

Community Needs Assessment Introduction:

Hidalgo County continues to be an area plagued by high levels of poverty. 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 high poverty. The County continues to experience high levels of unemployment relative or higher than that to the State and the rest of the nation. Over 30% of the adult population of Hidalgo County has not obtained a high school diploma or equivalent. Said indicator is twice the level statewide and almost three times the national level. Additionally, the population of individuals over the age of 16 lacking basic literacy skills is at 50%. This is twice over the state rate and again several points short of triple the national level.

Hidalgo County's poverty rate levitates above the 31% mark as it has for at least fifteen years. Information remains the same for children and seniors. Over 45% of children and 25% of seniors live well below the federal poverty level. There is a strong realization that a significant number of the County's children are faced with the pressure of wondering whether they will have consistent access to adequate food and shelter. A large percentage of families within Hidalgo County currently living in poverty are also burdened with not having access to health insurance or other such safety net resources. Almost a THIRD of the population report having no health insurance for the County.

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 assistance in obtaining increased job skills for an increase in earning better wages. Access to information and referral services ranked high on the list of needs as did access to food and resources for major medical conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

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 as well as those leaving the penal system, veterans, and migrants were identified as vulnerable groups in need of specific programming.

Planning Stage

Develop a timeline:

Date:	Tasks
TBD	Gather Qualitative Data
TBD	Present to Advisory Board
TBD	Committee Meeting
TBD	Conduct Organizational Interviews
TBD	Distribute Surveys Partner Organizations
TBD	Client Survey Begins
TBD	Collection of Surveys
June 17, 2021 & July 3,2021	Conduct Community Forums
June 18, 2021 & June 21, 2021	Conduct Focus Group
July 7, 2021	End of Data Collection
July 13, 2021	Present Report to Commissioners Court
July 15, 2021	Submit Report to TDHCA

Community Outreach Activities: The Agency conducted several outreach events intended to inform county residents about the Needs Assessment process. Press release stories appeared in various media outlet throughout Hidalgo County. The Monitor newspaper and Valley Town Crier in English and Spanish. Public notice was given formally via ad in The Valley Town Crier. Fliers were distributed in English and Spanish via mail and went house to house to conduct surveys. A total of 2 Public Forums were also conducted. Surveys were distributed to a wide variety of partner organizations that were identified because of their work and low-income individuals. The Commons Needs Assessment also provided surveys for clients receiving services in house. In addition, information regarding the process was provided to the Community Advisory Board and to the Hidalgo County Commissioners Court prior to the beginning of the process.

Community Organization Participants:

Organization	Contact	Involvement
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Affordable Homes of South Texas	Bobby Calvillo	Interviewee
Texas A&M University	Andrea Valdez	Interviewee
Proyecto Azteca	Ann Cass	Interviewee
La Union Del Pueblo Entero	Juanita Valdez-Cox	Interviewee
Hidalgo CO. Health Depart.	Eddie Olivarez	Survey Sites
Unidos Contra Diabetes	Salomon Torres	Interviewee
South TX Juvenile Diabetes Assoc.	Debra Franco	Interviewee
Texas Veterans Commission	Jerry Garza	Interviewee
Centro Desarrollo Humano	Sr. Fatima Santiago	Interviewee
United Way of South TX	Thelma Garza	Interviewee
Valley Interfaith	Sr. Maria Sanchez	Interviewee
Project Arise	Ramona Casas	Interviewee
Valley Interfaith	Eddie Anaya	Interviewee

Staff Participants:

Name:	Title	Involvement
Jaime Longoria	Executive Director	Planning, Interviews of Organization, Development of Surveys Instrument, Development Reports
Guillermo Palacios	Operations Manager	Chair of Committee, Planning, Procurement, Focus Group
Rosalinda Gonzalez	Executive Assistant	Planning, Focus Group Scribe, Survey Development, Development of Report
Mari Gallegos	Program Supervisor	Focus Group Participant
Rene Solis	Caseworker	Focus Group Participant
Michael Gonzalez	Caseworker	Focus Group Participant

Brittany Castillo	Eligibility Worker	Focus Group Participant- New Employee
Amanda Medina	Eligibility Worker	Focus Group Participant- New Employee

Board and Elected Officials:

Commissioner David Fuentes	County Commissioner	Interview
Commissioner Ever Villarreal	County Commissioner	Interview
Commissioner Ellie Torres	County Commissioner	Interview
Commissioner Eddie Cantu	County Commissioner	Interview
County Judge Ramon Garcia	County Judge	Interview

Quantitative Data

Demographics: Hidalgo County in deep south Texas is along the US-Mexico border. It encompasses 1,583 square miles. In 2000, official population counts found that 569,463 people were residing in Hidalgo County. The 2010 Census identified 774,769 residents. This made Hidalgo County the eight most populous county in Texas. For 2020, official estimates from the Census Bureau put the population at 881,525 persons (Commons, 2020). In twenty years, the population expanded by 46.9 %. During those same years, the state's population grew by 30.1% and the nation grew by 13.5%. Hidalgo County more than tripled its growth rate. (Commons, 2020).

Of the 2010 population, 88% were reported White, 8.8% other race, 1.1% Asian, 0.6 Black or African American, 0.3 Native American and 1.3% two or more other races. The Community Survey estimates that 51.5% of population is male and 48.5% is female. The ethnic makeup of the county was found to be predominantly Hispanic with 90.8% reporting Latino heritage (Commons, 2020).

National Data: According to the US Census Quick Facts report, there is an estimated 82, 623 children in Hidalgo County under the age of five. This represents 9.4% of the population. In total children 0-18 years of age represent 33% of the general population.

Poverty Local Data: Poverty continues to be a problem in Hidalgo County. Community Commons reports that 32.7% of county residents are living in poverty. This is almost double the rate for the rest of Texas (16.7%) and over twice the national rate of 15.1%. For Hidalgo County this means that approximately 268,912 persons earn

below the federal poverty level (Commons 2014-2018). A family of four, earning less than 24,600 per year would be considered living in poverty. Divided over a twelve-month period, the income would be \$2,050 per month. Breaking this figure down, this would mean a weekly gross salary of \$512 or \$12.80 per hour. The number of children living in poverty in Hidalgo County is very high. Community Commons reports that 44.8% of the child population ages 0-17 years live in poverty. That number is more than the national average of 21.3%.

Seniors aged 65 years and older are also living in Hidalgo County at a high rate compared to the state and nation. In Hidalgo County over 19,800 seniors live well below the federal poverty line. This represents 23.5% of the entire senior population for the County. The rate for Texas stands at 10.8% and the nation 9% (Commons, 2014-2018). According to a report issued by the Housing Assistance Council, approximately 1,876 Hidalgo County veterans are living below the federal poverty level. This represents 8.5% of the entire population of the county. In addition, the council reports that of the 7,596 veterans living with a disability in the County, approximately 625 are living below the federal poverty level (Commons, 2018).

Housing Census: The Discussion of housing is not complete without discussion of the high incidence of colonias in the County. The office of the Texas Secretary of State was tasked with tracking the progress of infrastructure improvements within these rural, unincorporated communities that lacked basic infrastructure such as paved roads, adequate wastewater disposal and potable drinking water. Although that agency is no longer charged with this task, in 2010 the Secretary's office reported there were 934 colonias in Hidalgo County. Over 50% of those communities were classified as "Green" indicating that the basic infrastructure needs had been met. However, that same report cited 100 colonias as "Red". Red indicates that the community lacks, platting, portable water and or adequate wastewater disposal. Many of these issues have been resolved, however, there remains isolated pockets of households that report lack of access to complete indoor plumbing facilities in their homes. The rate of incidence is THREE times the state rate and FOUR times the national number (Commons, 2018).

Chronic Medical Conditions: Hidalgo County and South Texas lead the nation in the prevalence of several of the most devastating chronic diseases. The prevalence of diabetes, coronary heart disease and obesity all manifest themselves throughout the population. Particularly hard hit is the low income "insurance gap" community. The "gap" occurs when a family's income is above the limits set by safety net health insurance programs and yet below the level where a family can truly afford the cost of health insurance. Households caught in the middle turn to alternative forms of medicine, travel across into Mexico for medicine and care or in more dramatic turn, wait until their condition worsens and eventually seek care in an emergency room.

According to a Community Health Needs Assessment conducted by Knapp Medical Center, the number of diagnosed diabetes cases for those the age of 20 was found at 10%. The rest of the nation almost mirrors this number at 9.1% (Knapp, 2016). Hidalgo County leads the state and the rest of the nation in the percentage of adults over the age of twenty who self-report that they have a Body Mass Index (BMI) greater than 30%. The Centers for Disease Control and Preventions reported in 2014 that the percentage of obese adults in Hidalgo County was over 34%. This rate is higher than the state and much higher than the rest of the nation. Excess weight is a sign of poor nutritional and lifestyle habits and is a leading indicator of risk for other health issues.

Qualitative Data

There were 412 surveys taken which provide data which led to the development of this report. Over 87% of those responding have more than three indicators as a priority need. Most of the surveys display access to health care, need for higher income, and need for assistance with utility payments.

Nearly 100% of the surveys presented a priority needs of utility assistance and assistance with access to health care and to prescription assistance.

Community Meetings: They are held regularly with a variety of groups throughout Hidalgo County. While most of these meetings are intended to deliver information about programming, many times the groups engage in dialogue with agency. During this Community Needs Assessment, one such meeting was held at the Mission Food Pantry and at the City of Hidalgo Community Center. Upon conclusion of the meeting, survey instruments were distributed to their membership. Responses from those surveys were included in this document.

Public Forums: Public Forums were conducted by the consulting firm and participants were asked to list and rank the top five needs faced by the low-income population in Hidalgo County. This was accomplished via interviews at the flea market and other various places.

Focus Groups: The session began by brainstorming the responses to perceived needs of the low-income community in Hidalgo County. After the group gave their responses, they were given the combined results of the survey responses, interview and forum results. They were asked to respond to these findings. Once there was a consensus regarding the list of community needs the group was asked to provide contributing factors for each need. The discussion continued by the group adding any identified resources to the matrix followed by possible solutions to the identified need. The process repeated itself for each of the five identified needs. The focus groups included the LGBTQ community and Teen Parents.

Causes and Conditions of Poverty: Educational Attainment and Basic Literacy Skills:

Over thirty six percent of the age of 25 in Hidalgo County have reported having no high school diploma. That rate is double the rate of Texas (17.65%) and almost three times the United States rate (13.02%). In addition, Community Commons report that 50% of adults in the County lack basic literacy skills. The rate for the rest of Texas is 19% and in the nation is 14.65%. This statistic is a very important indicator of the health of the employment sector. Prospective employers look for an educated and skilled workforce pool to selecting locations for new ventures. Many of the persons interviewed for this report indicate that many of the employment opportunities available in Hidalgo County simply are not enough to sustain a family. This coming from a County that the life of living is much less than the other bigger counties in the state. According to the website, Living Wage Calculator, this "living wage" is the hourly rate that an individual must earn to support their family. For a family of four with both parents working and two children the living wage for each parent was calculated at \$13.81 per hour. Many of the low-skill jobs available in the community fall short of this wage (Living Wage, 2018). In addition, many of the higher wage jobs require a higher level of skills and training. The result is a low per capita income rate. For Hidalgo County the per capita income levels is \$15,240. For El Paso County, the per capita level is \$19,145. The per capita level for the state is \$22,525 and the nation is \$29,829. The intersection of limited job opportunities and low literacy rates (implicit low levels of skilled labor) create a difficult situation for the working poor of Hidalgo County.

Uninsured Population: The high number of insured persons in Hidalgo County is also indicative of a population struggling to make ends meet. The US Census Bureau's small Area Health Insurance Estimates reports that 28.5% of the County's population is uninsured, this compared to 16.5% for the state of Texas and 8.5% uninsured for the United States. Over half a million persons have no health safety net in the event of major medical or chronic disease diagnosis. This combined with the high incidence of chronic disease such as diabetes further aggravates an already precarious family income situation.

Special Population: The number of children living in poverty in Hidalgo County is very high. Community Commons reports that 45% of the child population ages 0-17 years live in poverty. That number is more than the double national average of 21%. Seniors aged 65 years and older are also living in poverty in Hidalgo County at a high rate compared to the state and nation. In Hidalgo County, over 20k seniors live below the federal poverty level. This represents 24% of the entire population for the County. The rate for Texas stands at 10.8% and the nation at 9.3%. Veterans living in poverty are also disproportionately represented in Hidalgo County. According to a report issued by the Housing Assistance Council, approximately 1,776 Hidalgo County veterans are living below the federal poverty level. This represents 8.1% of the entire veteran population of the county. In addition, the council reports that of the 7,556 veterans living with a disability in the County, approximately 595 are living below the

federal poverty level (Commons, 2016).

High Unemployment: Hidalgo County continues to be plagued by relatively high levels of unemployment. Workforce Solutions is the state designated employment agency. Their latest report was generated in April 2019. This report indicates the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission Metropolitan Statistical Area's unemployment level stood at 6.5%. This number represent a 0.4 decrease over the previous number. However, the April figure is significantly higher than the rest of the state (3.8) and the nation at (3.7%) (Workforce, 2019).

Development of Organizational Standards to Community Assessment

Governance and Structure

Hidalgo County Community Service Agency is a department of Hidalgo County Government. As such, the agency is administered by the five-member Commissioners Court. The Court consists of four elected Precinct Commissioners and the County Judge. They in turn appoint the Court Administrator who serves as the day-to-day supervisor over all County Departments. For matters involving the Community Service Agency, the Court relies on the Community Service Agency Community Advisory Board (CAB). This nine-member board consists of three elective representatives of the low-income community, three elected officials or their representatives and three representatives of community organizations. In addition, one representative each of the Commissioners and County Judge serve as ex-official members of the board. Finally, the Hidalgo County District Attorney's office provides another official member who serves as legal counsel CAB. The CAB advises both the Executive Director and the Commissioners Court on matters regarding the agency.

Programs

The various programs are implemented by a staff of thirty-three personnel broken up in six departments. Current programs offerings include Utility Assistance, Family Support Services, Emergency Services Unit, Retired Senior Volunteers, and Operation Bravo Zulu-Veteran Services. A brief description for each of the program follow.

Utility Assistance- This program offers low-income residence of Hidalgo County Assistance with their utility bills. In addition, this program assists clients by providing information regarding the various things they can do to lower their energy bills. The agency conducts a comprehensive needs assessment and make appropriate referrals to other agencies as needed. In recent years, the agency receives approximately \$3.2 million annually via the Comprehensive Energy Program (CEAP) via the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs. In addition, these funds, the agency

receives limited funds from various private entities for the same purpose-utility assistance.

Family Support Services- This program assists families and individuals as they work towards transitioning out of poverty. The agency utilizes a comprehensive case management model in helping families identify the barriers that keep in poverty. Once identified, the agency and the participants work together to remove the barriers and improve their standard of living. Many families have benefitted from this case management program. Graduates have been placed in rewarding careers ranging from law enforcement, fire fighters, nursing, barber shops, entrepreneurs, pharmacy aids, and cosmetology. In addition, many program alumni have completed four-year degrees and have transitioned out of poverty.

Emergency Services Unit- Services provided via this program are administered primarily by Family Support Caseworkers. Those receiving services via this program are generally referred to the Agency via other social service agencies. Many of them are victims of disasters such as house fires, domestic abuse, homelessness, and weather-related situations. Many times, these persons are referred to the family support services unit for follow-up and transition out of poverty.

Retired Senior Volunteer Program- This department within Hidalgo County CSA is charged with recruiting, training, and placing volunteers over the age of 55 in various service locations throughout their service area. Program staff also identify and evaluate possible service locations that will accept program volunteers. Volunteer sites range from public libraries, hospitals, veteran clinics, food pantries to schools. In addition, the program boosts a disaster strike force. These 55 and older retired persons are being trained to augment the service offered by relief agencies in times of disasters. The program is funded primarily via the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Operation Bravo Zulu- Veteran Services- Agency personnel provide utility assistance to qualified low-income veterans via this program. The need for assisting low-income veterans was identified during the previous community needs assessment. Hidalgo County Judge Ramon Garcia first appointed out this initial idea. The program seeks to identify this vulnerable population and assist them with up to \$600 in utility assistance payment made directly to the utility provider. Qualifying veterans may also be assisted via the agency's CEAP program. In addition, client interviews helped to identify and address other areas of concern. The program was considered successful and is slated to commence in July 2021.

Additional Elements Related to Community Assessment



Resources Identified

The process used to conduct the assessment: The team utilized guidance by the Texas Department of Housing and Community affairs. This document entitled, "Community Needs Assessment Guide" was downloaded and distributed to the team for review on our weekly meetings. 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. During our initial meetings, a detailed timeline was developed together with a list of job functions and responsibilities. The assessment process was divided into in two distinct phases. Part one of the process involved the quantitative information that would provide valuable statistical information in our County. Program administrators would be charged with gathering data from the Community Commons website, local demographic data from reports such as Kids

Counts Data Book, employment information from Work Force Solutions reports, reports to various state and federal agencies developed by local entities such as the County Health Department.

The qualitative portion required six distinct phases to be accomplished at varying stages of the established timeframe. Community Needs Surveys were distributed to various target groups within Hidalgo County including The Alamo Flea Market, Mission Event Center, and distributed surveys in the southern McAllen area. In addition, interviews of organizational leaders were conducted as well as Hidalgo County Elected Officials and Community Service Agency Board members. Formalized community forums as mentioned were conducted in two locations throughout the County. The information provided was in English and Spanish.

All this information was compiled and presented to a focus group made of community members, organizational leaders, CSA board members, administration, and staff. The issues are presented in the qualitative and quantitative portions that were discussed. The top five needs were also identified.

Top 5 Needs by Priority for Hidalgo County: The agency completed the Community Needs Assessment process in July 2021. The **Social Vulnerable Index** is the degree in which a community exhibits certain social conditions, including high poverty, low percentage of vehicle access, crowded households, including the LGBTQ, people with diabetic or heart disease conditions, may affect the community's ability to prevent human suffering and financial loss in the event of any disaster. These factors can describe a social vulnerability. The higher the score of social vulnerability across the counties or neighborhoods, the higher its vulnerability. The report area of Hidalgo County 2020 has an index score of 0.99 which is greater than the state average of 0.65 (SNAP, 2010 to 2020). This becomes a huge problem to citizens who lack job skills, become a parent though their teenage years, who did not complete high school and are now jobless at age 26 because they did not receive a high school diploma. The needs assessment displays need for Teen Parent Program that can further educate these parents so that they can have the chance to acquire better jobs or further their education. The focus group as well as survey results displayed committees during their high school age years however once they reach their mid-20s and early 30s damaging high school diploma or college credits they're stuck in poverty. Income without a high school education so poverty status looking on the welfare system including Medicaid as well as food stamps. These individuals become a public charge to the taxing entities. The surveys indicate that these individuals have a much higher social vulnerability index meaning that they depend on public housing or live with a family member, they have lack of access to healthcare while their children may have access the parents don't, there is also a monthly struggle for meeting monthly payment requirements such as electricity, water, and the much needed Internet for their

children's studies. Other factors that tie in to the social vulnerability rate is the lack of access to child care, which also leads to other issues such as not having enough money for gas to participate in general activities, also the surveys indicate that at times even with food stamps there's a lack of food on the table. These findings of teen parents merit further study. It would be interesting to verify how many teen parents still live in poverty after they have past high school age and are now working adults.

The LGBTQ community provided a long list of issues that come with an alarming social vulnerability rate. The conservative, predominantly Catholic community brings concerns to the LGBT community. The focus group displayed that many who are part of the gay community get kicked out of their homes, have lack of access to health care and preventive medication for HIV. The social vulnerability rate increases since the focus group found that there is also a need for counseling available for the LGBTQ community to cope with issues such as but not limited to coming out, coming out to parents and family, dealing with HIV.

During the community meetings a need for job training programs, to entice employment, and job shadowing and/or apprenticeship programs. A participant brought up the old JTPA program, a federal program, Job Training Partnership Act which provided summer youth programs, on the job training opportunities, and a dislocated worker program. It provided ways that individuals could get jobs. The data indicates that these programs are a great need in Hidalgo County. This affects the social vulnerability rate since these unemployed individuals are a public charge to other programs such as housing, foods stamps, and Medicaid.

Top Needs for Hidalgo County are as follows (ranked in order of priority):

- **Lack of Affordable Housing**
- **Lack of Job skills Necessary for Better Wages/ Entice Employment**
- **Teen Parent Programs**
- **Access to Healthcare**
- **Household Assistance**