
United Way
of Central Minnesota



2007 State of Caring Community Assessment

Key Findings Summary

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Key Findings, 2007 State of Caring Community Assessment

Objective

Every five years United Way of Central Minnesota conducts a community needs assessment. The objective of the *2007 State of Caring Community Assessment* was:

To identify the most pressing community needs in Central Minnesota so United Way of Central Minnesota along with community partners can more effectively plan to meet those needs.

How the research was conducted

United Way of Central Minnesota worked with UpFront Consulting, St. Joseph to complete this community assessment. The research was conducted March through November, 2007. It included four phases, with each one building on the earlier phases:

Phase 1: Review of relevant Central Minnesota research from 2002 to 2007, plus state and national trends;

Phase 2: Focus groups with service recipients recruited and hosted by Catholic Charities Emergency Services, Reach Up, Inc., and Tri-CAP;

Phase 3: Online survey completed by 110 managers and service providers from human service and health care organizations, schools, and churches in Central Minnesota; and

Phase 4: Groups with Central Minnesota key informants selected by United Way, focused on four key root causes of community needs that had been identified by service recipients and providers in the earlier phases.

This summary

In this summary are the key findings of the 2007 State of Caring community assessment. The findings from Phases 1, 2, and 3 include a section on Community Assets, followed by sections organized by current UWCM impact areas:

- Economic Stability/Meeting Basic Needs,
- Early Childhood Development/Youth Development, and
- Strengthening Individuals and Families.

Each of these report sections includes key points from the literature review, the service recipient focus groups, and the key informant survey.

The final section of this report summarizes key findings from Phase 4 of this community assessment: key informant groups focused on four priority “root causes” or underlying needs identified in the earlier phases. Key informants identified barriers to reaching a community vision addressing the root cause, and named current strategies that are working and need to expand, as well as new strategies for reaching the vision.

Community Assets

Service recipient focus groups, key points

Participants across the three focus groups of service recipients noted these as important community assets of Central Minnesota:

- Sense of community
- Family friendly
- Welcoming to newcomers
- Low crime rates compared to larger cities
- Community attributes such as schools, health care, parks, outdoor recreation
- Strong community agencies that help people get their lives back on track

Key informants survey, key points

Service providers and other key informants named these as key community assets:

- The range of quality services and the caring people and organizations in this community are seen as key assets. Collaboration and cooperation are strong. As a result residents have good access to assistance, education, recreation and, to a lesser degree, health care.
- Welcoming newcomers and providing transportation to residents in need are seen by some as assets, but many believe the community could do better in these areas. Although diversity is a growing challenge, many key informants also see it as a new community asset.

Economic Stability/Meeting Basic Needs

Literature review, key points

Meeting basic needs was identified as a top priority in the 2007 Central Minnesota survey. It was also the top category of requested information from the 2-1-1 referral service for the past two years.

Findings from other studies showed:

- Lack of financial resources and lack of transportation were named most often by UWCM funded programs as a barrier to service access for their clients.
- According to parents and community informants, higher-wage jobs are an on-going need, as is economic development in rural areas of Central Minnesota.
- To meet the needs of both local employers and potential workers, more workplace and community occupational and conversational English classes are needed at multiple levels. Additionally, UWCM programs describe lack of English skills as a barrier to accessing needed services.
- Interpreters and translation services, including low or no-cost interpreters for the job application process, are an on-going need in the community.
- Cultural competency in health care, in education, and across the community is a growing need. It is especially important because it often impacts access to services.

Service recipient focus groups, key points

Participants who receive services from community agencies named these as priorities in meeting basic needs and creating economic stability for individuals and families:

- Higher wage, long-term jobs is a key need in Central Minnesota.
- Affordable, quality housing, including adequate-size housing to accommodate large immigrant and refugee families is a key need, as is emergency housing.
- Food and clothing assistance is a strength of this community, though some people still need more food assistance.
- Transportation access is also critical for some individuals and families as they try to meet basic needs.

Key informants survey, key points

Service providers rated needs identified by service recipients and the research review, ranking these highest in the area of financial stability/meeting basic needs:

- Access to health insurance, affordable and accessible childcare, and jobs that promote financial stability are top needs, according to respondents.
- Food shelves will need additional assistance in the coming years.
- Early intervention with families in need and affordable housing are also important needs, particularly because respondents believe the community has recently lost ground in these areas.

Early Childhood Development/Youth Development

Literature review, key points

Child and youth success and education were identified as two of the top four needs in a UWCM 2007 telephone survey of Central Minnesota households.

Other research findings:

- Parents in the community can readily find information about parenting, but have more trouble finding parenting services. The two services most difficult for parents to find are emergency childcare and activities for children under six.
- Affordable childcare was identified by low-income parents as one of six top unmet needs.
- According to both parents and community informants, specialized childcare is difficult to locate; this includes ill-child, special needs, behavior issues and medical conditions.
- There is a gap in educational attainment between students of color and white students. Increased diversity in local schools makes this a growing need.

Service recipient focus groups, key points

Affordable, accessible childcare is a critical need, according to community members. Other needs identified as important out of a list of community needs generated by the focus group participants are:

- Easier access to affordable pre-K education
- Parent education
- Health and mental health care access is lacking for children, youth
- A youth center with supervised activities
- After school and summer jobs/activities.

Key informants survey, key points

Survey respondents identified the following as key early childhood and youth needs:

- Early detection of the need for and access to mental health care is a top priority for children and youth according to key informants. Access to other health care is also a key need for this group. Both of these are identified as growing needs, and as areas where the community has recently lost ground.
- Early intervention is also important in solving behavior problems. Survey respondents believe this can happen through agency collaboration, described earlier as a key community asset.
- Key informants also noted the critical importance of education, ranging from accessible early childhood education to helping all students graduate from high school.

Strengthening Individuals and Families

Literature review, key points

Affordable housing is one of the top four needs identified in the 2007 Central Minnesota community-wide survey.

Other area studies noted these needs:

- Waiting lists for subsidized housing are long, according to low-income families and community informants. Limited emergency housing exists for homeless individuals, especially in rural areas.
- Housing denial (for inadequate rental history or because of a criminal record) and housing discrimination are barriers to accessing housing in the area.
- Families in Benton, Sherburne and Stearns Counties identified access to health care as an important need. Families on medical assistance and Minnesota Care do not have adequate access to dental services. Lack of health insurance is a growing problem in the middle class as well as for low-income families.
- Growth in numbers of residents 65 and older will require many additional services. For example, the number of seniors living alone in their own homes is projected to increase rapidly.

Service recipient focus groups, key points

Participants created a long list of needs that keep individuals and families from being strong and successful. They then narrowed their list to these priorities:

- Financial assistance—for rent, utilities, emergencies, and medical co-pays
- Affordable, accessible housing
- Health care access and affordability—insurance for low and middle income people, longer clinic hours, and mobile clinics bringing low-cost services to convenient locations
- Support groups and connections
- Respect for other races and cultures in the workplace.

Key informants survey, key points

Participants responded to questions about what is needed to strengthen individuals and families. Key findings are:

- Access to health care and to mental health care are just as important for other members of the community as they are for youth. Key informants rated these the two most critical needs for families and individuals.
- Getting medical and pharmacy help to the elderly is an important part of meeting this need.
- Providing transportation for all those with disabilities is seen as a critical need; and transportation for the elderly, especially to medical care, is a growing need.
- Providing services to those with disabilities in rural areas is also crucial, according to survey respondents.

Phase 4: Strategies to address root causes of community needs

Service recipient focus groups, key points

When focus group participants were asked to identify “root causes”--underlying problems that cause the community needs they had named, they discussed these:

- Financial need
 - Lack of income/minimum wage jobs
 - Inability to qualify for assistance/fear of losing assistance
 - Lack of funding for programs
- Access to health care
 - Limited hours
 - High cost of health care
- Housing access
 - Lack of quality
 - Lack of affordability
- Limited childcare access
 - Lack of access to subsidized care due to rigid income limits
- Lack of community-sponsored, safe meeting places for youth and families
- Limited knowledge of resources

Key informants survey, key points

These service providers responded to the above service recipient list along with other themes discussed repeatedly in those focus groups. Their responses were:

- Inadequate income is a root cause for many of the community needs, especially because of the number of low-wage jobs in the area, according to participants. Mental health issues also create many needs in the community. Respondents believe that programs that address these two root causes will help meet many community needs.
- Key informants also point out that lack of parenting skills and limited access to childcare are important root causes of many needs in the area.
- In the St. Cloud metro area, a shortage of affordable housing is an important root cause, according to respondents. Racism and tension between cultures are also part of the picture in the metro area.

Key informant groups, key points

Four groups of Central Minnesota key informants were invited to facilitated sessions focused on four key underlying needs or “root causes” identified in the three earlier

phases of this State of Caring assessment. Participants explored barriers and recommended strategies to achieve a community vision to address the root cause.

The visions and the key strategies recommended by the key informant panels follow. These recommendations are the culmination of all four phases of this community needs assessment, providing a suggested template for community action.

Financial stability

Vision—Our community supports all families in achieving and maintaining financial stability.

Priority strategies to achieve this vision:

- Take education about personal finance and resources to “where the people are.”
- Provide education for both providers and recipients about resources.
- Work to expand the admittedly finite financial resources available to families.
- Maximize resources available through employers to assist families.

Mental health

Vision— Our community helps everyone achieve optimal mental health.

Priority strategies to achieve this vision:

- Increase access to mental health services by bringing the services to where people need them.
- Educate the community and providers, and advocate for mental health with local and state government.
- Work to more closely integrate mental health care with physical health care, and with other services.
- Increase funding to allow agencies to add and sustain services.

Childcare

Vision— Our community helps all families have quality, affordable childcare.

Priority strategies to achieve this vision:

- Expand networking and connections among providers of childcare and providers of other services to families.
- Increase scholarships and other funding sources to help families pay for childcare.
- Educate the public and advocate with government about childcare issues.
- Provide more training and support to childcare providers.

Positive parenting

Vision— Our community supports all parents in positive parenting.

Priority strategies to achieve this vision:

- Create awareness—through technology, the media and the business community—that good parenting is a community issue.
- Ensure ongoing, stable funding to support parenting programs.
- Provide more support and education for parents of children ages 10 and older.

Strategies identified as common to all four visions

The key informant panels were asked to consider which strategies could be employed to move the community towards all four visions. Across the four key informant groups, participants named these strategies as having the potential to address all four visions:

- Educating the community
- Advocating for change
- Enhancing knowledge about services
- Taking programs and services to where people are
- Convening the community
- Coordinating resources
- Training and supporting providers
- Removing stigmas
- Providing additional funds to sustain and expand programs and services
- Providing and supporting employment programs
- Focusing on early childhood.

For more information

Full reports of each phase of the State of Caring 2007 community needs assessment are available from United Way of Central Minnesota, with some available on the UWCM website, <http://www.unitedwayhelps.org>