



Community Needs Assessment

*Key findings from Key Informant Interviews Prepared for the
Community Action Partnership of Hennepin County*

N O V E M B E R 2 0 1 6

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“ [CAP-HC] is very close to the community. They know what is going on there and the services they provide are really relevant. The good thing I like about them is they keep looking for gaps and keep asking other community organizations for gaps where they may [need to provide] more services. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County.” ”

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Executive summary

In 2016, Community Action Partnership of Hennepin County (CAP-HC) contracted Wilder Research to conduct interviews with representatives from organizations serving low-income people in Minneapolis, suburban Hennepin County, or Hennepin County overall to inform a community needs assessment. Key themes are summarized below.

The greatest needs of the low-income population in Hennepin County, as identified by the interview respondents, include needs related to housing, specifically affordable and quality housing, employment, transportation, financial stability, and nutritious food. Identified barriers to accessing services include limited transportation and difficulty navigating a complex and segmented social service system that lacks coordination. Challenges navigating the social service system are greater for immigrants and refugees who are new to the country and fear deportation, as well as for people suffering from mental illness or trauma. For these reasons, as well as language and literacy challenges, immigrants and refugees are a subgroup underserved by existing programs and services. In addition to significant barriers and challenges subgroups like immigrant and refugee communities face in accessing services, many lack information about what services are available to them and are not aware of services they may be eligible to receive.

Organizations will be challenged to address the needs of a changing population. The low-income population and the overall population are experiencing demographic shifts that are increasing racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in communities. Respondents also noted the needs of the growing aging population as Baby Boomers move into retirement age. While some respondents noted important demographic changes, other respondents feel that the needs of the low-income population have remained consistent and will stay the same, despite demographic shifts.

The main challenges faced by social service organizations to meet the needs of the low-income population are; 1) limited funding and resources, 2) difficulty collaborating across organizations, 3) improving and developing cultural competence, 4) addressing language needs and literacy, and 5) achieving authentic community engagement. In addition to being noted as a challenge, collaboration across organizations was identified as something that social service organizations are doing well to meet the needs of the low-income population. Organizations are increasingly working together to more effectively meet the needs of the people they serve. Organizations, like CAP-HC, could improve their effectiveness by moving towards programming and services that address the root causes of poverty in addition to the services they provide that address the immediate needs of people in crisis situations.

The services that are most needed are those that address the top needs previously identified, i.e., housing, employment and transportation, financial stability, and nutritious food.

Key informants offered the following recommendations for CAP-HC's expansion into Minneapolis: 1) learning about what organizations are already doing in Minneapolis to serve the low-income population; 2) sharing information about programs and services CAP-HC offers; and 3) building mutually beneficial partnerships with other organizations serving Minneapolis. Additionally, respondents recommended that CAP-HC engage in authentic community engagement to build relationships with community members, and to learn about their needs as well as assets.

The majority of comments about CAP-HC were complimentary. Respondents said that CAP-HC knows how to work closely with the community, is flexible with their services depending on needs, and uses their resources wisely. Although some respondents expressed minor frustrations with CAP-HC regarding the organization's "bureaucratic feel" and lack of consistent communication or information sharing about the services CAP-HC offers, overall respondents felt that partnering with CAP-HC had benefitted their organization and clients.

Introduction

As part of the community needs assessment for the Community Action Partnership of Hennepin County (CAP-HC), Wilder Research conducted key informant interviews with representatives from 30 organizations serving low-income people in Minneapolis, suburban Hennepin County, or Hennepin County overall. The sample of organizations was chosen by CAP-HC from a comprehensive field scan Wilder Research conducted to identify community organizations throughout Hennepin County who are serving the low-income population. CAP-HC chose to interview organizations that they currently have partnerships with and organizations they are interested in collaborating with in the future. These interviews reveal the perceived top needs of people who are low-income, barriers to accessing services, how services might be changed to better serve the low-income population, and opportunities for potential partnerships.

Interview participants were invited for an interview via email. Out of 49 organizations and agencies invited for an interview, 30 participated. All interviews were conducted over the phone by Wilder Research staff, and took approximately 30-40 minutes to complete. Interviews were conducted with representatives of organizations that serve Hennepin County (18 interviews), specifically suburban Hennepin County (9 interviews), and the city of Minneapolis (3 interviews). These findings are meant to complement the information provided by the other components of the community needs assessment which is being conducted by Wilder Research for CAP-HC, which include a demographic overview of Hennepin County, a summary of relevant studies, and a survey of CAP-HC clients. Key themes from these interviews are described below.

Key themes

Top needs of low-income residents

Respondents were asked what they see as the top three needs of the low-income population in Hennepin County. Needs related to housing, employment, transportation, finances, and food were mentioned by the greatest proportion of respondents. Details related to each need are described below.

Housing-related needs

Housing was the most common need identified by key respondents, who identified several primary issues related to housing including affordability, availability, and quality of housing stock. According to respondents, the lack of affordable and quality housing is a significant struggle for the low-income population in Hennepin County and is one of the main contributors to keeping people in a cycle of poverty. Even people with Section 8 housing vouchers are unable to get the housing they need. Two respondents discussed the lack of adequate housing for seniors in particular. Several respondents said that although there may be more housing available in the suburbs, lack of transportation is a barrier to accessing it. In addition to transportation limitations, having a criminal record is a significant impediment to obtaining housing. Many landlords and employers are reluctant to rent to people with any kind of criminal background.

Affordable housing is just such a significant issue for the families that we serve. They are really having a difficult time when 40-60% of their income goes to housing. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

For those 48 units of affordable housing we had 1,000 bona fide applications. Gives you an example of how housing is just out of control... In Hennepin County there are different public housing authorities who have waiting lists. Those waiting lists, while they crack open occasionally, they're often a 3-5 year waiting list. It's just ridiculous. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Because there is not enough affordable housing it really allows unscrupulous landlords. Not all landlords are unscrupulous. I don't mean to be painting such a broad stroke, but many are. They charge clients fairly high rent for substandard housing. They don't make the needed repairs and take advantage of this population. Number one, lack of affordable housing to start with. Then they're forced to have their families live in really problematic housing with lack of heat, and cockroaches, and rat infested. That type of thing. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

For most of our parents or families who are looking for housing who are low-income, they don't have Section 8 certificates and cannot find affordable low-income housing. Availability is one issue and affordability is another. Another thing we are seeing particularly with some of the immigrant families that we are working with who have more than four children is they are not finding 3 and 4-bedroom rental availability in the community. Housing is huge [a huge need in the community] and it's complex. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Employment-related needs

Respondents frequently talked about the challenges clients face in finding employment, particularly employment that is full-time, includes benefits, and pays a livable wage. There are significant racial disparities in terms of livable wages across the Twin Cities metro, as noted by a representative from an organization that serves residents in suburban Hennepin County. One respondent commented that “we have an unprecedented opportunity” to help low-income individuals get decent jobs with the shift in Baby Boomers exiting the workforce. As with housing, having a criminal background is a significant barrier for many people who need employment. In some cases there may also be gaps between the training and skills of members of the low-income workforce and the skills needed by employers.

Jobs - it's been great seeing more and more people this year starting to really find jobs. They're still not quite good enough paying jobs, but we have been happy to see more people finding jobs that have been unemployed for a while. But increasing the minimum wage and finding better jobs is really going to be important. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Underemployment. What we've seen a lot of is people falling behind in a changing job market. People who just don't have the job skills competitive for living wages. A lot of what our employment services folks are doing is working on helping families who are working, but working at jobs that are not paying the living wage, look at how they can become more competitive and upgrade their skills. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

The income is unstable and inadequate for meeting basic needs. It does not include benefits and things that add costs to their lives. They don't get sick pay so they lose hours if they have to stay home for sick child or if their hours get cut and they are short income that they desperately needed. All of that instability and inadequacy of income for working poor is a problem. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

There is a large population that doesn't have access to a vehicle. They rely on public transportation, often traveling an hour or more to get to and from jobs. They are low-paying jobs, low skill, low-paid. Some people are working more than one job to be able to pay their bills. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Transportation-related needs

Transportation was identified as the third greatest need among the low-income population in Hennepin County by the key informants who participated in this study. Some respondents said that this issue is particularly challenging for residents in the suburban areas of Hennepin County due to limited access to public transportation. A respondent who works with older adults said that existing services are having trouble keeping up with demand and that there is limited availability and flexibility of services. Respondents also mentioned liability and insurance cost as a deterrent to organizations to provide transportation services, even if they have access to vehicles.

Transportation [is a need for the low-income population]. Reliable and affordable transportation. It's expensive. Hennepin County is not walkable or bikeable. The people we serve have limited physical abilities. Access to a bus route is sometimes challenging just based on the frequency of the bus routes. It's really hard for folks to get around, especially in the colder months of the year. Not everybody can access the ancillary services like Metro Mobility. Qualifications in order to access it are prohibitive for some folks based on doctor's notes or on what is required to qualify. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

I've always considered the Metro region as resource rich, but I think we're poor in terms of coordinating transportation. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Transportation is huge. We have a significant number of staff whose job it is to transport the women to and from the multiple appointments they need in order to comply with the multiple systems within the county that they need in order to receive benefits and support for their family. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Financial needs

Several respondents discussed needs among the low-income population related to financial stability. They identified the need for asset building services, financial literacy training, and described a lack of investment in communities of color as a central reason for why certain communities experience more poverty than others. Some respondents talked about the challenges families face in being able to afford basic, everyday needs. Another respondent discussed the burden of debt that many people who are low-income face and their concurrent inability to build credit. Others talked about lack of access to financial systems and fair banking and credit building programs.

Quote from an organization that primarily serves Latino residents: I would say education and one-on-one financial coaching [are the biggest needs of the low-income population]...A lot of people have questions about building assets here. I see this broader, not only in Latinos, but also in other low-income families... When they're getting paid every two weeks, how to manage their money and organizing their finances to make ends meet. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

I'm actually of two minds on this because I think on the one hand people with really limited means know what's in their bank account and in their pockets better than many of the rest of us. Their lives literally depend on it. They don't necessarily need more literacy on finances, they just need more money. On the other hand at [our organization] we do have a partnership with [name of nonprofit organization] and we connect our participants with them to get some financial literacy and counseling if that's something that they desire. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

There is a really strong need for financial literacy and access to financial products that are in a fair market place. Right now the poor pay more and so they go unbanked and can't save because of the fees that are harvested from them by check cashing stores, and having to get money orders, and never have savings but putting things on debt, and high interest on credit cards or even pay day lending. I guess the second whole area is around personal finance – not only education and information but also access. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Food-related needs

Respondents talked about the challenges low-income families face in accessing food that is both healthy and affordable. Families may not live near a grocery store that has nutritious and affordable food, and high demand at food shelves means that sometimes people can only get food they need once a month. One respondent shared that in the Native American community, grandparents are often given the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren, and the money they receive in benefits from SNAP and EBT is often not sufficient for them to pay for food to feed their grandchildren.

Access to quality and nutritious food [is a big need in the low-income population]. It can be a fairly large portion of an individual's budget. Especially in the urban core, it's harder to get to the more affordable food outlets like Rainbows or Cubs or whatever. It goes back to transportation. One of the bigger challenges, in order to get healthy, nutritious food, it is costly. The folks that we work with don't have the ability to cook from scratch. That can be really expensive. I think folks can find empty calories pretty easily. It just makes all of their challenges a little more difficult if they're not eating well. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Other needs among the low-income population

Other needs discussed by the key informants, in order of number of mentions, include affordable child care and afterschool programming, adult education, access to mental health services, and affordable and accessible health care.

Perceived barriers to accessing services

Limited transportation

In addition to transportation being a need in and of itself, with regard to getting to employment, housing, education, stores, etc., transportation can also be a barrier to accessing services. Many of the services and resources that people need do exist in Hennepin County. However, getting to these services can be difficult due to a limited public transit system in the suburban areas of Hennepin County and lack of access to vehicles due to issues of affordability.

There aren't enough transportation options for people to access the services they need. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

The University of Minnesota did a good study specific to food, but I think it would apply to other things as well. The first barrier they identified was transportation. If it's a service where you have to physically go somewhere, as most food based ones are, then transportation by far was the number one barrier. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

About 85% or even closer to 90% of the folks we serve rely on some sort of personal transportation to get here. Either they have a vehicle of their own or somebody in their household has a vehicle or they have friends or neighbors with a vehicle. That's how they access us. A smaller percentage use public transportation and a very small percentage actually walk here from wherever. So definitely transportation is certainly a large obstacle to access out in our area. I think it's similar for folks in North Minneapolis and South Minneapolis. There's a few more public transportation options, obviously, but it still presents a fair amount of challenge. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Complexity of social service system

Navigating the various social service resources and benefits in Hennepin County can be confusing. Applying for various programs and benefits often requires filling out a significant amount of paperwork and can be intimidating for anyone interested in applying.

There are technical barriers like in Hennepin County, when you ask refugees, they [will tell you they] really have a tough time navigating the system. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

I also think that they just need someone to help them traverse the difficult system of accessing public benefits. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

There's just so many barriers that people are facing, and oftentimes it's a very convoluted system of referrals and applying for assistance. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Services available to the low-income population were described by those interviewed as segmented and lacking coordination. Respondents felt that the lack of coordination and integration of services makes it very difficult for people to know which services and benefits are available to them, which ones they are eligible for, and how to navigate from one to the other to cover all their needs. Families are being given, as one respondent put it, “the job of managing all their helpers.”

We set up a whole series of individualized specific programs so that if it's child care or housing or income or food stamps or whatever, you have to go through different hoops for all of these things. I don't think that's specific to Hennepin County, I think that's a national thing. But it's something that makes life miserable for people. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

In a hospital system there's care coordination, but we don't have that with the services in Hennepin County. There's Bridges to Benefits and other things that kind of tell you whether you qualify for a variety of services, but... And I know that with the purpose of having advocates and navigators and all this stuff, but there's a lot to know. Understanding what all the resources are, what they mean to you, and then how do you stay connected to them. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

I think that in our community clients get bounced around a lot...I think that can happen to them a fair amount and, of course, that's a very frustrating exercise for them. Often times by the time they call us they're confused about who they're calling. They might be very frustrated because they've tried so many places to get help. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Taking advantage of the services available can take a lot of time due to wait times and the need to travel to various locations to sign up for the services and benefits required to address the multiple needs that exist in the low-income population.

I just reflect on my own life and how little tolerance I have for spending my precious time on paperwork, and how privileged I am that I can get things done pretty quickly with a minimal amount of that. Then I think of people living in poverty, and we act as if their time means nothing. – Representative of an organization serving the city of Minneapolis

Many low-income families experience chronic trauma and mental health issues that impact their ability to navigate and engage in an overwhelmingly complicated service system.

I would say chronic trauma [is a barrier to accessing services]. It potentially affects the way people perceive each and every situation. So some organization may think it's fulfilling a service, doing it in a way that adds to the stress in terms to having so many steps to arrange something, or we might think, those of us that live in a stable, settled life that a rational person would choose one kind of decision because it's in their best interest. But if you're traumatized and your environment is one where your neighborhood feels unsafe, you're making completely different decisions that are also valid through your frame, but don't make you look like a compliant client. – Representative of an organization serving the city of Minneapolis

Individuals need to be stabilized before you give them more sophisticated things on to put on their plate. It's really hard to go stand in line and get to the building to get your driver's license if you are struggling in poverty, struggling with addictions, struggling with child care, struggling with mental health disorders and have no way to address those, no way to get to treatment. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Lack of knowledge or awareness about services available

Many people are not knowledgeable about the various services and benefits available to them. Learning about the services and benefits available can be particularly challenging for families in crisis.

People don't know what services are available. I know they are going to be opening this a new service center on [name of Street in South Minneapolis], not too far from where [our organization] is. That's good. I don't think people know or even are aware of what's out there as a possibility. From getting SNAP to assistance for caring for an elderly person in their household. People just don't know what's available from the County. That's probably the biggest one. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Very often families living in stressful situations don't have a working knowledge of how to navigate resources in the community. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Immigrants and refugee families face extraordinary challenges to navigating the social service system in Hennepin County due to a limited understanding of how it operates and, for those who are undocumented immigrants, fear of being deported. Immigrants and refugees, in particular English language learners and undocumented immigrants, were most frequently mentioned by respondents as subgroups that are underserved by existing programs and services. Other subgroups that were mentioned as underserved by one or more respondents included seniors, homeless youth, GLBT youth, African American and American Indian communities, and people with disabilities.

I think there are a lot of households who are either immigrant families or refugees, those who are not native to the U.S., who just don't know how to navigate the system. I think that's where the fear comes in. There are afraid of their name getting on a federal list if they are undocumented, or they're just not used to having these kinds of services available to them so they just tend to work things through as a community. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

I know for us there are different programs that Latino families who may be undocumented do not have access to. I would also say, for example, in our preschools we have services for Hmong families and because of their cultural, family structure, they are not eligible for the subsidies for child care, even though they are living in poverty, because they are living in multi-generational families...Figuring out different service delivery strategies that meet the needs of [people from different cultural backgrounds] is an issue that this community should be taking on. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

There may be some families living in Hennepin County that are not documented so they're not connected to resources or they may have family members that are not documented so they don't go after resources that could be really beneficial to them because they're afraid. And we have some families that are completely documented and yet the fear of something going wrong with their status impedes them from connecting to services that would be beneficial to them or their family. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Additional barriers mentioned by respondents that make it difficult for people living in poverty to access services include lack of child care, shame, discrimination or cultural bias, and lack of health insurance.

Changing needs of the low-income population

Growth in aging population and the unique needs of Baby Boomers

Respondents recognized changing needs due to an imminent shift in the low-income population (and the population overall) as the Baby Boomer generation ages. The change will require agencies and organizations to ensure their programs and services are addressing the shifting needs of the aging segment of the low-income community.

I think that there will be an increased need for senior services just because the Boomers are, like myself, hitting retirement age and they need access to more services if they're living on a fixed income. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

We will see a real [need for services for] people who are aging in place and doing so on fixed incomes. We work with about 650 older adults who are between the age of 80 and 100+, and many of them are either out-living their resources or living at or near the Medicaid eligibility level. If they're not eligible for waivers, they're living on a very thin line. I think that that's going to be a growing population. It's going to be a growing stress to communities as they age. – Representative of an organization serving the city of Minneapolis

Changing ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity

Organizations and agencies may be challenged in the next 5-10 years to meet the needs of an increasingly racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse low-income population.

I would think we will continue to see that the immigrant population in our area is going to stay high or perhaps expand. Just knowing what we need to do to effectively integrate new populations into our community is a major concern. A lot of the strengths of the suburbs has been that sense of community that people can feel because people are not in a big city. But if it's a new population, then they can often struggle to get integrated into the full life of the community and that means you lose out on possible support networks, you lose out on information, you lose out on opportunity. So how we effectively respond or change these institutions so that they are welcoming to new populations I think is a significant challenge. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Needs will stay consistent

Several respondents felt that the needs of the low-income population have remained consistent over time and will not change over the next 5-10 years.

It might change a little bit but I think it will still remain. The need will always be there. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

[Needs won't change] unless things get drastically better or worse. If everyone were able to get educational attainment and wonderful, well-paying jobs, and quality housing in neighborhoods that were healthy and safe.... I don't foresee that 5 to 10 years is enough time to address all the inequity that we have in Hennepin County or disparities.... We have a lot of things that are impacting families that keep them where they are. The systems are not aligned to fast track people out of poverty. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Challenges to meeting the needs of the low-income population

Limited funding and resources

Many respondents talked about the challenge of organizations not having adequate resources or capacity to meet the needs of the communities they serve. Social service organizations are often competing for the same grants or government funding streams to fund their work. One respondent elaborated that the challenge is not only to get funding for programming, but also determining how to use limited funds most effectively.

When you look at these big issues like housing, transportation, child care, these are very costly transformations that are needed to catch low-income people up with a real opportunity for change. They demand both public and private investment. Just to give you an idea, if there was a national investment in families like there was when the GIs came back from the second world war, where there was money for education and training or there was money to help them buy a house, where there were opportunities for families to get some legs under them and child care, those aren't there now... Those are big complicated issues and we need this country to begin to say we need to invest in families and kids again and find some creative ways to do that. At federal, state, and local levels. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Usually [what organizations need most is] money to staff up, money to innovate, money to build capacity to address these issues more effectively. It's about working and leveraging community resources more effectively. That takes time, innovation, and staff to build that kind of capacity. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Collaboration between social service organizations

Finding ways to work together to avoid duplicating services and to maximize the impact of services can be difficult. Most organizations have an area of expertise and find themselves “siloed” and lacking sufficient knowledge about what other organizations in their area provide for the population they serve.

I think collaboration is a barrier. Organizations don't mind referring people to each other, but finding ways to work together and having a common mission is pretty nonexistent. I think everyone pretty much admits it would be great if we collaborated, but it's such hard work that very few of us do that. I think it's something within an organization that we would like to do better. That collaboration between organizations and even wider than just nonprofits – collaboration within local communities, congregations, faith communities, businesses. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

I think making sure that there are strong partnerships around the program. Perhaps looking at how do you properly refer, or how do you help impact when you have just a slice of what a family needs? – Representative of an organization serving the city of Minneapolis

I think a challenge that we all face is that we all need to work together in greater partnership so that we're not delivering these services piecemeal. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Language and literacy challenges

For people who are low-income and do not speak English or have limited English proficiency it can be challenging to communicate their needs and to also understand what services are available to them. Low literacy also makes it difficult for people to navigate social service systems and, in some communities, a large portion of the elderly population do not read or write in English or their first language.

Language barriers are there. Figuring out how to navigate school systems when you don't understand the language, or navigate a community or workforce when language is a barrier is certainly [a barrier]. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Improving cultural competence

Shifting demographics may increase the demand for services in multiple languages, the need for increased ethnic, racial, and language diversity among staff in social

services, and may require agencies and organizations to look critically at the services being provided to make sure they are culturally relevant and meet the needs of people from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds.

Many times when they [large institutions] address the issues, it doesn't fit us [my cultural community]. We talk about so many things at the Capitol, but these things are not related to us, related to what we need. Because we don't have anybody to speak on behalf of us, so we have to "go as the crowd goes." – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Achieving authentic community engagement

According to several respondents, the most effective way to understand the needs of a community is to engage that community in dialogue and to build rapport and trust among individuals. Some respondents talked about partnering with organizations that serve the community already, working at a grassroots level, and respecting community members as having knowledge about what their needs are and what the solutions may be to meeting those needs.

In the past couple of years, what we found is, it's much more important to connect directly with low-income renters that speak Spanish or Somali and work on grassroots level with households. Often times, there's a lot of folks living in a particular building or particular community. We found that to be one of the primary methods of connecting to those communities... Just making sure that you're working with organizations that serve in particular communities, language and culturally-based organizations. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

They should speak to the community, because sometimes people assume what works or what the priority is for the community. They should engage the community in finding out, if possible, to find out what services are needed. What service would be a priority for them? Then, work with the community to design a service that would be culturally specific to them. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

I think over the years we've learned, you get these organizations to pull a small focus group together for some purpose or reason and then you have an outsider come in and they'll sit and have their questions interpreted and then they leave. It's like the people of the community, "Okay, so what's in it for us? We're just taking the time and giving you information. What ultimately are we going to get out of this?" – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

What organizations and agencies are doing well to serve the low-income population and what could be improved

Effectiveness rating

The vast majority of respondents rated organizations and agencies serving low-income people in Hennepin County at a 3 on a scale of 1-5 in terms of effectiveness. This collective rating implies that there is room for improvement for how services could more effectively meet the needs of the low-income population. Some respondents said that there are a lot of crisis services available in Hennepin County, but that organizations struggle to address the root causes of poverty.

I think we do all we can, but I think we are largely based on systems that were set up from long, long ago. We haven't gone through the renovation to keep up with what people truly need. We are existing on systems that are really having a hard time keeping up with not just with what people's real needs are but what their real deeper needs are. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

I'm torn because I think that the agencies are all working very hard, but I don't know that we are upstream enough to make the changes that need to happen. A lot of us are focused ... You know the story of the downstream? Down there they're pulling people up, but nobody goes upstream to see what's pushing them in. As more and more people are going to move into poverty and need services, we're going to keep putting in more and more dollars downstream, and we're not going upstream enough to try to figure out how to stop the poverty in the first place. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Collaboration and partnership

Although many respondents described collaborating and partnering with other organizations as a challenge, several respondents felt it was also something that organizations are doing well. Some benefits to collaborating include the development of hubs, where people can get the resources they need more easily, and the sharing of best practices.

I think that what the County agencies are doing well is increasing accessibility through networking. You might have to make several calls before you find the agency that can assist you, but it used to be you used to have to make several stops. That would be impacted by your ability to get transportation. It also used to be there was less of a network of folks. There is much more willingness to connect people and it's easier. Some of that has been advanced by technology. But also I think, in general, agencies are seeing themselves more in partnership with other agencies and government entities. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

I think they're partnering with government in a new way, which I think is important. Recognizing that state and federal programs can't answer all the needs so they're identifying niches and gaps and plugging into those. I think that there are some very creative community-based organizations to serve new residents that have come a long way and they have some growing pains, but that's to be expected. I think that they've done a lot of valuable outreach and collaborative work with schools, which I think is a really good idea. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

I think the County creating hubs and partnering with other agencies has been very beneficial. We need to see more of that partnership. I think social service agencies in Hennepin County do a good job of working together and sharing best practices. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Services needed

Respondents were asked what services and programs are needed to better serve the low-income population in Hennepin County. Key themes that arose mirror the top needs described previously: **housing, employment, and transportation services** were the top three service types listed by respondents. Other responses varied greatly across interviews. These are recommended services for the community, however, these are not necessarily services CAP-HC will be providing. Some examples from individual respondents include:

- Services for people with criminal records
- Services that provide one-on-one help for individuals
- Development of personal relationships across organizations for better communication
- Comprehensive mental health services for children and adults
- Resources for community organizing
- Respite services
- Services that help form social connectedness and facilitate relationships amongst clients so that they can form their own web of support
- Services that address racial discrimination and racial disparities
- Promoting, publicizing, and doing outreach about existing services
- Education-related services

- A single-payer health care system

Recommendations for expansion to Minneapolis

Develop partnerships and engage with community residents and leaders

Respondents said overwhelmingly that CAP-HC should, 1) learn about what organizations are already doing in Minneapolis to serve the low-income population, 2) share information about programs and services CAP-HC offers, and 3) build mutually beneficial partnerships with other organizations serving Minneapolis.

Other suggestions included CAP-HC acting as a convener, by bringing organizations and community leaders together to talk about needs and how to address them, and connecting with neighborhood associations in Minneapolis.

I think that they should do exactly what you're doing. A lot of talking to people who currently work in the city of Minneapolis who have a better beat on exactly what's going on. I think that they shouldn't come in and try and replace anybody who's currently providing service, but instead enhance it. Maybe form partnerships with existing social service agencies [so] that they can increase their outreach. I think that they should hold community events and be in the community and have people know them and recognize them, and I think that they should really benefit from the knowledge of the people who live there. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Well, one of the things that we find at [where I work] is that community engagement is valuable, and important. We have been intentional about distinguishing community engagement from just community outreach, or community information giving. Really this needs assessment you are doing, if you're talking with agencies, I think CAP-HC needs to go deeper, and they need to talk to community groups. Go to faith communities, go to PTA meetings, or whatever we call them now in the school. Really hear from the people that they intend to serve. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

One respondent stressed that it is important for CAP-HC to understand the unique needs of Minneapolis residents and also mentioned that it will be important for CAP-HC to understand the differences in how local agencies operate differently, e.g., Hennepin County versus City of Minneapolis.

They'll have to show that they have as much as a commitment to the city of Minneapolis as they do the entire Hennepin County area. I think that that's going to be a struggle, but I think that they can do it. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Current and future partnerships and collaboration

Of respondents who had a previous organizational partnership with CAP-HC (12 respondents), the majority gave their partnership with CAP-HC a rating of 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5 in terms of effectiveness of the partnership, with 5 being “very effective.” Every respondent that has a current or had a past partnership with CAP-HC said that the partnership was helpful to their clients or organization.

I really like CAP-HC's approach. They go to the community and ask us what is working and what is not working, and they apply that. ...They have taken our ideas and really tried to implement them. We need more organizations like them. They are community-oriented. Their services are based on the needs available. They changed their policies and services according to the needs in the community. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Several respondents said that it has been beneficial to know people at CAP-HC because they can call someone directly when they need to get information about a service or program at CAP-HC. Additionally, they know who they are sending their clients to instead of directing them to a general number.

It streamlines things for both the clients and for me, so to be able to go directly to one person and find out what's going is very helpful to be able to communicate with them what we're working with the client on and get them some assistance. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

It works well because then somebody sees a face. I think having that relationship to be able to pick up the phone and call a few of their staff people to connect them directly to them. It's great having that relationship-building between them and not just randomly sending a family who's in crisis, or whatever it might be, off to who knows where. They're good at getting out there and making sure that people know. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

Impressions of CAP-HC

Overall impressions of CAP-HC are very positive. However, a few respondents had negative impressions due to CAP-HC’s “bureaucratic feel,” insufficient communication about the services they provide. Some respondents said CAP-HC should make more of an effort to reach out to other organizations doing similar work in the low-income community.

We run into times when the bureaucratic feel of the organization gets in the way, and some of the same issues that we run into with the County we sometimes feel at smaller scales with CAP-HC. The staff turnover or reaching the right person for the right thing or the people being effective in the role that they are at, especially at the lower levels. We run into some of those issues. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

When Minneapolis used to hold the grant for energy assistance, before CAP-HC absorbed that allocation, they used to lead the community leader's roundtable and it was a variety of social service agencies that all got together on a regular basis to really kind of explore how to best partner. It was intentional time and effort into community building amongst organizations really working together. I haven't seen quite that same level of intentionality or relationship; not to say that it's not there among some people, I just haven't noticed it as much although they are still working with us. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

The majority of comments about CAP-HC were complimentary. Respondents said that CAP-HC knows how to work closely with the community, can be flexible with their services depending on what the needs are, and uses their resources wisely. Some respondents mentioned that people in their organizations may not have had a good impression of CAP-HC in the past, but that that has changed over the last several years. Several respondents have a desire to learn more about CAP-HC.

What I saw 5 years ago when I came in [was that] CAP-HC was known to be an organization that had a lot of potential, but really wasn't doing nearly as much in our community. In the last 2 or 3 years we started to see a lot of change where they are starting to do a number of other things in the community that we really found to be helpful and good signs that they are turning things around and becoming much more proactive and connected in the community. They are doing more of the things that we really feel are going to be helpful for families. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

I think they're very committed. I think they're knowledgeable. They certainly care. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

I thought the CAP-HC in St. Louis Park had done a fabulous job. I thought they were squeaky clean with their audits. They were very fair. They were 90-100% as far as using up all their money efficiently and correctly. I would highly rate them. They do a fine job with the budget that they have to work with. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Overall, I'm impressed by their involvement of low-income consumers into the feedback about the services. I'm impressed they have a multicultural, multilingual staff. They've really paid attention to that and not just wished for it, but made it happen. I think internally they're pretty good about referring to different places. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

As I've said before, they are great about partnering with agencies in the community, so we appreciate that. They have been pretty easy to work with and give feedback to. We like that they come out to the agency and are helping our clients and working with us so that we can better serve them. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

I have to say that I think they do a good job of providing a lot of those holistic services. It does seem like they provide a lot of wrap-around services to help people. However, I don't have a real deep working knowledge of them, but that is my impression of the services that they provide, and that it's very positive. – Representative of an organization serving all of Hennepin County

Recommendations

- Continue building on current work to increase and improve cultural competency within CAP-HC; hire more staff with diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds and increase language capacity.

[CAP-HC and other agencies] need to think about how they're going to make themselves be perceived, even though they're large and even though they do a lot of work as a government contractor or in partnership with government entities, how are they going to be perceived as accessible and approachable. If I'm a second generation, somebody from East Africa and my command of English is okay, but I need to get my mother to some services because I was just able to get her to this country, where am I going to go and are these folks really going to understand what my mother's challenges are so that I can get her some assistance and get myself some assistance as well. I think that's probably going to be the biggest challenge for a nonprofit like CAP-HC and others. – Representative of an organization serving suburban Hennepin County

- Contact community-based groups such as neighborhood associations and service providers in Minneapolis and across Hennepin County to learn about the unique needs and assets of each area.
- Develop an education and outreach initiative targeting immigrants and refugees, but also focusing on the whole community to inform and educate this population about services available.
- Provide additional opportunities for CAP-HC and other organizations in Hennepin County to learn about existing services, identify service gaps, and visit organizations in-person in an effort to build relationships and trust.
- Build on current housing efforts to expand beyond current work with the Suburban Housing Coalition to all of Hennepin County, and focus on addressing systemic issues around housing availability.
- Explore innovative options to provide transportation services that are sustainable and affordable, particularly for residents in suburban Hennepin County.
- Develop and utilize resources for community organizing around anti-poverty measures, such as access to housing, structural inequality, food justice, and living wage.
- Promote, publicize, utilize new media, and participate in hyper-local outreach to educate communities about services.