

# MCHENRY COUNTY HEALTHY COMMUNITY STUDY KEY INFORMANT REPORT 2014



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Prepared for  
McHenry County Healthy Community Partners

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## Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

To understand community needs from the perspective of community leaders and agency directors, individual interviews were held. This Key Informant Study complements the other two studies that comprise the 2014 McHenry County Healthy Community Needs Assessment: community analysis and survey of community residents. Twelve partners joined forces to conduct the 2014 McHenry County Healthy Community project: Advocate Good Shepherd, Advocate Sherman Hospital, Centegra Health System, Family Alliance Inc., McHenry County College, McHenry County Community Foundation, McHenry County Department of Health, McHenry County Mental Health Board, Pioneer Center for Human Services, Senior Services Associates Inc., United Way of Greater McHenry County, and Woodstock School District 200.

This report summarizes information obtained from 21 in-person key informant interviews. Key informants are individuals considered to be experts based on their professional experience, knowledge of local health and human services, or who are in a position of influence within the community.

Health Systems Research, an applied community research unit at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford, oversaw this key informant study. Four local residents, namely Teresa Dailey, Barbara Iehl, Carol Louise and Ed Rickert, conducted and recorded the interviews, while Health Systems Research transcribed the interview recordings and synthesized the results to present in this report.

### **Methodology**

The Healthy Community Steering Committee, made up of representatives from the 12 partner organizations, identified 25 key informants to be interviewed, repeating where possible individuals or organizations that were included in the 2010 and 2006 studies. Of the 25 selected key informants, 21 interviews were conducted and a total of 22 interviewees (one interview included two persons). The remaining four interviews could not be scheduled due to variety of reasons. A listing of key informants and their affiliations is shown in Figure 1.1. Fewer key informants were interviewed in 2014 than 2010 (34) and 2006 (43).

With Health Systems Research as their guide, the four volunteer interviewers received training about the study's purpose, expectations and methods to be used during the interview process. The interviewers then contacted the interviewees who had already received an introductory letter from the Healthy Community partners (Appendix A). Interviews were conducted in December 2013 and February 2014. Most interviews lasted about an hour. Each interview was recorded and those recordings were transmitted to Health Systems Research for transcription. The report's chapters synthesize the information from the 21 interviews, while the transcriptions of interviews offer an account of the key informants' actual remarks (Appendix B).

Key informants voiced their appreciation for the work conducted by the Healthy Community Partnership in assessing community needs. They appreciate being involved as key informants and the opportunity to share their knowledge and views.

Figure 1.1  
 MCHENRY COUNTY KEY INFORMANTS: 2014

Michael Eesley, CEO Centegra Health System	Jeffrey Poynter, Director McHenry County Workforce Investment Board
Jane Farmer Executive Director Turning Point	Maggie Rivera League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
The Reverend Budd Friend-Jones First Congregational Church of Crystal Lake	Dennis Sandquist, Director McHenry County Planning and Development
Tina Hill, Chairwoman McHenry County Administration	Nancy Schietzelt, President Environmental Defenders
Suzanne Hoban, Executive Director Family Health Partnership Clinic	Rick Schildgren, Board Chair McHenry County Community Foundation
Elizabeth Kessler, Executive Director McHenry County Conservation District	Dr. Vicky Smith, President McHenry County College
Dwayne Lahti, Interim Executive Director McHenry County Mental Health Board	Dan Volkens, Manager McHenry County Farm Bureau
Cheryl Levinson, Director Strategic Advancement Family Alliance	Lt. James Wagner McHenry County Sheriff's Department
Patrick McNulty, Public Health Administrator Dr. Ted Lorenc, Board of Health Chair McHenry County Department of Health	Toni Weaver PFLAG (local chapter)
Jason Osborn, Principal Transportation Planner McHenry County Dept. of Transportation	Ellen Wrzeski, Superintendent Woodstock School District 200
Steve Otten, Executive Director United Way of Greater McHenry County	

The Healthy Community partners also selected questions (Figure 1.2) to guide key informant discussions. Again, in order to compare the current study to previous studies, similar questions were used in 2014, 2010 and 2006.

Figure 1.2  
KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: 2014

- What are the major population groups that your organization serves and what services do you provide?
- What would you say are the best aspects of living in McHenry County?
- Overall, in McHenry County, which population groups would you say are in greatest need of increased community attention? For each population group named
  - a) What are the major needs of this group?
  - b) What evidence do you see of their needs?
  - c) What are the barriers to services for this group?
  - d) What services are currently provided and what services need expansion or improvement in the way they are delivered?
- How well does the McHenry County health and human services delivery system work?
  - a) What are the strengths and weaknesses?
  - b) What gaps in services exist or what barriers keep people from using services already available?
  - c) What examples of duplication exist or ways that efficiency might be improved?
  - d) What would you say are the major barriers that keep people from using services already available?
- Aside from the topics that you have already discussed, what would you say are the three biggest challenges that McHenry County is facing? Do you have any thoughts about the following:
  - a) growth and development in McHenry County?
  - b) transportation needs in McHenry County?
  - c) education system in McHenry County?
  - d) job development/retention?
  - e) environmental issues in McHenry County?
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell us?

## **Organizations Represented**

The 21 organizations represented by the key informants provide a wide range of services: business, employment, workforce; health care; education; government; mental health; transportation; conservation/land use; human needs funding; agriculture; faith-based organizations; law enforcement; social services, advocacy; and seniors. The common link among most organizations is their county-wide focus even though their location may not make their services widely accessible to all parts of the county.

Interviewers began their interviews by asking each key informant to describe the services and populations served by their organizations. For a detailed description of the services and population groups served by the organizations, please read the first section of the interview transcriptions as presented in Appendix B.

Some services are age-specific such as the Woodstock School District which serves persons up to age 22 while another Family Alliance focuses on adults ages 50 years and older. Other organizations included in the interviews are designed to help a particular group such as agricultural families (Farm Bureau), League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), and domestic violence victims (Turning Point). In some cases, the reach of these organizations extends into the broader population to cultivate greater awareness and appreciation for the people they serve.

Chapter 2  
BEST ASPECTS OF MCHENRY COUNTY

**Introduction**

Key informants find many reasons to like McHenry County. They believe that the overall environment in the county distinguishes it from neighboring counties. The local communities have positive attributes that make them appealing places to live and work.

Most of the favorable qualities of life in McHenry County fall into six broad categories: environment, rural/urban/suburban setting, people, services, sense of community, and economy. Each of these was named by five or more key informants. Other good characteristics cited by at least three individuals are also shown in the following list.

Greater than Ten Mentions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Environment</li><li>▪ Rural/Urban Mix</li><li>▪ Services and Recreation</li></ul>
Five to Nine Mentions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ People (Helpful, Tolerant, Diverse)</li><li>▪ Sense of Community</li><li>▪ Economy</li></ul>
Three to Four Mentions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Safety</li><li>▪ Quality of Life</li></ul>

**Environment**

The beauty and variety of the local landscape impress key informants. They appreciate the open spaces and are grateful that the wilderness, forests, oak woodlands, farmland and other natural resources have been preserved. One informant said how much she likes the local “green infrastructure.”

**Rural/Urban Mix**

The blend of rural and urban characteristics within the county offers a strong draw to persons who appreciate the small town atmosphere that key informants feel in local communities alongside amenities typically associated with much larger cities and suburbs. Living outside of a major metropolitan area is a real plus, especially for families, yet the county’s easy access to Chicago allows residents to get there easily, especially by using the Metra rail line. Ready access to another major city, Milwaukee, was also mentioned. Six key informants emphasized the appeal of the rural nature of much of the county, while close proximity to Chicago was highlighted by another six informants.

## **Services**

Both the quality and quantity of services were mentioned as positive characteristics of McHenry County. Most often, education was cited with strong public school systems located in Crystal Lake and Woodstock, good private schools, and opportunities for post-secondary schooling at McHenry County College. Key informants also noted the abundance of social service organizations within the county. Several mentioned that collaboration occurs among these agencies. Access to good health care, available locally and close to highly specialized services in the Chicago area, was pointed out as a favorable attribute in the county by two key informants.

Recreation opportunities, especially those geared toward the out of doors, are plentiful in the county. The recent increase in the number of hiking/biking trails along with canoeing/kayaking waterways has popularized public interest in these forms of physical activity. Parks and park districts are also regarded very positively.

## **People**

Key informants describe local residents as helpful and tolerant. The Latino community has become a large presence in the county and, for the most part, these persons have been warmly welcomed. The county's growing diversity in terms of race and ethnicity is regarded as a plus. Several key informants said they have witnessed a growing empathy and willingness to help among local residents and communities toward others in less fortunate circumstances, perhaps aided by the recent increase in local poverty.

## **Sense of Community**

A keen sense of community exists within McHenry County. The communities are supportive, active, and exhibit pride in their current composition and history. This sense of community lends itself to two important aspects mentioned by informants: 1) historical preservation is valued and cultivated, and 2) towns are oriented to be family-friendly with numerous activities for families and multi-generational groups.

## **Economy**

According to key informants, the local economy is felt to be quite strong with a suitable mix of businesses. No single company dominates. Furthermore, there are very few polluting industries in the county. Decent employment opportunities exist, said one informant. Another informant pointed out the positive effect of the mix of agriculture and farms into the local economic base, making McHenry County quite different from some of the other (Chicago) collar counties. Another remarked that the county is financially sound.

## **Other Good Qualities**

A favorable aspect of life in McHenry County is the low crime rate which contributes to a feeling of personal safety. Another aspect which reflects a sense of overall well-being is what three key informants called "quality of life" which they say captures one of the best aspects of living in the county.

One informant praised the active county-level government, while another mentioned the large number of churches, many of which reach out to communities and people in need in important ways such as food pantries.

### **Best Aspects Comparison of 2014 Findings to 2010 and 2006**

In the three rounds of the Healthy Community Study, each of which included a key informant study, the most frequently named best aspects of living in McHenry County are similar. At the top in all three years is the appreciation of the blend of rural-urban-suburban qualities evident in the topography and cultural life of local communities. This mix is complemented by living in close proximity to Chicago. What emerged more strongly in 2014, however, was the emphasis on the rural environment with more comments made about the attractiveness of the landscape coupled with an appreciation of preserving existing open spaces and forests/woodlands.

Key informants in all three years named the presence and quality of services, particularly outstanding schools, abundant social services, and good parks. More prominent in 2014 than prior years was the number of key informants who made particular mention of recreation opportunities.

The key to any community is its people and their attitudes, a factor that has surfaced in all three studies. In 2014 and 2006 but not in 2010, the cultural diversity and presence of the Latino population emerged as positive characteristics of the county. Another difference between the current and prior studies was an affirmation of the improving local economy in 2014. This was not the case in 2010 perhaps because that study was conducted on the heels of a major national and local economic downturn.

## Chapter 3 GROUPS NEEDING MORE COMMUNITY ATTENTION

### **Introduction**

Key informants were asked to identify the population groups in greatest need of increased community attention. For each group, follow up questions addressed describing the group's major unmet needs, evidence of those needs, barriers to service, available services, and services that need expansion or better delivery. The needs of the groups are described in detail in the following sections.

In descending order of the groups most often mentioned (by at least two key informants), the populations in McHenry County that need more community attention are listed below.

- Latinos/Hispanic Population
- Low-Income/Working Poor
- Mentally Ill & Substance Abusers
- Youth
- Seniors
- Special Needs Persons (disabled, with dementia)
- Underemployed Adults
- Gay and Lesbian Persons

### **Latinos/Hispanic**

More than any other group, informants said that Hispanics/Latinos are a population in need of more community attention. The number of Hispanic persons in the county has grown, many of whom have settled here fairly recently. As a first-generation culture, the Hispanic families tend to be low-income. Unlike in Elgin where Hispanics have resided for a much longer time, there is no Hispanic middle-class in McHenry County and very few Hispanic adults are employed as professionals. While this will change as the younger generation ages and integrates socially and economically into mainstream society, currently most of the local Hispanic population is poor/near poor.

The most often mentioned needs of local Latino residents include employment, affordable housing, education, health care, and transportation.

Language appears to be the foremost barrier for Latino residents of McHenry County. While many local Hispanics speak English, a large proportion does not, especially among the older population. Many area social service agencies are reported to have no bilingual staff. Some of these agencies claim that no one comes to them needing translation or help understanding English, however, the fact that they do not have Spanish-speaking staff means that Hispanic would not likely come to them in the first place. Compounding the language barrier is the fact that Hispanic residents' illiteracy in their native language is common.

Hispanics are further hampered by cultural differences. They are, to a large degree, socially isolated from the rest of the population and tend to stick to themselves. The majority population does not realize the sensitivities especially in health care that Hispanics confront when they seek care. Like the rest of the population, Latinos suffer from mental health problems and substance abuse but are very reluctant to get help due to these cultural and communication

differences. The closing of Family Service and Community Mental Health Center left a huge gap in services among the Hispanics, remarked one key informant.

Many in this population lack health insurance or have minimal coverage. Cost to access care, even with a sliding fee scale, is viewed as prohibitive.

In the health arena, key informants spoke about the high prevalence of diabetes and obesity among the local Hispanic population and the higher rate of teen pregnancy. An informant commented that Hispanics exhibit an overall feeling of inadequacy and possess low self-esteem.

Because a large proportion of this population is living in the county as undocumented, they are hesitant to seek out services even in serious circumstances for fear that their situation will be discovered and they will be sent back to Mexico. Their undocumented status also renders them ineligible for some social programs.

In terms of employment, the Hispanic population suffers because of a lack of jobs that pay a decent wage. Greater proficiency in English coupled with higher education would improve their job opportunities.

Several key informants run organizations which they acknowledge do or should make greater efforts to reach out to Hispanics by providing different support mechanisms, increasing their communication vehicles in Spanish, or making sure the Hispanics feel welcome and included in community-wide efforts such as faith-based activities, conservation programming, and recycling.

### **Low-Income/Working Poor**

This group encompasses a broad range of persons in the county including the medically indigent, single family parents, homeless and rural poor. Many in the rural reaches of the county are both poor and isolated. One informant was not sure whether the poor in the county even have “safety net” services.

A leading need of the low-income population is affordable, adequate housing. McHenry County, says one informant, has a notoriously “difficult housing market.” This population also needs much better access to public transportation because many cannot afford to own and maintain a vehicle. The lack of a decent, widespread, regional public transit system within the county limits employment and education options, though as one informant pointed out, people in the county, unlike in Chicago, do not want to ride a bus.

### **Mentally Ill/Substance Abusers**

Residents of McHenry County with mental health problems, substance abuse and addiction disorders suffer because there is no local inpatient center for treatment. Several informants mentioned the growing local problem of heroin use. Another emphasized the depth and scope of concerns with the “severely, persistently mentally ill” population, some of whom are in treatment and making progress and others are not. Sometimes these individuals get involved through the judicial system because of an offense or violation they have committed. Often they end up using expensive resources like emergency rooms. Different models through different agencies are available but matching the approach to the person can be difficult. Engaging people via telemedicine/telepsychiatry offers promise but is still fairly new in McHenry County.

According to one informant, a lot of situations involving substance abuse start out as financial. When the financial problems worsen, people self-medicate which easily leads to addiction. Not only is there no treatment center to help people, there are no providers adept at these treatment regimens either. Many of the mentally ill or substance abusers get involved with law enforcement, yet these persons are usually not breaking the law. The turmoil with the closing of Family Service and Community Mental Health Center has left gaping holes in service delivery and access.

Lack of transportation to services is a barrier for McHenry County residents who need treatment for their problems, as is lack of insurance coverage which may be ameliorated by the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Many who suffer with mental health or substance abuse issues fall into the low-income/working poor population.

## **Youth**

Children and youth were identified as an important target population because interventions done at this age level have a lifelong impact. Making sure that children succeed including being able to read well and graduate from high school gives them much stronger tools for the future. Proper adult interaction, supervision and mentoring are ways to provide valuable structure and support for young people.

Problems that were mentioned with regards to youth include high school drop outs, obesity and drug abuse. According to a health care provider, another major issue among children and young adults is their lack of health insurance. Another remarked that this group has significant emotional and mental health needs.

## **Seniors**

Seniors represent a growing population in McHenry County. While many are well off financially, a significant number took a big hit during the 2008 economic downturn, losing jobs and retirement accounts. Job opportunities for this age group are minimal for those who want or need to be employed. Also, the high cost of housing in the county affects seniors.

In terms of health, there is a genuine scarcity of medical professionals who specialize in aging or geriatrics, especially in the field of psychiatry. There should be alternatives to higher level health care, not just nursing homes, and more education about wellness and healthy aging.

Among the barriers to meeting the needs of seniors are the physical impairments of the individuals themselves (vision, hearing, ambulation) and finances. Another big barrier is transportation for seniors who no longer drive. The county is large geographically and public transportation options are very limited.

## **Special Needs Persons**

This population group includes developmentally disabled adults, elderly with dementia, persons with physical impairments, and persons with emotional disabilities. Each of the groups has its own set of needs but the consensus of key informants is that the special needs population is not getting adequate services. The transition that has occurred with the closing of Family Service and Community Mental Health Center along with severe cuts in state funding of services has been particularly hard on this group.

## **Unemployed/Underemployed Adults**

Despite an improving overall economy, unemployment remains stubbornly high, said one informant. A major need among the unemployed or underemployed population is skill enhancement as well as adjusting job expectations to the skills these workers already have. Several resources through the Workforce Investment Board are available to help these persons.

Another informant wants the community to offer more employment for the “unemployable,” such as persons returning from prison or jail. People with a conviction record have an even harder time than other unemployed persons finding a job.

## **Gay and Lesbian Persons**

Negative attitudes persist about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons who often feel as though they are not welcome when they seek services. According to several informants, McHenry County has a conservative contingent that exercises its beliefs over the true needs of the community. Education is the strongest antidote to countering misperceptions about LGBT persons including school environments that do not tolerate bullying.

The subgroup in greatest need among the gay and lesbian population is the youth, however, many are not “out” to their parents which complicates their ability and readiness to seek care. Larger metropolitan areas such as Chicago (Harold Brown Center) and Elgin (Open Door Clinic) have facilities that offer a broad spectrum of services for LGBT persons. While it is unrealistic to expect the same in McHenry, getting to these services is not feasible for most local residents. Local LGBT youth need health care, education and emergency shelter.

## **Other**

Several groups had single mentions including other non-majority race/ethnic groups such as African Americans and Hindu communities as well as populations which are the focus of services that key informants direct such as domestic violence victims and families. The homeless population was also mentioned.

## **2014 Top Groups vs. 2010 and 2006**

Most of the groups named as needing increased community attention in 2014 were similar to the 2010 and 2006 interviews. In all three studies, the Hispanic population was recognized as the foremost group needing more community attention, likely due to their size, barriers they confront in living here, and array of services needed. The second most common group mentioned in all three years was the low-income/working poor population.

Unlike 2010, children/youth and gay/lesbians were two groups mentioned in 2014 as needing more community attention. 2014 marked the first time that gays/lesbians were named by at least two key informants, though youth made the list of leading groups in 2006.

Key informants in the 2014 and 2010 interviews more often mentioned the unemployed and underemployed as needing community attention than 2006 interviewees, probably a result of economic downturn that hit the county in the late 2000s.

Chapter 4  
MCHENRY COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES DELIVERY SYSTEM

### **Introduction**

Key informants were asked how well the McHenry County health and human services delivery system works by describing strengths and weaknesses, gaps in services, barriers that keep residents from using available services, examples of duplicative services, and ways in which efficiency might be improved.

### **Strengths of the System**

Most key informants feel that the existing health and human services delivery system in McHenry County works fairly well. Social service and human services organizations offer a wide range of services, are staffed by a diverse range of providers, and are well run. An adequate supply of medical professionals resides in the county and the hospital systems have had no difficulty recruiting professionals to work in the area. Social service providers are said to be excellent and strongly committed to the work they do. While not all key informants would agree, several said that services are well organized, coordinated and exhibit good collaboration with one another.

Several organizations were pointed out for their fine work:

- Family Health Partnership, one of the “finest efforts I’ve ever seen” said one informant, and two others praised their service delivery for the low-income population.
- Two federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) now serve residents of the county, the Community Health Partnership in Harvard and McHenry Community Health Center (part of the Greater Elgin Family Care Center). The fact that these two centers are at either end of the county improves access.
- Crisis line.
- Pioneer Center for Human Services is doing good things and collaborates well with other organizations.
- McHenry County Department of Health was recognized for their collaborative efforts with other organizations, free flu shot clinics and access to mammograms for low-income persons.

The recent addition of the 211 system for information and referral meets an important community need. Most key informants were aware of this system but some were not. Another strong feature of the current delivery system is the ready availability of immediate care during normal working hours in Crystal Lake, McHenry and Woodstock. The mental health court has been successful in the county showing that when people get the care they need and are plugged into the system they become productive members of the community.

### **Weaknesses of the System**

Two issues generated the most comments about local health and human service delivery system weaknesses: mental health services and cuts in state funding.

Mental health services are not a high priority in the county, in the eyes of one key informant, perhaps due to “a lack of recognition of need,” she said. The general public does not know how to access mental health services, remarked another informant. Still another commented that

more mental health providers and caseworkers are needed to help people with alcohol and drug addictions. He continued by indicating that we should better educate people to help them understand addictions. There appears to be a growing substance abuse problem in the county.

Another dimension about local mental health service delivery addresses the turmoil occurring following the closing of Family Service and Community Mental Health Center several years ago. The Mental Health Board has been under the leadership of a successive number of interim executive directors. The reorganization of the mental health board has been a rough transition, in the words of one informant, “rougher than it needed to be.”

There has been a “politicizing of local mental health services,” says a key informant, which has “turned into a partisan battleground.” The blame, he says, goes in all directions but the bottom line is that families have lost services because of fighting and mismanagement. Another informant describes mental health services in the county as “silos” whereas there should be a more unified approach.

Numerous informants talked about the cuts in funding that have jeopardized the provision of local services. While the county is fortunate to have a strong donor base of donors, their donations do not come close to making up the shortfalls caused by state budget cuts. Tight funding has meant a reduction in staffing and services for many organizations, including services for seniors with dementia and domestic violence victims and their families.

Two key informants who have moved to the area within the past ten years felt that local services are not coordinated, describing the existing system as “something of a hodgepodge.” Two other informants remarked that the local Department of Children and Family Services is not doing a good job. They may be understaffed and under pressure, but the impression they convey is that some personnel do not want to be there.

Other weaknesses about the local delivery system expressed during the key informant interviews are:

- Not enough bilingual providers.
- Inadequate awareness of cultural differences by health providers when treating the Latino population.
- Lack of transit to clinics and hospitals, most of which are located in “remote” locations.
- Lack of local physicians who accept Medicaid.

### **Gaps and Barriers to Services**

Based on key informants’ remarks, four gaps/barriers to receiving health and human services stand out: 1) lack of public awareness about existing services, 2) cost of care/lack of insurance, 3) poor public transportation, and 4) language.

Even with the recent addition of the 211 system of information and referral, inadequate awareness and knowledge about services appears to be a major deterrent to persons getting care. This includes knowledge about what services are available, locations of those services, and how the information is conveyed. One informant emphasized that the right tools for information must be used for the right audience. Customizing communications is part of broadening awareness including smart phone apps for younger people and more traditional means for the older population.

Financial barriers include lack of insurance and cost of services. Key informants hope that the Affordable Care Act will address this gap. Now, the high cost of insurance, even in some employer-sponsored plans, burdens many families who sometimes opt for plans with very high deductibles and copays which generally means high out-of-pocket costs for health care. A lack of health and mental health providers in McHenry County accepting Medicaid adds to the problem.

McHenry County's public transportation system is limited. Residents must travel to the health care provider or agency location, many of which are not in central locations. Many low-income people who need services do not own a car. Some seniors no longer drive. The broad expanse of the county also means that some parts are quite geographically isolated.

Language is a barrier and, therefore, the inadequate number of bilingual staff in McHenry County's health and human services system is viewed as a significant gap given the large number of Spanish-speaking residents in the county. This gap is particularly acute among mental health counselors and therapists. Along with the barrier to effective communication is the fact that many providers are not "culturally competent" in that they do not acknowledge differences in views and perceptions of people from different cultures such as the Latino population. As a result, many Latinos do not have much trust in the local health care system.

Personal pride and the stigma associated with utilizing services are other barriers. Some people do not recognize that they need help. Others do not take personal responsibility for their own health. Eligibility requirements often pose a barrier to some in the Hispanic population who are undocumented residents.

### **Duplication and Inefficiencies in the System**

Key informants do not see evidence of duplication or inefficiency in the public sector of the local health and human services delivery system. There may be multiple providers but that is viewed positively as offering choice or in some cases, improving access because services are available at different geographic locations.

One informant did say that human service organizations could be looking at ways to merge operations. The Pioneer Center has been an excellent leader of that strategy in recent years by bringing PADS and Youth Service Bureau into their organization. While the mission of the individual organizations can remain unique, administrative tasks and fund raising are done in common which produces cost efficiencies.

### **2014 Comparison to 2010 and 2006**

Key informants named similar strengths, weaknesses, gaps, and barriers of local service delivery all three years. However, in 2014, they pointed out that the recent addition of Greater Elgin Family Care Center (FQHC) in McHenry, Family Health Partnership's expansion into Crystal Lake and the opening of Community Health Partnership of Illinois, and Harvard Area Community Health Center (FQHC) have helped close the gap for people who have limited incomes and cannot afford the cost of health care services. Also, the implementation of the 211 system of information and referral has helped address the glaring weakness of poor awareness of existing services noted in 2010 and 2006. However, key informants say that awareness still needs to be heightened, including letting people know that 211 is operational.

## Chapter 5 CHALLENGES FACING MCHENRY COUNTY

### **Introduction**

Key informants were asked to identify the three biggest challenges facing McHenry County, excluding issues related to health and human services. Further thoughts not mentioned earlier in the interview concerning growth and development, transportation, education, job development/retention, and environmental issues were also solicited. Two interviewers asked specifically about the challenges as its own separate question, while the other two rolled the challenges into considerations of growth, environment, education, jobs and environment. Therefore, this chapter begins with a list of challenges in order of most frequently mentioned followed by a fuller description of the five topics that were discussed individually.

### **Challenges**

As has been true in the two previous McHenry County Healthy Community studies, transportation and the local economy top the list of challenges facing the county, each of which was mentioned by about half of all informants. Five additional challenges were identified by two or more informants.

In descending order of frequency of mention, leading challenges to the county are

- Transportation needs focused on improving public transit
- Economic growth, job creation and retention
- Protect environment (open spaces, water)
- Affordable housing
- High taxes, cost of living
- Education
- Personal accountability and responsibility

### **Transportation**

Most comments about transportation focused on the limited public transportation options within the county. Said one informant, the existing transportation system does not reflect the composition of the county. More train stops and dependable bus routes are needed, including options to get to McHenry County College easily. Another said that older adults plan to move out of McHenry County to Chicago so they do not need a car to get from place to place.

Yet big hurdles face the development of a broad-based public transit system including funding, the large expanse of the county with large rural areas of sparse populations, the fact that many people do not want to use a bus system, and the difficulty in setting up bus stops.

Several key informants see a strong link of transportation with economic development. An effective transportation system that allows efficient movement of people, raw materials and finished goods would stimulate economic growth. Funding is needed to support the expansion of transportation, stated one informant, who cited how Huntley maneuvered to have an interchange constructed that routed transportation through town, bringing significant economic benefits to the town. Two other comments about transportation mentioned the need for road

improvements and the traffic congestion in Crystal Lake which dramatically slows down emergency response time.

### **Growth and Development**

While the local economy has improved in recent years, key informants still view the need for economic growth as a foremost challenge in the county. One informant said that cities, towns, and the county itself have to make economic development a priority by looking at incentives for building their own economies and stimulating corporate growth. Economic development in the cities has centered on retail and needs to shift toward corporate growth. Many retail establishments now sit empty. According to one informant, we need to be more progressive and less reactive and should harness the ideas of the intelligent people who live in the county; he referred to this as the opportunity to “leverage the local intellectual capital.”

McHenry County is more affected by what is happening in Chicago than local residents realize, said one informant, including job skills, housing market, investment into the region, and culture. He continued by explaining that it is now easier for immigrants to get established in McHenry County and other collar counties because the discriminatory practices of the 1960s, 70s and 80s have largely dissolved. The close interaction of the county and Chicago needs to be acknowledged in economic growth planning.

From another viewpoint, re-development is the bigger issue and should be the strategy for developing a second generation of commercial areas. This means re-using and re-purposing areas like empty big box stores and empty car lots. Business models “change faster than our strips,” he said, using Target on Higgins as an example. That store will close, not because it was not doing well but because Target wants to add a grocery store. Businesses scale up and leave behind abandoned properties. Spring Hill Mall once was popular but not now; the same may happen on Randall Road or Route 31. Another factor is the tax incentive for businesses -- once that runs out (like for big chain stores), they often relocate. Another informant wants to see fewer chain stores in the county and more mom-and-pop establishments.

The effects of growth and development on land, environment, roads, schools and water resources were voiced as major concerns by several key informants. With growth and development comes sprawl (which was slowed with the economic recession, an unintended but desirable effect, said one informant). The walkability of our communities is compromised by building up establishments. What is needed is “smart development” which connects residential area to schools via walking routes and sidewalks and erects structures that use less energy. One informant pointed out that more and more people are coming to McHenry County in search of affordable housing.

### **Job Development and Retention**

Closely related to economic development is the issue of jobs. Key informants are concerned about continued unemployment and the lack of local jobs that generate a decent income. What is needed are more jobs, especially better-paying entry and mid-level jobs that pay a living wage and enable workers to afford the cost of living in McHenry County. Those are jobs whose wages, in the words of a key informant, allow families to “put food on the table, buy clothes, and let children participate in sports activities.” Because of the high cost of living, one informant indicated that “it is hard to live in this community and make it work,” referring to the large number of low-income persons including many in the Latino population who lack job skills and may not speak English well.

Second, if manufacturing, semi-skilled, and professional-level jobs were based in the county, more people would work closer to home rather than commuting long distances to earn wages that support a middle-class lifestyle. Many people travel outside the county for work because too few opportunities exist locally, especially for professionals. However, as was pointed out in reference to medical professionals, the more talent you draw to the area, the more who will come which has been the case here.

The county has some of the highest needs for manufacturing jobs in the state, said one informant, which is something that most local residents do not realize. Through a partnership with McHenry County College, companies will offer students right out of high school well-paid jobs after successful internships.

We need to support existing businesses; job retention, said one informant, is “the real question mark,” given the high taxes businesses pay in the state of Illinois, including unemployment tax. Continuing these tax policies, he says, will drive businesses away. That starts a spiral of declining property values which fund education and services. High property taxes locally and statewide are a problem.

Another piece of the jobs issue is career counseling and training/education that enable local residents to qualify for jobs currently available. Some people who lost higher-level positions during the economic downturn five years ago did not find equivalent positions salary-wise. Adjusting expectations along with development of new skills should be two dimensions of the job focus. Jobs change over time and preparing for the future means keeping up with changing needs. The county has to have a trained workforce to attract and keep employers.

A huge gap in job development is the lack of employment opportunities for the disabled adult population. Pioneer Center offers some positions but they are limited. Basically, for this population, one key informant said, there is nothing.

## **Environment**

Regarded as one of the most attractive areas in the region, McHenry County is known for the beauty of its landscape and abundance of open spaces. According to several key informants, these qualities attract many people to live and visit. The county is said to contain some of the most pristine land in the state and top-grade streams. Fortunately, no smokestack industries or chemical plants are present to pollute air and water. Among community leaders and local residents, there appears to be a strong commitment to balance farm land and town/village life. One informant offered strong advice to “not pave over all the gorgeous areas in McHenry County.”

Local conservation efforts including the Conservation District are credited with keeping the preservation of the environment a top priority, protecting local groundwater, and making progress on past environmental problems such as cleaning up dumps from the 1970s and transforming what once was called Vulcan Lake into the Three Oaks Recreational Area. Key informants feel that the county is ahead of most other counties in environmental awareness.

Yet, environmental issues were voiced as an important challenge by key informants. Some said that agricultural land continues to be lost and the so-called green infrastructure (high quality woodlands and edges of agricultural fields) has become fragmented. Water, both quality and quantity, is at the forefront of environmental concerns.

The county's water supply is now adequate and clean, however, constant vigilance is needed to keep the water in the aquifers plentiful and clear of contaminants which, said one informant, are most important for the health of children and pregnant women. Ten years ago, development in the county was robust and sometimes occurred in the wrong places such as critical aquifer recharge areas. According to one informant, conservation was racing against development efforts to protect "the best" and areas critical to sustain the future of McHenry County were fragmented. One of the positive effects of the economic downturn in the late 2000s was a suspension of that race. One informant urged continued attention to protecting the natural resources, especially water.

Other environmental concerns include

- Developing avenues and better coordination of efforts for more local food production including diversification in agriculture. More local consumption adds to sustainability, especially valuable due to the county's location on the edge of a major metropolitan area.
- The need for more recycling among businesses. The lack of an onsite pickup service for business recycling means there is limited awareness and a perception that it is not important.
- Managing invasive species.
- Improving environmental awareness. People need to realize that when the environment is damaged, they live in an unhealthy place.
- Today's society lacks social integration and many people are lonely. Said one informant, this is a result of broad city planning that has created "cages" in which people live in a box, work in a box, and drive in a box.
- Local gravel pits are not good (but they are part of a local business).

Several local activities are underway by the county's Natural and Environmental Resources Committee (NERC) to address environmental problems, namely advocating for a ban on 1) cold tar sealants due to hazards associated with excessive contact, especially among children and pets who play on paved driveways, and 2) phosphate fertilizers because they decrease oxygen and stimulate algae growth in waterways. Another local initiative that was spearheaded by the Environmental Defenders is the passage of a ban on leaf burning, though enforcement has been lax.

## **Education**

Most key informants are impressed with the local public school systems in the county. They realize the value of strong schools in attracting businesses and families to the area. There are challenges, however, because some schools are underperforming and should be better able to handle diverse populations. In the opinion of one informant, local schools will not be effective with these groups in the future because they are already struggling. Another informant worries that as the county's population ages, they may not support educational referendums to improve local schools. On the positive side, one informant stated that the current systems are looking at ways to deliver education electronically, a good move in this digital era.

The lack of a four-year university in the county is a drawback. McHenry County College does a very good job with post-secondary education and offers a wide variety of programs, two-year degrees and certifications including in the field of technology and trades. Not all students are college-bound and high schools are trying to push students to explore these options and careers. In addition, Aurora University offers some graduate coursework in the area. But these

are not a substitute for a full-time, locally based four-year university. Among the benefits would be the ability to keep young people in the area while they are pursuing a college degree.

One informant expressed a concern that three recently elected McHenry County College Board members are intent on holding down spending which may jeopardize plans to expand the nursing program there.

### **Other Challenges**

The lack of affordable housing was specifically mentioned by three informants. The high price of housing creates a financial burden on many local families.

Two informants noted two additional challenges facing the county: high taxes (including property taxes)/cost of living, and personal responsibility and accountability for education, health, and taking care of one's own needs.

Single-mention challenges are developing age-friendly communities in Crystal Lake, the lack of adequate planning and zoning in the town of McHenry allowing businesses to be built anywhere, infrastructure needs and funding, homelessness, and acceptance of destructive behaviors (result is domestic violence).

### **Challenges in 2014 Compared to 2010 and 2006**

The top two challenges have remained the same in all three studies: improving public transit and economic growth that stimulates creation of good-paying jobs. Protecting the environment rose in importance and frequency of mention in the 2014 study, while affordable housing continues to remain a major challenge in the views of key informants.

Appendix A

KEY INFORMANT INTRODUCTORY LETTER



Working together for a  
Healthier McHenry County

## *McHenry County Healthy Community Partners*

*Advocate Good Shepherd • Advocate Sherman Hospital • Centegra Health System  
Family Alliance Inc. • McHenry County College • McHenry County Community Foundation  
McHenry County Department of Health • McHenry County Mental Health Board  
Pioneer Center for Human Services • Senior Services Associates, Inc.  
United Way of Greater McHenry County • Woodstock School District 200*

November 1, 2013

Key Informant  
Address  
Address

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

The 2014 McHenry County Healthy Community Study partners have selected you as one of 25 “key informants” to be interviewed as part of a comprehensive needs assessment. You have been identified as a key informant because of your leadership and knowledge about our County.

The Healthy Community Study partnership is comprised of 12 organizations representing health and human services, education, philanthropy and government serving McHenry County. The Partnership has contracted with Health Systems Research (HSR), University of Illinois College of Medicine in Rockford, an applied social science research group, to analyze the key informant results as well as conduct two additional assessments – Community Analysis and Household Survey.

For the key informant assessment, interviewers consisting of volunteer business leaders will be contacting you soon by email or phone to ask about your willingness to be interviewed and set up a time for the one-hour interview. Our goal is to complete all interviews by the end of January, 2014.

The Partnership and other organizations strongly endorse this Study which will be compared to the 2010 McHenry County Healthy Community Study findings in order to determine changes and identify emerging needs.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation in sharing your perspectives. A copy of the questions that will be used in the interview is enclosed.

Sincerely,

McHenry County Healthy Community Study Partners