Bucks County Opportunity Council

Executive Summary: Community Needs Assessment Report

(Compiled March, 2018)

Purpose of the Report

The Bucks County Opportunity Council (BCOC), now in our 53rd year, is the lead anti-poverty 501 (c)(3) organization in Bucks County. Our mission is to reduce poverty and partner with the community to promote economic self-sufficiency. BCOC conducted a community needs assessment in 2018 in accordance with the strategic planning process and in an effort to inform our work in developing strategies to achieve our mission of helping improve the lives of those in poverty in Bucks County.

Community Input

BCOC sought the input of key stakeholders, current clients, and community members through the use of surveys, focus groups, and the Community Action Association of Pennsylvania Community Needs Assessment tool to gain comprehensive insight into the needs of Bucks County residents. The CNA tool is a comprehensive database that captures community information regarding health, poverty, housing, and many other data points. **There were a total of 560 responses from a broad range of the population.** With this data, we will work to address gaps in service for low income individuals and families in Bucks County.

Survey Methodology

Surveys provided the primary source for community input. Surveys were developed by The Pennsylvania State University and widely distributed throughout the County and by social media to the general population, low-income community members who had utilized BCOC services at least once, and key stakeholders (other nonprofits, community organizations, local government and elected officials, as well as representatives from the faith-based community, businesses, education and the healthcare sector). Results were separated below for statistical purposes; yet, remarkably, the responses from each group were very similar.

Survey Results

The following list represents the priority needs identified through surveys as the most significant gaps in service in Bucks County. The list of priority needs includes the top five categories identified through survey responses.

People with low income reported:

Highest Priorities

1. Expand affordable housing
2. Improve Senior Citizen services
3. Improve employment opportunities for jobs at a living wage
4. Increase access to rental assistance
5. Decrease crime

Greatest Strengths in Bucks County

- Resources
- Sense of community
- Good education system

Greatest Challenges in Bucks County

- Affordable Housing/Homelessness
- Drugs/opioid addiction
- Living wage jobs ($25-$29 per hour)

General Population reported:

Highest Priorities

1. Improve employment opportunities at a living wage
2. Improve healthcare access and affordability
3. Improve employment and training opportunities
4. Expand affordable housing
5. Improve senior citizen services

Greatest Strengths in Bucks County

- School system
- Resources/Community/People who care
- Food access

Greatest Challenges

- Drugs/Opioid epidemic
- Affordable housing
- Employment at a living wage ($25 to $29 per hour)

Key Stakeholders (34% of responses from nonprofit, community organizations; 29% from public sector -local government, elected officials; and 37% from faith based, businesses, education, and healthcare)

Highest Priorities

1. Expand affordable housing
2. Expand access to healthcare
3. Increase employment training opportunities
4. Increase access to affordable childcare
5. Increase access to rental assistance

Greatest Strengths in Bucks County

- Resources
- A Community that cares
- Strong non-profits/leadership

Greatest Challenges

- Opioid epidemic
- Housing/homelessness
- Transportation

Other Survey Indicators:

Healthcare Challenges: Among challenges related to health care, difficulty accessing and affording dental services was identified as a severe challenge. Other health care challenges included lack of primary care/family doctors; providers that don't accept Medicare or Medicaid; the cost of prescriptions; and having no health benefits.

Challenges for Seniors: The top challenge for seniors is their inability to meet basic needs, followed by access to medical services, affordable housing, social isolation, and transportation.

Basic Needs Challenges: The highest need identified (by 65% of the respondents) was difficulty acquiring food. Other issues listed were: difficulty paying rent and utilities.

Challenge of Social Issues: Over 90% of the key stakeholders identified opioid addiction as the #1 social challenge, with poverty, alcohol abuse, underage drinking, crime, domestic violence and sexual assault also listed.

Bucks County Community Profile

- Population: 626,399
- 40,872 people living in poverty in Bucks County (6.6%); 9,417 children, 5,748 seniors
- Unemployment rate: 4% (less than the state and national rates)
- Median Family Income: $97,493
- Living Wage for a family with one adult and two children: $29.00 per hour
- In Lower Bucks, 4 school districts have free/reduced lunch rates over 50%
- Education: 6.43% of people over age 25 do not have a high school diploma
- Housing: 54,763 occupied units paying rent; 48% of renters and 32% of owners pay 30% or more of income on rent; low rental vacancy rates at only 1.75% of units empty; median gross rent: $1,143; median home value: $318,233
- Nutrition: 20,507 households eligible for SNAP; only 12,962 households receive SNAP benefits
- Health Insurance: 5.8% of the population is uninsured, 36,000 people

Among the top 50 employers identified in Bucks:

- Education – school districts and colleges
- Healthcare – hospitals and healthcare centers
- Retail centers – food stores, drug stores, department stores
- Government – County of Bucks, federal and state
- Senior Living – Nursing facilities
- Recreation and gaming

Conclusion /Next Steps

As the Bucks County Opportunity Council finalizes its next Strategic Plan, the results of this assessment will inform our work; we will strengthen existing programs and create new ones if needed to address newly identified needs.

Housing: BCOC will continue to expand housing supports for low income families in Bucks County and will explore affordable housing partnerships with agencies that currently own properties. We will expand our landlord base through our new Housing Location services and GIS mapping being created by the County of Bucks. BCOC will increase housing prevention and stability services offered, including street outreach, diversion, rapid rehousing, and resource navigation, by partnering with our local Housing Continuum of Care, United Way, and other partners. Lastly, we will advocate to increase the number of housing vouchers available to our disabled population so that they can maintain independent living with as little subsidy as possible.

Employment: A living wage in Bucks County ranges from $12.17 an hour for a single adult to $38.00 per hour for a two parent household with three children. Education and/or training are required to acquire the skills needed to get a job at this income level. BCOC has been working closely with clients through our Economic Self-sufficiency Program for more than 20 years. This

program has helped over 300 households achieve livable wage employment. Expansion of this program through a two generational approach to address the needs of the whole family is in the early planning stages. The two generational approach is considered best practice for reducing poverty permanently.

Education & Training: As previously stated, education or training are needed to secure employment at a living wage in Bucks County. A college degree is one pathway, but other technical and training programs and certificates can accomplish this goal. We are working with partners to identify new training opportunities so that our clients can gain employment in high-demand jobs that pay a living wage. BCOC is also planning a coalition of multiple sectors to address this topic. More to come on this in the coming months.

Healthcare: While BCOC does not provide healthcare services, we partner with multiple healthcare providers in Bucks County to help people with low income access services and also to help them become healthier. Through our collaborative partnership, Fresh Connect, we are beginning to see long term health benefits of participants including weight loss, improved blood pressure, and improved mental health (self-reported). We will continue our partnerships with the healthcare providers to best address the needs of individuals and families with low incomes.