



Serving the people of Hidalgo County since 1984

ABSTRACT

An in depth look at the issues facing the low income and vulnerable populations of Hidalgo County

Presented:

June 1, 2018



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Summary

The Hidalgo County Community Service Agency is charged with addressing poverty within the geographical boundaries of Hidalgo County, Texas. The agency strives to understand the needs of the constituents it serves and as result of that effort, works to create platforms intended to further the communication between program planners and those they serve. Every three years, the agency embarks on a journey designed to do just that. The purpose of the Community Needs Assessment is to determine the programs and services needed most by members of the community, identify potential customers in the service area and current gaps in reaching them and guide the Board and program planners in the development of the strategic plan, goals and outcomes. The agency relies on a mix of needs surveys, customer satisfaction surveys, interviews of organizations, board members, elected officials, public forums, and focus groups for the qualitative portion of the assessment portion. To compliment this, the agency relies on quantitative information compiled by the Community Commons Website, Texas Workforce Commission, The United States Census, Kids Count Data Book, The Center for Public Policy and Priorities and others. Both types of information are analyzed and interpreted through the lens of poverty and its root causes. The resulting report will be used to develop more focused strategies at eliminating poverty through use of the agency's own funding and through strategic alliances forged with the many partnering organizations working in unison.

Background

The Community Services Block Grant Act requires “an assurance that the State will secure from each eligible entity in the State.... a community action plan... that includes a community-needs assessment for the community served...” In 2001, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (USHHS) issued Information Memorandum 49, requiring eligible entities to conduct needs assessments and use the results to design programs to meet community needs. In 2015, USHHS issued Information Memorandum 138 establishing Community Services Block Grant Organizational Standards, requiring Community Action Agencies to conduct a Community Needs Assessment and that they develop a Community Action Plan to address the needs identified in that assessment.

The Hidalgo County Community Service Agency began the process for this year's assessment in December of 2017. Program planners began by assembling a team who would be responsible for various aspects of the process going forward. The team was led by the Executive Director with the Manager of Operations reporting on every aspect of the process as it moved forward. In addition, the Needs Assessment Committee was comprised of the Executive Secretary, and several Advisory Board Members.



Process

The team utilized guidance provided by the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs. The document entitled, “Community Needs Assessment Guide” was downloaded and distributed to the team for their review. In addition, the documents listed as attachments were copied, customized and in some cases translated into Spanish so that they could be utilized during the assessment process. When the materials were properly distributed and reviewed by the team, a planning meeting was convened. During this initial meeting a detailed timeline was developed together with a list of job functions and responsibilities. The assessment process was divided in two distinct phases. Part one of the process involved the quantitative information that would provide valuable statistical information. Program administrators would be charged with gathering data from the Community Commons website, local demographic data from reports such as Kids Count Data Book, employment information from Workforce Solutions reports, reports to various state and federal agencies developed by local entities such as the county Health Department and others.

The qualitative portion required six distinct phases to be accomplished at varying stages of the established timeframe. Community Needs Surveys were distributed to various targeted groups within Hidalgo County. In addition, interviews of organizational leaders were conducted as well as Hidalgo County Elected Officials and Community Service Agency Board members. Formalized community forums were conducted in three locations throughout the County. The local media provided coverage of the events leading up to the date as well as coverage of the events. Information was provided to English and Spanish media as well.

All this information was compiled and presented to a focus group made of community members, organizational leaders, CSA board members, administrators and staff. The issues as presented in the qualitative and quantitative portions were discussed. The top five needs were identified. The report was developed, and findings were presented to the Advisory Board on May 25, 2018 and a subsequent presentation was made to the Hidalgo County Commissioners Court on May 29, 2018. The report will be delivered to the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs on June 1, 2018.

Findings and Conclusions

Hidalgo County continues to be an area plagued by high poverty. The quantitative data indicators point to all the problems endemic with an area as such. The area’s high rate of population growth exacerbates an area already beset with poverty. The County continues to experience high levels of unemployment relative to the state and the rest of the nation. Over 37% of the adult population has no high school diploma. This indicator is twice the level statewide and almost three times the national level. In addition, those persons over the age of 16 who are lacking basic literacy skills is at 50%. This is over twice the state rate and again several points short of triple the national level.

The county’s poverty rate hovers above the 31% mark as it has for at least fifteen years. For children and seniors, the news is more of the same. Over 45% of children and 25% of seniors live below the federal poverty level. A significant number of the County’s children go to bed



often wondering if they will have consistent access to adequate food sometime during a given month. As is often the case, families living in poverty rarely have the resources to invest in health insurance or other safety net investments. Almost a third of the populations report having no health insurance.

The qualitative data shores up what the numbers already reflect. The questionnaire results of the County's low-income community report a need for health insurance or access to reliable healthcare. The community also reported a need for help in obtaining increased job skills in order to earn better wages. Access to information and referral services ranked high on the list of needs as did access to food and assistance with major medical conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Finally, the community reported a concern for those segments of the population with challenges.

The public forum input echoed similar themes. The top identified need was access to affordable healthcare. In addition, forum attendees ranked tuition assistance for higher education/job skills training programs as very important to the low-income community. This was followed closely and logically) by access to higher paying jobs and reliable transportation to both seek and maintain employment. Finally, the community identified two underserved populations and recommended improved courses of action for each of the population subgroups. Improved access to social service programs for DACA students, veterans , young adults leaving foster care as well as persons on parole were identified as groups in need of specific programming.

Recommendations for Action

As per the agency mission statement, the agency must devote its own resources and also develop the partnerships within the community to address the various needs identified during this process. Given the large population and the limited resources, strategic alliances are the only way progress towards the elimination of poverty can be achieved. It is with this in mind that the following recommendations are proposed for each of the Top 5 needs:

Access to Affordable Healthcare – The agency must develop and maintain strategic alliances with healthcare providers within the geographic boundaries of Hidalgo County. Increased visibility for mobile clinics and improved public information regarding the various primary health clinic organizations is important. The agency must assist in the coordination of services to those areas within the community that are currently underserved by the medical community.

Assistance in Obtaining Improved Job Skills and Training – The agency must continue to identify families and individuals in need of support to improve their level of relevant job skills and training. The agency must increase the level of participation in the Family Support Program. In addition, the agency must develop formal agreements with similar missioned agencies within Hidalgo County for coordinating the efforts and avoiding duplication of services.

Access to Nutritious Food – The agency must work together with agencies such as the Rio Grande Valley Foodbank, WIC and others to address the needs of those who report consistent access to nutritious food. In addition, this effort must include other partners to address the healthy eating options for those with chronic illnesses.



Identification of Resources in the Community – The agency must coordinate and spearhead family support fairs within the county. These fairs could be hosted in the relative safety of the county’s numerous community centers and feature employment opportunities, training opportunities, support programs and the like.

Special Populations – The agency is charged via its mission statement to assist those vulnerable households in Hidalgo County. The agency must work with partner organizations and develop the social infrastructure it will need to address the needs of the special populations.