

Riley County Community Needs Assessment

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS



In an effort to gain insights from the community for the purposes of planning and community improvement, Wichita State University’s Center for Applied Research and Evaluation (CARE) was contracted by the Flint Hills Wellness Coalition to conduct a community-wide needs assessment for Riley County, which included the compilation of selected secondary data, administration of a community survey, community member interviews, and focus groups. Secondary data, which is publicly available data such as the Census, Kansas Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), and others, were compiled for the most recent years available. The community survey was conducted online and through administration at public locations or meetings to gather input from residents regarding their perceptions of community strengths and needs in 10 topic areas (Quality of Life, Physical Health, Mental Health, Social Issues, Children and Youth, Education, Aging, Housing, Transportation, and Economics/Personal Finance).

A total of 1,229 surveys were completed. Although significant efforts were made to solicit participation by a representative sample of community members, survey respondents were largely white, female, middle-aged or older, educated, with higher incomes than average. In order to gain additional insight on the issues addressed in the survey as well as any other concerns, 25 community members representing a wide range of interests, ages, length of residency, and professions were interviewed. Additionally, two focus groups were held for populations that were underrepresented in the survey – persons with low income and Hispanics/Latinos – as well as an additional group with community/governmental organization representatives. The strengths and needs that were identified for Riley County were remarkably consistent across all methods of data collection.

THE OVERARCHING THEMES FOR ALL OF THE DATA COLLECTED ARE THAT RILEY COUNTY IS A COMMUNITY THAT ENJOYS A HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE AND VIBRANCY, BUT IS BEGINNING TO SHOW MORE NEGATIVE SIGNS OF GROWTH, SUCH AS INCREASED HOUSING AND PROPERTY COSTS, TOO FEW LIVING WAGE JOBS, AND AN EXPANDING GAP BETWEEN “HAVES” AND “HAVE NOTS” WITH A RESULTING NEED FOR MORE RESOURCES FOR THOSE IN NEED.

For the full report, go to: www.rileycountycommunityneedsassessment.org

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HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE

Riley County has a reputation as a good place to raise a family, with good schools, including Kansas State University as an anchor for education as well as culture/activity, good size, good physical and natural environment, and a strong sense of community and collaboration. While the diversity fostered by the university and larger businesses was noted as a key element of the quality of life, discrimination regarding race/ethnicity, income, sexual orientation/gender identity, and disability was also noted as an issue.



LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Affordable housing remains a major issue across the community with the median value being \$194,800 in Riley County and \$200,400 for Manhattan versus \$145,400 in Kansas (2014-2018 estimate). The current median rent is \$938 for Riley County and \$908 for Manhattan (\$831 for Kansas). As noted above, many participants feel the cost of housing is being driven by current or expected growth, which is in turn increasing property taxes and the need for services to help those who are falling behind economically due to these costs. Additionally, residents are finding that new housing is primarily for those with higher incomes while those with moderate or lower incomes are priced out of the market, even for older or less desirable properties. A lack of accountability for landlords is also an issue as deficient properties are not properly addressed but are often the only affordable options for students and those with lower incomes.



LACK OF LIVING WAGE JOBS

As noted previously, this issue is tied to growth, housing, and the expanding need for services for persons with low income in the community. This issue was brought up across all data collection methods, and a number of interview participants noted the difficulty of keeping talented people in Manhattan unless they are being brought in for the National Bio and Agro-defense Facility (NBAF) or similar high-paying, but highly targeted positions. And even though there may be a reasonable number of job opportunities in the community, a large number are minimum wage or are filled by students. This leaves few employment options beyond entry level and which allow people to have a decent standard of living.



GROWTH AS BOTH A STRENGTH AND A CHALLENGE

While nearly all participants in interviews and focus groups acknowledged that growth in Riley County, and Manhattan especially, has brought good things like increased diversity and new businesses, they also frequently connected this growth with increasing problems such as higher than average housing costs and property taxes, a lack of living wage jobs, and concerns about insufficient infrastructure. In a domino effect, increasing costs to live amidst such growth has created greater needs for services such as food pantries/community meals and other services for persons with lower and even moderate incomes. Some participants felt the community is prematurely preparing for an influx of higher incomes while forgetting about the needs of those who currently live and struggle there. Additionally, the growth of “big box” stores has primarily brought minimum wage jobs, not the living wage jobs that are considered a primary need and economic catalyst in the community.



LACK OF ACCESSIBLE & AFFORDABLE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

In the 2014-2015 assessment, mental health services emerged as one of the primary issues. Although the lack of mental health services remains a concern, the recent addition of the Pawnee Mental Health Crisis Stabilization Center has helped address at least some of the need. However, the lack of adequate and affordable healthcare has risen to the top for 2019-2020, most particularly related to the hospital. A number of participants noted the limited services offered through the hospital means that many Riley residents must travel or be transported to other hospitals for issues as common as heart attacks. Additionally, it was noted that the community lacks specialists and affordable options for those with lower incomes. Although participants in focus groups noted a few clinics that provide affordable, accessible services, an issue still remains with some providers requiring full payment for services up front, which is typically not an option for lower income persons.