

Executive Summary: Community Needs Assessment Report *for Bucks County*

Compiled April-August 2021



**PREPARED BY BUCKS COUNTY
OPPORTUNITY COUNCIL**



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Purpose of the Report

The Bucks County Opportunity Council (BCOC), now in our 56th 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 2021 in accordance with the Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) funding regulations, 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

To gain comprehensive insight into the needs of Bucks County residents, BCOC sought the input of key stakeholders, current clients, and community members, using surveys, focus groups, and the Community Action Association of Pennsylvania Community Needs Assessment tool. The CNA tool is a comprehensive database that captures community information regarding health, poverty, housing, and many other data points. **There was a total of 585 responses from a broad range of the population.** With this data, BCOC 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 redesigned this year by MBA students from Villanova University, who acted as consultants for their MBA Social Consulting Practicum. The students spent several months working with BCOC leadership to identify problem areas and propose solutions. The final survey was 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:

Most Critical Priorities

1. Affordable housing
2. Employment opportunities that offer a livable wage
3. Expansion of senior citizen services
4. Improvement of healthcare access and affordability
5. Rental assistance

Greatest Strengths in Bucks County

1. Community organizations
2. Food access
3. Availability of resources
4. Faith
5. Emergency assistance

Greatest Challenges in Bucks County

1. Affordable housing/Homelessness
2. Drug use and addiction
3. Living wage jobs (\$25-\$29 per hour)
4. Access to mental health services
5. Access to affordable health care

Focus Groups:

Client focus groups were held to gather input from the people who receive services from BCOC and face challenges daily to meet basic family needs. Thirteen clients attended the focus group sessions, which were held virtually. Discussion focused on the areas of affordable housing, employment at a living wage, and self-sufficiency.

The consensus on affordable housing was that it does not readily exist for most residents who need it to survive. Most reported that, if not subsidized, they would be paying more than 50% of their net income to rent. Regarding employment at a living wage, clients' biggest concern was economic mobility without penalty. Each small raise in salary reduced benefits, causing financial chaos. One client commented, "*People want to do better, but government sets it up so that people are better off not working.*" Self-sufficiency programming was best described by this focus group participant who said, "*We need accountability with support, and that is what the BCOC ES program offers.*"

General Population reported:

Most Critical Priorities

1. Affordable housing
2. Employment opportunities that offer a livable wage
3. Healthcare access and affordability
4. Transportation

5. Food access

Greatest Strengths in Bucks County

1. Community organizations
2. Volunteerism
3. Access to education
4. Availability of resources
5. Food access

Greatest Challenges

1. Affordable housing
2. Drug abuse/addiction
3. Employment at a living wage (\$25 to \$29 per hour)
4. Access to mental health services
5. Access to affordable health care

Key Stakeholders (44% of responses from nonprofit groups and community organizations; 16% from public sector: local government, elected officials; 10% from private sector (for-profit businesses); 10% from healthcare; 8% from educational institutions; 5% faith-based organizations.)

Most Critical Priorities

1. Expand affordable housing
2. Expand access to healthcare
3. Expand quality of healthcare
4. Increase access to affordable childcare
5. Increase access to food assistance

Greatest Strengths in Bucks County

1. Availability of resources
2. Sense of community
3. Strong leadership in government and non-profits

Greatest Challenges

1. Lack of affordable housing options
2. Access to mental health services
3. Living wage jobs

Other Survey Indicators:

Transportation: Difficulty affording private transportation and difficulty affording car repairs, annual inspections, and general maintenance were the top concerns of respondents regarding transportation. There were several comments regarding solutions for people who are not eligible for a license due to fines/fees/suspensions or other issues.

Housing: In addition to the 74% of respondents who identified difficulty affording rent, 71% of respondents identified difficulty affording utilities as a housing challenge. Comments indicated that many people are challenged with saving up the funds to move to a new home, either due to lease nonrenewal, change of job location, or increase/decrease in family size.

Healthcare Challenges: Among challenges related to health care, difficulty accessing and affording dental services was identified as a severe challenge by 81% of respondents. Other health care challenges included lack of primary care/family doctors; providers that don't accept Medicare or Medicaid; the cost of prescriptions; and the cost of copays.

Challenges for Children's Education: Areas of concern included affordability of pre-school programs and school flexibility for working parents. Among respondents, 76% reported that their public school was not meeting the educational needs of their children.

Challenges for Seniors: The top challenge noted for seniors was difficulty finding reliable transportation to needed services, followed by difficulty affording produce and other food items, lack of affordable housing, and their inability to meet basic needs.

Basic Needs Challenges: The highest need identified (by 71.5% of the respondents) was difficulty acquiring rental/mortgage assistance. Difficulty acquiring utility assistance was the second highest need identified (by 70% of respondents). Other issues listed were: difficulty getting heat assistance, acquiring food assistance, and obtaining home repair assistance.

Challenge of Social Issues: Over 66% of the key stakeholders identified opioid addiction as a severe challenge, with poverty, alcohol abuse, preventable diseases, sexual abuse/assault, and domestic violence also listed. *Important to note:* in the last community needs assessment, 90% of key stakeholders reported opioid addiction as the number one challenge.

Bucks County Community Profile

- Population: 646,538
- 35,075 people living in poverty in Bucks County (5.7%); 8,843 children
- Unemployment rate: 5.7%

- Median Family Income: \$109,235 for white households, Black households, \$72,624, Latino households, \$59,920
- Median Household Income: \$89,139
- 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: 6.11% of people over age 25 do not have a high school diploma
- Child Care Costs: \$38.24, daily cost, full time, per child
- Housing: 54,977 occupied units paying rent; 47% of renters and 28.5% of owners pay 30% or more of income on rent; low rental vacancy rates at only 1.23% of units empty; median gross rent: \$1,257; median home value: \$344,300
- Nutrition: 20,236 households eligible for SNAP; only 13,900 households receive SNAP benefits
- Health Insurance: 5.4% of the population is uninsured, 34,913 people

Among the top 50 employers identified in Bucks County:

- Education – school districts and colleges
- Healthcare – hospitals, home care 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 -casino, theme park
- Manufacturing

Conclusion/Next Steps

As the Bucks County Opportunity Council continues to make progress on our Strategic Plan, the results of this assessment will inform our work. Following the aftereffects of the global pandemic, BCOC 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, including establishing better working relationships with local utility companies to offer reduced rates for customers with low incomes. BCOC currently works with PECO Energy through its Universal Services program for low-income customers, but we will expand efforts to the smaller companies as well. We will continue to expand our landlord base through our Housing Location services, and continue to promote the landlord incentive and bonus programs to increase housing stock for our clients. BCOC will continue our efforts in housing prevention and stability services offered, including street outreach, diversion, rapid rehousing, and resource navigation, by partnering with our local Housing Continuum of Care, Department of Housing & Community Development, United Way and other partners. We will work with community partners to support the development of workforce housing so that employed individuals earning too much to qualify for subsidies can afford available housing options in Bucks County. Lastly, we will work closely with Habitat for Humanity and Bucks County Housing Group to support new home ownership to close the racial wealth gap and help people build assets.

Employment: A living wage in Bucks County ranges from \$14.47 an hour for a single adult to \$33.12 per hour for a two-parent household with three children. Education and/or on-the-job 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 25 years. This program has helped 359 households, representing more than 1,000 people, achieve livable wage employment. In 2020, graduates' average income at entry to the program was \$23,305 or \$11.20 an hour. Graduates' income at program exit was \$46,539, an increase of \$23,234. ES graduates doubled their income. We will continue to apply a two-generation approach to address the needs of the whole family. The two-generation approach is considered best practice for reducing poverty permanently. BCOC is also expanding our work with employers to secure jobs for clients and market employment supports to reduce staff turnover.

Education and Training: As previously stated, education or training are needed to secure employment at a living wage in Bucks County. These two key factors move a person out of poverty. Though a college degree is one pathway, it is not the only path. Technical and certificate programs also can accomplish this goal. Bucks County Community College offers Certificate and Professional programming that increases skills that in turn increase earning capacity. 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, our programming does seek to mitigate several fundamental social determinants of health, e.g., economic stability, housing, transportation, and access to nutritious foods. BCOC partners with multiple healthcare providers in Bucks County, assisting people with low-income to access necessary services and thus increase their ability to achieve and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Through our collaborative partnership, Fresh Connect, a mobile farmers market, 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 healthcare providers to best address the health needs of individuals and families with low incomes.

Diversity/Equity/Inclusion: BCOC has partnered with the YWCA and United Way of Bucks County to present ongoing workshops/trainings utilizing the Racial Wealth Gap training model from *Bread for the World*. The simulation is an interactive tool that helps people understand the connections among racial equity, hunger, poverty, and wealth. BCOC has also joined a Racial Equity Learning Collaborative (RELC) through the Bucks-Mont Collaborative. The vision of the RELC is to advance racial equity and justice in Bucks and Montgomery counties through committed organizational learning, community building, and action that deepens organizational and collective capacity for change. Lastly, BCOC has partnered with several community partners to create the *Serving Bucks Together*, a nonprofit collaborative to address the needs of the Warminster community. For BCOC, we are intentionally working to engage the Latino population. White households have nearly double the median household income of Latino households. BCOC will strive to increase enrollment of African American and Latino households in our economic self-sufficiency program to address education, employment, income and asset building.