

COUNTY OF HIDALGO

2021 COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

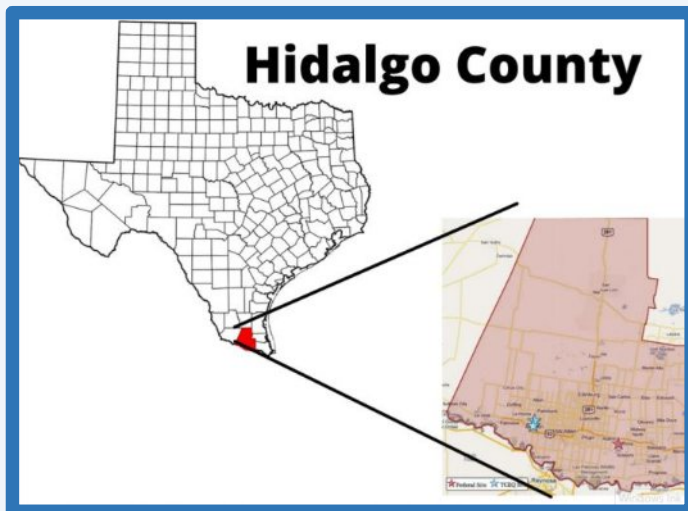
PREPARED FOR

HCCSA



EXECUTIVE 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 as a result of that effort. It 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, current gaps in reaching them, and to guide the Board and program planners in the development of the strategic plan, goals and outcomes. The agency relies on a

combination 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. Also, the agency relies on quantitative information compiled by the Community Commons website, Texas Work Force Commission, The United States Census, Kids Count Data Book, The Center of Public Policy and Priorities, and others. Both types of information are analyzed and interpreted to evaluate poverty and its roots causes. The resulting report will be used to develop more focused strategies in eliminating poverty through the use of the agency's own funding and through strategic alliances forged with the many partnering organizations working in unison. The Hidalgo County Community Service Agency began the process for this year's assessment in June of 2021. Program planners began by assembling a team that would be responsible for various aspects of the process going forward. The team was led by an 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 Director and several Advisory Board Members.

The team utilized guidance provided by the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs. The document titled, "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 material was properly distributed and reviewed by the team, the planned meeting was convened. During the meeting a detailed



timeline was developed with a list of job functions and responsibilities. The assessment process was divided into two distinct phases. Part one of the process involved the quantitative information that would provide valuable statistical information for our research. The program administrator 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.

The qualitative research portion required six distinct phases to be accomplished at varying stages of the established frame. 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 both the English and Spanish media as well.

All this information was compiled and presented to a focus group made up 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 for the County. The report was developed, and findings were presented to the Advisory Board and a presentation was made to the Hidalgo County Commissioners Court on August 10, 2021. The report will be delivered to the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs on August 15, 2021.

CONCLUSION

For persons familiar with Hidalgo County because many of the issues discussed in the following report are familiar. It is evident that the county has grown and is growing exponentially and along with it, the needs of the community. Progress regarding these issues can only be attained when the issues are clearly defined, and creative solutions proposed. Hidalgo County must first attract industry and investment that in turn creates higher paying jobs. Employees demand more salary, but investors counter that higher paying jobs should be based on higher skills and job training. Yet those higher salaries are needed to move the community out of poverty and into a community of growth and prosperity. In addition, the County touts its' reputation as a retirement community but that runs counter to the fact that many of the seniors in Hidalgo County live in poverty. It is the ultimate chicken vs. egg dilemma. To deal with societal and community issues, leaders must evaluate each and every issue and propose specific strategies designed to deal with them.



This process identified five distinct needs for the County of Hidalgo. They are :

- 1. The Need for Safe Affordable Housing**
- 2. Job Skills Training Necessary for Higher Paying Jobs**
- 3. Assistance to Vulnerable (Hidden) Populations such as post teen parents, DACA, Veterans, Parolees**
- 4. Access to Affordable Healthcare**
- 5. Household Assistance to include disaster and crisis**

DRAFT



AGENCY GOVERNANCE AND STRUCTURE

Hidalgo County Community Service Agency is a department of the County of Hidalgo. The Court consists of four elected Precinct Commissioners and the County Judge. They in turn appoint the Administrator who serves as the day-to-day supervisor over all County Departments. The Executive Administrator together with the Court are responsible for hiring the Executive Director of the agency. For programmatic 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 of each of the Commissioners and County Judge serves as ex-officio members of the board. Finally, the Hidalgo County District Attorney's office provides personnel who serves as legal counsel CAB. The CAB advises both the Executive Director and the Commissioners Court on legal matters regarding the agency.

PROGRAMS



The various programs are implemented by a staff of thirty-three personnel broken up into 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 makes appropriate referrals to other agencies as needed. In recent years, the Agency receives approximately \$6.0 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 them 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, firefighters, nursing, barbershops, entrepreneurs, pharmacy aides, 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 house fires, domestic abuse, homelessness, and weather-related situations. These persons are often 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 boasts a disaster strike force. These 55 and older retired persons are being trained to augment the service offered by relief agencies in times of disaster. 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. The program seeks to identify this vulnerable population and help them with up to \$600 in utility assistance payments 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.

Pandemic Related Assistance – The agency has received several large grants related to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic may be somewhat temporary, its impact has been profound in terms of how it has affected families with particular emphasis on the needs of the most vulnerable. Thus, monies for rental and mortgage assistance have been administered by the Hidalgo County Community Service Agency. In addition, the agency serves families with food delivery and referrals, funds for internet service, medication assistance, prescription assistance and even insurance premium stipends.



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 at 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 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 [Hidalgo County Community Service Agency Community Needs Assessment 2021](#)

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. Finally, formalized community forums as mentioned were conducted in two locations throughout the County. The information was provided in both 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 presented in the qualitative and quantitative portions were discussed. The top five needs were also identified.



PLANNING STAGE

Dates	Tasks
MAY 1-JUNE 30, 2021	Gather Qualitative Data
JULY 30, 2021	Present to Advisory Board
JUNE 7, 2021	Committee Meeting
AUGUST 3, 2021	Conduct Org. Interviews
JUNE 1-30, 2021	Distribute Survey Partner Org.
JUNE 1, 2021	Client Survey Begins
JUNE 1-18, 2021	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
AUGUST 10, 2021	Present Report to Commissioners Court
AUGUST 15, 2021	Submit Report to TDHCA

COMMUNITY OUTREACH ACTIVITIES:

The Agency conducted several outreach events to inform county residents about the needs assessment process. Press releases were disseminated to local and regional press, and news coverage appeared in various media outlets throughout Hidalgo County. An ad was placed in the Valley Town Crier and various newspapers, in English and Spanish. This provided notice to the public about the assessment process. Flyers were also distributed in English and Spanish within the community via mail and staff members went house to house to conduct surveys.

There were two public forums held in distinct areas of the County. Staff distributed surveys to a wide variety of partner organizations because of their work with low-income individuals. The Hidalgo County Community Service Agency also provided surveys to clients receiving services in-house. Before the data collection commenced, the Community Advisory Board and the Hidalgo County Commissioners Court were provided a briefing on how the independent community assessment would progress.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION PARTICIPANTS:

Organization	Contact	Involvement
United Way	Lilly Lopez-Killelea	Survey Response
Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service	Andrea Valdez	Survey Response
DHR Health	Mario Lizcano	Survey Response
Superior Health Plan	Mary Lou Cavazos	Survey Response
Rainbow International of McAllen	Abel Garza	Survey Response
Presidente Home Care, Inc.	Romeo Valladares, RN	Survey Response
Salvation Army	Angela Belton	Survey Response
El Milagro Clinic	Marisol Resendez	Survey Response
Centro Desarrollo Humano	Sr. Fatima Santiago	Survey Response
United Way of South TX	Thelma Garza	Survey Response
Valley Interfaith	Sr. Maria Sanchez	Survey Response
Project Arise	Ramona Casas	Interviewee



Community non-profits and private businesses participated by submitting surveys to indicate the needs of low-income persons in Hidalgo County. The primary needs found to be assistance for housing, transportation, utility, rent or mortgage assistance, and employment with higher wages.

The non-profit and business community deal with individuals in poverty and have addressed the issues that are presented before them my families who are in need. The surveys also indicate that individuals need life coaching skills that will help them address their issues as well as identify resources where they may be able to obtain other assistance. It is noted that at times those who are in need have a difficult time having access to Internet portals for applications of services and/or have little skill to be able to handle an online system, especially the elderly.

BOARD AND ELECTED OFFICIALS:

Name	Position	Involvement
Richard Cortez	County Judge	Interview
David Fuentes	County Commissioner Precinct One	Interview
Eddie Cantu	County Commissioner Precinct Two	Survey Response
Ever Villareal	County Commissioner Precinct Three	Interview
Ellie Torres	County Commissioner Precinct Four	Interview

INTERVIEWS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

Short term training programs

The Hidalgo County Commissioner’s Court members were interviewed to identify the needs which their respective offices identify daily. Each of the members of the Commissioner’s Court were able to identify various needs. One of the main identifiers was that individuals who lack education need to obtain short term training programs to obtain better jobs and transition to an income level that would place them above the federal poverty guidelines.

Support system for the elderly It was also found that the elderly population lack basic needs and care. Historically, the elderly would depend on their children to provide basic needs, however; it is increasing that the elderly lack support from their children or other family members. An identified need is that elderly have support for emergency situations they cannot afford like home repair, necessities, or household goods. Finally, the elderly



community seems to have a real need for programs to assist with home modifications such as plumbing and ramps.

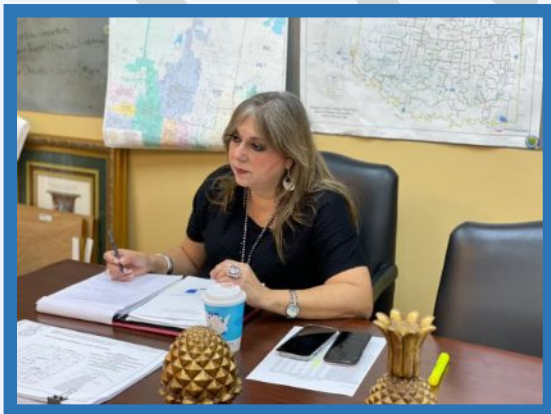
Assistance to hold long-term success It was further discussed that there was a need for programs to be developed that would provide a solution to poverty. The key would be not to provide programs that simply give immediate help but rather have a long-term benefit to success. While various models were discussed to engage in services that would help those in poverty and in emergency situations, the true champion would be to support educational programs. This not only includes job training programs, but it would include support such as childcare, rental assistance, help with prescription drugs, better access to preventive care, and housing.

Emergency Assistance due to flooding.

Since the County of Hidalgo has many locations where flooding occurs, mainly in colonias, officials hold concerns for the ramifications that come from flooding. Some of these issues include closures of roadways which prohibits individuals living in colonias to attend school or go to work. Flooding at times causes other disaster including electrical issues causing power outages or damaging the interior of homes at times even ruining necessary appliances such as refrigerators or stoves.

High Social Vulnerability Index

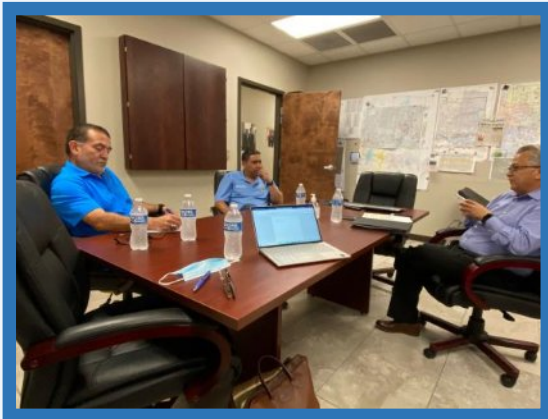
Finally, one should know that it is important to see that individual in poverty in this county hold multiple needs. Individuals are lacking education, lack access to health care, lack housing, lack sufficient wages that will place them above the federal poverty guideline. Many times household emergencies or even wide spread emergencies push an already vulnerable population over the edge and into a downward spiral of poverty. Hidalgo County ranks among the highest area with regards to this index of vulnerability.



County Commissioner Precinct 4 Ellie Torres discussing with Vazaldua and Associates community needs August 2021.



Precinct 4 Administrative staff sharing information of the significance of poverty in their quadrant of the county.



County Commissioner Precinct One David Fuentes along with his Chief of Staff David Suarez and Jaime Longoria, Executive Director HCCSA meet with Vazaldua and Associates to provide input



County Judge Richard Cortez and top administrators meet with Vazaldua and Associates to advise on matters of needs and available resources

STAFF PARTICIPATION

The Hidalgo County Community Service Agency staff participated in a focus group which helped to identify the needs that they encounter daily with potential clients and/or clients of the agency. The agency staff provided great examples of needs gleaned from countless interviews with clients.



Name	Agency	Involvement
Sandy Ramirez	CSA Staff Focus Group	Participant
Guillermo Palacios	Operations Manager	Chair of Committee, Planning, Procurement, Focus Group
Leslie Villegas	Executive Assistant	Planning, Focus Group Scribe, Survey Development, Development of Report
Mari Gallegos	Program Supervisor	Focus Group Participant
Rene Solis	Caseworker	Focus Group Participant
Amanda Medina	Eligibility Worker	Focus Group Participant-New Employee
Nora Vasquez	CSA Staff	Participant
John Jalomo	CSA Staff	Participant
Sylvia Sepulveda	CSA Staff	Participant
Xiomara Veliz	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Rigo Garcia	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Mari Garza	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Denise D. Ramirez	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Belinda Gonzalez	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Gloria Hernandez	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Alejandra Anaya	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant

Linda Barron	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Annabel Villegas	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Jennifer Vilegas	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Sheila Griffin	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Lidia Limas	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Michelle Garza	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Michelle Moreno	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Natalee Garcia	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Antonia Cadena	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Rosalinda Simmons	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Marleen Fuentes	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Clara Chapa	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Mario Ramirez	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Amador Celedon	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Amanda Medina	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Alma Garcia	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant
Jaime Longoria	CSA Staff	Focus Group Participant



FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS:

Assistance with Property Taxes	Home Repairs	Post-Teen Parents Services	Medical Assistance
Homelessness Flooding issues	Handicap Ramps Sowers/Tubs Appliances	Child Care School Supplies	Preventive Medicine Prescription Assistance Post-Surgery Medical Bills Access to Health Care
Elderly Services	Mental Health Services	Digital Divide	Low Wages
Lawn Care Fixed Income Thresholds to qualify for Assistance	Anxiety/Depression	Lack of Internet How to use agency portals Lack of Knowledge to use Reset password	Lack of Income Loss of Income
Assistance in obtaining documents to qualify such as birth certificates or social security cards. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migration Needs • Tire Repair • Vehicle Repair 			

The agency staff was able to identify needs and there was a consensus in the focus group that poverty causes an affect in multiple areas and categories. Providing that the social vulnerability index increases in both young and elderly populations due to a lack of income and other resources



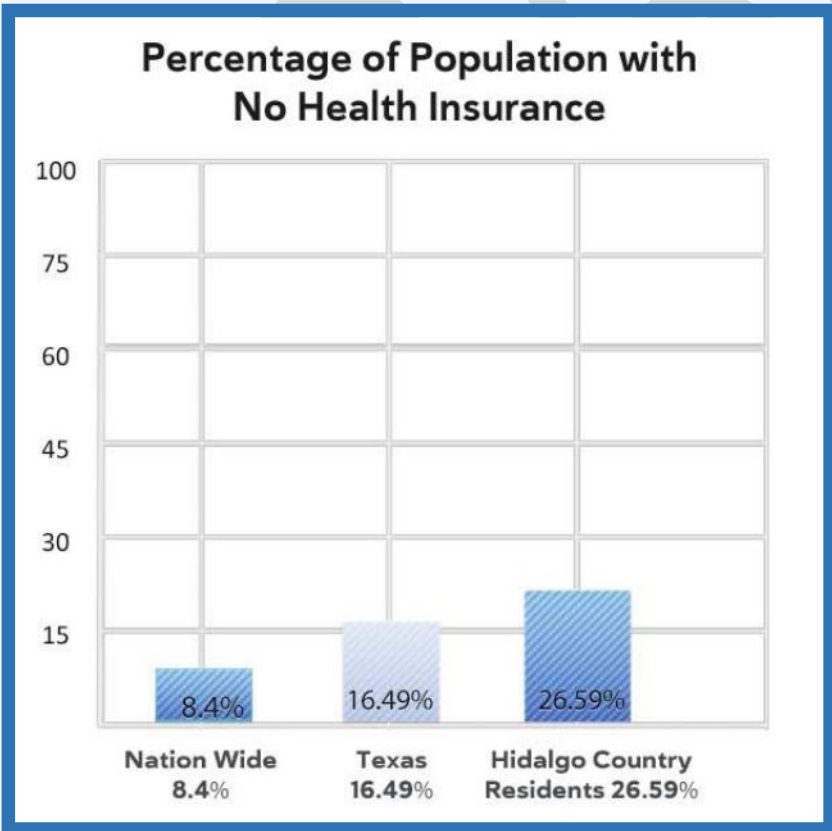
INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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 a region already beset with high poverty. The County continues to experience high levels of unemployment. Relative to or higher than that of the state and the rest of the nation.

Over 30% of the adult population has no high school diploma. This indicator is twice the level statewide and almost three times the national level. The literacy rate is over twice the state rate and again several points short of triple the national level.

Hidalgo County is historically an area plagued by a high poverty rate. The quantitative data collected by various groups all demonstrate that poverty in this region is an epidemic. With the extensive growth in population, high levels of unemployment, a high number of high school drop outs, and an illiteracy rate that is twice the state average and three times the national average, Hidalgo Country has faced an uphill battle in overcoming some of its biggest challenges.

The poverty rate in Hidalgo Country has maintained steady at 31% over that past 15 years. In



addition, over 45% of children and 25% of seniors live well below the poverty level. With the onset of the pandemic another growing concern, emerged. Consistent access to healthy food for those children that did not have secure access to food at home prior to the pandemic were at greater risk over the last year. School district leadership met this challenge individually and raised public awareness to the needs of this population.

Source: Community Commons, 2021



By the same token, the nutritional needs of the elderly were accentuated by the pandemic. Local agencies partnered to expand the Meals on Wheels Program capacity and food distributions.

Another need of the vulnerable community that was aggravated by the pandemic was the needs of the uninsured. Families struggling with the ravages of the pandemic preferred to medicate at home with over-the-counter meds versus seeking costly medical visits and hospitalizations.

The qualitative data shore 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 population surveyed noted a need for help in obtaining increased job skills to earn better wages. Access to information and referral services ranked high on the list of requirements, as did access to food and assistance with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

Finally, the community reported a concern for those portions of the population with higher-than-normal everyday challenges made worse in times of crisis.

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. Job training was followed closely and logically by accessing higher-paying jobs and reliable transportation to seek and maintain employment. Finally, the community identified two underserved populations and recommended improved courses of action for each of the population subgroups. The most needs for social service programs include DACA recipients, those leaving the penal system, veterans, and migrants.

Access to healthcare was the prevalent need. Finding affordable healthcare complicated the issue even more. Many voiced their need for tuition assistance which may be an access to information issue since low-income tuition assistance for those below or near the poverty level is readily available. Job training, transportation issues and better pay were also notable needs according to the respondents. The community surveyed showed concern for underserved populations within their community including After Post Teen Parent Programs, LGBTQ, DACA recipients, veterans, migrants and those leaving the penal system.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

DEMOGRAPHICS:

Hidalgo County is located 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. Hidalgo County is the eighth-most populous County in Texas. For 2020, official estimates from the Census Bureau put the population at 881,525 (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%. Thus, Hidalgo County more than tripled the growth rate. (Commons, 2020).

Hidalgo County encompasses 1,583 square miles. The 2000 Census reported 569,463 residents residing in Hidalgo County.

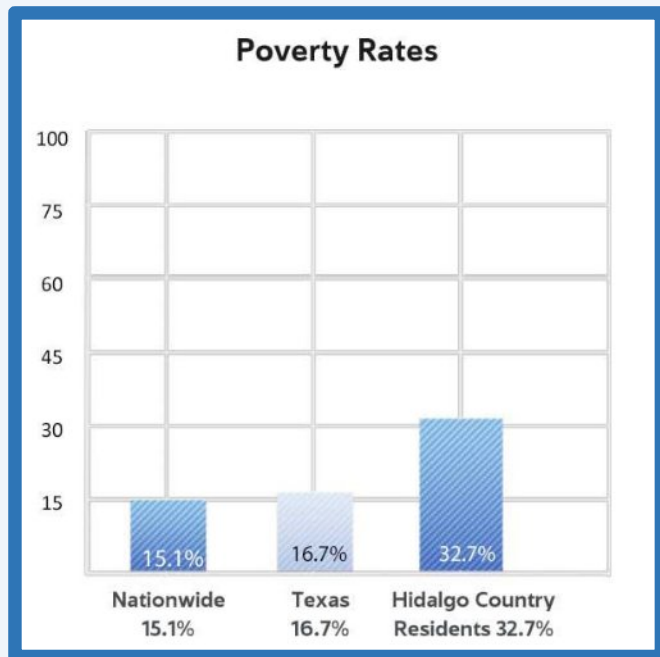
Of the 2010 population, 88% of Census respondents identified as White, 8.8% listed "other" for their race, while 1.1% identified as Asian, 0.6 Black or African American, 0.3 Native American, and 1.3% identified as various other ethnicities. The Community Survey estimates that 51.5% of the population is male and 48.5% is female. The ethnic makeup of the County of Hidalgo is predominantly Hispanic, with 90.8% reporting Latino heritage (Commons, 2020).

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



LOCAL POVERTY DATA:

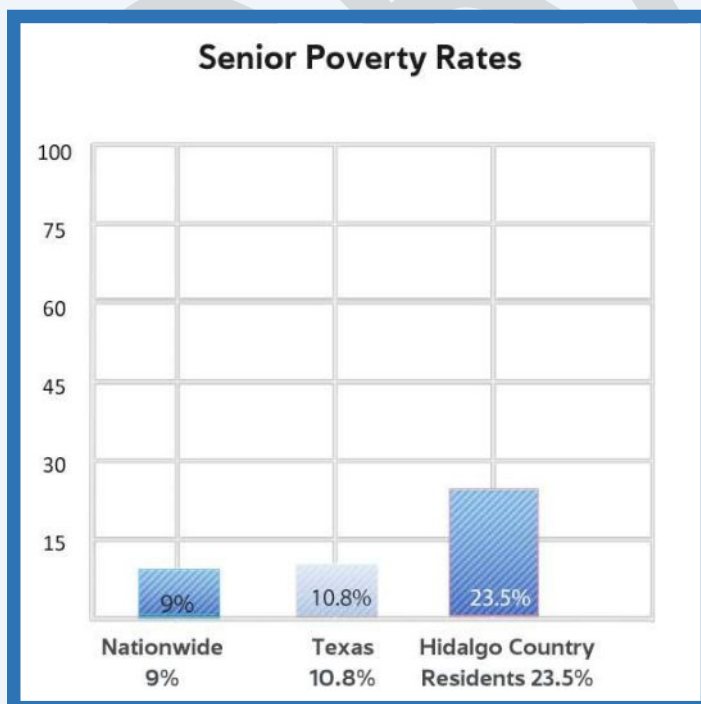
High levels of poverty continue to be a problem in Hidalgo County. Community Commons reports that 32.7% of county residents are living on or below the poverty line. Poverty in Hidalgo County is almost double that of the State of Texas (16.7%) and over twice the national rate of 15.1%. For Hidalgo County, this means that approximately 288,259 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 twelve



Source: Community Commons, 2021

months, the income would be \$2,050 per month. Breaking this figure down would mean a weekly gross salary of \$512 or \$12.80 per hour. The number of children living in poverty in Hidalgo County is also considerably high. Community Commons reports that 44.8% of the child population ages 0-17 years live in poverty. That number is more than twice the national average of 21.3%.

Seniors aged 65 years also make a large part of Hidalgo County's population. In Hidalgo



County, over 19,800 seniors live well below the federal poverty line. Approximately 23.5% of the entire senior population for the County. The rate for Texas stands at 10.8% and the nation at 9% (Commons, 2014-2018). According to a report issued by the Housing Assistance Council, approximately 1,876 Hidalgo County veterans live below the federal poverty level; this represents 8.5% of the County's entire population. 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).

Source: Community Commons, 2021



HOUSING CENSUS:

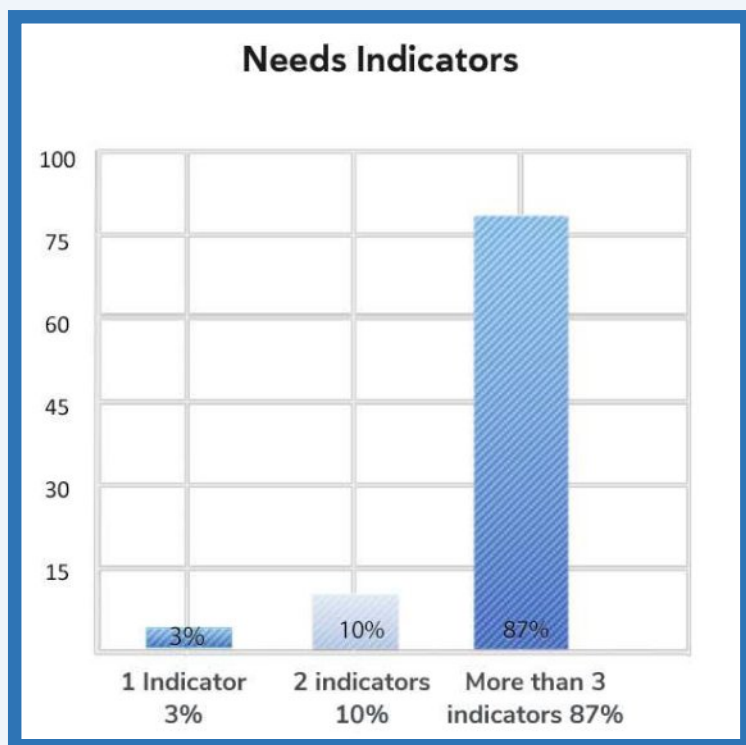
The Discussion of housing is not complete without discussing the high incidence of “colonias” (substandard housing developments) in the County. The Texas Secretary of State was tasked with tracking the progress of infrastructure improvements within these rural, unincorporated communities that lacked basic infrastructures 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. 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 households that report Hidalgo County Community Service Agency Community Needs Assessment 2021 a 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 are far too common in our 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. Residents caught in that gap turn to alternative forms of medicine. They travel to Mexico for medicine and care, or in a 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 Prevention 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. It is a leading indicator of risk for other health issues.



QUALITATIVE DATA



Source: Community Commons, 2021

COMMUNITY MEETINGS:

Community meetings were held with a variety of groups throughout Hidalgo County. While most of these meetings are intended to deliver programming information, it was common for the groups to engage in dialogue with the Agency. For example, during this Community Needs Assessment, one such meeting was held at the Mission Food Pantry and the City of Hidalgo Community Center. Upon conclusion of the meeting, survey instruments were distributed to the membership.



Ultimately, there were 412 surveys taken that provide data that is reflected in this report. Over 87% of those responding had 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.

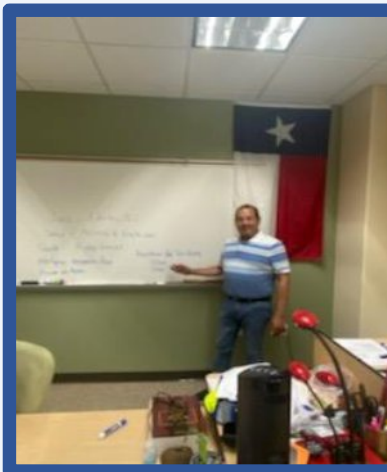
Nearly 100% of the surveys presented a priority needs for utility assistance and assistance with access to health care and prescription assistance.

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 markets, adult daycare centers, and various other places.

FOCUS GROUPS:



The sessions began by brainstorming discussing the perceived needs of the low-income community in Hidalgo County. After the group gave their responses, they were given the combined results of the surveys, interviews, Hidalgo County Community Service Agency Community Needs Assessment 2021 and forum results. Participants were asked for their reaction to these findings. Once there was a consensus regarding the list of community needs the group was asked to provide contributing factors for each of those need. The discussion continued by the group adding any identified resources to the matrix followed by possible solutions to the needs identified. The process repeated itself for each of the identified needs. The focus groups included the LGBTQ community, as well as teen parents.

CAUSES AND CONDITIONS OF POVERTY:

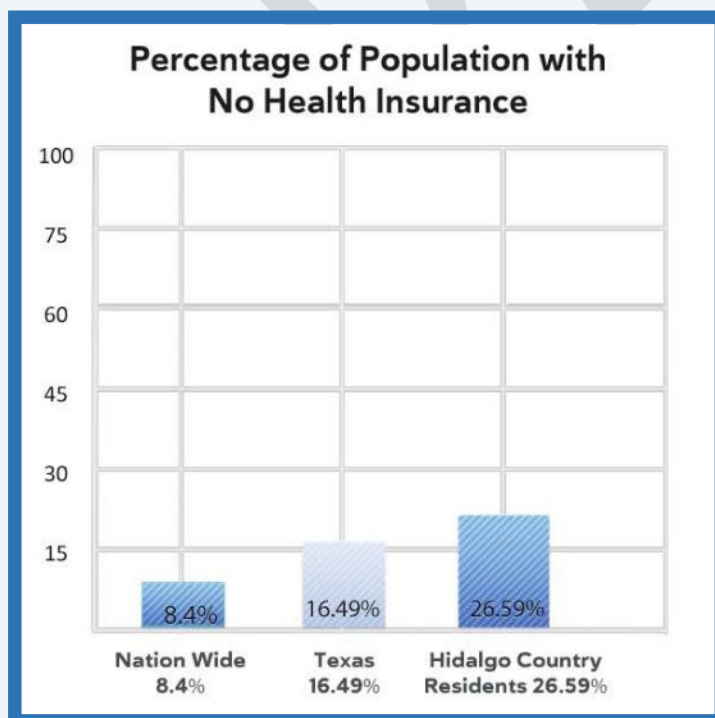
Educational attainment and basic literacy skills: According to the 2021 US Census Bureau Quick Facts approximately one in three adults of working age report lack of a high school diploma. That rate is double the rate of Texas (17.65%) and almost three times the United States average (13.02%). In addition, Community Commons reports that 50% of adults in the County lack literacy skills necessary for higher wage-earning positions. The rate for the rest of Texas is 19% and in the nation is 14.65%. This statistic is a strong indicator of the condition of the employment sector. Prospective employers consider access to an educated and skilled workforce part of the selection process for 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 is alarming since the cost of living is much less than the other 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 level 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 combination of limited job opportunities and low literacy rates (implicit low levels of skilled labor) creates a difficult situation for the working poor of Hidalgo County.

Uninsured Population: The high number of uninsured persons in Hidalgo County is evidence 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, 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, combined with the high incidence of chronic diseases such as diabetes prevalent in this culture, further aggravates an already precarious family income situation.

SPECIAL POPULATIONS:

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%.



Source: Community Commons, 2021

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 20,000 seniors live below the federal poverty level, representing 24% of the entire senior 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 a state-designated employment agency. Their latest report was generated in April 2019 indicates the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission Metropolitan Statistical Area's unemployment level stood at 6.5%. This number represents 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).

VUNERABILITY INDEX

The Agency completed the community needs assessment process in July 2021. The **Social Vulnerability Index** is the degree to which a community exhibits certain social conditions, including high poverty, low percentage of vehicle access, crowded households, the poor, the elderly, disabled, children and the LGBTQ population, people with chronic diseases, 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).

For instance, this becomes a prevalent issue to residents who already lack job skills become a parent in their teenage years, did not complete high school, and those now jobless. This assessment ratifies the need for a teen parent program that can further develop these parents so that they can have the chance to acquire better jobs or further their education.

Focus group and survey results demonstrated a strong correlation between high levels of poverty among young parents (post teens) with no high school diploma or college credits. Many of these post teen parents end up looking for social programs as a means to existence versus programs that are truly designed to transition them to a better way of life economically. 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 lack access to healthcare (their children have access, but the parents do not). There is a monthly struggle for meeting monthly payment requirements such as electricity, water, and other utilities. Other factors that tie into the social vulnerability rate are the lack of access to childcare, which then leads to other issues such as not having enough money for gas to participate in general activities. The surveys also indicate even with food stamps many families continue to struggle with access to nutritious foods. These findings merit further



study.

The LGBTQ community provided a long list of issues that come with an alarming social vulnerability rate. The focus group displayed that many who are part of the gay community get kicked out of their homes, they also lack 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, and dealing with HIV. It is not only the LGBTQ community in South Texas that suffers from HIV and HIV related illnesses. This adds to the issues made prevalent by the lack of healthcare or inadequate health care of this poverty-stricken Hidalgo County population.

During the community meetings it was expressed that job training programs are needed to entice employment and job shadowing and/or apprenticeship programs would be particularly helpful. A participant brought up the old JTPA program, a federal program called the 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 programs like these needed 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.

RESOURCES IDENTIFIED

Hidalgo County is a resilient community blessed with many resources and committed leaders who understand the diverse needs of the vulnerable populations they serve. Apart from state and federal programs there are many community-based organizations. The range in mission and budget but here is a partial listing of those resources and the area of work.

Community Organization	Mission Summary
Project Arise	Empowering leaders within low-income communities
LUPE	Improve the lives of colonia residents through civic engagement
Texas Rural Legal Aid	Legal representation for low-income residents
Affordable Homes of South Texas	Provides safe affordable housing to eligible residents
Tropical Texas Center for Behavioral Health	Provides health services to eligible residents
Easter Seals	Delivers child rehabilitative services



Proyecto Azteca	Self-help housing organization
Foodbank RGV	Provides food assistance to families
United Way	Provides funding and network building for participating organizations
El Milagro Clinic	Delivers healthcare services
Valley Aids Council	Provides sexual health and wellness services

DRAFT

Top Needs for Hidalgo County

Lack of Affordable Housing

Lack of Job Skills Necessary for Better Wages

Under served populations including Post Teen Parents, DACA recipients, veterans, migrants, and post penal system population

Access to Healthcare

Household Assistance

In conclusion, the Hidalgo County Community Service Agency is an agency charged with providing services to the most vulnerable populations of Hidalgo County. A County where one in three persons live below the federal poverty line and one in four seniors live below the federal poverty line. The program must develop and identify programs designed to address the root causes outlined previously. This survey concludes by summarizing the finding of Needs as the following:

- Lack of safe, affordable housing for residents
- Lack of job skills and training necessary for better, high wage-earning jobs
- Programs for the hidden sub-groups who are particularly vulnerable such as Post-Teen Parents, DACA Recipients, Veterans, Migrants, Parolees, etc.
- Improved access to healthcare
- Continued household assistance via utility, rent and crisis assistance

It is important to note that this list is only five of the long “laundry list” of needs voiced for this assessment. The work of the editors was to listen to the respondents and interpret the voices to form the Top Five Needs for the families of Hidalgo County.

