Community Listening Sessions
Summary Reports

OVERVIEW

During the week of July 9-13, 2007, Rappahannock United Way and its community partners sponsored Community Listening Sessions with a cross-section of residents and community leaders. The purpose of the Community Listening Sessions was to (1) share the preliminary findings of the Community Needs Assessment with the public and to (2) gather input from the community to help improve the quality and usefulness of the final report.

The consultant team, from Dialogos and ETC Institute, started each session with a 30-minute presentation about the Community Needs Assessment. Following the presentation, the participants were asked if they have any concerns or questions about the Needs Assessment. They were also asked to comment on what they thought the region's priorities should be based on their own knowledge and the survey results that were shown at the meeting.

A summary of the feedback from each group is listed below. Many of the comments reflect the opinions of individuals at each meeting and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of everyone who attended the meeting.

This summary is provided to help community leaders who use data from this study understand the initial reactions and concerns that specific segments of the community had about the assessment.

RELIGIOUS SESSION

- Surprised that issue of housing was ranked higher than hunger as a priority.
- Observed that there was a high level of dissatisfaction among leaders regarding tackling the issue of obesity.
- Housing issues affect everyone
- Surprised by the number of households have one or more members overweight
- Since the region is not viewed as a good place to work, one participant was surprised that need for quality jobs did not rank as high on the list of priorities by community leaders
- Concern that people with disabilities cannot afford a place to live
- Thought high quality paying jobs should be added to list of priorities; other issues that were identified as high priorities by individual members of the group included: early childhood education, discrimination, and family/domestic violence

- Concern about the region being a less desirable place to work needs to be addressed. Leaders need to view the need for better paying jobs in region in order to address the issues of affordable housing, hunger, mental health, etc.

BUSINESS SESSION

- Surprise that so many residents identified mental health issues as a major concern. This may be viewed as a positive sign as more citizens appear open to expressing concerns in this area.
- Seems to be a disconnect between community leaders and residents regarding issues, such as dropouts.
- Surprised about lack of transportation concerns by residents; the real concern is probably travel time and congestion while the survey focused on access to vehicles and transit.
- Some felt that discrimination issues needed to be ranked higher as well as physical health/dental needs.
- Affordable housing is definitely a top issue because it affects so many other areas.
- Education should be high on the list of priorities because good education is such an important foundation for adulthood.
- A suggestion was made to bring a diverse representation together in each community and ask that they create their own priority list.

SENIOR SESSION

- Surprised with low rating of developing skilled workforce since residents say they need job skill training
- Surprised transportation was not ranked a major issue.
- Interest in seeing the results broken down by respondents who have cars or those who rely on public transportation.
- Desire to see the data by various demographic groups; for example, how is need for affordable housing related to income level and family structure
- Can we determine the degree people commute to work and tie back to why many do not feel region is a good place to work?
- Can we do correlation between households with low-income seniors and the need for adult day care or other senior services?
- Is there a way to identify what supportive services seniors need so that community organizations can be mobilized to meet supportive senior needs?

HOUSING/BASIC NEEDS/ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY SESSION

- Pleasantly surprised that mental health was at top of list where it should be.
- Study validates need to address issue of affordable housing in all its dimensions.
- Affordable housing an issue for both low and moderate-income households.
- Transitional housing is also a major need but was not really addressed in this study.

- Although residents indicated that accessing transportation was a need, further study is required to solicit evaluation of current public transportation efforts.
- Money management classes are offered but response has been slow. Can we determine if this is a marketing or delivery issue?
- When the region became part of DC corridor, funds for rural areas were lost.
- Several participants felt that discrimination needed to be high priority
- Residents have access to transportation but there is still a need. Public transportation does not run late evenings or weekends. May not have a problem with access, but how reliable or flexible is it?
- George Washington Regional Commission is doing a public transit study. Several participants urged the commission to seek input from their clients.
- Affordable housing for persons with disabilities is a major need

EARLY CHILDHOOD/YOUTH SESSION

- Low ranking of suicide prevention. However, it was pointed out that most people experiencing stress do not resort to suicide. Incidence of depression nationally is 1 in 10. Incidence of suicide is much less. There is not a direct correlation between depression and suicide. Stress factors being reported are much more generic in nature. We need better understanding as to why so many families reported mental health concerns.
- Concerned about children with behavior problems and educating them. Has an impact on their education.
- Can we know which communities are more dissatisfied with lack of after school care programs? Do the programs exist and community leaders are aware or are they aware and feel we need more services?
- Households ranked obesity high, but community leaders did not.
- Leader survey showed that teenage pregnancy is a high priority. We have the highest rate in the state.
- Could it be that community leaders see issues like school dropout and teenage pregnancy as concerns, but not perceived so by residents?
- Early childhood education is important. There is a connection between early childhood education and K-12 education.
- A number of major issues identified in this study cannot be adequately addressed until we face the underlying issue of addressing lower paying jobs forcing a number of households to have to commute for better paying jobs and, in turn, creating other stress factors.

GENERAL SESSION

- Teenage pregnancy rates are the highest in the state.
- Surprises that residents rated access to transportation so highly. DSS suggests that many of their clients have transportation-related problems. Many cannot participate in work programs due to lack of transportation.
- Emergency preparedness should be a high priority.

- For low-income families, affordable housing is non-existent.
- Not surprised with the high incidence of stress related reporting among households given the level of commuting and stress it brings on families.
- Do the mental health findings span all income levels?

LATINO POPULATION SESSION

- Is there a correlation between the high depression/anxiety rate and family violence and sexual assault?
- Not surprised by high depression/anxiety rates.
- Concern that we would use only 2000 census to determine number of Latinos in area. This segment of the population is growing rapidly.
- Accessing and securing transportation for Latinos is a problem.
- Huge issue for Latinos is the issue of affordable childcare. Many single parents work long hours and current available childcare is not affordable or accessible.
- Language barriers coupled by the lack of culturally appropriate services is viewed as the number one priority concern for many Latinos
- Lack of 911 responsiveness is a problem due to language barriers
- Sensitivity training related to responding to requests for information and services
- Challenge in finding bilingual people to serve Latino population. Business and Latino community should come together to address these and other issues.
- Need to inform Latinos of their rights by law in order to empower them to access and receive services. Empower them to ask questions. Federal funds under Title 6 mandate free interpretation services
- Providers need to go beyond just having one staff person be bilingual. Essential that providers train staff to be sensitive and aware of how to provide culturally appropriate services to Latinos and other groups.
- Again, the most important issue is language barriers. Providers need to assure interpretative services, diversity training among staff coupled with creation of culturally appropriate services.
- Latinos need to be more involved in the decision making process, especially in terms of designing services.

GOVERNMENT SESSION

- Community leaders chose transportation as high needs, but residents did not respond the same. I think there is agreement that we were asking about "access" while government officials define public transportation differently.
- Surprised that meeting basic needs was ranked lower.
- The most urgent issues are housing and livable income/wages.
- High priorities for the government sessions were:
  - Transportation
  - Health care
  - Housing

- Livable income-wages

HEALTH/MENTAL HEALTH SESSION

- Some difference in perception of transportation needs between residents and leaders.
- Surprised that availability of mental health services was as high as reported.
- Did the VA Tech incident have some impact? How does the mental health issue breakout geographically and demographically?
- Dropout issue ranked much higher for leaders than residents
- Half of households are concerned with someone in their household being over weight.
- Do we have breakout as to how public officials responded to issues? Versus social service providers?
- There seems to be consensus from all the groups as to why people like living in this area, but not as related to work.
- Commuting is driven by lower paying jobs coupled with high cost of housing. Housing is cheaper in the region but still expensive in relation to salaries in the region.
- Can we get profiles of households with different types of problems?
- Many groups discuss the high findings related to mental health. Although we can create a demographic profile, I have recommended that as a next step, they bring the mental health community together to further define and develop solutions as to how to move forward.
- There seems to be a disconnect between residents needing help with information about parenting and community leader's satisfaction with parent education.
- The top priorities for this group were:
  - mental health
  - housing
  - health care/dental
  - affordable prescriptions.
- The most urgent needs were mental health and affordable housing

DISABILITIES SESSION

- For the deaf and disabled communities, many agencies are not proactive in asking clients if they need to make special accommodations in serving their needs.
- Spotsylvania teachers earn $8-10,000 less annually than in Stafford or Richmond.
- Employers express concern in finding adequate number of quality people to work due to overall salary scale compared to outside the region.
- Our housing costs may not be as high as elsewhere but we still are not competitive salary wise.
- Cost of housing, especially in certain areas of the region, has skyrocketed in the past three years.
- Lack of health providers in the area...long waiting list with medical providers

- Quality nursing home needs further definition
- There are services for deaf that remain unknown. There is a gap in attitude and sensitivity by providers and larger community with families who have disabled members
- Money management is a major need for many households, especially given the cost of living
- Need stronger emphasis in teaching life skills to high school students (money management, etc.)
- We lack sufficient number and diversity of providers to serve the disabled population
- Many employees are opting to drop health insurance coverage in order to have more disposable income
- Although transportation efforts have increased, still not adequate in rural areas

AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION SESSION

- The group was surprised that there was not more attention related to the issue of young adults. They have nothing to do and therefore become involved in inappropriate activities. Community leaders appear more focused on activities and programs for the younger youth.
- Teen pregnancy is an important issue. The area has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the state.
- Teenage pregnancy leads to many students not graduating from high school, lack of jobs skills as well as other concerns.
- Many issues in this study were broad and, therefore, will require more definition in order to determine how best to proceed.
- Affordable housing is a key problem. Wages are not sufficient to afford decent housing for many families in the region.
- Services for senior citizens are important. There are waiting lists for programs like Meals on Wheels.
- Affordable housing needs are not limited to low income families. Many moderate-income level families are facing the same challenges.
- The sense of diversity that existed in the region continues to erode.
- Early childhood education is important for all families.
- The lack of higher paying jobs in the region is the foundation as to why many unmet needs were identified in the study.
- Essential to bring people from diverse perspectives to discuss findings of the study and to develop solutions.