

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Racine Kenosha Community Action Agency, Inc. (RKCAA) is a non-profit organization committed to improving the quality of life for vulnerable children and families who live in southeast Wisconsin. RKCAA's mission is to provide quality programs and innovative solutions for individuals and families.

Every three years, the Community Services Block Grant authorizing statute mandates that each community action agency compile a Comprehensive Community Needs Assessment (CCNA) to determine and address local needs, or "gaps" between current conditions and desired conditions or "wants." The goals are to improve the current performance or to correct existing deficiencies. This report is the RKCAA 2016 Comprehensive Community Needs Assessment.

The goals of the 2016 comprehensive community needs assessment were:

- 1) to create an updated snapshot of the communities RKCAA serves, highlighting any notable changes in those communities through an updated **community profile** of the counties and cities of Racine and Kenosha;
- 2) to gain the collective viewpoint of how different groups of representatives from these communities see the area(s) in which they live and work through **surveys** and **focus groups**, and
- 3) to develop broad recommendations for shaping RKCAA's model of community development, policies, and program implementation activities

From 2013 through 2015, changes in macro-level state and local funding, resources and community needs resulted in an in-depth review and revision of RKCAA's strategic plan, its management and operational structures, and its programs and services. To adapt to these changes, RKCAA focused on socio-economic theory and public health practice that confirms health status trends to illuminate patterns of poverty for some years. RKCAA's current programs reflect this wellness-based antipoverty model that links a variety of beneficial social determinants such as high-quality education, employment, housing, recreational opportunities, nutrition, medical care, and safer and cleaner neighborhoods with improved health outcomes.

COMMUNITY PROFILES

The findings of the community profiles for Racine and Kenosha are summarized in the following trends and prospects:

Since the 2013 RKCAA community needs assessment, the counties and cities of Racine and Kenosha have sustained similar population and demographic profiles. These similarities are evident in

- the population shift from a rural to an urban population;
- the changing county and city demographics that demonstrate

- increased proportions of non-white residents in Racine and Kenosha;
- the growing Latino/Hispanic communities;
- the balanced gender distribution where the ratio of women to men is roughly equal;
- the disproportionately large under-twenty population with a median age of approximately 34 years;
- the family structures that reflect a growing divorced population with fewer large families of six or more; and
- the general increases in poverty and low-income families.

Despite these similarities, the overall prospects for Racine and Kenosha have significant differences.

As its population has decreased in recent years, Racine County and the city of Racine has rated lower than Kenosha on several measures: the quality of the public schools, lower levels of educational attainment, and average income lower than the national average. In fact, the population in the city of Racine is described as “low-income” in comparison to the description of Kenosha’s average income as “lower middle class.” Racine families tended to be larger and poorer with higher numbers of low-income households. Unemployment in the county and the city is greater than Kenosha County and city.

With the increase of Chicago residents now living in Kenosha, the County is evolving into a bedroom community to Chicago. The rise in Kenosha’s average income, increases in education attainment, the overall quality of local schools, and the availability of reasonably priced housing have contributed to and reflect this trend. As a result, Kenosha County has gained population and the county demographics are compared to demographic statistics in Chicago as often as to the state of Wisconsin.

RECOMMENDATION: While each RKCAA office responds to the specific needs of their communities and constituencies, the RKCAA should continue and sustain the combined effect of collaborative policies and programs to strengthen and enlarge the agency’s reach and efficacy.

SURVEYS

The findings of the surveys for Key Informants and HBO Partners are summarized in the following:

Key Informant responses reflected their front-line, daily work experience with individuals and families most in need. Key informant responses to questions about essential services, service outcomes, and satisfaction were detailed and conveyed a high degree of confidence in their knowledge about these topics. Most of their open-ended responses were characterized by Certainty or confidence in their statements and opinions. Education was identified as the most important aspect of

their services which suggested the importance that Key Informants placed on increasing the self-help capacities of individuals and families they served.

Healthy Birth Outcomes Partner respondents were drawn from large bureaucracies, and many worked at the owner and senior management levels. Their leadership positions within large bureaucracies and in the community enabled a more expansive overview of the issues of healthy birth outcomes. The most frequently identified characteristic of HBO responses was Optimism. Like Key Informants, HBO Partners ranked employment/income as the most significant challenge. Likewise, they emphasized formal and informal education as a significant multiplier of individual and family efficacy. However, their responses to these critical services, service outcomes, and satisfaction were less detailed and conveyed a relatively lower degree of confidence in their knowledge and authority to speak on these topics.

RECOMMENDATION: The themes of responses between Key Informants and HBO Partners were very similar. These similar responses can be explored to determine the degree to which these themes are in alignment with each other. For example, although human interests are emphasized at the same rate for both Key Informants and HBO Partners, to what extent are both groups referring to the same people and activities? Also, what can they learn from each other about their concerns for people and their activities and can these concerns be translated into mutual understanding and action in policy and program changes?

FOCUS GROUPS, INTERVIEWS AND RKCAA PROGRAM DATA

Focus groups among individuals and families involved in RKCAA programs or as members of the general public focused on

- 1) their views of the communities in which they live;
- 2) whether their needs are being met;
- 3) additional needed services;
- 4) their suggestions concerning the provision of services or overall community enhancements and progress; and
- 5) the barriers they or others they know encounter.

FATHERHOOD INVOLVEMENT: A STRUGGLING CONSTITUENCY

Fathers who participated in both focus groups identified some critical issues (jobs, child support, income, incarceration, mental health, public perception) that create barriers to their capacity for being fathers. However, they were less clear about movement or changes to minimize these obstacles. Fathers continued to struggle with the individual and systemic problems of fatherhood and parenting. Although they believed father support programs were relatively limited, fathers expressed determination in attempting to access and use available resources in this area. They also articulated how they could and should be better fathers.

RECOMMENDATION: Individual self-help emerged as an essential element for addressing the issue of fathers' involvement. However, recognition and support for

fathers to deal with systemic barriers that also limit this participation can be the focus of additional policy and program change. Fathers themselves can contribute to prioritizing problems and craft solutions to them. They can be more involved at the level of developing programs in ways that go beyond their position as recipients.

RACINE SPANISH LANGUAGE: NEW ISSUES, NEW ENERGY, NEW FRUSTRATIONS

The Spanish-language focus group was very knowledgeable and forthcoming about their individual situations and existing systemic barriers. As an emerging immigrant population in Racine and Kenosha, Latino/Hispanic communities also brought some different issues to light (language, culture, immigration issues, deportation).

RECOMMENDATION: As local efforts to address these matters continue to develop, RKCAA can provide leadership to encourage and support a collective response by building coalitions and expanding agency programs.

RACINE YOUTH: A COMMUNITY IN PERIL

Violence, drug abuse, premarital sex and parenthood and death are pervasive realities of young people in Racine. Although youth participants were articulate about the support they needed and wanted, they also seemed skeptical and pessimistic about this help being forthcoming, particularly from existing agencies, institutions and resources. Access to opportunities for education, work, and safety, appeared to be important to them. However, they recognized current limitations in these vehicles of support. Overall, they seemed to seek assistance on all fronts.

RECOMMENDATION: The youth population (20 years and under) comprises the largest age group in both Racine and Kenosha counties. This demographic data, combined with responses from the youth focus group, suggests that existing organizational and institutional programs and services for youth are not effective in meeting the needs of this constituency. Given these factors, RKCAA can pursue the potential for developing policies and programs in this area. First, evidence-based social and behavioral science about young people can be identified to guide RKCAA in identifying the specific needs of different cohorts of young people and the capacity for RKCAA to develop policies and programs for these groups. Second, the number and locations of local youth-serving programs and services also can be identified, and trends in youth programming can be documented. Also, finding out how young people interface with these programs and services can be an important element in understanding a full picture of youth services. By these and other analyses, RKCAA can become the catalyst to lead joint, county-wide planning to develop strategic policy directions and program implementation for further examination and future action.

CREATING HEALTHY FOOD ENVIRONMENTS: MODELS FOR PROGRAMMING

More Wisconsin households now live in poverty and, as a result, struggle to secure adequate and healthy food. RKCAA has targeted seniors and families with young

children as the focus for specific food-related support. Apparently, while access to healthy food fulfills a basic need for both groups, individual interviews and a survey with Racine and Kenosha seniors ranked a range of other essential needs that accompany food insecurity. WIC focus group participants indicated the importance of program activities for learning about the importance of healthy food and applying that knowledge to caring for their children.

RECOMMENDATION: RKCAA is taking steps to strengthen their programs to create healthy food environments for seniors and families with young children. The agency can continue to enhance these programs and generate more connections with other social determinants of health as they have with fatherhood involvement and access to food vouchers. The culturally-specific program strategies for supporting the food-related needs of the Spanish-speaking communities, such as the Spanish Language Food Survey, can become exemplars for creating healthy food environments for other individuals and families most in need.

LEVERAGING FOCUS GROUP ASSETS

While focus group respondents conveyed human interest, collectives and concreteness and accomplishment themes in their responses, they also emphasized themes that were unique to them as program participants and members of the public.

RECOMMENDATION: The high frequency of the characteristic of persistence can be explored more closely to establish and understand how respondents demonstrate persistence and how the positive dimensions of tenacity can be channeled in beneficial ways.

RECOMMENDATION: Participant stories could be the basis for identifying concerns and initiating efforts to develop specific programs and services.

RECOMMENDATION: RKCAA can be a vehicle for them to expand this limited vision to incorporate a greater understanding of the contexts (institutions, other people, systems) which impact their lives.

WELLNESS AS ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY

RKCAA has made significant steps in developing a new strategic and operational model for the agency. Emerging evidence in socio-economic theory and public health practice confirms that health status trends have paralleled patterns of poverty for some years. RKCAA's wellness as an anti-poverty strategy is a new approach for connecting social factors, such as education, housing, and food insecurity to trends in health status.

RECOMMENDATION: RKCAA should continue to articulate and operationalize this model to strengthen the connections between poverty and health and establish metrics that measure the impact of this model on improving the lives of individuals and families most in need.

POVERTY AND EDUCATION

Education (formal and informal) is a key factor in the responses of both survey groups and among many of the focus groups. In fact, the two-way connection between the systemic and individual social and economic vulnerability and inequities in quality educational, policies and programs has been validated in research connecting poverty and health. Greater levels of education shape employment opportunities and is a major determinant of educational resources, such as income, wealth, and health. More-educated individuals experience lower rates of unemployment and higher relative social standing.

RECOMMENDATION: RKCAA can evaluate the scope and effectiveness of its formal and informal education policies and programs to determine their implementation strengths and weaknesses. These systematic findings can be the basis for instituting strategic actions to address gaps and to determine how collaborative strategies can be used to increase the scope of agency efforts. Also, focus group responses from community residents suggests a range of untapped local assets that can be accessed to help shape potential formal and informal educational strategies. Their participation can transform their position from subjects of policies and programs to key contributors at all levels of policy and program implementation.