully understand the meaning of what is being said.

Participants discussed the **shift toward telehealth** during the pandemic, which they deemed a mixed bag of benefits. Many older adults have been challenged to learn and use virtual technology to access health care. However, others pointed out that telehealth has made it more convenient for some to access care for certain health issues, resulting in fewer “no shows” for health providers. One noted that *“show rates [attendance] for appointments actually increased when they switched to virtual. ... People actually kept their appointments a little better.”*

Suggested Actions

Raise awareness of mental health resources in schools and the community. To increase awareness among youth, one said: *“I think high schools should address the issue. Guidance counselor should make kids aware and tell them it’s okay to need help.”* Another suggested: *“Whether it’s doctor’s offices or hospitals or wherever you work in the community, just put up signs ... so anybody who’s walking down the street can look at a sign hanging in a store ... they can call this helpline to get some resources.”* Education to reduce the stigma associated with behavioral health issues also is needed.

Increase availability of affordable mental and behavioral health care for youth and adults. *“Even if these kids have insurance on a parent’s plan, mental health in terms of insurance coverage is, to me, severely lacking,”* one said. Another suggested that *“health insurance is not the answer for mental health and maybe we need to look at mental health in a different way to fund it differently so that people have access.”*

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Conduct more county-wide planning to address the need for affordable housing for lower-income residents and, for older adults, aging-in-place services to enable them to remain in their homes.