



United Way of
North Central Massachusetts

Community Needs Assessment Impact Paper

I. Community Needs Assessment – An Overview:

In an effort to gain insights from the 22 communities served by United Way of North Central Massachusetts (UWNCM), we launched a community needs assessment to identify where critical gaps in service may exist and where UWNCM should consider investing donor dollars.

Needs assessments are valuable tools for determining community perceptions, strengths and concerns for the purposes of planning and community improvement. UWNCM undertook this effort to gather both qualitative and quantitative information from a range of sources, including publicly available data and community members themselves, in order to highlight community strengths and needs to guide our efforts to address issues and plan for the future.

Given that we are in the middle of pandemic, we believe that many of the answers to the survey questions, focus groups and interview sessions were heavily influenced by COVID-19 and the impact it is having on our communities.

The assessment and this corresponding document are not intended to provide a complete picture of issues and needs throughout the region. Instead, they are an articulation of findings gleaned from the community engagement and data analysis described below. The purpose is to identify the most significant issues impacting low- to moderate-income residents in our region and how we can mitigate these issues through grant making, advocacy and the development and implementation of strategic initiatives.

II. Needs assessment methodology and process:

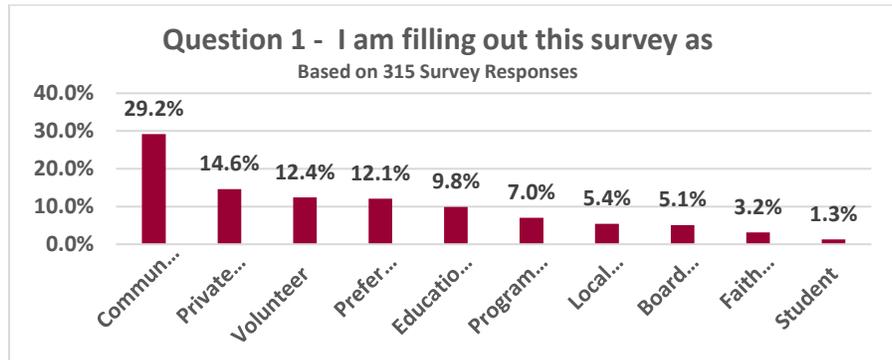
Our community needs assessment process included three elements:

1. Compilation and analysis of publically available data from a range of sources, including information from the US Census/American FactFinder, reporting data from our network of over 30 service agencies, and information and findings from numerous regional/community studies from academic and health institutions, municipalities and community development organizations.

Sources include:

- *The US Census*
 - *American FactFinder*
 - *Community Assessment and Regional Strategic Plan 2018: Making Opportunity Count, Inc.*
 - *Community Health Assessment; Heywood Health*
 - *The Joint Coalition on Health Community Health Assessment*
 - *Partner Agencies Data and Reporting Information*
2. A community-wide survey conducted in English, Spanish, Hmong and Portuguese that sought to identify and rank critical need areas impacting low- to moderate-income residents (housing, child care, transportation, affordable housing etc.). The purpose of the survey process is to understand the needs, challenges and assets of our community/region from the perspective of community members including residents, program participants, municipal representatives, service providers, students and volunteers (Diagram 1). The survey featured a wide variety of issues related to United Way's focus areas of income, health and education. A total of 315 surveys were completed. Each respondent answered a total of 17 questions. The questions consisted of nine demographic sections and eight sections focused on specific areas of importance including education, employment, health, housing, income & asset building, support services and overall needs.

Diagram 1:



Responses – 1.) Community Organization/Partner (local service provider/non-profit); 2.) Private Sector Representative/Community Member (for profit, small business, private citizen, etc.); 3.) Volunteer; 4.) Prefer not to respond; 5.) Educational Institution Faculty/Staff (local adult education, schools, colleges & universities); 6.) Program Participant; 7.) Local Elected Official/Government/Public Sector Representative (includes municipalities); 8.) Board Member of Local Community Organization; 9.) Faith Based Organization Representative (church/faith based groups, clubs, councils, associations, etc.); 10. Student

3. Over a dozen interviews and focus group sessions with representatives from academic and health institutions, municipalities, foundations, non-profit organizations, ethnic advocacy organizations and resident groups were conducted over the course of the past several months. The focus groups and interviews enabled us to gain in-depth information about respondent’s attitudes, feelings, beliefs and experiences. Questions were open-ended and allowed for more substantive conversations regarding the context and implications of respondents’ answers. Focus group and interview sessions ran 60-90 minutes each, and information gleaned was organized by topic areas. Answers were grouped, ranked and categorized by common themes in order to identify trends and patterns in how respondents experience and understand barriers impacting low- and moderate-income residents as well as the programs, services and resources needed to achieve measureable impact in reducing or eliminating these barriers.

III. Strengths & Limitations of Needs Assessment

As with any needs assessment process, ours has both strengths and limitations. It is also important to acknowledge a number of contextual factors that influenced the scope and depth of our analysis. Most significantly, the assessment was conducted by staff and volunteers from our Community Impact Leadership Committee and was not outsourced to an academic or research institute. The document itself is not a research paper but an articulation of findings resulting from a community assessment process. Staff utilized

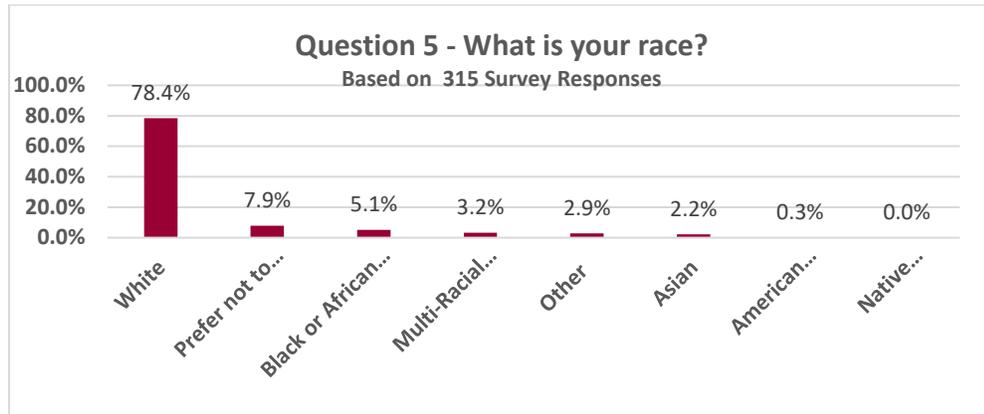
assessment methodologies consistent with industry standards and best practices advanced by community-based and grass roots organizations, health institutions and community foundations.

Strengths in the assessment process include the collection and analysis of a healthy blend of quantitative and qualitative data, and a survey respondent composition largely reflective of the racial and ethnic composition of the region. Publically available data enabled us to gain a better understanding of poverty and employment rates by town and race; statistical trends related to housing and homelessness; health outcomes for particular populations; and other important empirical information, while the survey and focus group/interview process enabled us to better understand the implications of the data and how these issues impact the day-to-day lives of people in our community.

The accuracy by which the respondent composition reflects the racial and ethnic makeup of our community is evidenced when comparing the population of Worcester County and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to responses to Question 5 regarding race. Diagram 2 shows the percentage of survey responses received in the demographic question regarding race. According to *American FactFinder*, Worcester County is 85.7% white, and Massachusetts as a whole is 80.6% white. Our survey response rate of white respondents is 78.4%. Additionally, while the response rate among African Americans was low (5.1%), it is consistent with demographic information, as Worcester County is 6.1% African American.

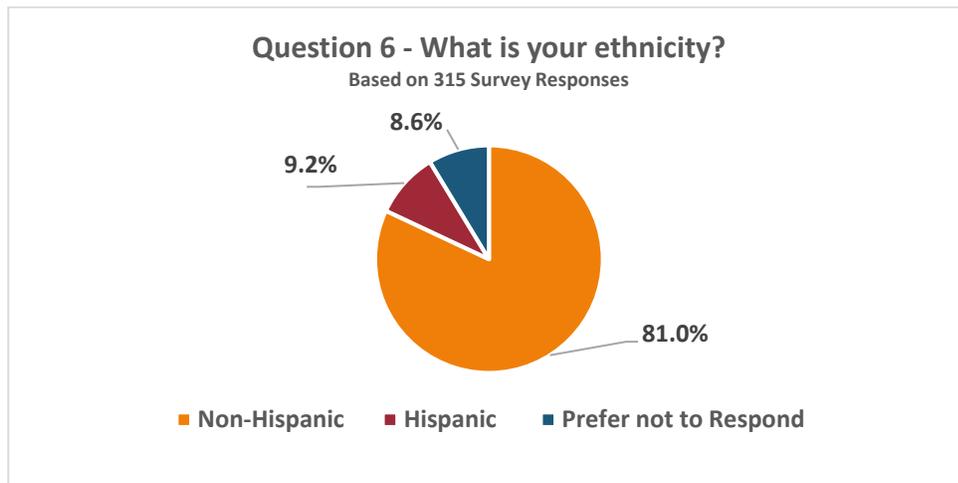
People who identify as Hispanic were underrepresented in our survey. As shown in Diagram 3, 9.2% of survey respondents identify as Hispanic. According to *American FactFinder*, Worcester is 12.2% Hispanic and Massachusetts is 12.4% Hispanic. This is something we will need to improve upon going forward.

Diagram 2:



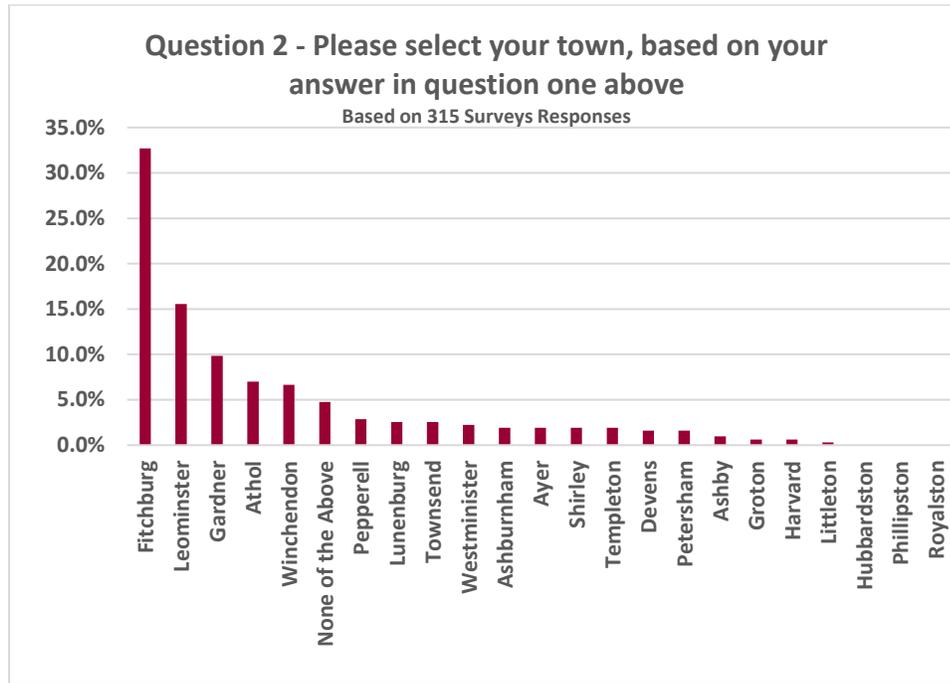
Responses – 1.) White, 2. Prefer not to respond, 3.) Black or African American, 4.) Multi-Racial (two or more), 5.) Other, 6.) Asian, 7. American Indian or Alaska Native; and 8.) Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.

Diagram 3:



Limitations in our process include the following: we were unable to convene focus groups and conduct interviews in person; the most recent completed Census information is ten years old (American FactFinder does generate estimated statistics that are more up-to-date but the data is limited); and we achieved higher concentrations of completed surveys in our core communities of Fitchburg, Leominster, Gardner and Athol, resulting in underrepresented data for surrounding communities. However, it is worth noting that the areas where we were able to obtain higher concentrations of data are the communities of highest need. Diagram 3 provides a comprehensive picture of the percentages of responses received from the 22 communities UWNCM serves.

Diagram 4:



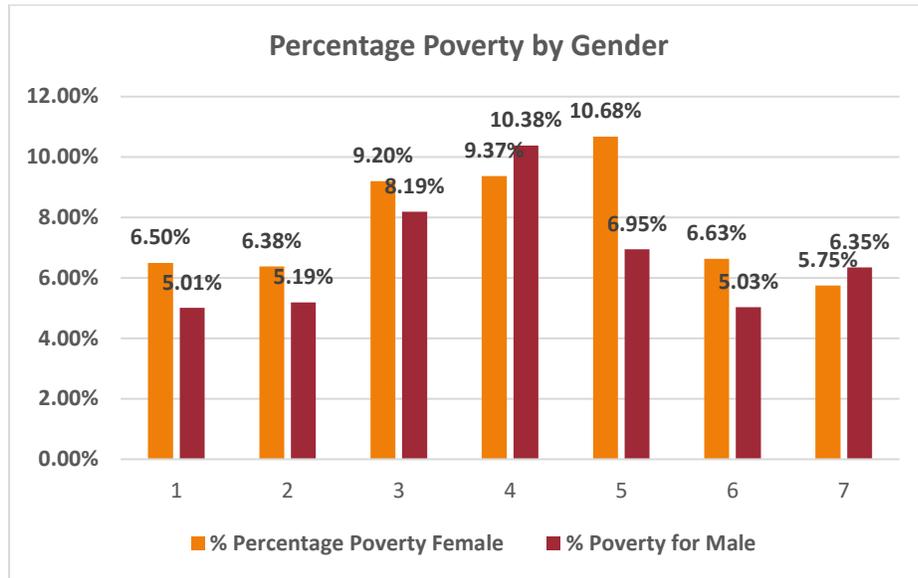
There are a number of cities and towns across the commonwealth with populations who continue to experience significant levels of poverty. For example, Fitchburg, Leominster and Athol have percentage of residents living at or below 100% of poverty that are more than 1.5 times Massachusetts. Additionally, the percentage of residents living at or below 200% of poverty is 1.3 times that of Massachusetts. All of the five centers have household median income lower than Massachusetts, with Gardner, Leominster, Fitchburg, and Athol roughly 69% of the state. ¹

IV. Key Findings:

Overall we found that there are significant pressures impeding socio-economic trajectory for low- and moderate-income individuals and families. Wages are not keeping pace with the costs of housing, child care, transportation and basic needs like food and utilities, and a disproportionate number of residents in our core service area are living at or below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). In fact, all of UWNCM’s core communities have higher poverty rates than the state average, and the average weekly wage for people living in these communities is about half of the state average.

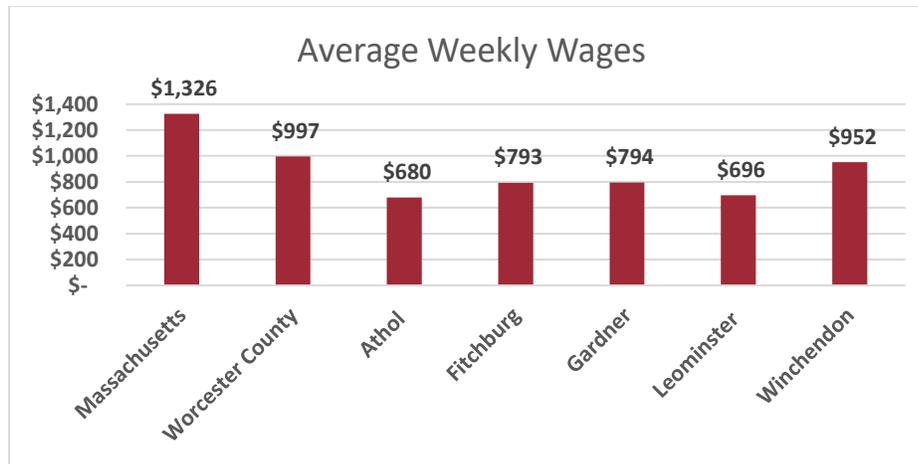
¹ Poverty in the United States; Frequently Asked Questions. National Poverty Center at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan.

Diagram 5:



Legend: 1 = Massachusetts 2 = Worcester County 3 = Athol 4 = Fitchburg
5 = Gardner 6 = Leominster 7 = Winchendon²

Diagram 6:



Source: Massachusetts Department of Labor & Workforce Development. Employment and Wages (ES-202).

In addition to higher poverty rates and lower wages compared to state and national averages, the higher cost of living has put additional strains on low- and moderate-income residents. For example, according to the Council on Community and Economic Development, compared to the

²NWLC Analysis of 2014 Census Poverty Data. National Women’s Law Center. Accessed March 2017 at: <http://nwlc.org/resources/nwlc-analysis-2014-census-poverty-data>

average American household, residents in our area pay 24% more for medical visits, 33% more for utilities, 24% more for telephone services, and 4% more for housing.

The historic economic instability impacting low- and moderate-income residents has only been exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 public health pandemic. Indeed, we are seeing a dramatic increase in the demand for food and utility assistance. A recent survey of our funded food programs shows that close to 40% of program beneficiaries are first time users. In addition, disruption to education and structured out of school programming has put low- and moderate-income students at increased disadvantages. A focus group of public school principals revealed a significant drop off in parental engagement, attendance and overall performance. Surveys of parents show frustrations and concerns about the quality of online instruction, excessive screen time for young people and a lack of constructive outlets for youth.

Ongoing economic instability resulting from low wages and high costs of living has created the need for a continuum of programs, tools and supports to help families meet their basic requirements and access opportunities to build financial stability. In addition, in recognizing the need to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, there are additional requirements to support early literacy and youth development initiatives.

The overarching challenges associated with economic instability for low- and moderate-income families has created a significant attainment gap in the following areas:

- Financial Literacy and Capability, including budgeting, career mapping/workforce development and credit development
- Youth Development Programming, including out-of-school time programming
- Early Education and Care, as both a child development and employment vehicle
- Basic Needs, including housing stability, food insecurity, utilities, emergency shelter and transportation

V. Recommendations & Focus Areas for 2021 – 2024*

Based on findings from the needs assessment, UWNCM will employ a range of strategies including investing in community-based organizations through grant support, capacity building and technical assistance. We will continue to develop and implement strategic initiatives that leverage innovation, strategic partnerships and best practices gleaned from successful program models across United Way's national network. We will also leverage the larger public and private sectors through deployment of both skilled and traditional volunteer opportunities to aligned programs, organizations and initiatives.

Multi Year Grant Funding:

UWNCM seeks to invest in community-based organizations and programs that have a successful track record of providing services through proven models and strategies. We will provide multiyear grants to support services and programs that produce measurable changes for participants. Changes may include the acquisition of new skills and opportunities (accreditations, employment, educational programs that promote economic mobility) or the mitigation or elimination of a particular social condition (homelessness, financial instability, intergenerational poverty, hunger, etc.).

A comprehensive Request for Proposals (RFP) process will begin in January 2021. UWNCM will invite organizations to apply based on program alignment and geography. Funding commitments will be made to those who demonstrate approaches to services and programs with the highest probability of success. Success factors include a proven track record of delivering aligned services; the use of research-based or otherwise proven methodologies in the provision of services; an ability to identify, recruit and retain program participants from diverse populations; and an established regime to track and measure participant and program level outcomes.

Focus Areas for 2021 – 2024* Include:

- **Pathways Out of Poverty:**
Supports financial coaching, job mapping, career exploration and credit building to promote economic self-sufficiency.

- **Education and Youth Opportunities:**
Supports youth development and early childhood education and care.

- **Supplemental Basic Needs:**
Supports food security, housing, utility assistance and other related basic needs.

Special Initiatives:

Recognizing the need for innovation and collective approaches to complex social issues, UWNCM will continue to develop and pilot special initiatives to support children, youth and families. These initiatives currently include Youth Venture and the Early Literacy Zone, two programs that serve close to 20,000 children and youth annually with literacy and skills development; and the Working Families Initiative, a statewide effort in partnership with United Way of Massachusetts Bay to help low- and moderate-income families build financial security. Each of these efforts are nationally recognized for their impact and innovation.

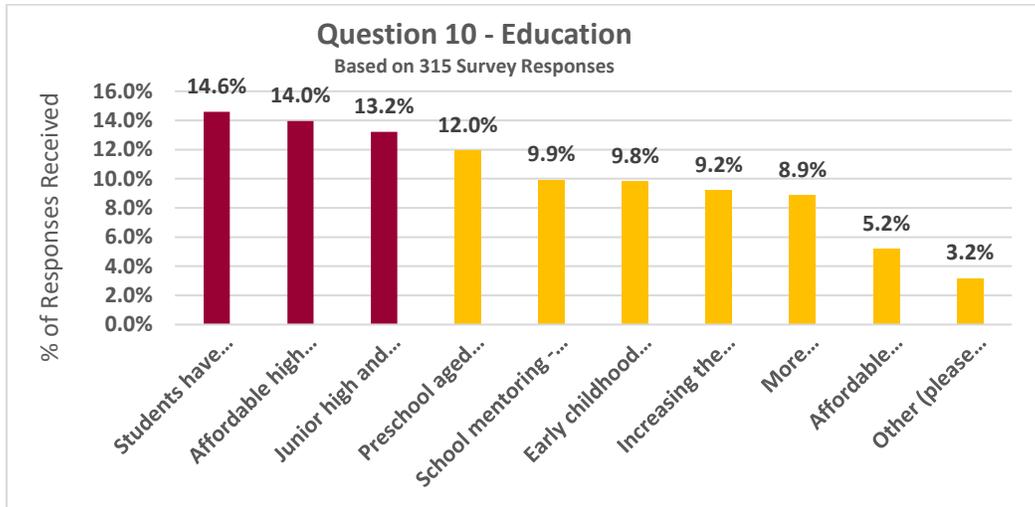
Engaging the Community:

UWNCM will continue to leverage our relationships with the business community, institutions of higher learning and community groups to deploy volunteer support to local organizations. The UWNCM Volunteer Center will have a dedicated focus on supporting programs and services consistent with UWNCM's impact priorities.

*Awarded agencies will receive multi-year funding commitment contingent upon successful performance and the timely completion of required year-end reporting. Funding is dependent upon UWNCM ability to raised donor dollars to support these program efforts from 2021 – 2024.

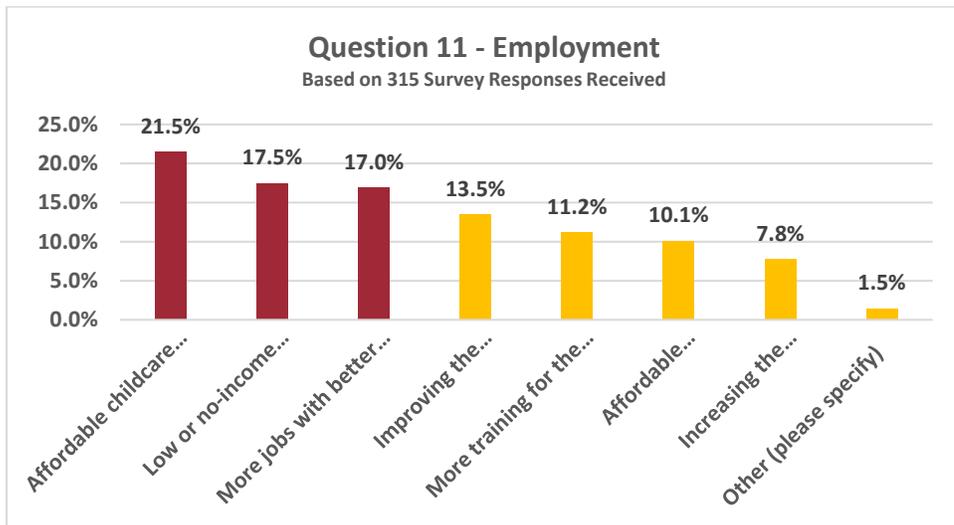
VI. Responses from Survey Questions 10 – 16:

Diagram 7:



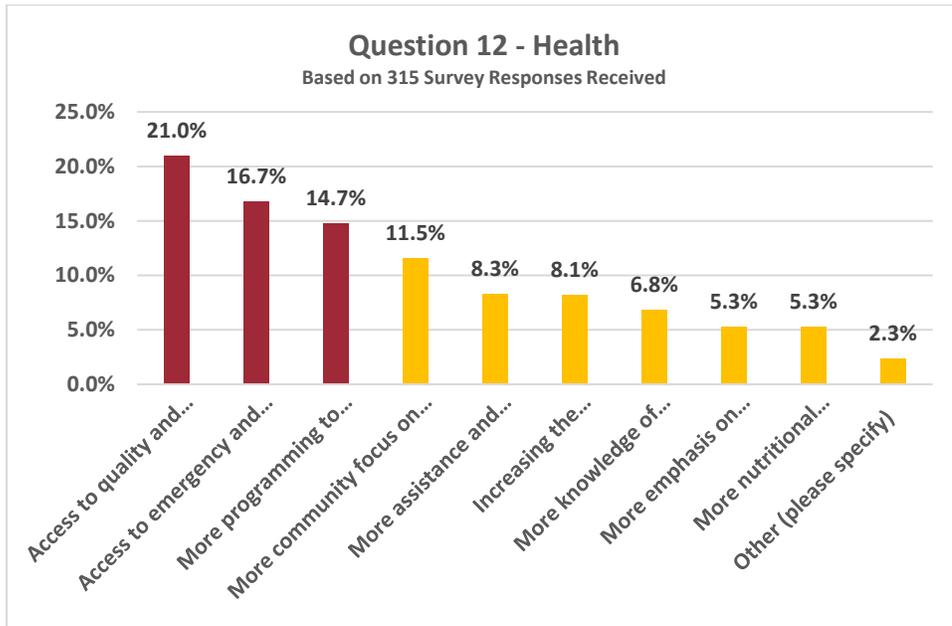
Top 3 Responses – 1.) Students have access to high quality, enriching out-of-school programs for educational success; 2.) Affordable high quality childcare options for parents who would like to further their education; and 3.) Junior high and high school students have access to age-appropriate college and career preparation, and graduate equipped with skills for success.

Diagram 8:



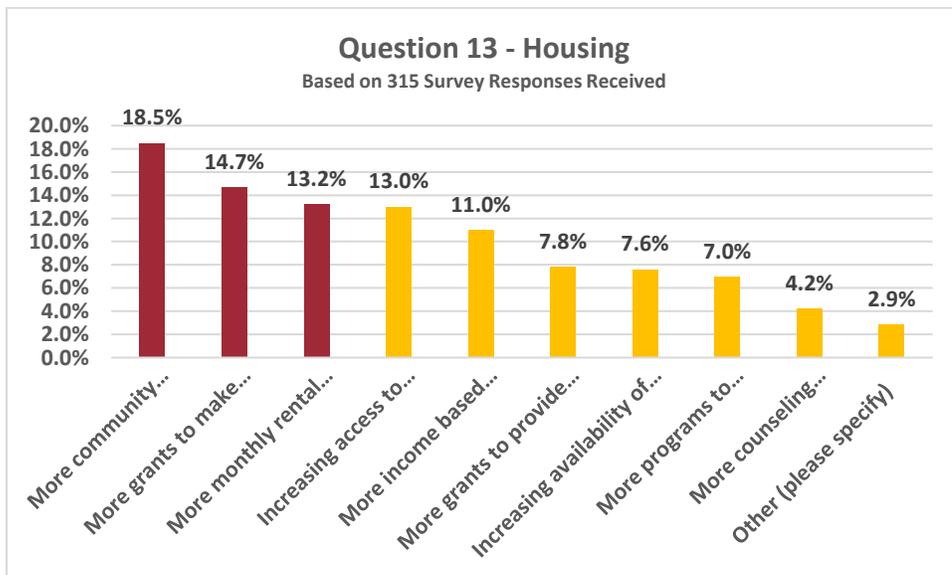
Top 3 Responses – 1.) Affordable childcare during work hours; 2.) Low or no-income individuals acquire the skills necessary to secure and retain self and/or family - sustaining employment, and 3.) More jobs with better pay and benefits

Diagram 9:



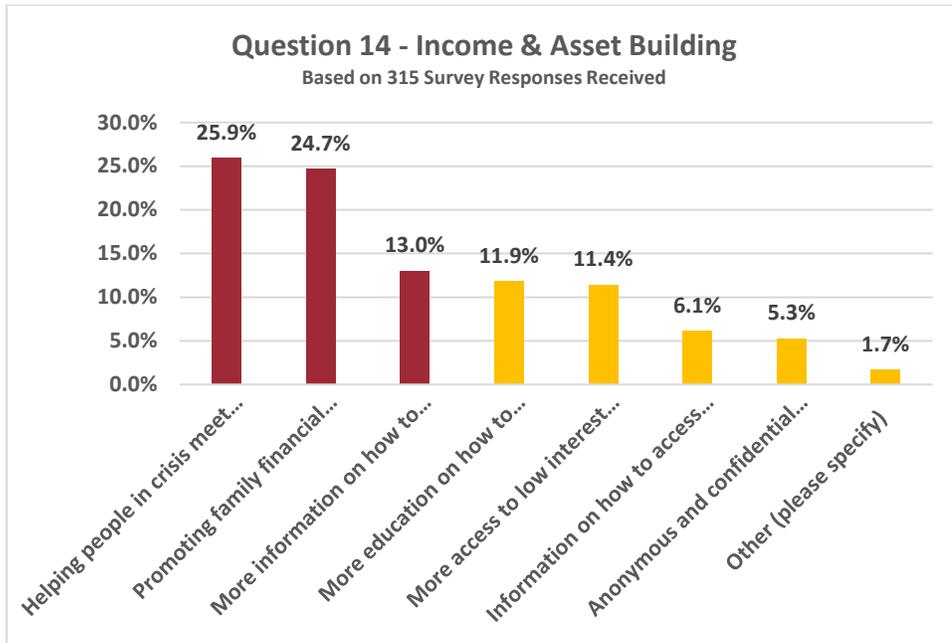
Top 3 Responses - 1.) Access to quality and affordable healthcare including physical, dental, mental health and wellness; 2.) Access to emergency and ongoing mental health and counseling services for children and youth; and 3.) More programming to reduce substance use/abuse and all its devastating consequences on individuals, families and communities

Diagram 10:



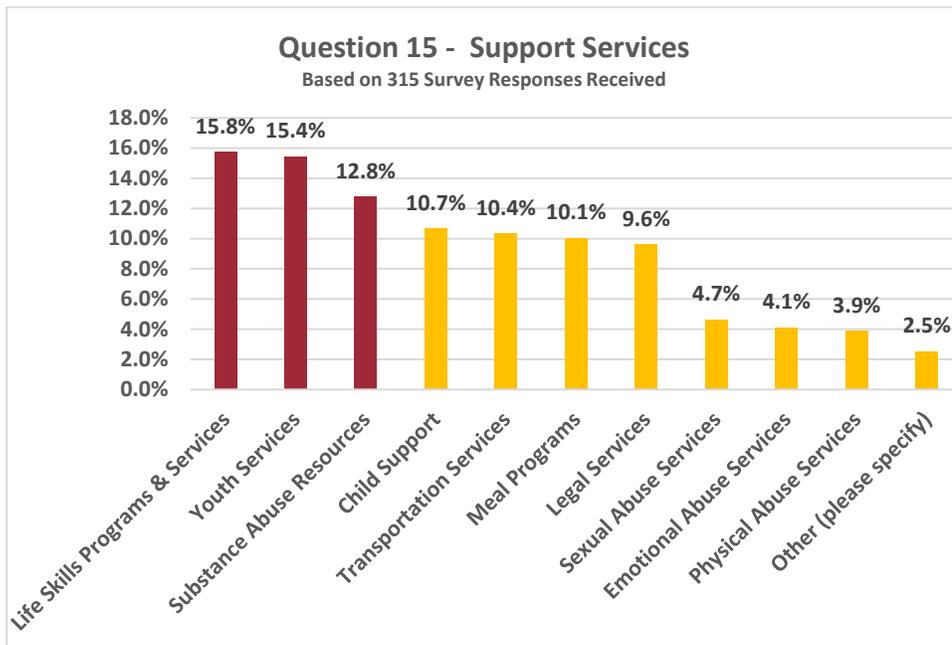
Top 3 Responses: 1.) More community support for homeless individuals and families; 2.) More grants to make home ownership and home rehab affordable; and 3.) More monthly rental assistance programs

Diagram 11:



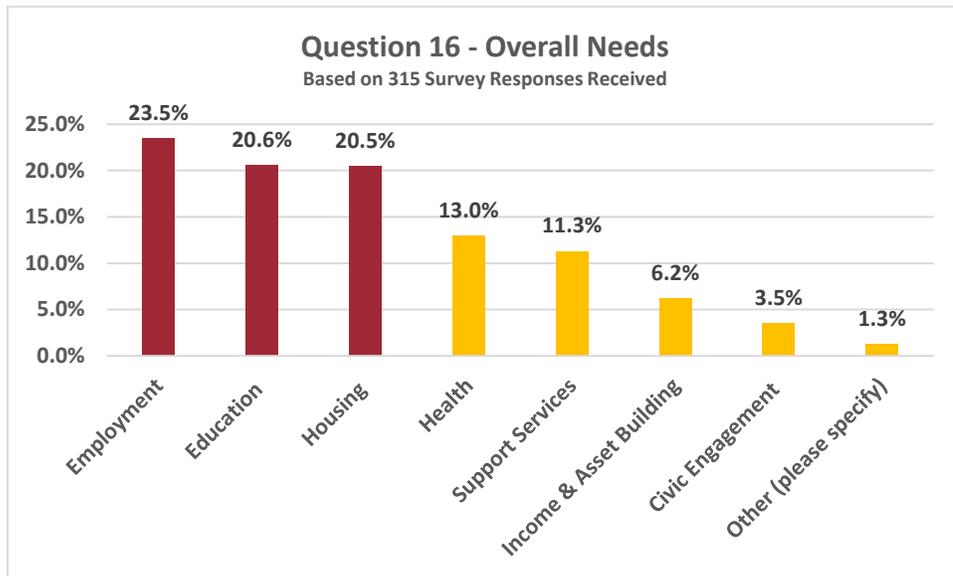
Top 3 Responses - 1.) Helping people in crisis meet their basic needs and become self-sufficient; 2.) Promoting family financial stability and independence; and 3.) More information on how to access financial resources

Diagram 12:



Top 3 Responses – 1.) Life Skills Programs & Services; 2.) Youth Services; and 3.) Substance Abuse Resources

Diagram 13:



VII. Acknowledgements:

We wish to acknowledge everyone who participated in the UWNCM community needs assessment. We extend this heartfelt thank you to each one of you, whether you engaged in a focus group or interview session or took our online survey. The information we were able to collect in a short period of time was extremely helpful. We could not have done this without you.

In addition, we want to extend a thank you to all members of our Community Impact Leadership Committee for their direction and guidance on this critical community project.