

COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

FOR UNION COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE TOGETHER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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FOREWORD

In 2019 the Board of Chosen Freeholders included a Community Needs Assessment (CNA) among their many initiatives to improve life in Union County. The purpose of the CNA was to monitor community conditions and identify emerging and critically important human services needs in the community. At the kick-off session for the Union County Community Needs Assessment, then Freeholder Chair Bette Jane Kowalski stated that the reason for undertaking the CNA was not to produce a document that would sit on shelves, but to take a hard and honest look at the needs and aspirations of Union County residents and develop strategies for real, positive change. Freeholder Kowalski expressed her vision for all residents to live in “thriving communities” that afford them the opportunity to reach their greatest potential. As the assessment unfolded, many Freeholders attended sessions, listened and shared their views.

In the world of human services today there is a growing recognition that the challenges communities face cannot be solved by any single organization, level of government or sector. The concept of “collective impact” has emerged as a strategy to bring the strength, expertise and energy of numerous diverse stakeholders together to understand and tackle the many challenges that most communities face today to leverage opportunities for the future. The goal of achieving “thriving communities” throughout the county will require the banding together and mobilization of all community members to take on the challenges of the present and future. In addition to

identifying the many discrete strengths and challenges in Union County a few recurring themes continue to resonate as areas of concern:

- Income Disparity verses Cost of Living
- Affordable Housing
- Food Insecurity
- Substance Abuse Disorder
- Access to Healthcare
- Transportation

We could not have imagined that through surveys, focus groups, planning body sessions, individual interviews and meetings with a diverse and committed Steering Committee that we would have reached close to 1,000 residents and stakeholders in the development of this report. In the course of data collection, both quantitative and qualitative, we have come to learn and respect the openness and honesty of community members and stakeholders and have been motivated by their desire to seek positive change. While this study has looked at the needs and challenges of Union County residents, we have taken care to also identify the existing strengths and advantages upon which to build.

We learned more about the assets and tremendous resources that already exist within Union County, and how much residents use and value them. From the natural beauty of its landscape and many parks, a thriving economy and the Freeholders’ commitment to supporting people in need, we have come to understand the rich diversity that Union County has to offer its residents.



While most communities are thriving or holding their own, there are several communities within the county where the needs of residents require focus and greater resources and opportunities — we have referred to them as “communities of challenge and opportunity.” In each of these communities we have identified challenges yet recognize the tremendous strengths and vitality on which to build momentum for the future. Helping residents find the right resources and assuring resident-friendly access to services can become the gateway to a better quality of life. While the challenges of affordable housing, adequate income, and access to healthcare, among others, may be significant, with everyone working together so are the opportunities for progress.

We have concluded that the greatest strength in the county, and the reason for optimism for the future, lies in the talent, commitment and authenticity of the hundreds of people who contributed to this undertaking.

Acknowledgements

We cannot overstate our admiration and appreciation for the time, energy and thoughtfulness that the Community Needs Assessment participants contributed to the process. We thank everyone who has contributed, with particular gratitude to the members of the Steering Committee. We also thank the many volunteers who facilitated Focus Groups and lent their support with the community survey. Finally, I would like to thank the JANUS Solutions team for hard their work on this project.

If the vision is “thriving communities throughout Union County”, and the suggested method for progress is “collective impact”, there is little question that the many stake-holders are ready, eager and willing to come together to create significant positive change. With the leadership of the Board of Chosen Freeholders and Union County officials, in partnership with so many individuals and organizations throughout the county, progress is imminent. We thank everyone involved in the Community Needs Assessment for their invaluable contributions in looking into the future together.

Tom Blatner
President, JANUS Solutions

BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION

Union County has a strong reputation as a leader in understanding and responding to needs of daily living by providing services and supports to its residents. For example, the Union County Department of Human Services, as the lead recipient of Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) funding through the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, has targeted this grant funding for safety net services for the neediest and most vulnerable people in Union County. The completion of a community needs assessment is a requirement to continue receipt of CSBG funds.

The needs assessment focused on communities with the highest levels of poverty and included an in-depth analysis of the degree to which the needs of residents are being met. Furthermore, it is the desire of county leadership to better understand how to positively

impact the lives of its residents through an updated assessment of their needs and interests. Among her initiatives for 2019, then Freeholder Chair Bette Jane Kowalski announced the undertaking of a comprehensive community needs assessment. For this reason, county government engaged residents throughout the county. In fact, Freeholder Chair Bette Jane Kowalski chose the undertaking of a comprehensive community needs assessment as her primary initiative for 2019. After an open competitive process, JANUS Solutions, an experienced NJ-based consulting firm, was chosen to assist the county in undertaking this Community Needs Assessment (CNA). The CNA planning process began in June of 2019, and concluded with a full report and Executive Summary.

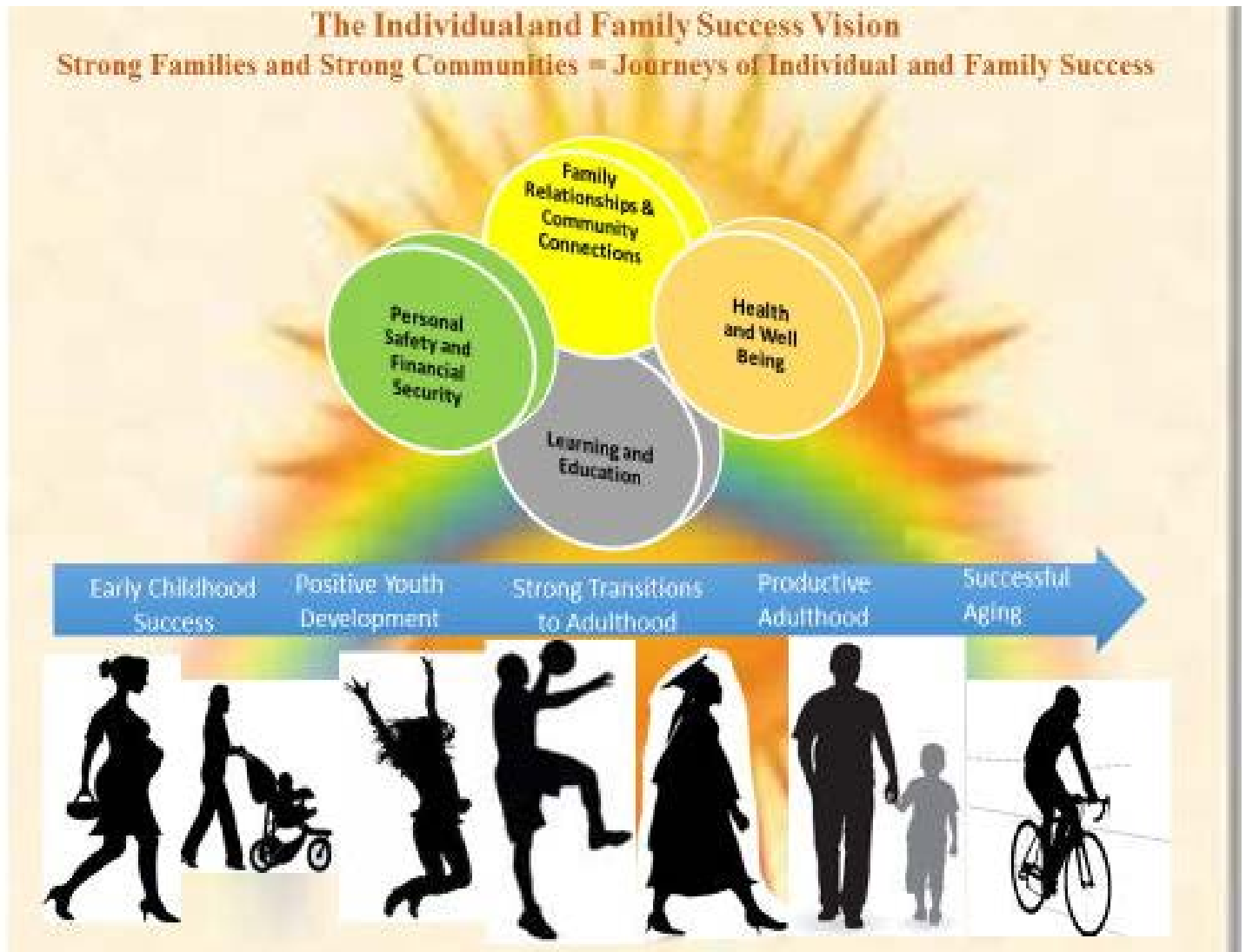
FRAMEWORK AND PROCESS OF INFORMATION GATHERING

The goal of the CNA was to examine not only the needs that exist among county residents, but also the strengths, capabilities, and interests of the residents and their communities. The approach utilized was systematic in determining needs, or “gaps” between the current conditions and desired conditions or “wants.” It used multiple methods to gather information from diverse constituencies, examining partnerships

and collaborations that exist, and keeping the assessment realistic to provide county government and community stakeholders with usable data for community improvement. The county was very successful in engaging the community, both residents and other stakeholders, to participate in this process, with close to 1,000 residents and stakeholders contributing.

THE FRAMEWORK

The assessment was conducted within a framework of individual and family success, as depicted below.



The premise of the family success approach is that comprehensive, holistic investments in organized local systems of family and individual support and community improvement will, over time, produce dramatically better results for children, youth, individuals and families. This approach acknowledges that developmentally appropriate resources and services are required to successfully support developmental journeys through life.

The developmental stages of life represent the journey, and its goals are:

Early Childhood Success
(0–8 years old) — All young children will be safe, healthy, and ready to learn.

Positive Youth Development
(9–15 years old) — All school-age children and youth will be living in a permanent home, achieving in school, and connected to their families and communities.

Strong Transitions to Adulthood
(16–26 years old) — Youth transitioning to adulthood will be on positive pathways to economic and social independence with strong and responsible family and community ties.

Productive Adulthood (27–62) — adults will achieve their greatest potential for economic and social independence as responsible and contributing community members.

Successful Aging (63 and over) — aging adults will maintain their greatest level of independence, functioning, and dignity as valued members of their families and communities

Strong Families, Strong Communities — Families and communities will have the knowledge, resources, and skills to successfully support their families and community members from birth to the end of life.

The family success framework provides a unifying vision for stakeholders' goals around child development and individual and family support in their community across four life areas, or pillars:

- Family relationships and community connections
- Personal safety and financial security
- Health and well-being
- Learning and education

Participants in information gathering process:

446 SURVEYS

300 FOCUS GROUPS

198 PLANNING BODY MEETINGS

13 KEY INFORMANTS

26 STEERING COMMITTEE

983 TOTAL

The process began with the formation of a Steering Committee, a diverse representation of stakeholders in various aspects of the human services system in Union County. This group adopted this consensus framework for data collection and analysis, and oversaw and provided direction and input for the entire needs assessment process. There was qualitative information gathering from myriad sources and methods, including input from members of planning bodies for human services in the county. There was also a strong interest in reaching out to residents, particularly those who

need or use available human services, through surveys and focus groups. Participants represented various parts of the county, diverse populations including persons who spoke a language other than English, and specialized populations/needs (e.g., older residents, youth, persons with special needs, etc.). The consultants also completed individual stakeholder interviews. The results are findings and suggestions/recommendations about what can be done to better support county residents being successful in every stage of their lives.

FINDINGS

POPULATION TRENDS

Union County has an increasingly diverse population. The county has the fourth highest number of foreign born residents in the state. Over 43% of residents in the county speak a language other than English. This demographic has implications for their ability to take full access of available services and supports. This includes prenatal care, which for families in some communities remains inaccessible. Some communities have greater need for Early Childhood Intervention due to rising numbers of children. 35% of families in the county are headed by single adults, and grandparents are raising grandchildren in increasing numbers.

35%
OF FAMILIES ARE SINGLE PARENTS

43%
**OF RESIDENTS SPEAK
A SECOND LANGUAGE**

Union County has the highest number of children in foster care for more than five years. Older adults, and those with disabilities, are living longer in communities in Union County, with needs beyond the existing healthcare and social service systems. Isolation of these individuals also increases with age and disability, particularly for those without significant community supports.

The populations of highest concern in Union County are:

- Children, youth and adults living in poverty
- Non-English speaking people of all ages, especially undocumented individuals
- Seniors and persons with disabilities
- Very young children, in particular children with special needs
- Individuals with behavioral health issues, especially substance use disorders
- Grandparents raising grandchildren
- Children in foster care for more than five years.

TRENDS RELATED TO NEEDS

The results of the survey were highly consistent with that of the focus groups, with the following identified as top needs for each pillar of support/condition of concern:

Family Relationships and Community Connections:

- Family outings/community events
- Art/music events
- Volunteer opportunities

Health and Well Being:

- Dental care and coverage
- Eye/vision care, including glasses
- Health insurance/affordable medical care

Safety and Financial Security:

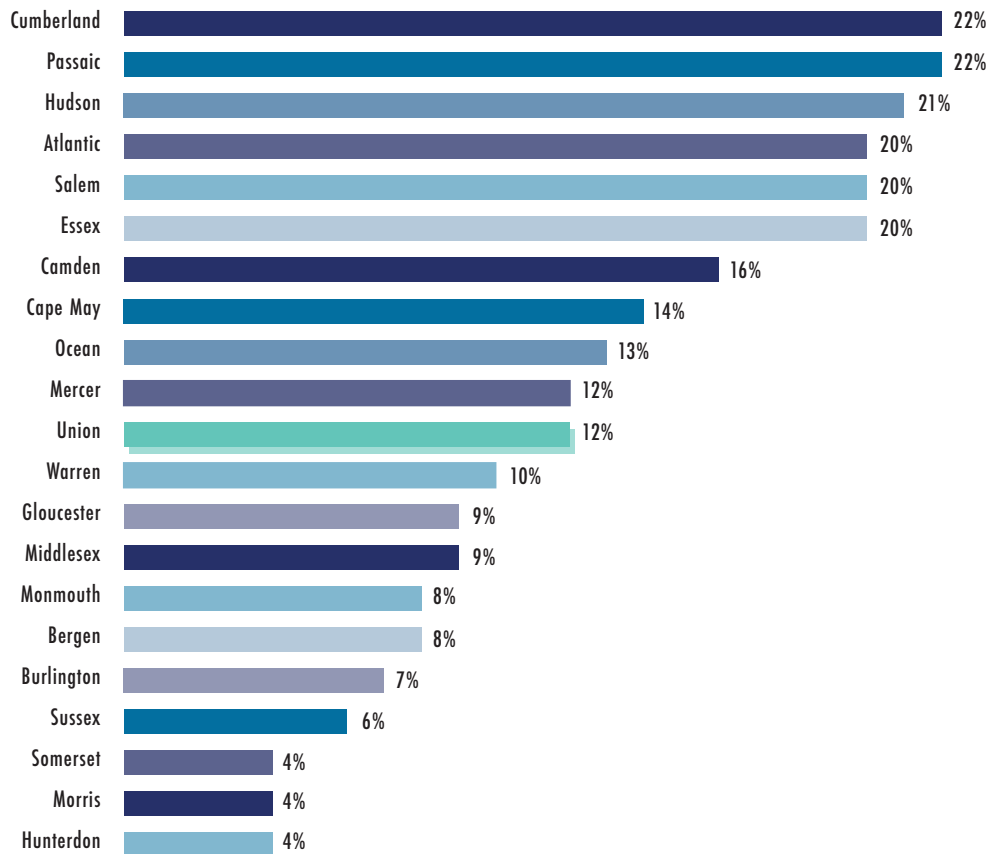
- Affordable housing
- Public parks
- Services to make neighborhoods safer

Learning and Education:

- Finding a better paying job
- Money for tuition for college/trade school
- Job training for a better job

1. NJ families (%) with children under the age of 18 living in poverty (by county)

Source: 5-yr American Community Survey, estimates 2017

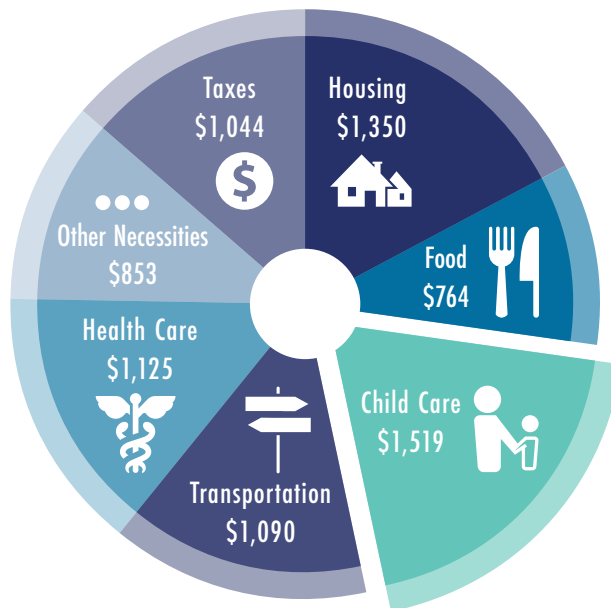


Explanation. Families “living in poverty” earn an income below the threshold appropriate for that person’s family size and composition. Federal guidelines can be found at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>

2. Monthly cost of living budget (\$), by county

Source: Economic Policy Institute, 2018

The Economic Policy Institute divides the family cost of living budget into these seven components:



March 2018 estimate (in 2017 dollars) for a two parent, two child family to attain a “modest yet adequate standard of living”. Estimates include costs associated with 7 components: housing, food, childcare, transportation, health care, “other necessities” and taxes.

HOUSING

Housing was the most frequently and consistently identified issue in the CNA. Affordable housing, low income housing and shelter care, are needs articulated across age groups and family sizes, including those with special needs, such as persons living with disabilities or those who are aging in their communities.

Issues raised related to the lack of affordable housing, availability of Section 8 housing, availability of housing for seniors or persons with disabilities, lack of shelter beds, and the fact that on average a resident pays 42.3% of his/her income on housing or rent. Affordable housing was the top issue raised — in every community and for every group. 45.5% of households spend more than 35% of their income on rent. A two bedroom apartment in Union County averages \$1,600 per month. Further, subsidized Section 8 Housing is effectively closed, as landlords are

increasingly refusing to accept Section 8 vouchers and/or the waiting lists to get a Section 8 voucher last five to ten years.

The county identified 68 people as chronically homeless, and sheltered 3,132 people during nights of extreme weather conditions (“Code Blue”) in 2018, including 532 children. The problem of homelessness in the county is one that is getting worse, as the vast majority of new housing being built in the county is luxury housing, well out of reach economically for the average Union County family.

Health and Well Being:

- Dental care and coverage
- Eye/vision care, including glasses
- Health insurance/affordable medical care

INCOME

Many people in Union County are living comfortable, yet there are 57,900 people living in poverty, including over 11,000 children. While the median family income is \$77,095, the *Economic Policy Institute Cost of Living Annual Cost Chart* notes that a family of four in Union County requires \$92,937 to be economically secure.

Data Source: US Census Bureau Population Estimates (2018)

Poverty for children and persons over 65 exceeds the state average (14.4% and 8.7%, respectively). The dynamics of intergenerational poverty tend to reinforce poverty as the status quo.

In November of 2019 a total of 37,115 Union County residents were receiving SNAP (formerly Food Stamps); 19,722 adults and 17,393 children. A total of 52,090 residents are labeled food insecure. One-third of the children in the county (33%) qualify for free or reduced lunch in school. Public assistance numbers, while declining, are still significant in the county.



SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

3,341
UC RESIDENTS
ADMITTED
FOR SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

Opioid use has increased in the county, as evidenced by a rise in the number of Naloxone administrations increasing by 90% from 438 in 2016 to 830 incidents in 2018. While other services exist in the county, there is no inpatient facility for detox or treatment in Union County. 3,341 residents of Union County were admitted for substance use disorder in 2017 and of those 1,110 were for alcohol and 2,223 were for drugs. There were 98 overdoses in 2016, 131 in 2017 and 150 in 2018; in just three years the number of deaths from overdoses increased by 50%. 49.2% of residents needed, but could not access, treatment for substance use disorder.

CRIME

Both violent and non-violent crime is higher in the county than the state average. This is a particular problem in some communities. Union County ranks

5th in the state as it pertains to violent crimes. Union County has a lower juvenile arrest rate than the state average.

HEALTHCARE

Many residents still do not have access to affordable healthcare: 14% have no health insurance, including 5.6% of children. Access to multi-lingual specialists, especially psychiatrists, is also a need.

14%
WITHOUT
INSURANCE **5.6%**
OF CHILDREN

SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

While the county has a significant number of services and supports for families and children, including Family Success Centers, not all families know how to find and access them. The centers can provide significant support to young families, youth, and

for grandparents raising their grandchildren. Many community members identified as unmet needs: affordable childcare, after school care and summer care, and recreational programs for youth.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation needs of residents are great and varied — to work, school, services, etc. — and impact their ability to be safe and financially secure. Residents of Union County spend 18% of their income on transportation.

EDUCATION

The graduation rate in Union County overall is 88% but some communities fall short in this area. 13 schools in the county struggle the most to meet standardized testing requirements. Residents that participated in surveys and focus groups stated that school personnel were not knowledgeable about services and supports available to students and their families.

88%
GRADUATION RATE

The conditions of highest concern in Union County are:

- Housing
- Poverty
- Substance Use Disorder
- Crime
- Healthcare
- Services for children and youth
- Transportation
- Education

Communities Holding Their Own:

- Berkeley Heights
- Clark
- Cranford
- Fanwood
- Mountainside
- New Providence
- Scotch Plains
- Springfield
- Summit
- Westfield
- Winfield

Communities With Emerging Needs:

- Garwood
- Kenilworth
- Roselle Park

COMMUNITIES OF OPPORTUNITY

The CNA focused on seven communities of opportunity, which represent areas where the needs of the identified populations of concern are intensified, and where priorities should be placed for addressing needs. These communities represent areas where the barriers to individual and family success may be the greatest.

The communities of focus and greatest opportunity are:

- Elizabeth
- Hillside
- Linden
- Plainfield
- Roselle
- Rahway
- Union Township

Communities of opportunity are places where focused attention is needed to address the issues effecting individuals and families in these areas:

- Income Disparity vs. Cost of Living
- Graduation Rates
- Substance Abuse
- Access to Healthcare
- Grandparents Raising Grandkids
- Foreign Born Residents
- Unemployment

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE TOGETHER

SYSTEMIC ASSETS AND OBSTACLES TO FUTURE CHANGE

Assets — Union County has great physical assets — natural beauty, parks, outdoor activities, etc., and its most important assets are the diversity of cultures and people. In looking to the future, Union County can build on the many strengths identified throughout the CNA to overcome entrenched systemic obstacles.

Many of these assets are listed below:

1. A history of Union County's quick response to resident needs by providing services and supports to its most vulnerable residents;
2. A new generation committed to a strong Union County;
3. A demonstrated willingness and openness among diverse leaders and stakeholders to work together for common purpose;
4. A pride and vision of Union County as a healthy and thriving place to live;
5. Mostly thriving communities in a robust economy;

6. A collective determination to face and address the most challenging systemic obstacles to resident success, and remove them;
7. A focus on the potential of collective impact to inspire hope for improved coordination and collaboration; and,
8. An emerging atmosphere of contribution, volunteerism, and public good.

Systemic obstacles to individual and family success in Union County have been identified. They are described in a way that suggests how they block those who wish to improve their lives. Obstacles are described this way deliberately—to suggest how each might be challenged and overcome. The intent of identifying these systemic obstacles is to inspire stakeholders to move beyond traditional solutions to problems, onto solutions that will benefit all of Union County residents well into the future.

These obstacles include:

1. Prevention and support services are either challenging to find or under-resourced, with help primarily available for crisis situations;
2. Despite the great wealth of resources throughout Union County, the ability of residents to understand the availability of resources and how to access and navigate is limited. A fortress of complexity hides impactful resources;
3. While services and supports may be available, they are not coordinated and integrated for populations by age (e.g., for young children, youth), or by area of need (e.g., behavioral health or housing). Services and resources operate in silos, fragmented and, for the most part, not connected. This affects the continuity and quality of care for residents;
4. Populations with barriers to success do not have a significant voice in impacting decisions that affect their lives. This includes how services are planned and delivered, and how their effectiveness is measured; and,
5. Given the economic, racial and cultural diversity in the county, there are many groups of people who feel that they are not full and valued members of the Union County community, and who, in fact, do not share in the wealth of the county.

The findings, as well as consideration of strengths and obstacles to implementation success, suggest that different approaches need to be taken to effectively address the issues identified.

The recommendations that follow are not structured according to population or condition; but rather, by the methods to address the findings for the populations and conditions of concern. They are organized into three categories:

1. Unmet Needs;
2. Overcoming systemic obstacles to individual and family success; and,
3. Advocacy and resource development.

UNMET NEEDS

Following are the major unmet needs, and recommendations for addressing these needs.

HOUSING

As the most frequently raised issue, the need for affordable housing is clearly the highest unmet need in the county. Issues exist related to availability of shelter beds, transitional housing, long term affordable housing, low income housing that includes housing for seniors and individuals with disabilities. While the county has taken efforts to address the needs of homeless people, including developing warming centers and engaging the faith-based community in this effort, concentrated efforts are still needed to make the housing system, limited as it is, more responsive to resident need. To accomplish this, the following activities are recommended:



Short-term:

Under the public/community partnership, create a workgroup focused on homelessness to:

- Design and implement an organized system of services for homeless individuals and families
- Reinforce a single point of intake and service routes for homeless services

- Create strategies and projects that emphasized “housing first” and homeless prevention in addition to crisis-based services
- Consider best practice models/strategies within NJ and nationally

Utilize a unified, consistent approach to shelter development among faith-based providers.

Review the use of the Homeless Trust Fund in the context of emerging strategies.

Long-term:

- Engage federal and state officials, municipal officials, developers and landlords to create a Union County Housing Task Force to confront and resolve the many challenging issues identified in the CNA related to affordable housing and income disparities.

INCOME DISPARITIES AND POVERTY

Because many county residents, including children, struggle with the effects of poverty on their ability to successfully navigate the life journey, several approaches have been recommended to attempt to begin to address their financial needs:

1. Ensure that benefits are made available to those eligible. This includes educating the community on the availability of SNAP, Work First NJ, Medicaid, and Family Care (including Children’s Health Insurance Program/CHIP). Advocate for regulatory changes that consider the cost of living over the time and benefit amount limitations.
2. Enhance the likelihood that customers will access services by providing them in a customer-friendly manner at the Union County Division of Social Services (DSS); this requires improving the customer service skills of employees.
3. Increase the accessibility of online applications for these services at locations across the county, including Family Success Centers and libraries.
4. Expand “Financial Empowerment Centers” in the county to support residents accessing these and other financial support services, such as VITA, EITC, and first time homeowner programs.
5. Launch additional entrepreneurship and small business development initiatives, such as a small business incubator, and the development of entrepreneurship curriculum, possibly with the community college.
6. Continue to focus on resident access and utilization of services and supports available to help them to address their desires to attain better paying jobs, funding available for education/training, etc.



COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH FOR ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY

One unfortunate effect of poverty is the food insecurity that residents feel. A comprehensive approach to addressing food insecurity is recommended, including:

- Increased outreach by Division of Social Services (DSS) and other agencies to educate about SNAP eligibility;
- Evening hours at DSS to support increased SNAP enrollment; and,
- Enhanced coordination with the Food Bank of NJ on other outreach and food distribution opportunities.

TREATMENT SERVICES FOR RESIDENTS WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

Opioid use is increasing in Union County, yet there is no inpatient treatment facility within county borders. Despite best efforts by providers in the county, the continuum of care is incomplete within Union County communities for local residents struggling with opioid addiction. To address this significant issue, the following is recommended:

- Advocate with, and seek funding from, the state and federal government for inpatient treatment services within the county for residents with substance use disorder.
- Work with appropriate planning bodies (Human Services Advisory Council, Municipal Alliances, Local Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (LACADA) to develop a full continuum to support sobriety, including clear strategies for prevention, treatment, and supports for each resident in recovery.



KEEPING COMMUNITIES SAFE

Because crime overall is an issue in Union County, particularly in some of the communities of opportunity, a strategy is recommended that engages community members, along with the police, in keeping their communities safe.

Specifically, it is recommended that:

- Communities complete neighborhood assessments on safety and crime issues and develop new solutions for crime mapping.
- “Neighborhood Watch” and other police-community partnerships to address crime and quality of life issues be encouraged and supported by the county and its municipalities.
- Volunteer supports for these and other activities aimed at increasing community safety be developed and supported.



HEALTHCARE

The issues of affordable healthcare availability and the availability of appropriate providers and services within the county were raised by many county residents. Undocumented individuals raised issues of the lack of healthcare coverage, even for children (who could be covered by CHIP). Federal Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), as well as physician/psychiatrists that speak languages other than English, are in short supply in Union County. Pharmacies are sometimes difficult to access, as transportation is limited or challenging in some parts of the county.



To address these issues, the recommendations are:

- Educate residents about healthcare coverage available for children. This can be done effectively by Union County government working with the non-profit community to educate residents about the availability of coverage for children, or through the FQHCs that exist in the county.
- Seek and support the expansion of FQHCs in the county, and other options such as the increased use of Community Health Workers, to increase healthcare coverage for undocumented individuals and those with low incomes.
- Work with non-profits to educate the community about available mail-in pharmaceutical services that can reduce costs for prescriptions.

AFFORDABLE CARE FOR CHILDREN OF ALL AGES

Residents and providers repeatedly raised the lack of availability and appropriate childcare of all types as barriers to family success and self-sufficiency. Infant and toddler care (especially during non-traditional hours), after school programming, summer care, and recreational and tutoring programs for youth were all identified as unmet needs by the community. Particularly in communities of opportunity, these services help children achieve in school and increase graduation rates. A comprehensive approach to meeting these needs will include: Prioritizing the development of specialized childcare, perhaps through a consortium of providers that could provide evening and weekend care, and care for children with special needs; and, prioritizing the development of after school recreational, tutoring and summer programs for youth, especially in the communities of opportunity.



MEETING TRANSPORTATION NEEDS



Residents raised numerous issues related to how difficult it is to meet their transportation needs — whether it is to work, school, or for needed medical or social services. Addressing transportation issues requires

intense partnerships and collaboration. To begin, transportation options for residents could be improved through educational efforts and pilot programs, such as:

- Asking NJ Transit to provide additional community education on how to use services, perhaps as part of resource fairs;
- Ensuring that libraries have printed material on transportation routes and times for their area; and,
- Developing pilot programs, such as volunteer transportation programs, or working with supermarkets or pharmacies to increase delivery services.

However, more comprehensive and creative strategies will be needed to better connect county residents with the jobs and services they need to access. In the longer term, it is recommended that an array of options be explored to meet these needs:

- Non-profits and faith-based agencies in the community could form transportation pools;
- Development and expansion of teleservices, to replace a resident needing to travel to access a service, be explored for various services and supports;
- Increased out-stationing of services and supports at accessible community locations to ease resident access; and,
- A comprehensive examination of the value of utilization of Uber, Lyft, etc. to meet transportation needs.

OTHER UNMET NEEDS — RELATED TO POPULATIONS

Several other unmet needs were identified through community input, and each focus upon members of the community being better able to interact with each other, and supporting their success, including:

- **Youth and Adults:** ESL and Spanish classes throughout the community to foster communication among residents.
- **LGBTQ residents:** More support groups to recognize and address the stigma and other issues these individuals may be struggling with.
- **Children:** Behavioral supports for young children, especially for those who have received Early Intervention Services, and are awaiting services from the public education system.
- **Adults with Disabilities:** Increased opportunities for adults to better interact socially with others.
- **Children in foster care for long periods of time:** A special focus should be for the county to reach out to the NJ Department of Children and Families to assess and address the issue of children being in foster care in Union County for long periods of time, especially over five years.

UNMET NEEDS RELATED TO COMMUNITIES OF OPPORTUNITY

To the extent possible, priorities should be placed for meeting unmet needs and overcoming systemic barriers to services and supports in the communities of opportunity. The particular challenges in each of these communities should be prioritized and addressed. It

is also recommended that the potential of establishing interconnected, place-based, collective impact strategies for each of the communities of concern be explored.

OVERCOMING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

CSBG funded agencies should be in the forefront of these activities, as they meet the intent of this funding.

The needs of individuals and families in Union County cannot be met by government and the non-profit human service community alone. Responses to complicated issues require holistic, collaborative responses. The degree to which services and resources are organized and connected to support integrated pathways for residents to follow (including outreach/access,

performance measurement, and system development/improvement) was a topic considered during the strategic formulation process with the Steering Committee. There were a number of issues raised for which innovation, or more comprehensive/coordinated approach, are recommended. Several recommendations resulted from this discussion, as described below.

OUTREACH AND EDUCATION ABOUT RESOURCES

Issues related to what residents know about services available, and how to navigate them, were raised by every group, in every area of the county. Specific areas about which it is recommended that the community be better educated were also identified.

There are several components to addressing the challenge of residents being unaware of how to get help when needed. A comprehensive approach to addressing this challenge includes the development of a system for cataloging resources, and a plan for getting the word out to residents about help that is available.

Groups provided advice about having a variety of ways to convey information to residents, and about engaging community stakeholders in educating residents about how to access and navigate the human services system, including:

- Develop or enhance the capacity for a comprehensive online resource directory.
- Develop an array of other means to increase awareness of county residents about services available (such as websites, printed material in a variety of languages and real live video chats in multiple languages). Continue outreach to expand knowledge of the Union County Department of Human

The recommendations related to residents being able to find and access resources require a comprehensive approach, led by CSBG funded agencies, to develop mechanisms and a system to help county residents become better educated about issues affecting their wellbeing, and services/supports available to help address them.

Services Action Line. Improve web-based resources and information and provide education through community and faith-based agencies and libraries.

- Host resource fairs throughout the county, with priority on the communities of opportunity, share information about all governmental and community services available and how to access them.
- Educate and train educational personnel and police about key issues affecting community well-being, and the availability of services and supports to address resident needs. They can then serve as resources to residents who need help in identifying services and accessing them.



Educating residents on key issues that may be affecting them or their community was also recommended repeatedly. These issues include:

- Reverse mortgage information for seniors;
- Stigma reduction;
- Technology supports to monitor children/teens internet usage; and,
- Vaping

HOLISTIC APPROACH TO COORDINATED SERVICE DELIVERY

Deemed the “Yellow Brick Road Pipeline” by the Steering Committee — an integrated, comprehensive

“Can we have a more one stop approach for serving people with mental health challenges?”

— Focus group participant

approach to support individual and family success is recommended as the primary way to overcome the fragmented services that exist in several key areas: early childhood success, positive youth development, housing/homeless-

ness, behavioral health, and financial empowerment. Currently, services do not follow individuals and families, are not coordinated, and often do not include methods for measuring effectiveness.

To begin this process, it is recommended that the county review its own operations and the coordination and integration of its functions and funded services across each of its departments and divisions. Opportunities for enhanced coordination among county departments and divisions should also be considered, particularly among the workforce

development, health, and human services areas. Next, engage residents in defining their strengths, needs, and preferences. Service providers should seek cooperative planning and service collaborations with state services, for example the Department of Children and Families and the Division of Developmental Disabilities. The goal would be the development of an integrated system to efficiently and effectively support Union County residents in being successful in each area/pillar, and across the life journey.

One key area where there are opportunities for enhanced coordination to support resident success is in the area of workforce development. Particularly for young adults and those residing in the Communities of Opportunity where unemployment is highest, an approach is needed to engage, educate, train, and place individuals on career paths. A public-private partnership to support an effort to help residents find and keep jobs, and have careers that allow them to support themselves and their families, would also maximize the use of available funding in this area.

VOLUNTEERS

It is recommended that the needs for tutoring and mentoring programs for youth, and potentially in other service areas, be addressed partially through the development of a volunteer program that recruits, trains, manages and supports volunteers to work with youth in a trauma-informed manner. Ideally, a multi-generational tutoring /mentoring program could address the needs of both the older adults (for productive activities) and children being served.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Stakeholders recommended the development of a customer satisfaction system, as a method to measure system responsiveness to resident need, and effectiveness of services. This system should be developed with provider and consumer input.

ADVOCACY AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Several issues were raised for which advocacy by the county, and other community stakeholders, is recommended:

- Advocate regarding licensing standards for sober living homes — to increase the number of these residences within the county.
- Advocate for more affordable housing development throughout the county.
- Advocate for reasonable increases in safety net programs and services that come closer to addressing the cost of living challenges.

Additionally, there is a need for funding to be identified to meet unmet needs in the county; this is beyond the capacity of county government alone to

achieve. It is recommended that strategies be developed for creative, diversified and leveraged funding to support the implementation of the Community Needs Assessment recommendations. These strategies would include:

- Developing a grants clearinghouse;
- Consistently exploring state and federal grant opportunities;
- Pursuing philanthropic opportunities;
- Developing and enhancing private sector partnerships; and,
- Creating a new entity to focus on financing initiatives related to the CNA.

IMPLEMENTATION

The undertaking of the Community Needs Assessment has mobilized a wide array of stakeholders from all sectors, government, non-profit and community residents. Throughout the process the interest, energy and participation of the Union County community has been identified as a clear and resounding strength. The 2019 Freeholder Chair and Human Services Director inspired community participation by pledging

that the Community Needs Assessment would not be a document that sits on a shelf but would serve as an informed vehicle for positive forward change to better meet the needs, challenges and aspirations of Union County residents. This document, consistent with that vision, is a guide for *“Looking into the Future Together”*.

In order to build on the momentum of broad and large-scale stakeholder interest generated by the Community Needs Assessment, the following recommendations related to implementation are offered:

1. Widely disseminate the results of the CNA — to educate the community about needs and to encourage the development of partnerships to influence policy and implementation of the CNA.
2. Create a unified and structured public-community partnership to plan, implement and evaluate the implementation of the key findings and recommendations of the CNA, utilizing the principles of collective impact and the framework in the CNA.
3. Transition the CNA Steering Committee into a streamlined body to guide and oversee the implementation of key recommendations.
4. Integrate and streamline existing planning bodies to assure coherent, efficient and holistic implementation strategies.
5. Review and restructure where appropriate the organization of county government personnel, processes and funding to align and support the implementation of key recommendations.
6. Create quantitative and qualitative methods to support the planning and evaluation of the public/community partnership.
7. Explore innovative strategies to finance implementation of key recommendations by seeking diverse sources of funding and leveraging available resources.
8. Outreach to the business community and higher levels of government to participate and support the public/community partnership.
9. Create a formal advocacy agenda to address long-term issues that lie beyond the authority of county government to address.

The Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders



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