

Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties: Community Strengths and Needs Assessment 2024



The **Improve** Group



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Executive Summary

Background

The Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties (CAPRW), in partnership with The Improve Group, conducted a needs assessment to understand community strengths and needs in order to ensure that organization planning aligns with the communities that CAPRW supports.

The needs assessment utilized a mixed methods approach to gather input from seven communities in Ramsey and Washington Counties (Hmong, Somali, African American, Native, Karen, Latino, and disability community). The Improve Group engaged community advisors, analyzed secondary statistical data, conducted focus groups and interviews, and supported CAPRW in administering a survey for participants of CAPRW's services. Additionally, key informant interviews with community organizations provided insight into the communities as a whole and gave direction to the broader need assessment.

This needs assessment focused on three main areas: the needs of people with low incomes, the possible solutions to help them, and the scale and level of response needed to implement those solutions.

Themes from Community Workshops and Interviews

Community members and cultural and community organization staff responses shared the following themes. Across all communities, the following **strengths** were identified:

- Deep community connectedness
- Trusted cultural community and faith-based organizations
- Access to government programs and support services
- Suburban neighborhood safety

Across all communities, the following **challenges** were identified:

- Lack of accessible services
- Lack of safe, stable, and affordable housing
- Lack of access to employment training
- Need for safe neighborhoods
- Mental health challenges from living in poverty
- Feelings of social isolation
- Lack of safe and reliable transportation
- Lack of safe spaces to gather as a community

Key Recommendations

Based on the data collected from community members and cultural and community organization staff, The Improve Group provides the following recommendations to CAPRW at three levels: family, agency, and community.

At the **family level**, CAPRW can improve support for families by adjusting their resources and how the community interacts with them. CAPRW can offer more flexible, individualized resources, such as a “one-stop shop” or mobile solutions. Expanding assistance to families slightly above income eligibility thresholds and enhancing capacity for non-English speakers are crucial steps. CAPRW should take steps to increase communities’ awareness of available resources through timely communication and culturally specific navigators. This will help reach more families while addressing community needs for more digital literacy and accessibility. Finally, connecting families to external resources and encouraging them to organize within their communities will empower them to provide valuable input to agencies, ensuring that services are further tailored to their needs.

At the **agency level**, CAPRW can support families and communities by offering flexible resources tailored to their needs. We recommend that CAPRW prioritizes culturally responsive access to services, including language support and navigators, to help community members connect with CAPRW and other assistance programs. Cross-training staff on all programs will streamline the agency experience for families,

as all staff will have an increased knowledge of how CAPRW can support people. Building relationships through outreach and engaging with the communities engaged in the needs assessment will enhance trust and collaboration. Additionally, supporting safe cultural spaces and events will foster community connectedness. We recommend that CAPRW actively seek and incorporate family and community input into their services to ensure they remain relevant. Finally, collaborating with community-based organizations, advocating for policy changes, and providing a buffer against funding fluctuations will help sustain efforts to support families and communities.

Finally, our **community-level recommendations** acknowledge that CAPRW can and should collaborate with other organizations to best support the communities involved in this needs assessment. We recommend that CAPRW should streamline its referral process to better use community organizations, reduce service gaps, and enhance people's experience when accessing services. Additionally, CAPRW must advocate for increased and flexible funding after COVID-19. Policies aimed at improving the lives of families in poverty should include access to job training and living-wage employment, affordable housing for various family structures, enhanced public transportation, healthy food access, neighborhood safety, equitable law enforcement, and flexible eligibility for assistance. Overall, CAPRW can strengthen ties within and between communities by partnering with suburban cities in Ramsey and Washington County to support initiatives that promote inclusiveness and a sense of belonging among all.

Background about Community Action Partnerships

President Lyndon Johnson established Community Action Agencies (CAA) in 1964 as part of the Economic Opportunity Act to fight poverty by empowering the poor as part of the War on Poverty. Thousands of Community Action Agencies throughout the US provide various services, including energy assistance, Head Start programs for early care and education, and many other anti-poverty programs. Each CAA is governed by a board of directors consisting of at least one-third of low-income community members, one-third of public officials, and up to one-third of private sector leaders. This board structure is defined by federal statute and is known as a tripartite board. Community Action Partnership of Ramsey County was founded in 1964.

In 1984, funding for CAAs was block granted through the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Act. In 1994, an amendment to the CSBG Act established six national goals and outcome measures by which community action agencies would be measured¹:

- Low-income people will become more self-sufficient (Family)
- Conditions in which low-income people live are improved (Community)
- Low-income people own a stake in their community (Community)
- Partnerships among supporters and providers of services to low-income people are created (Agency)
- Agencies increase their capacity to achieve results (Agency)
- Low-income people, especially vulnerable populations, achieve their potential by strengthening family and supportive systems (Family).

In 1981, the Minnesota legislature passed the Minnesota Community Action Program Act to provide funding, technical assistance, and support to Minnesota Community Action Agencies.

In 2004, Community Action Partnership of Ramsey County merged with Community Action Partnership of Washington County to form the Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties to share administrative costs and better serve residents of the eastern Twin Cities metro area.

¹ <https://minncap.org/history>

About the Needs Assessment

Purpose

Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties (CAPRW) completes a community strengths and needs assessment and strategic plan every three years. The last assessment was completed in 2021. The assessment ensures that organizational planning is rooted in a clear understanding of community needs and strengths. It also aims to be a resource for other Ramsey and Washington County service providers and organizations.



About Ramsey & Washington Counties

Ramsey County covers 152.2 square miles and comprises 19 cities, including Saint Paul, the state capital and county seat.² The county has an estimated population of 552,352 and 221,871 estimated households.³

Washington County covers 384.7 square miles and comprises 27 cities and six townships.⁴ The county has an estimated population of 267,568 and 106,606 estimated households.⁵

For additional information about Ramsey and Washington Counties, see the Community Profile section of this study.

² Source: Ramsey County, ramseycounty.us

³ Source: Ramsey County Profile, 2020 Decennial Census

⁴ Source: Washington County, wahingtoncountymn.gov

⁵ Source: Washington County Profile, 2020 Decennial Census

Table 1: Client Demographics – Comparison of CAPRW Clients and Ramsey & Washington County Residents Under the Federal Poverty Level

	CAPRW Clients ⁶	Ramsey County All Under the Federal Poverty Level ⁷	Washington County All Under the Federal Poverty Level ⁸
Gender			
Female	57%	14%	5%
Male	47%	12%	4%
Unknown/not reported	1%	N/A	N/A
Age			
Under 18	43%	19%	4%
18-64	47%	12%	5%
65+	10%	9%	6%
Race			
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	36%	10%
Asian	25%	20%	4%
Black or African American	34%	26%	11%
White	24%	7%	4%
Multiracial	7%	17%	10%
Unknown/not reported	6%	N/A	N/A
Ethnicity			
Hispanic or Latino	9%	17%	11%
Not Hispanic or Latino	83%	N/A	N/A
Unknown/not reported	7%	N/A	N/A

⁶ Source: CAPRW demographic data for Federal Fiscal Year 2023 (10/1/2023 - 9/30/2024)

⁷ Source: 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

⁸ Source: 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the needs assessment.

- What are the most important areas of need for people with low incomes in Ramsey and Washington Counties?
 - What are the underlying causes?
 - What are reasons that these persist?
 - How do different communities experience them?
- What solutions would help to meet the needs of low-income community members?
 - What strengths and assets do communities bring?
 - What is CAPRW's role, given what others are already doing and CAPRW's unique strengths?
 - What current or future partnerships/initiatives could support these solutions?
- Is a family or community-level response needed?

Methodology

The Improve Group partnered with CAPRW to conduct this needs assessment and utilized a mixed-method approach to produce a more well-rounded understanding of Ramsey and Washington Counties and incorporate voices from various stakeholders.

Data Collection

The Improve Group collected information from multiple sources to inform CAPRW's Community Needs Assessment, including:

Engaging **Community Advisors** from CAPRW's network to advise the Community Needs Assessment, with a particular focus on the survey, expanding its reach, and strengthening its cultural responsiveness.

Analyzing **secondary data**, including the US Census, American Community Survey, County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, and the Urban Institute's Upward Mobility Framework. These sources provided an overview of population groups and community-level metrics of Ramsey and Washington Counties.

Supporting CAPRW to conduct a **participant survey**, online and on paper, which collected feedback about the needs of Ramsey and Washington Counties residents. CAPRW and The Improve Group collaborated on the protocol design; CAPRW administered the survey and analyzed the results. For the survey protocol, see Appendix A.

Conducted **focus groups and interviews** with community members to gather rich qualitative data from those living with low income in Ramsey and Washington Counties. The Improve Group reviewed inequities in census data of those living in

poverty and identified the following seven focus communities for this needs assessment:

- Hmong community
- Somali community
- African American community
- Native community
- Karen community
- Latino community
- Disability community

The Improve Group worked with seven **community partners** who conducted outreach to participants and organized and facilitated the focus groups in participants' preferred language and setting. Each focus group included participants from a single community.

At the beginning of each focus group, participants completed a short survey to help guide the conversation on community strengths and challenges. For the pre-focus group survey, see Appendix C. Participants made meaning of their discussions in the focus groups, summarizing their community's strengths and challenges and identifying top priorities they heard during the conversation. For the focus group protocol, see Appendix D.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with community members living with disabilities as participants preferred, which was the most responsive data collection method. These interviews followed the same protocol but did not complete the meaning-making portion, as there was no group discussion to summarize.

Conducting **key informant interviews** from sixteen community organizations, service providers, and community leaders provided insights about community strengths, challenges, and opportunities for action. For the interview protocol, see Appendix E.

Community advisors, community partners who facilitated focus groups, and focus group participants were all compensated for their time and expertise.



The following table outlines the number of participants engaged in each data collection type.

Table 2: Community Strengths and Needs Assessment Data Sources

Data Source	Number of Participants
Survey	Total respondents: 866
	Respondents with low income: 295
Community Focus Groups	Hmong community: 13 participants
	Somali community: 8 participants
	African American community: 24 participants
	Native community: 15 participants
	Latino community: 28 participants
	Karen community: 8 participants
Community Interviews	Disability community: 20 participants
Key Informant Interviews	16 organizations

Community Profiles of Ramsey and Washington Counties

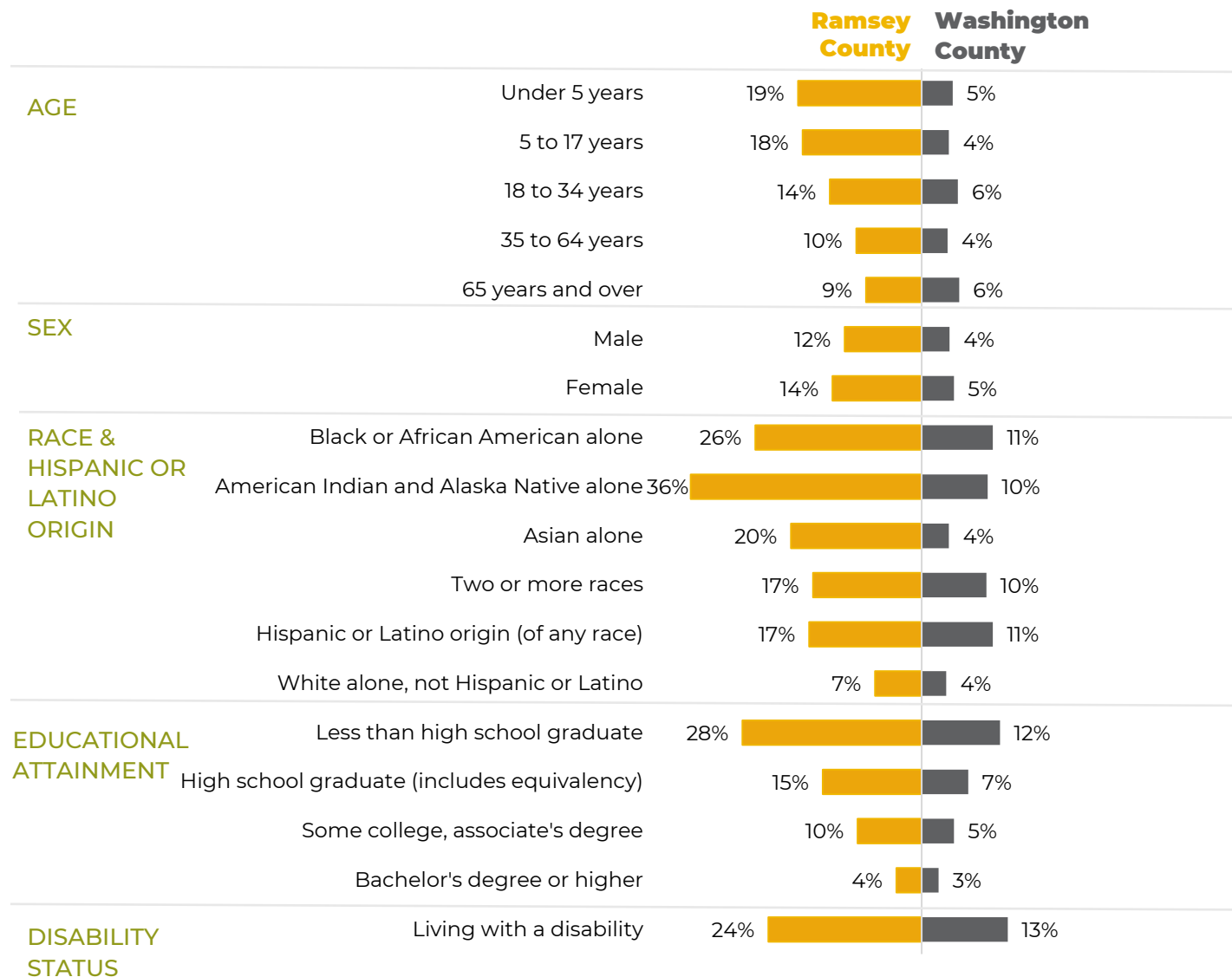
The following community profile overviews population groups living below the poverty level and additional community-level metrics to describe Ramsey and Washington counties. This profile uses publicly accessible data from the [American Community Survey](#), [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps](#), the [Urban Institute's Upward Mobility Framework](#), and [Kids Count Data Center](#) to illustrate conditions that shape opportunities to improve the lives of people struggling to make ends meet. The data is organized based on domains adapted from the [Whole Family Approach](#) from Ascend at the Aspen Institute.

The following pages provide statistics on communities in Ramsey and Washington Counties in various dimensions, including populations living under the poverty level, economic assets, education, social capital, employment, and health.

Population Groups Living Under the Poverty Level by County

Source: 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

	Ramsey County	Washington County
Total population	552,352	267,567
Share of individuals living in poverty	12.9%	4.7%
Share of families living in poverty	8.4%	3.0%



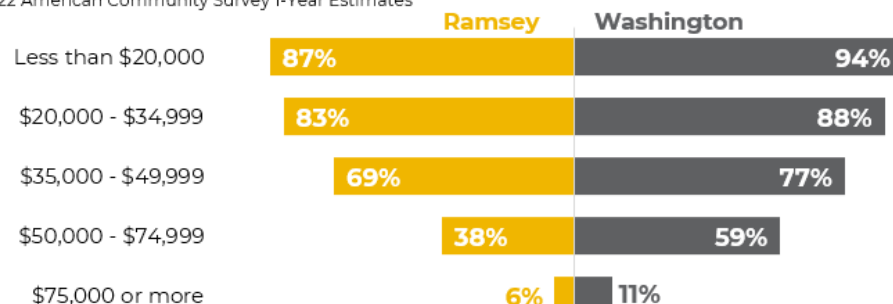
Economic Assets



HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

METRIC: Percentage of households by income level paying 30% or more of their income on housing

Source: 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates



HOUSING STABILITY

METRIC: Number and share of public-school children who are ever homeless during the school year

	Ramsey County	Washington County
Number homeless	815	210
Share homeless	1.2%	0.5%

Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



FINANCIAL SECURITY

METRIC: Share of households with debt collections



Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



ECONOMIC INCLUSION

METRIC: Share of people experiencing poverty who live in a high-poverty neighborhood

4.5% in Ramsey County
0.0% in Washington County

A high-poverty neighborhoods in which over 40% of residents are experiencing poverty

Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



TRANSPORTATION ACCESS

METRIC: Number of public transit trips taken annually

73.5 in Ramsey County
50.1 in Washington County

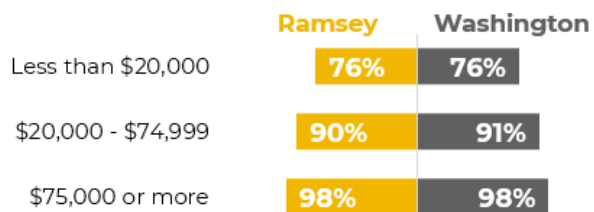
Values range from 0 to 100. Higher scores reflect better access to public transportation.

Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



DIGITAL ACCESS

METRIC: Share of households with broadband access in the home by income levels



Source: 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

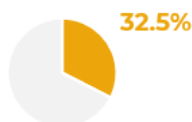
Education



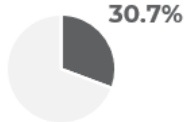
ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL

METRIC: Share of children enrolled in center-based care

Ramsey County



Washington County



Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



PUBLIC EDUCATION

METRIC: Average per grade change in English Language Arts achievement between third and eight grades

1.0 in Ramsey County
0.95 in Washington County

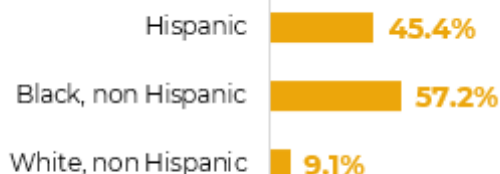
Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



SCHOOL ECONOMIC DIVERSITY

METRIC: Share of students attending high-poverty schools

Ramsey County



Washington County

0%
0%
0%

Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework

This metric is calculated separately for each racial/ethnic group. It indicates the percentage of students attending schools where more than 20% of students are from households earning at or below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level.

In Washington County, no schools meet the high-poverty criteria.



PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE

METRIC: Share of 19- and 20-year-olds with a high school degree



Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework

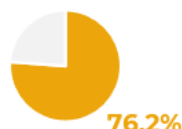
Social Capital



POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

METRIC: Share of voting-age population that voted in the 2020 presidential election

Ramsey County



Washington County



Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY

METRIC: Number of Membership Associations per 10,000 people

11.5 in Ramsey County
7.8 in Washington County

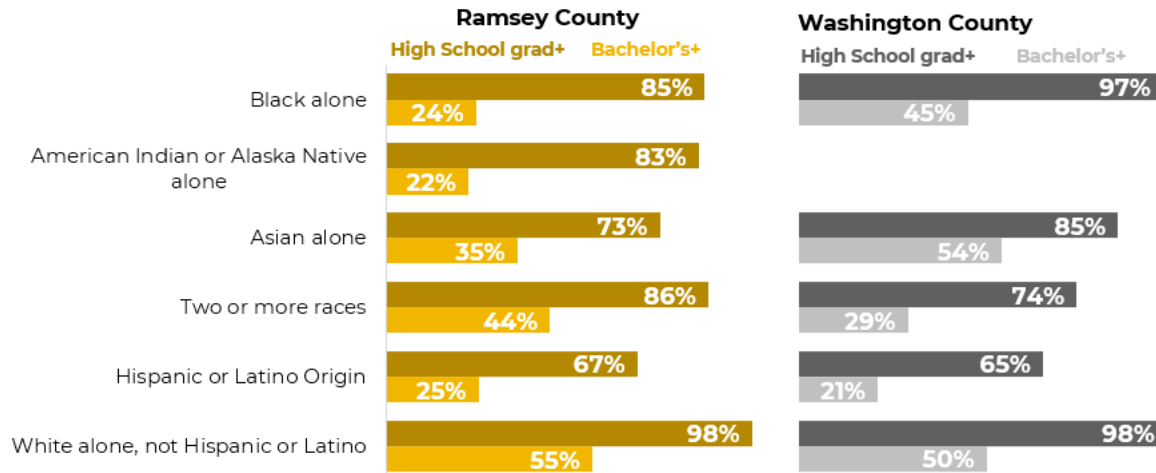
Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework

Employment and Post-Secondary Pathways



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

METRIC: Educational attainment by race and Hispanic or Latino origin



Source: 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates
Data unavailable for American Indian or Alaska Native population living in Washington County



INCOME BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

METRIC: Median income for adults 25 and over with earnings by educational attainment

	Ramsey County	Washington County
Less than high school graduate	\$30,457	\$36,362
High school graduate or equivalency	\$35,520	\$42,962
Some college or associate's degree	\$43,214	\$60,242
Bachelor's degree	\$62,098	\$81,438
Graduate or professional degree	\$78,220	\$90,599

Source: 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates



JOBS PAYING LIVING WAGE

METRIC: Ratio of pay on the average job to the cost of living

0.77 in Ramsey County
0.60 in Washington County

This metric is calculated by dividing the average earnings for a job in an area by the cost of meeting a family of three's (for a 1 adult and 2 child household) basic expenses in that area. Ratio values less than 1 suggest the average job pays less than the cost of living.

Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



INCOME INEQUALITY

METRIC: Ratio of household income at the 80th percentile to income at the 20th percentile

4.5 in Ramsey County
3.7 in Washington County

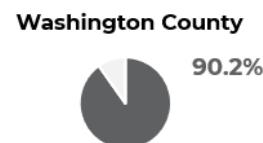
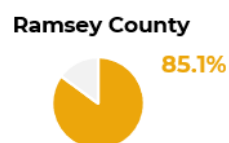
Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

A higher inequality ratio indicates a greater division between the top and bottom ends of the income spectrum



EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

METRIC: Share of adults aged 25-54 who are employed



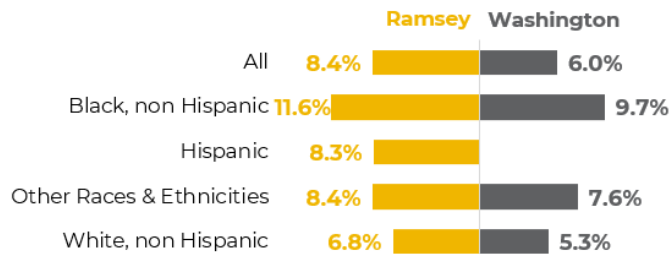
Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework

Health and Mental Health



NEONATAL HEALTH

METRIC: Share of low-weight births

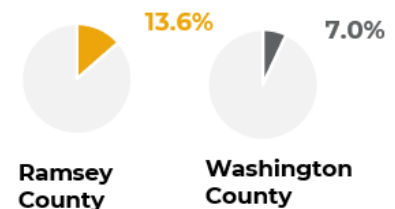


Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework
Data unavailable for Hispanic infants born in Washington County



INADEQUATE PRENATAL CARE

METRIC: Share of births to mothers who received late or inadequate prenatal care



Source: Kids Count Data Center



ACCESS TO PRIMARY CARE PROVIDERS

METRIC: Ratio of population per primary care physician

919 : 1 in Ramsey County
941 : 1 in Washington County

Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS

METRIC: Ratio of population per mental health provider

190 : 1 in Ramsey County
310 : 1 in Washington County

Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps



PREMATURE DEATH

METRIC: Years of potential life lost before age 75 per 100,000

7100 in Ramsey County
4700 in Washington County

Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps



AIR QUALITY

METRIC: Air quality index

7 in Ramsey County
35 in Washington County

0-50 air quality is satisfactory, and air pollution poses little to no risk

Source: Urban Institute Upward Mobility Framework



ACCESS TO RECREATION SPACE

METRIC: Percentage of population with access to parks or recreational facilities for physical activity

100% in Ramsey County
95% in Washington County

Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

Individuals are considered to have access if they reside in a census block within a half mile of a park, reside in a census block within one mile of a recreational facility in an urban area, or reside in a census block within three miles of a recreational facility in a rural area.

Needs Assessment Survey

In collaboration with The Improve Group, CAPRW designed a participant survey to collect feedback about the needs of Ramsey and Washington Counties residents. The survey asked respondents about their areas of highest need, aiming to understand the underlying causes of poverty. The survey was organized based on domains from the [Whole Family Approach](#) from Ascend at the Aspen Institute, which include economic assets, health and wellbeing, employment and postsecondary pathways, early care and education, and social capital.

In its analysis, CAPRW used household income and household size variables to derive a proxy indicator representing families' poverty level. This indicator was specifically developed to align with the dataset and is based on predefined assumptions outlined below. Due to these assumptions and limitations, the findings are not generalizable beyond the scope of this survey. However, the indicator serves as a useful tool to provide an approximate position of families on the poverty scale within the context of this dataset.

A limitation of this survey was the inability to collect precise household income data due to privacy concerns. Instead, the survey asked respondents to report their household income within predefined ranges. During analysis, CAPRW assumed that the household income for each respondent fell at the midpoint of the given range. This assumption introduced a potential source of bias because it may not have fully captured the specific incomes within each range. Despite the limitations, this strategy allowed a consistent approach to estimating income across the dataset.

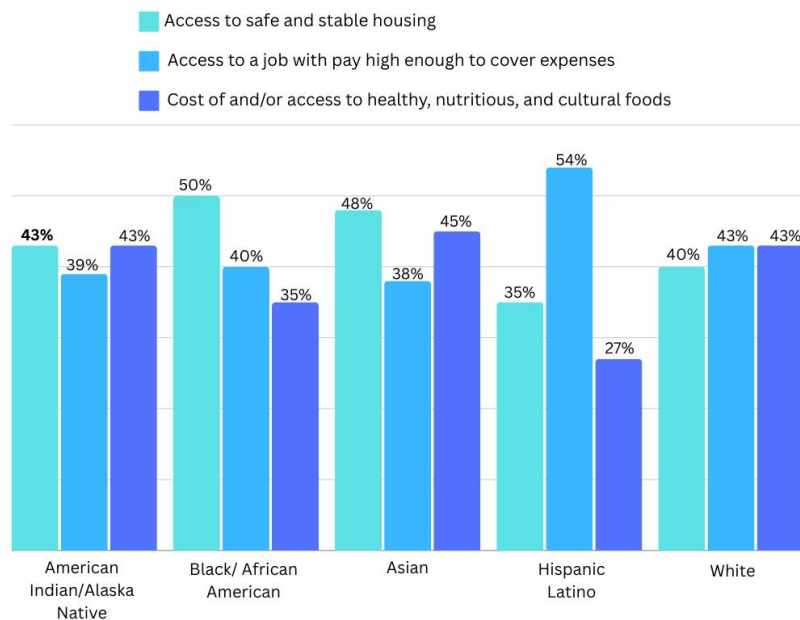


Top Needs of Low-Income Respondents

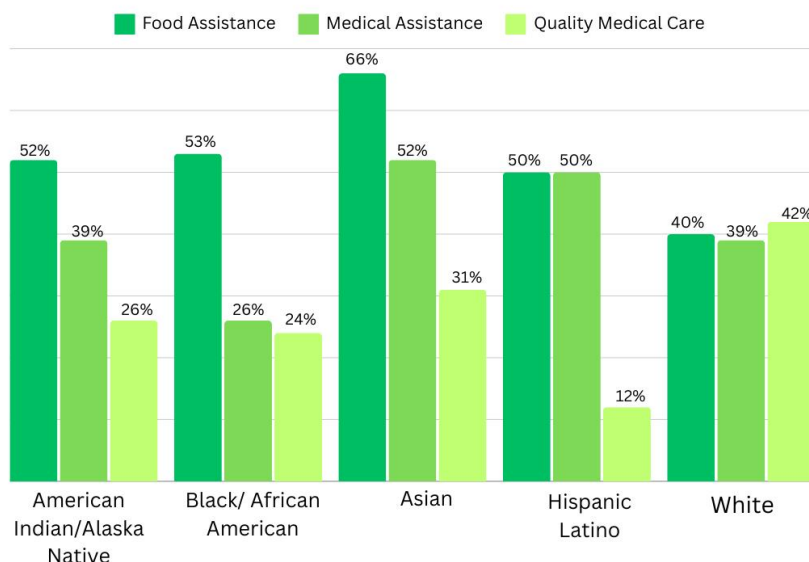
The survey asked respondents to select their households' top three needs in economic assets, health and wellbeing, employment and postsecondary pathways, early care and education, and social capital.

The following charts illustrate the top three needs of 295 low-income respondents by race and ethnicity across each domain. For additional survey data, see Appendix B.

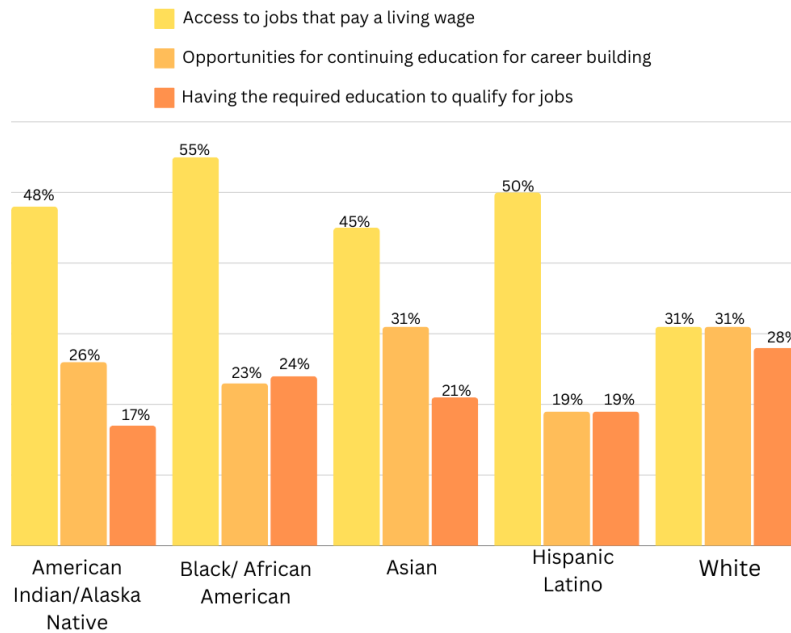
Top 3 Economic Needs of Low Income Respondents in Ramsey and Washington Counties



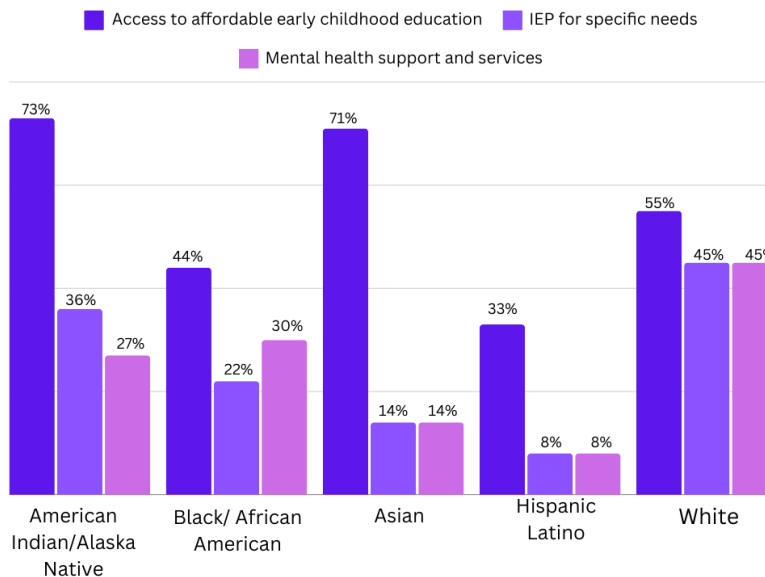
Top 3 Health and Wellbeing Needs of Low Income Respondents in Ramsey and Washington Counties



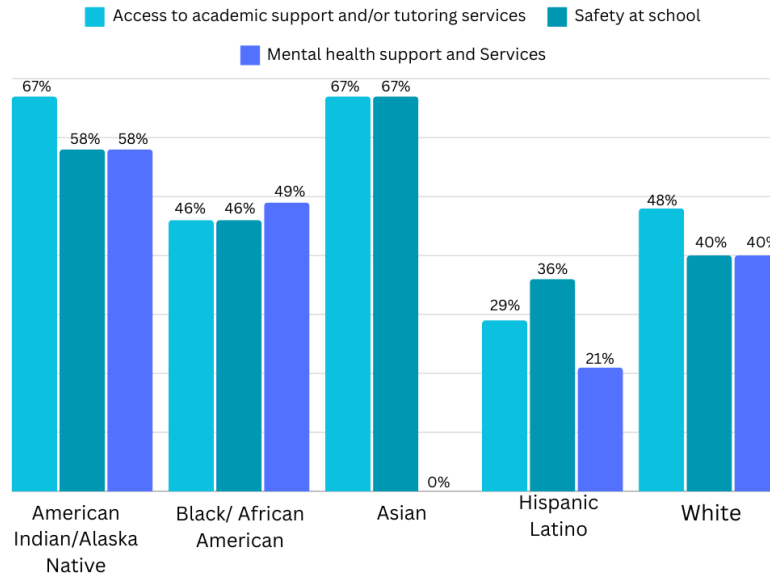
Top 3 Employment Needs of Low Income Respondents in Ramsey and Washington Counties



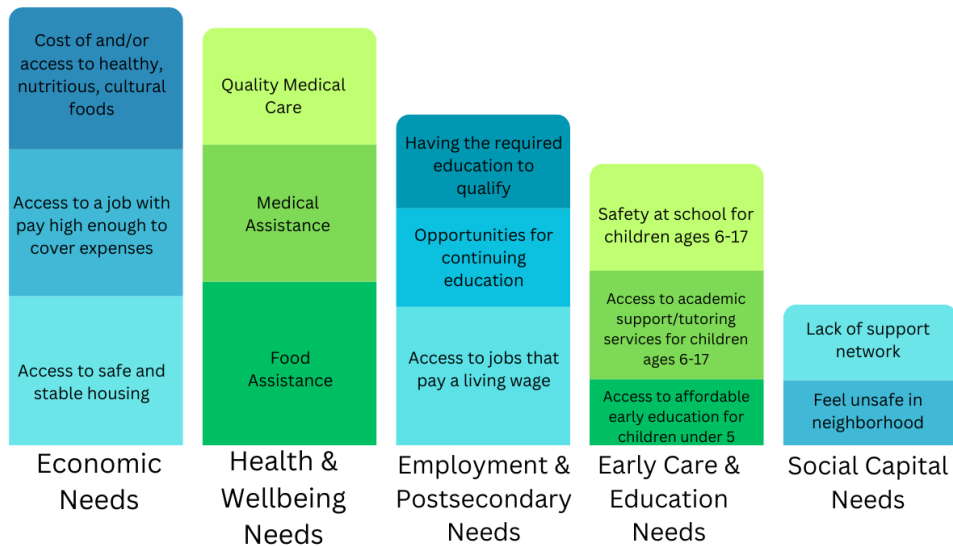
Top 3 Early Care and Education Needs of Low Income Respondents with Children Under 5 in Ramsey and Washington Counties



Top 3 Early Care and Education Needs of Low Income Respondents with Children Ages 6-17 in Ramsey and Washington Counties



Top Needs Identified by Low Income Respondants from Ramsey and Washington Counties by Domain



Community Strengths and Needs

The following section shares the strengths, challenges, and input provided by community members in the focus groups and interviews, as well as the feedback and recommendations from staff of cultural and community organizations. It is important to note that the feedback shared by participants and interviewees is useful in understanding the perspectives and experiences of different groups living in Ramsey and Washington County; however, they cannot be generalized to the entire community or organization. Responses represent the perspectives of participants.

The strengths, needs, and input shared by participants from each of the seven focus communities are presented in this report by each community, and interviews with cultural and community organization staff are presented similarly. The Improve Group has also identified commonalities across communities and interviewees and offers broader recommendations for CAPRW to use in its planning.

CAPRW aims to use community input to identify emergent needs, strengthen its programming, and improve partnerships with the communities it serves, particularly with communities of color.



Engagement with Community Members

This section highlights the community strengths, challenges, needs, and input identified by community members from the seven focus communities.

Hmong Community

Demographics of Participants:

- 10 community members from Ramsey County and 3 from Washington County participated
- Ramsey County participants resided in St. Paul and North St. Paul
- Washington County participants resided in Oakdale, Cottage Grove, and Woodbury
- Ages of participants ranged from 18-54, with the majority aged 25-44
- Majority of participants identified as female
- Participants' average household size was 2.8 (adults and children); most had 1-2 children in their household
- All participants spoke Hmong and English in their household
- Participants' average annual household income before taxes was \$66,000

Strengths

Feeling connected to and supported by their community is a key strength of the Hmong community.

In Ramsey County, the Hmong community has shown great strength in fostering connections and supporting each other. People can easily get to know and support each other; there is a willingness to help each other when needed.

Participants shared that to leverage this strength further, there should be a focus on expanding connections and organizing more community events, workshops, and support groups. Encouraging more leadership roles and formalizing volunteerism can amplify their collective voice and ensure consistent support.

Participants shared that the Hmong community in Washington County takes pride in celebrating their cultural traditions, such as the Hmong New Year, preserving their language, and providing communal support during important life events. Over the past year, they have continued to uphold these traditions through vibrant celebrations and educational initiatives. Expanding language and tradition programs, strengthening support networks, and promoting cultural awareness can further enhance the community's well-being.

Family-provided childcare and eldercare are strengths of the community.

Community members noted that families share caregiving responsibilities, which strengthens family ties and demonstrates their commitment to collective responsibility. Participants shared that grandparents care for grandchildren while parents work, allowing for children to be raised in a culturally rich environment. Families support eldercare by rotating elders' housing among families throughout the year, ensuring elders are cared for in a familiar and loving environment.

Community Challenges

Hmong families lack the information or knowledge about improving educational experiences, navigating post-secondary pathways, and securing well-paying jobs.

Participants noted that there is a lack of information or knowledge about how to improve educational experiences and navigate post-secondary pathways. Students and their families often turn to public schools for guidance; however, participants felt a gap in career advising. In addition, many students may lack social and generational wisdom if their parents did not attend college or were not fully informed about the burden of student loans or how to secure well-paying, equitable jobs. This information gap directly impacts the lives of Hmong students, families, and the community, leaving students underprepared for the job market and exacerbating educational inequities. As a result, the community faces higher unemployment rates or underemployment, which negatively impacts the community's economic growth and overall quality of life.

Income thresholds make resources, assistance, and support inaccessible to some.

The inability to access resources, assistance, or support due to income thresholds is also a key challenge community members cited. Participants shared that income limits for assistance programs must be adjusted to avoid pushing people back into poverty when they earn slightly more than the eligibility threshold. For example, a small pay raise could push a family over the income limit for food assistance, causing them to lose those benefits. This extra financial pressure on families can force them to make difficult choices, such as reducing healthy food spending or skipping meals. Thus, what may seem like a beneficial pay increase can negatively affect families.

Participants identified additional barriers to accessing support services.

Additional barriers to accessing services include a lack of awareness, limited internet access, language barriers, and stigma. Additionally, complicated application processes, transportation issues, and inconsistent information can make it challenging for families to find and utilize available help.

Opportunities for Improvement

Participants identified the following key areas for growth:

Improved support for educators to provide quality education and career guidance to students is needed.

Community members recommended that the **application processes for government services be reformed to eliminate application barriers**, including for those who are incorrectly deemed to make too much to qualify. Example improvements included adjusting income thresholds and creating more flexible qualification criteria.

Participants reflected on the importance of job training programs to advance their careers and improve their livelihoods. **Clear, reliable information about programs and resources for employment training** would be impactful.

Community members reported **barriers for low-income people to learn about and access resources**. Participants recommended creating a central website and local centers with clear, up-to-date information, launching outreach programs to raise awareness, simplifying the application process for assistance, improving transportation to services, and building community support networks.

Additional Community Input for Service Providers and Funders

Community members provided additional input on ways service providers and funders can best support the low-income Hmong community.

Participants shared additional input to help low-income families. Community members emphasized that adjusting income limits for assistance programs is critical to avoid pushing people back into poverty when they earn slightly more than the eligibility threshold. They shared that implementing gradual benefit reductions rather than abrupt cutoffs would support people as they work toward financial stability rather than penalize progress. Additionally, participants would like it to be easier to find and access resources. Suggested improvements included a central website with timely information, outreach programs to raise awareness about services, simplifying the application process for assistance, improved transportation to services, and building community support networks. Participants felt these steps would help people get what they need more quickly and easily.

Somali Community

Demographics of Participants

- 8 community members from Ramsey County participated
- All participants resided in St. Paul
- Ages of participants ranged from 18-65+, with the majority aged 35-54
- Participants' average household size was 7.7 (adults and children), with an average of 5 children per household
- All participants primarily spoke Somali in their household
- Participants' average annual household income before taxes was \$41,000

Community Strengths

Access to support from government programs is a strength.

Participants named accessibility to support from government programs, including financial or disability benefits, food support, housing, and rental assistance, as a key strength. The strength of government programs lies in their ability to provide a safety net for families facing financial instability. For many community members, these programs are not just a temporary relief but a fundamental component of their daily survival. When a family can rely on food stamps to ensure their children are fed or receive medical insurance to cover necessary healthcare, it reduces the overwhelming stress of living in poverty. The support also enables families to focus on long-term goals and prevent severe hardship during times of crisis.

Faith-based organizations support Somali participants.

The support from faith-based organizations is invaluable due to their tailored approach to meeting specific cultural, religious, and social needs. These organizations offer emotional support, spiritual guidance, and a sense of belonging crucial for mental and emotional well-being. They also step in where government programs fall short and may be less intimidating to some community members. For example, during religious observances such as Ramadan, faith-based organizations organize food drives that ensure families have enough to eat while observing their religious practices. This type of support is not just about providing food; it is about maintaining the dignity and cultural identity of the community. During the pandemic, faith-based organizations actively addressed challenges by providing essential services and mental health support and advocating for community needs.

Reliable childcare for their children and elders is a strength of the community.

Additionally, community members shared that access to reliable childcare and eldercare services is essential for families and is a strength in the community. It allows parents to work and pursue education while ensuring the well-being of their children and elderly relatives. These services also contribute to the overall well-being of the

community. Quality childcare benefits children's development, while proper eldercare reduces the burden on families and the healthcare system.

Community Challenges

Participants struggle to access well-paying that meet basic needs.

The inability to access well-paying jobs to meet basic needs is a challenge and profoundly impacts individuals' and families' lives. It leads to constant struggle, resulting in financial insecurity, limited opportunities for children, negative mental and physical health outcomes, and limited housing options.

Access to affordable, stable, and safe housing is lacking.

Community members shared that they lack access to affordable, stable, and safe housing. High rent prices and the inability to buy a home mean they are forced to live in less desirable conditions. The high rent costs mean they have little left over for other necessities. Their homes do not feel safe due to crime in their neighborhoods and poorly maintained buildings. For example, one participant noted that their landlord is slow to address issues, including mold, which exacerbates their children's asthma, and an unreliable heating system, making winters difficult and dangerous. The stress of living in an unsafe environment also affects participants' mental health, leading to feelings of anxiety and fear that can have long-term consequences.

Participants shared concerns about neighborhood safety.

Participants are concerned about neighborhood safety due to community violence and lack of law enforcement. Participants feel vulnerable and unsafe in their homes, sharing fears of burglaries, assaults, and drug-related activities. Community members also had concerns about a lack of a prompt and effective response from law enforcement, which exacerbated their fears and created a sense of helplessness. These concerns have not only affected their own families, limiting their children's ability to play outside but have also impacted their ability to build a sense of community. Participants shared that they are reluctant to leave their homes or interact with neighbors, making it difficult to create support networks.

Opportunities for Improvement

Participants identified the following areas for growth:

To better **access government services**, participants shared that coverage should be expanded to include more families on the borderline of eligibility. In addition, the application process needs to be simplified, and participants would like to see more outreach and education about the availability of resources within the community.

Building stronger partnerships between community and faith-based organizations and government agencies is essential to provide comprehensive support.

Government agencies can provide funding and resources to these organizations, increase community involvement through volunteerism, and improve visibility and outreach to ensure people can access their services.

Participants also discussed how to **expand and ensure affordable childcare and eldercare services**. They discussed increasing the number of facilities, providing financial assistance for low-income families, and enhancing the quality of services through better training and standards. Raising awareness in non-English-speaking communities can help more families access these services.

Additional Community Input for Service Providers and Funders

Community members provided additional input on ways service providers and funders can best support the low-income Somali community.

Participants shared there is a lack of outreach to the Somali community to understand their challenges. They also noted that they rarely see themselves represented by those who work at county and government agencies and thus do not feel represented. Lastly, participants noted that there are language barriers because information about resources is primarily in English, greatly inhibiting their access to essential services.

African American Community

Demographics of Participants

- 16 community members from Ramsey County and 8 from Washington County participated
- All Ramsey County participants resided in St. Paul
- Washington County participants resided in Woodbury, Stillwater, Oakdale, Cottage Grove, and Forest Lake
- Ages of participants ranged from 18-64
- Half of participants identified as female and half as male
- Participants' average household size was 3.0 (adults and children); half of participants did not have children, and half had 1-2 in their household
- All participants primarily spoke English in their household
- Participants' average annual household income before taxes was \$48,000

Community Strengths

The ability to access transportation is a community strength.

Participants in the focus group discussed getting to where they needed to go in their day-to-day lives and to necessary events like community gatherings and doctors' appointments. Almost everyone in the group owned a car. However, many shared that they used other transportation methods when it was more practical. For example, the cost of gas was brought up as a reason someone would take public transportation instead of driving their own car. A strong transit system, including the Metro Green Line, offers community members access to transportation. Others have leaned on scooter rentals, Metro Mobility, Community Access for Disability Inclusion (CADi), waived paid transportation, and carpooling. Many available transportation

resources depend on eligibility for other programming like medical assistance or CADI waivers. However, the group members noted that these resources are unavailable to everyone.

During the African American focus group in Washington County, most participants selected access to reliable transportation as a critical community strength, emphasizing its role in providing access to employment, healthcare, education, and community events. For instance, several participants highlighted the importance of dependable bus routes in reaching jobs and medical appointments that would otherwise be inaccessible. Carpool systems within churches and ride-sharing services were also noted as essential, particularly for elders and those working late shifts. Many participants eagerly anticipate the upcoming St. Paul/Woodbury Gold Line, which will make transportation to jobs in Saint Paul more accessible, further enhancing their employment opportunities. Some participants felt stable in their transportation options; others expressed significant concerns. Parents near Forest Lake, for example, shared their frustration over a recent school bus driver strike, which left them scrambling for alternatives.

Creative approaches to transportation demonstrate African American suburban community strength.

Participants suggested creating a “community mobility partnership” with African American residents from Ramsey County suburban areas. This board or partnership could work with local transportation authorities to address specific needs, such as improving bus routes to job centers and schools. While some thought this idea might be ambitious, everyone was excited about the potential. They were enthusiastic about having such a community resource and would be happy to support and use it if it came to life.

Community members can access healthcare services, including physical, mental, and behavioral health (such as substance use) or disability resources.

All participants in one of the Ramsey County focus groups had health insurance and felt they could care for their health and access the available resources for support with healthcare. One participant brought up that while he was incarcerated, his healthcare was severely neglected, and once he was released, he was able to access health insurance and address health issues with the help of an advocate appointed to him. People shared that they were able to have surgeries that they needed, including follow-up care like physical therapy. The benefits of free clinics like the Public Health Center at 555 Cedar, urgent care, and Minute Clinics within the community were considered a strength. Outpatient treatment was made available for those on their way to recovery from substance abuse. People reflected that they could connect with therapists for their mental health.

Participants discussed who has and who does not have access to medical resources due to eligibility requirements and being able to navigate the system. Community members talked about the high workloads of county workers, making it difficult to

reach someone when they had questions about the process and that they may or may not hear back from someone. It was stated that you are more likely to reach your caseworker's supervisor than your caseworker. People who are layering insurance brought up the prohibitive cost of premiums. There was also discussion about therapists being in and out of their healthcare provider's networks, making them, at times, hard to access.

Community members appreciate that there are places they can go to spend time with and feel supported by others in their community.

For community members, living life during the pandemic highlighted how important it is for the African American community to come together. Experiences during that time underlined that having spaces community members can access to gather is not always available and is not to be taken for granted. People shared that costs can be a barrier since all community spaces are not free, and everyone who needs space cannot always access it. Participants discussed the need for even more spaces so their communities can get together.

Community members reported feeling safe at home and viewed that as a community strength.

Focus group participants felt that everyone should feel safe in their home, that it is a basic human need, and that the barriers people face should be addressed. Participants discussed how feeling safe at home shows up in many ways and how "safe" can mean different things. Feeling safe at home contributes to mental health and overall quality of life. For example, one participant talked about feeling safe due to the location of where they live now. Another brought up safety because their current property owner/manager handles any issues that can cause health-related problems like mold.

Homes that were in proximity to bars and similar atmospheres while participants were working on their sobriety were mentioned as unsafe environments that they had to get away from. Moving to an area with less temptation is safer for those on the road to recovery. Home safety was also tied to participants' physical abilities due to their health and age. They felt safe because they felt they could defend themselves. It was also highlighted that leading a peaceful life helps you deter trouble and keep it from your home in most instances.

Community members also discussed how job stability was tied to feeling safe at home. Challenges like being able to afford the rent and the worry and stress that come with that can contribute to feeling insecure and unsafe. Relationships with your neighbors were also discussed as contributing to a sense of safety.

Accessing job training and professional development resources is a community strength.

Participants have utilized programs available for higher education, certification, job placement, and professional equipment support. College Possible and Summit Academy were explicitly named community assets that help people access educational and vocational opportunities. Access to the training also gives community members access to jobs that provide livable wages and benefit packages. Although these programs are available, they are not always accessible. People experiencing homelessness do not have a permanent address or access to the internet or computers. Additionally, reliable transportation is not afforded to everyone. Some training takes a lot of time, and if someone needs money right away, it may be unrealistic to train or go to school full-time while trying to pay rent and take care of themselves.

The ability to access jobs with living wages is a strength for the African American community in Washington County.

Participants agreed that having access to well-paying jobs is crucial for Black economic stability and personal well-being. It enables individuals to support their families. For many, a stable income allows them to plan, build savings for emergencies, and experience personal freedoms. Many participants added that, despite having jobs with decent incomes, they still feel their earnings are on the lighter side. Growing up, they did not have the freedom to afford things they wanted, only what they needed. One participant excitedly shared his car-buying experience as a young Black professional. He recounted how his single mother never owned a vehicle and how he had to rely on a rocky bus system in the 2010s. Participants noted that job opportunities could better match their specific qualifications or certifications. One HVAC apprentice participant shared feelings of isolation at his workplace as the only person of color and expressed concern about his potential for advancement. He worried that his youth and lack of representation might limit his ability to 'move up' in the company, highlighting a need for more equitable career advancement opportunities within the workforce.

Many African American participants in Washington County reported successfully securing positions with increased income, which allowed them to improve their quality of life and financial stability. One participant mentioned how their new job with a higher salary enabled them to save for a down payment on a house. They could use their new salary as proof for first-generation homebuyer assistance, making homeownership a reality. Another participant highlighted their ability to invest in further education and professional development courses, which they could afford thanks to their steady income. To leverage the strength of having access to good jobs, members suggested community organizations should set up programs that match people's skills with job opportunities and offer career workshops developing resumes and interview skills. Networking events could help African American community members connect with mentors and build professional relationships. They said it is

important to include mentoring assistance for BIPOC or young Black professionals. There are such networks in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, but they share a bigger need for support in the suburbs where the African American community is less vibrant.

African American community members in Washington County can access safe and affordable housing, even though they are still “othered.”

Discussing life in predominantly white suburbs, participants highlighted that being able to afford safe housing is a significant community strength. They emphasized that having secure, affordable homes provides stability and peace of mind, allowing them to focus on jobs, education, and family without the constant worry of relocation. One participant shared a personal example of moving to a suburban neighborhood and noticing how their presence was sometimes met with uncomfortable stares or assumptions about their background. They said, “Even though I own my home and have a decent job, I still feel like people see me as different. It is like that no matter what I do, I will always be 'othered' in their eyes.” This experience led to a broader discussion about the stereotypical misconceptions many in the group face and the challenge of fully belonging, regardless of where they live.

Participants agreed that safe housing is crucial for raising their children in better environments and providing them with more significant opportunities for success. They also noted that stable housing encourages families to stay in one place, build relationships with their neighbors, and contribute positively to the community. Participants noted that their children have been able to join local sports teams, which has helped them build friendships and feel more connected to the community. Families have participated in local Juneteenth gatherings and events, which have felt increasingly inclusive and welcoming. These activities not only allowed them to celebrate their culture but also helped foster a sense of belonging and pride within the community.

Creating more suburban inclusive spaces and events that actively welcome and celebrate diversity.

Participants suggested organizing more cultural events, like neighborhood block parties or community dinners, which bring people together and allow for greater interaction among residents. Expanding programs that support children's involvement in sports and extracurricular activities would also help to strengthen community bonds. Providing resources and support networks specifically for Black families in predominantly white areas could help address feelings of isolation and build a stronger, more unified community.

Community Challenges

African American community members in Ramsey County cannot access living wage jobs, impacting their ability to access safe, affordable housing.

This is a challenge that participants said shows up when looking for housing and rental qualifications. Most places today require you to make three times the rent to qualify for a place to live. People who do not make three times the rent in wages are automatically disqualified (or discriminated against) and denied access. At the same time, high-paying jobs are not available in the city. Many jobs, in general, are incredibly competitive, and racism plays a role in who is getting hired, which can lead to homelessness or settling for homes of sub-par quality because they are what people can afford. This can lead to hardships, health issues, and stress. This is the start of a domino effect that leads to many other issues: participants have gone to in-patient treatment facilities and, in extreme cases, jail to provide shelter for themselves. The rent increases have resulted in people forfeiting housing because they cannot afford it.

Focus group members reflected that not having enough access to jobs that pay wages that you can afford to live on impacts every area of life. It is the starting point of a ripple effect of barriers and hardship. For African American families, not having enough money creates a cycle that is difficult to escape from. Even with resources available, people can become subject to “the system” and often find themselves victims of discrimination, labeling, institutionalized racism, and classism. Systems are confusing and can be difficult to navigate.

Participants said that criminal backgrounds and the need for certification of traditional education create barriers. Removing trades from the curriculum of high schools meant that many students missed the opportunity for free vocational education, which led to well-paying union jobs. Many participants believe that sharing the correct information can disqualify people from receiving assistance, such as making too much money and not meeting the definition of homelessness, which can disqualify them from affordable housing resources.

Many African American community members report being unable to access healthy food options.

Participants noted that food is getting increasingly expensive, especially after COVID-19, and that inflation makes it hard to cover basic needs, resulting in stress. Participants shared how hard it has been to access affordable, fresh, healthy foods, and “food deserts” were discussed. In Ramsey County, participants shared that several grocery stores have been closing. Some participants shared their struggle with accessing fresh produce, noting that the closest grocery store with healthy options is miles away, making it difficult for them to maintain a balanced diet. They mentioned relying on convenience stores, which often have limited healthy choices, leading to a diet high in processed foods.

One participant shared that their limited budget forces them to rely on less healthy, processed foods, which affects their family's overall health. They noted that this has led to issues like weight gain and health concerns for their kids. Another challenge mentioned was the difficulty in managing food assistance effectively. Some participants find that the assistance is insufficient to cover the cost of healthy food throughout the month. They often must stretch their food budget by purchasing cheaper, less nutritious options, which can lead to an imbalanced diet and exacerbate health problems.

Many participants utilize food distributions and programs to make food more affordable. Although these resources are beneficial, they are not always available. Most food shelves have operation times that make it difficult to reach before all the food is gone.

Affordable housing remains inaccessible to many African American community members in Ramsey County.

Focus group members noted that the rising rent costs and low vacancy rates in housing intersect with low wages and lack of access to professional job training, reducing access to affordable housing. Where one lives impacts where one goes to school and the quality of education one receives in local schools. When people must move because of rental increases, additional costs are incurred because moving to a new place is extremely expensive. Moving into a new rental unit requires thousands of dollars between the first month's rent, security deposit, increased deposits due to credit scoring, movers, and moving trucks.

Overall, participants said that many qualification factors make it extremely difficult to access housing. Background and credit checks are a barrier, even if there is a good rental history. This puts people in a constant state of being at risk, and the associated stress can contribute to physical or mental illness. Additionally, some people are single parents, which adds to the challenges with income and cost of living, and single dads may not be offered as many resources compared to single mothers.

A participant said that they had used an inpatient treatment facility during a time of being unhoused. Additionally, it was learned that if you are in jail or an inpatient treatment facility, you are not considered "homeless" and do not qualify for resources for those who meet their definition of homelessness.

The inability to access reliable transportation is a barrier to success.

Some resources are more challenging to reach without reliable transportation, like job training, school, work, grocery stores, and family and friends. It creates a barrier to accessing available resources. It takes more time to get around, leaving less time to study, rest, care for oneself, work, and spend time with kids. Participants said that public transportation can be violent and dangerous at times.

Law enforcement does not serve and protect African American community members.

Participants reflected that there is a lack of safety in their neighborhoods due to the discriminatory actions of law enforcement. The people supposed to be there to help often cause more harm. This creates challenges of having immediate support in delicate situations that can quickly turn into life-or-death situations. While some people see the police as a helpful resource, for many, they are weaponized and used to exclude people from receiving help or assistance in times of need. Participants shared how events in the past few years have drastically impacted them as far as police brutality and subsequent demonstrations and civil unrest.

African Americans in Washington County do not have a sense of community and belonging.

Participants shared that isolation makes it difficult to find support and resources, leading to increased stress and difficulty managing daily needs. One participant said it is hard to get help when you do not feel like you belong anywhere. This isolation affects African American community members' family well-being because they struggle to find the support they need. Not feeling connected to the community creates several challenges. Participants mentioned that it leads to isolation and makes it difficult to access resources since people often do not know where to find help or feel uncomfortable seeking it out. Racism adds another layer of difficulty, making it hard for individuals to engage fully and feel accepted in white areas.

This sense of disconnection also impacts mental health, increasing stress and limiting opportunities for involvement in local activities. Participants shared that when people do not feel like they are part of the community, it is hard to reach out for help or even know where to go for assistance. It feels like there is no one to turn to, which can be overwhelming. Another participant shared their experience of feeling disconnected, noting that they live in a white suburban area, and it often feels like there is a gap between them and the local resources. The lack of diversity and outreach makes it hard to feel they belong or that the community cares about their needs. Many participants feel a lack of targeted outreach and representation in white areas. One participant mentioned that local service providers often do not cater to their specific needs or reflect the local community's diversity, and outreach is not designed to reach communities of color.

Opportunities for Improvement

Participants identified the following areas for growth:

Service providers need more capacity.

Participants requested an increase in the number of caseworkers so they are not operating over their capacity and leaving people to fall through the cracks. They urged the creation of dedicated departments to work with people to ensure communication is not lost. Participants said there needs to be a change in who is making the decisions, suggesting that leadership should be from people with experience who can understand the nuances of everyday life and struggle. People also expressed the need for homeownership programs to help them get into homeownership, as you cannot own anything and be on assistance.

One-stop-shop for services

Participants also said there are many programs, and it is noticeably clear that one program does not help with everything. Once people find themselves in a position where they need and qualify for assistance, they usually need to be in several different programs offering different services and resources to get everything they need. The amount of time and energy it takes to get themselves into a position to be self-sustaining is overwhelming. Participants suggested that it would be beneficial if services and programs were wraparound, and people could get what they need in a one-stop shop and only have to deal with one caseworker and navigate one system.

Mobile units can help reach people with services.

Focus group members brainstormed that mobile resource units could significantly impact predominantly white suburbs where Black representation is limited. These units could roll into underserved neighborhoods and offer essential services like financial literacy workshops, job skills training, and health education. They could also provide food assistance, housing support, and healthcare information. To make sure these units are genuinely helpful, they should seek to include bilingual support and culturally relevant materials for Black families and other minorities. They could also help build community by hosting or sponsoring events like Juneteenth and Black History Month. This would offer valuable resources and allow people to learn about their diverse neighbors, challenge stereotypes, and create a stronger sense of community. Promoting these units through local media and community leaders and regularly getting feedback for improvements would keep the services effective and relevant in areas lacking diverse representation.

Creating more suburban inclusive spaces and events that actively welcome and celebrate diversity.

Participants suggested organizing more cultural events, like neighborhood block parties or community dinners, which bring people together and allow for greater interaction among residents. Expanding programs that support children's involvement in sports and extracurricular activities would also help to strengthen community bonds. Providing resources and support networks specifically for Black families in predominantly white areas could help address feelings of isolation and build a stronger, more unified community.

Additional Community Input for Service Providers and Funders

Community members provided additional input on ways service providers and funders can best support the low-income African American community.

Quality education is a priority for African American communities.

Focus group members identified other strengths that could be used to improve the community, particularly access to quality education and the powerful sense of resilience within the Black community. They highlighted that quality education is key to empowering their children and ensuring they have the tools to succeed, ultimately benefiting the entire community. Participants suggested advocating for better resources in local schools and creating after-school programs that reflect their culture and history to ensure that children are well supported. They noted that schools' recent "DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) or CRT (critical race theory) issues" were hard to navigate.

Community members want service providers to hire people with lived experience, as they would have peers in leadership positions. For example, at Safezone, youth who age out can be hired in the program. Incorporating this model into other systems would be helpful. They would also recommend incorporating art to mitigate stigmas around the criminalization of young people and people of color, as well as lessen caseloads for workers to make the tasks more manageable, which would benefit program participants.

Lastly, community members would want service providers and funders to know that African American families' needs go beyond just having access to resources, but that those resources need to be culturally sensitive and accessible. Addressing challenges like limited transportation, lack of local support, and community connections is important. What would help is having services that provide both immediate support and long-term community building, like mobile units offering ongoing education and events celebrating culture. Community members want organizations to create platforms for families to share their needs directly, and this would make services more effective and relevant.

Native Community

Demographics of Participants

- 8 community members from Ramsey County and 7 from Washington County participated
- Ramsey County participants resided in St. Paul and Maplewood
- Washington County participants resided in White Bear Lake, Woodbury, Afton, St. Paul Park, and Oakdale
- Ages of participants ranged from 18 to over 65, with the majority aged 25-44
- Majority of participants identified as female
- Participants' average household size was 3.4 (adults and children); half of participants had 1-2 children, and one-third had no children in their household
- Majority of participants primarily spoke English in their household
- Participants' average annual household income before taxes was \$46,000

Community Strengths

The ability to access government assistance while fearful of stereotypes.

Native American participants in the Ramsey County focus group felt that accessing government programs is a significant community-based strength, with many appreciating culturally relevant services, trauma-informed care, and the convenience of organizations offering free internet, cell phone services, and voter registration on the spot. During the focus group, participants emphasized that access to government programs like SNAP, disability assistance, and housing aid is a strength. One participant highlighted that these programs provide essential support, helping individuals and families meet their basic needs and allowing them to focus on cultural preservation, education, and community engagement. Another participant shared that when someone in the community successfully navigates these programs, it strengthens the collective knowledge base. They pointed out that those who have undergone the application process can assist others, reducing barriers and fostering a culture of mutual support. This guidance helps others access assistance more easily. One participant strongly expressed that they feel owed these forms of assistance as the bare minimum for growing up and living in an assimilated world, where navigating systems is inherently more difficult for Native people. They said, "We have had to adapt to a world that was not made for us, and the least they can do is provide support through these programs."

However, not all participants felt this way; some agreed on the importance of community engagement and access to services but expressed concerns. One participant felt that they did not want their community to be perceived as a "welfare" community, fearing it might reinforce stereotypes about Native and Indigenous peoples.

Cultural events and ceremonies help preserve Native traditions and cultural knowledge.

Participants identified events such as the Central High School Pow Wow, which provided health, diabetes, SNAP, and other culturally connected services that can help preserve Native traditions and knowledge. The Central High School Pow Wow was particularly significant for two participants with children at the school, who highlighted it as a key example of community strength. One participant expressed pride in the growing involvement of young people in cultural revitalization efforts. This is especially important in places like the White Bear Lake School District, which strongly commits to American Indian education and cultural connection. The school district offers dedicated programming and resources to support Native American students and organizes important cultural events like powwows and graduation honoring ceremonies for Native graduates.

Focus group participants appreciated the positive changes they have witnessed in suburban schools regarding Native American representation and support. They highlighted the inclusion of Native American history and culture in the curriculum, the development of culturally competent support systems, and the celebration of Native culture through events like powwows. While recognizing progress, participants emphasized the need for ongoing efforts to support Native American students in suburban schools. One participant stressed the importance of continuous cultural competency training for staff, saying they need teachers who understand their needs and can teach in a culturally relevant way. Another participant called for expanding access to culturally relevant resources.

Native community-based organizations are trusted to deliver culturally relevant and trauma-informed services.

Participants appreciate culturally tailored services and trauma-informed care, leading to greater trust in partnering organizations like the Division of Indian Work and the American Indian Family Center. Expanding culturally relevant services will ensure they meet specific Native American needs and preferences. Participants have emphasized the importance of events and organizations specifically geared toward their needs. Enhancing outreach and engagement through collaborations with trusted organizations like the Division of Indian Work and the American Indian Family Center can effectively reach more community members. Prioritizing trauma-informed care is crucial, with one participant suggesting to “assume trauma” when interacting with community members and recognizing that while residents are managing bills, health, and food, cultural aspects often become an afterthought. Prioritizing cultural needs and balancing the whole person, as represented by the medicine wheel, is essential for Native American communities. This includes mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health. Just as a car needs all four wheels to function properly, a Native American needs all parts of the medicine wheel to feel complete and whole.

Accessing support from community organizations is a significant strength for Native Americans because they provide culturally relevant and tailored assistance that addresses specific needs within the community. Specific organizations like Juel Fairbanks Recovery Services, Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition, the Department of Indian Work, and the American Indian Family Center were named by participants, with over half utilizing their services. Many participants felt confident returning to these organizations or referring other Native community members to them, demonstrating a keen sense of trust and satisfaction. These organizations help bridge gaps in care, offer critical support for issues such as substance recovery and sexual assault, and facilitate access to essential services, all while respecting cultural values and addressing the unique challenges faced by Native Americans. This trust and reliability in community support systems empower individuals and strengthen the community. The participants highlighted the importance of community organizations, especially their role in providing mental health support and essential resources like housing and food. Native organizations provide a solid foundation of support.

In the past year, the strength of accessing support from community organizations has been displayed through the easy access and availability of telehealth appointments, making essential services more accessible. Expanding services to include registered descendants and children of enrolled members beyond just enrolled members has addressed previous concerns about access barriers. This change reflects a broader acceptance of new or 'decolorized' views of Native identity, acknowledging that belonging and blood quantum concepts can be controversial and complex in urban Native communities. Many participants have embraced these inclusive approaches, demonstrating a positive shift toward a more inclusive and accessible support system that strengthens the community. Strengthening partnerships between organizations and local leaders can enhance service effectiveness. Increasing awareness through targeted outreach and supporting culturally relevant programs—such as traditional birthing, classes on fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, and ribbon skirt making—creates a stronger sense of community, especially in areas like Ramsey County, where services are less robust compared to Minneapolis.

Community members are resilient and have adapted to their neighborhoods even when deemed not as safe as other areas.

Many participants said they felt safe but had “acclimated” to their living conditions and assimilated. Many Native Americans in Saint Paul have demonstrated resilience by adapting to their neighborhoods, even if these areas are not the safest. This adaptability has allowed them to navigate their environments with a sense of security, minimizing conflict and blending in with their communities. The ability to identify with their neighbors and build strong community bonds has contributed to a feeling of safety. This resilience and community cohesion have been evident through increased participation in local events and deeper engagement with cultural practices (one participant named a local sweat lodge ceremony she found out from other Ojibwe members in her community). This strength can help the American

Indian community by leveraging the resilience and adaptability of residents. Community members urged efforts that can lead to the creation of programs that further support and enhance their sense of security, such as community-building activities and initiatives addressing local needs. Participants reflected that enhancing neighborhood engagement through events and support networks can strengthen connections among residents, fostering a greater sense of community and additional layers of support.

Two participants in the focus group discussed the importance of feeling safe in their suburban communities as Native Americans. One participant expressed the ongoing impact of historical trauma, noting that it can be challenging to feel truly at home in a setting where they may not have a powerful sense of belonging. The second participant echoed this, highlighting the continued presence of racism and prejudice, even in suburban areas. However, they noted that in the past year, Woodbury and White Bear Lake have taken steps to create safer and more inclusive communities for Native American families and students. Woodbury's school district implemented a new curriculum emphasizing Native American history and culture, while the community center hosted events celebrating Native heritage. White Bear Lake schools have strong partnerships with the local tribes, offering culturally relevant programming, and the community center has hosted workshops and events promoting understanding of Native American history and current issues.

Children feel safe at school, which enhances their learning and growth.

Participants said one community strength is their children feeling safe at school: if children feel secure at school, they are not just learning but thriving and succeeding. Students can then focus on their education and participate in cultural activities without fear, which benefits the entire community. Another participant highlighted that, especially in Native American communities where historical trauma and systemic challenges persist, having a school environment that respects cultural identity and provides a sense of belonging is crucial. They noted that it was not all about academics but that when kids feel safe, it strengthens the bond between families, schools, and the community. Another parent added, "When children feel secure, it breaks the cycle of trauma and helps build a stronger, more resilient community for the future." The sense of safety at school supports the well-being of individual children. It reinforces the community's collective strength by ensuring that the next generation grows up confident and connected to their cultural roots, particularly Ojibwe and Dakota. Parents noted that seeing their traditions respected and integrated into the school environment made their children feel like they truly belonged as Dakota people.

Community Challenges

The inability to access living wage jobs is an ongoing challenge for Native community members.

Participants shared that the inability to access jobs with sufficient income has forced them into precarious living situations, including living in cars, encampments, and hotels while searching for sustainable housing. They expressed feeling unsafe in these conditions, with some fearing sexual assault or even losing their lives. Many of the women in the group spoke about the added fear of becoming part of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) crisis, which led to emotional moments as they recounted spending their entire adulthood in survival mode. While local organizations have provided some assistance, such as one-time rent support or help with utilities, it has not been enough to prevent eviction, especially during harsh Minnesota winters. This financial insecurity has not only strained their physical and mental health but also limited their ability to participate in cultural activities, pass down traditions, and maintain stable family relationships. The overall sentiment was of ongoing hardship and diminishing hope for the future.

Participants reflected that the lack of stable, well-paying jobs limits educational opportunities and perpetuates a cycle of poverty. Participants highlighted the challenge of cultural disconnection, noting that some important ceremonies must be conducted at sacred lodges located four to eight hours away or in Canada. The costs for gas, food, hotels, and other incidentals often prevent them from attending these ceremonies, which are vital for grounding, cleansing, and revitalizing their spiritual, mental, and physical well-being. One participant was particularly vocal about breaking “generational curses,” emphasizing the importance of earning enough to afford a traditional Indigenous diet, including lean meats, wild rice, and vegetables. She reflected on how Indigenous people once had a rich diet, low mortality rates, and no diabetes, stating, “We were never supposed to be like this.” She strongly believed they deserve to be healthy and create new opportunities for their children.

The lack of reliable transportation has a negative impact on community members.

Participants highlighted the significant impact of unreliable transportation on their lives and families. It limits their ability to access essential services like medical care, job opportunities, and educational activities, leading to delays in treatment, job instability, and educational setbacks. Some participants have faced issues with being late to work, which has damaged their employment records and increased anxiety about potentially losing jobs that already do not provide sufficient income. The lack of reliable transportation makes attending important community and cultural events, including ceremonies and funerals, difficult. One participant noted that missing funerals, a recurring challenge in their life, adds to their stress. Additionally, the financial strain of relying on costly alternatives like taxis or ride-sharing services exacerbates the situation, particularly for those living paycheck to paycheck. Four participants described themselves as being in a constant state of survival mode, feeling on edge in every aspect of their lives. This lack of transportation also

contributes to isolation from support networks and reduces opportunities for social interaction, further impacting mental health and overall quality of life. For families, especially those with children or elderly members, the lack of reliable transportation creates additional burdens and limits access to vital resources.

Community members have difficulty accessing education and job training.

The focus group discussed the significant impacts of limited job training and education access in Ramsey County communities. Participants highlighted economic barriers, noting how this lack of access limits employment opportunities and contributes to high unemployment rates and dependency on government assistance, which was noted as a negative perception of Native communities. Participants also shared social challenges, including the connection between education and broader social outcomes such as health and civic engagement, and how these challenges reinforce cycles of poverty, affecting mental health and community “togetherness.” Participants emphasized the importance of education in preserving Native languages and cultural practices and expressed concern that limited access to education hinders cultural revitalization efforts. The generational impact of lack of education was a key topic, as educational disparities often influence children's perceptions and values around education.

The lack of culturally safe and accessible spaces is a barrier to community cohesion and bonding in Washington County.

Participants highlighted the significant need for culturally supportive spaces throughout Washington County. One participant felt isolated in a predominantly non-Native area, noting the lack of places to connect with others who share their cultural background. Another participant voiced concerns about their children losing touch with their heritage, emphasizing the challenge of staying connected without a supportive community space. They also mentioned that outside of events hosted by local schools, there is not much available for cultural enrichment unless they leave the area, which adds to the sense of disconnection. Some participants added that they often have to travel to the Native American Community Clinic in Minneapolis for health services or attend a traditional powwow in Saint Paul to stay connected to their culture and that this constant need to leave their community for culturally relevant resources not only creates challenges but also makes it difficult to build a community within their local area.

One participant pointed out that living in the suburbs often means being cut off from the wider network, making learning about local events and resources harder. Another participant added that while stable housing in the suburbs offers safety, it also means not being as integrated into the community. They noted, “There are pros and cons to living out here, and not being part of a more connected community makes it challenging to access the support and information you need.”

Native community members do not feel supported or embraced by their neighbors in suburban Washington County.

Participants mentioned feeling like they are “walking on eggshells” outside of areas with Native representation, which exacerbates the sense of alienation. Some noted that it becomes challenging to maintain cultural connections and access necessary services without community backing. One participant shared that presenting as Native, whether with his long hair or cultural attire, has led to encountering racial slurs and assumptions, experiences they did not face while working or attending school in the cities. They noted that they had access to community and support services and allies to fall back on in urban areas. This absence of local support in suburban areas heightens their sense of isolation and leaves them without the crucial resources and networks they rely on in the city.

Isolation and loss of community are common to Native people who move to Washington County.

Some participants reported feeling disconnected, navigating everything alone, and missing the support systems that fulfill their needs. Some emphasized that lacking community ties makes accessing resources and maintaining a sense of belonging difficult, which is particularly challenging when trying to preserve cultural identity without local support.

One participant shared that suburban areas often face increased stereotyping. At the same time, another noted that visible symbols of colonization, like certain types of architecture or community landmarks, can be upsetting and make it harder to integrate into the community. They said seeing these symbols makes it feel like they are not welcome. There are constant reminders of why they do not quite fit in.

Opportunities for Improvement

Participants identified the following areas for growth:

Comprehensive public outreach, education, and information sharing.

Native community members said that to improve services to help people with low incomes, the first initiative would be to implement a comprehensive community outreach and education program that includes digital literacy services. Recognizing that some individuals, particularly the elderly and those unfamiliar with technology, may struggle to access online resources, the program would offer training sessions focused on developing digital skills. These sessions would empower participants to navigate the internet safely and access job training, educational resources, and other essential services. The outreach program would include trusted community members who can highlight vetted programs and resources that ensure safe spaces, particularly emphasizing Native child safety. By engaging respected community leaders and elders, the initiative could foster trust and encourage participation, especially among families. These trusted individuals can also serve as mentors, guiding participants toward culturally relevant and supportive resources.

Participants also recommended the creation of a network of community liaisons who are Native American and trusted members of their communities. These liaisons would work with local businesses, schools, and institutions to connect Native individuals with job opportunities, internships, and educational programs tailored to their skills and interests, as well as those who can educate the community both Native and with the dominant community. They would also help build and maintain long-term, sustained relationships between Native organizations and local government agencies, advocating for more inclusive policies and resources. Using these trusted relationships, the network would address gaps in economic and educational opportunities while supporting, preserving, and celebrating Native culture.

Additional Community Input for Service Providers and Funders

Community members provided additional input on ways service providers and funders can best support the low-income Native American community.

Several key changes could make a real difference in addressing the priorities identified by focus group participants, such as implementing enhanced safety measures, establishing neighborhood watch programs, and fostering better collaboration with local law enforcement to help residents feel more secure in their neighborhoods. Creating safe spaces for community gatherings could also encourage engagement and build a sense of belonging. Job creation and support programs tailored to the Native American community's skills and needs are crucial. Partnering with local businesses to develop job opportunities, internships, and apprenticeships would provide meaningful employment, and offering services like resume workshops, interview preparation, and access to job resources could empower individuals to secure better jobs. Establishing a centralized resource hub where community members can easily find information on job training programs, educational opportunities, and support services would be invaluable, and this hub could also host workshops and provide guidance on effectively utilizing these resources. Creating mentorship programs that connect community members with local professionals could provide essential guidance and networking opportunities, helping individuals navigate their job searches and career paths more effectively.

It is crucial to recognize that many Native people rely on strong, intergenerational family networks for support, so any services or programs should consider how they impact these family structures. Increased funding for community-driven initiatives and support for culturally competent outreach efforts would make a significant difference.

Karen Community

Demographics of Participants

- 8 community members from Ramsey County participated
- Participants resided in St. Paul and North St. Paul
- Ages of participants ranged from 18-54, with the majority aged 25-44
- Majority of participants identified as female
- Participants' average household size was 6.0 (adults and children); most had 1-2 children in their household
- All participants primarily spoke Karen in their household
- Participants' average annual household income before taxes was \$39,000

Community Strengths

The regular community gatherings provide mutual support.

Karen community members host events to reinforce a sense of community and provide mutual support. Community members always support each other and help those who need assistance. They have formed different groups to help people resolve problems. Community members gather on weekends for religious activities and traditional cultural events that help community members stay connected.

Community members need affordable spaces to hold cultural events because these events remind community members to help one another and help maintain and promote Karen culture.

There is support from community leaders and organizations within the Karen community.

Karen community members find strength in the fact that they can access support from community and/or faith-based organizations. The community of immigrants has experienced many challenges and barriers. Still, the community is always surrounded by friends, community members, and community leaders to help resolve most of the community's obstacles. Karen religious institutions hold activities that keep the community members connected and host many events throughout the year, and many topics are discussed and shared during the events.

Many community members are eligible for assistance.

As one of the newest immigrant populations in Minnesota, the Karen community has many members whose incomes are lower than many program eligibility guidelines. The community is grateful for assistance and support. Still, sometimes essential services are delayed because some community members do not know how to navigate the support systems and do not know how to apply for assistance. Most adults are first-generation immigrants, and language barriers make system navigation more challenging. Over the years, more community members have

become fluent in English, serving as resources for other community members who cannot read or speak English.

Community Challenges

Karen community members need living wage jobs that sustain families.

Participants talked about the need for affordable jobs with better wages. Community members need language and skills training to access higher-wage jobs. They discussed the need for job training and education opportunities for community members to help develop skills and improve prospects within the community and for better-paying jobs. Community members cannot fulfill all their aspirations because of language barriers, education levels, and lack of job requirements. They noted the lack of connection between the agencies or organizations and Karen community members, resulting in barriers to help or assistance.

Affordable housing is a challenge, and community members cannot access stable and/or affordable housing.

The price of rental housing is constantly increasing disproportionately to income compared to past trends. This stresses families and induces a sense of helplessness as monthly bills become recurring stressors and families struggle with rental housing payments and other bills. Participants in the focus group explained that they have large households with many family members, and it is hard to find affordable housing with enough bedrooms to accommodate their family sizes.

When there is damage, families who own their own homes find that they cannot afford the necessary repairs and maintenance or budget for unforeseen circumstances. One participant mentioned that her air conditioner unit was not functioning in the summer, and when she called for service, she was told that it would cost more than eight thousand dollars to repair it. Her family could not afford the repairs, so they used the fans in the summer.

Community safety is a concern.

Karen community members in the focus group discussed seeing an increase in juveniles using illegal drugs and causing problems in the community. They have stolen cars, damaged property, and caused problems for their parents. Some participants mentioned that their catalytic converters were stolen a few times, and they had difficulty paying for the repairs. Reporting the crimes to the police has not helped, and property crimes keep happening. This impacts community members who cannot go to work when their cars are damaged or stolen. Community members have no idea where to seek help to repair their cars when they are damaged. Some families do not feel safe where they live; they do not have enough funds for repairs or moving.

Opportunities for Improvement

Participants identified the following areas for growth:

Community education and system navigation services are important to Karen community members.

Participants said they need more information about the available assistance they are eligible for, awareness training about public safety, and current issues that impact community members. They said they need assistance navigating through services and systems of support and connections to the right people for various systems for the community to be more successful.

Since the Karen community hosts events, Karen community members would like staff from local government, community organizations, and institutions to attend and share information about their services and how community members can access them.

Additional Community Input for Service Providers and Funders

Karen community members also noted that they would like more education training and opportunities to improve their standard of living.

Latino Community

Demographics of Participants

- 15 community members from Ramsey County and 13 from Washington County participated
- Ramsey County participants resided in St. Paul, Maplewood, White Bear Lake, and New Brighton
- Washington County participants resided in Oakdale, Woodbury, Landfall, and Stillwater
- Ages of participants ranged from 18-64, with the majority aged 25-44
- Two-thirds of participants identified as female; one-third identified as male
- Participants' average household size was 3.4 (adults and children); most had 1-2 children in their household
- Majority of participants primarily spoke Spanish in their household; half also spoke English
- Participants' average annual household income before taxes was \$42,000

Community Strengths

The appreciation and use of outdoor spaces, parks, trails, and outdoor activities are key strengths.

Latino community members appreciate that outdoor activities are cost-effective, and families can grill outdoors, host birthday parties, and provide options for kids' activities instead of being online and on technology all day. Many outdoor activities are free, especially events at local lakes and parks, plus children can play soccer outdoors and get exercise. Events in parks and public spaces are family-friendly, even for pregnant women. Community members said outdoor activities help them stay healthy, meet others, and form a community. Participants believe that outdoor activities support both mental and physical health.

The outdoor physical spaces cited by community members are appreciated, including parks, trails, community centers, and public spaces that host events such as movies, music, group sporting events, and other cultural celebrations. Some community members said they came from places in Mexico with concrete and fake grass and appreciated the abundance of green spaces in Minnesota.

Diversity is an asset.

Another strength cited by community members was the diversity, especially in Ramsey County. The presence of Hmong, Somali, Ecuadorian, Nicaraguan, and Mexican families is seen as an indicator of a welcoming community. Latino community members appreciate seeing people from diverse cultures together and sharing spaces. They said sometimes they feel like communities self-isolate within their groups, but it is wonderful that there are places where all communities come together in shared spaces. They wished communities could create safer places where everyone could get along and get to know each other. Many participants said they enjoyed the diversity of food options and appreciated that they were not the only immigrants or people of color. They shared some cultural differences but stated that overall, they felt positive as diversity indicates openness to immigrant communities. They would like ways for immigrant communities to support each other.

Support from faith-based and other community organizations strengthens the community.

Latino community members appreciate the number of community and faith-based (churches typically) organizations offering support for Latinos. Though the focus group participants agreed that there were resources in Ramsey County, they felt these resources were poorly advertised and inaccessible for people who did not know how to navigate various locations and were new to the Twin Cities. These resources are valued as they help families during tough times, financial struggles, or emergencies. Also appreciated are many resources from community-based and church organizations that do not require citizenship or much paperwork. Diet and culture are important, so organizations like Neighborhood House and Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio (CLUES) with the Canasta food distribution program are

valued as they offer foods that Latino community members can eat, such as tortillas, corn, and beans, and ensure better nutrition since family members know how to incorporate them in meals. Other food shelves help, but their offerings are not always in line with specific cultures. Participants especially appreciated the food support during the pandemic and free food and school lunches for students. Food distribution programs reduce stress and anxiety from an inability to meet basic needs for families, but participants regret that many community members are unaware of available community resources. Information is usually communicated through community networks such as friends, family, neighbors, case workers, therapists, doctors, social workers, schoolteachers and staff, and church leaders.

Some community members in Washington County reported that they value community centers' resource information and programming that supports families, such as monthly presentations with new speakers every time addressing mental health, finances, government resources, community-based food support, youth activities, and other connections.

Community safety is a major concern in the community.

Members outside the City of St. Paul felt safe in their neighborhoods and community and comforted by constant police presence. The participants who felt safe in their neighborhoods felt that moving to places like Ramsey and New Brighton helped alleviate concerns about break-ins, car thefts, and property crimes. They reported that feeling safe reduced stress and helped increase community engagement with neighbors.

Community members in Washington County reported feeling safer there after moving from Ramsey and Hennepin Counties due to safety concerns and community violence. They said Washington County seemed safer and calmer, even when walking in their neighborhood in the evening. Members used words like “calm,” “quiet,” “clean,” and “safe” when describing their neighborhoods in Washington County. Again, they shared that the stress from feeling unsafe has negative health effects. They did acknowledge the loss of diversity and sacrifice of community, with the trade-off being the feeling of physical safety and their kids being able to be in outdoor spaces safely. Participants reported that even if they were mostly among people who did not look like themselves, good realtors helped them navigate their move, and good neighbors helped.

Latino community members' concept of safety also extended to winter road conditions. The focus group attendees agreed that Washington County does a decent job keeping the roads clean and plowed in the winter. Regardless of whether participants were in or close to big cities like Woodbury or more rural locations, they said they rarely had to worry about road conditions in winter and felt safer.

Communication by local government is important.

The participants shared that, for instance, the mayor of Woodbury communicates well via social media, and they can easily follow local community updates. They cited faster police response times in Washington County and social media communications by the Woodbury police, including communications via social media sites like Nextdoor. Community members appreciate programs for kids publicized on social media platforms and cultural and social events. They found communications on platforms such as TikTok and Facebook understandable and easy to follow, and they got updates on what was going on in parts of Washington County but not everywhere. Participants liked that the police are engaged with the community and communicate notable events, emergencies, or updates in general.

Community Challenges

Interpretation services are poorly funded and inaccessible for some.

Participants noted that when community members who speak Spanish apply for services from their home counties or community-based agencies, they must fill out lots of paperwork required to determine eligibility and cannot access services due to the lack of interpreters. They are sometimes denied services due to their paperwork not being filled out correctly. This is also the case when navigating medical services. When available, some community members said the interpreter phone services sometimes do not do a respectable job, especially when trying to navigate medical terms that doctors who do not speak Spanish cannot explain to patients. As a result, Latino community members trust only Latino-based community agencies due to language and cultural affiliation and get better services from those agencies.

The lack of interpreters also impacts the educational experience of children who do not speak English, as school districts are not adequately staffed with interpreters. Some parents shared that their children must interpret for new Spanish-speaking students, which was stressful and exhausting. Parents reported negative school experiences if their children went to schools without a diverse student body and did not speak English due to teachers saying negative statements about them. In addition, parents reported that Advanced Placement (AP) classes were not offered at the same level to Latino students unless the parents advocated for the placement. Teachers assume all parents know they are supposed to be engaged and push for resources and opportunities for their children. In one school district, a parent shared that there was only one interpreter for seven schools. Most participants felt racism was still creating barriers to accessing information, resources, and assistance in schools and with specific county programs.

Eligibility guidelines penalize families for small increases in income.

Community members also expressed frustration with income guidelines that benefit very low-income families but not lower-middle-class ones, who barely make ends meet and sometimes need assistance.

Lack of community safety due to law enforcement racial profiling.

Participants reported feeling unsafe due to racial profiling and harassment in their neighborhoods by law enforcement in St. Paul. Some community members reported racist experiences with rude, aggressive behavior. During traffic stops that traumatized their children, some community members said they do not drive as a result, and one person shared that their older children do not drive out of fear. Some male community members on the west side of St. Paul reported being profiled by police, stopped in “routine” checks, and had negative and racist experiences, getting ticketed for asking for reasons they were pulled over, including requests for documentation. They shared they did not feel safe, and one person was asked for documentation to prove they were in the country illegally and had to produce their Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) permit.

Safety concerns were multi-faceted, with participants in St. Paul naming different ways they felt unsafe. Some participants reported a lack of safety in their neighborhoods. Some reported commotion in their neighborhoods all the time in every corner. The streets feel unorganized, and they do not always feel safe. As a result, those participants reported being stressed, not being comfortable walking around their neighborhood, feeling unsafe driving due to carjackings, and ultimately feeling that their hard-earned possessions and property were at stake.

Lack of reliable transportation is a challenge for low-income families without a car in Washington County.

Focus group participants noted that people without cars cannot access reliable transportation in Washington County. Because of how suburbs are planned, everything seems far away and requires a car to access. People without cars have difficulty meeting their everyday needs, including groceries, medical appointments, school (outside of high school), and jobs. In the winter, it becomes even more challenging to get around. In addition, people who do not speak English or speak little English have difficulty getting their driver's licenses as they have to pass written tests. The public transit options are limited and unreliable.

Access to healthcare services, particularly culturally appropriate services, is limited.

Focus group participants said they cannot access healthcare and health services, including physical health, mental health, behavioral health (such as substance abuse), or disability services. They reported that there are no support groups or limited support (often with waitlists) for Latinos or Spanish speakers. This negatively impacts the health of community members with chronic diseases such as diabetes or dialysis needs. Community members reported sometimes avoiding going to the doctor for things that later became emergencies. Sometimes, people reported getting referrals, not knowing how to get the services, or following up if no one got back to them. People questioned the healthcare law that promised “healthcare for all” if they must pay for medical costs (deductibles, insurance, medications) that almost take all their

income. Participants questioned the healthcare business model as one geared towards generating profits for providers rather than community health.

Community members who live in the suburbs feel isolated.

Some Latino community members in suburban communities reported not feeling supported by families in their neighborhood and feeling like they would always be treated as outsiders. Focus group participants feel that racism, xenophobia, and stereotypes are rampant in their suburban communities, making it difficult to build a new community. Most people keep to themselves. One family described how their high school freshman daughter opted to camp in Fridley. She needed more diversity and people of color to “relax” because, for the whole year, she felt she had to put on an act and assimilate. One participant shared that there was a movement to stop a mosque from being built in a nearby city, and committees were formed to stop it. They said that though they are not Muslim, they could not imagine how it felt, and this did not help them feel welcomed as brown people.

Latino community members in Washington County said there are no places they can go to spend time with and feel supported by other Latinos. There are no Latino spaces or events. The cultural events are primarily for other cultures, not particularly Latino. They have a challenging time connecting to Latino culture and also having Latino accessible for their children. Their desire to raise multicultural children is undermined by the fact that their children are growing up surrounded and immersed in the predominant culture that is different from their culture at home. Sometimes, assimilation and adaptation become the norm by losing language and cultural practices. Participants felt that suburbs were not as great for lower-income newcomers but that middle-class and affluent English speakers had different experiences. Similarly, people felt that more affluent areas like Woodbury had more resources. Participants said people tend to stay in their circles, making it hard to create a community. If they need or want Latino spaces, they often must go out and seek that outside of Washington County and not in places close to home.

Affordable housing remains a challenge.

Participants said stable and affordable housing is hard to find, and some shared that they must live with extended family to afford decent housing or pool income to try and qualify to buy a house with extended family to afford housing. Two participants shared that they live with family members. Participants said apartments with more than two bedrooms are difficult to find at an affordable price in safe neighborhoods. Some families reported they had moved to less safe areas of town to be able to afford housing. This trade-off has negative impacts on community members' mental health as they must live in fear of crime but cannot afford to keep themselves and their families safe. One homeowner reported being unable to afford repairs but stuck in place due to being on county program waitlists for years, but not having enough money to move elsewhere or easily purchase another home.

Opportunities for Improvement

Participants identified the following areas for growth:

Better public education and information sharing.

Community members want information that is easily accessible, as currently, the way information is shared is not readily accessible. They would like QR codes shared in public areas, apartment lobbies, doctors' offices, laundromats, parent-teacher conferences, and church announcements or places where the public is. They would like doctors to provide information packets with resources regardless of what they think parents know during children's medical appointments. The participants felt the county did not place resource information in helpful places. The burdensome paperwork, lack of interpreters, and lack of trust in information sharing are already barriers to accessing resources. Community members feel that any information they provide may be used against them.

Provide diverse staff.

Latino community members want schools to create more diverse and safer spaces. They want schools to recruit and hire more staff and teachers of color who understand how to serve the community to reduce the education and learning gap. They want children of color to be treated the same as white children when it comes to offering higher/gifted/AP programming. Interpreters are crucial to the learning experience of students who are learning English, and the Latino community would like school districts to have more interpreters in schools and school districts.

Anti-racism initiatives would be helpful.

Latino focus group participants would like racism addressed by counties, community-based providers, and law enforcement to build trust and make services accessible to all.

Communities want agencies to listen to them and be responsive.

Community members appreciate it when local government agencies and community-based service providers listen to them and try to understand their needs and aspirations through surveys, listening sessions, or community gatherings. They want services responsive to community needs and guided by community input.

Additional Community Input for Service Providers and Funders

Community members provided additional input on ways service providers and funders can best support the low-income Latino community.

Latino focus group participants want counties and service providers to find better ways to help people not become dependent on the system, empower people to get off aid and help them be independent advocates for their interests, and, in turn, be able to support others. The community does not want to feel helpless. They want to be able to provide, stand on their feet, and grow in this country as part of the community, but they feel that the country holds them back and then blames them.

They want agencies to reduce barriers to accessing resources and amend policies to help people become more self-sufficient instead of feeding them for a day (El Pan del Dia). Relationships and community are important. It is important to understand that people want more safe spaces so that they do not have to make trade-offs between safety at the sacrifice of cultural communities in Minneapolis and Saint Paul or other areas with stronger Latino presence.

Disability Community

Demographics of Participants

- 16 community members from Ramsey County participated and 4 from Washington County participated
- Ramsey County participants resided in St. Paul
- Washington County participants resided in St. Paul Park, Hugo, Willernie, and Woodbury
- Majority of participants were white
- Ages of participants ranged from 18-64, with the majority aged 25-44
- Majority of participants identified as female; one-quarter identified as a different gender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming
- Participants' average household size was 2.6 (adults and children); most did not have children in their household
- All participants primarily spoke English in their household
- Participants average annual household income before taxes was \$35,000

Community Strengths

Disabled people have access to healthcare services.

People with disabilities described having access to the healthcare services they need as a key strength. Having clinics near their home saves them time traveling to necessary care. They also appreciated disability-related benefits, making healthcare more affordable and accessible (e.g., SSDI, medical assistance, waivers). People with disabilities describe healthcare as being a basic need, and having access to healthcare is required for maintaining a baseline quality of life. In addition to personal healthcare, people shared how community health programs, like peer support groups and workshops, support them in maintaining their health and connecting with other community members.

Disabled people feel relatively safe where they live.

People with disabilities said they generally feel safe where they live due to building relationships with their neighbors. They feel their neighbors are willing to look out for them and their property. People with disabilities use social media to stay connected to neighbors, share resources, and ask for help. A few people said that responses from law enforcement are often quick when needed.

People with disabilities use multiple types of transportation and appreciate increased options.

Transportation is critical for people with disabilities to access basic needs, like medical appointments and food. Transportation is also critical for helping people participate in social activities. People with disabilities often use different types of transportation depending on their varying needs and tasks, which is why having access to multiple modes of transportation is important to them. In particular, they mentioned Metro Mobility, discounted bus passes, and waivers for rideshares (e.g., Lyft or Uber) as especially useful.

People with disabilities have places they can go to feel connected with others in their community.

People with disabilities described the importance of having places outside their homes to go and feel like they are part of the community. This includes activities, events, and interest-based groups. They describe feeling seen, respected, and included in their communities when going to these places.

Community Challenges

People with disabilities struggle to find accessible employment without risking their disability benefits and, therefore, struggle to maintain financial stability.

People with disabilities must balance the “benefits cliff” related to their disability-related income with the need and/or desire to earn employment-related income. They describe challenges in balancing types of income so as not to put their benefits at risk. Additionally, most jobs will not accommodate the needs related to their disability (e.g., paid sick time, variable schedules to accommodate last-minute health issues, accommodations for chronic pain). For some people, additional incomes are needed to make ends meet. For others, additional income means being able to do “extras” like attending special events, giving birthday/holiday gifts, and generally reducing financial strain.

Finding affordable, healthy food is challenging for people with disabilities.

People with disabilities report challenges with affording food and accessing food, especially if grocery stores and food shelves are located too far away. Lack of access to enough healthy food exacerbates health issues for some disabled people (e.g., managing low blood sugar). Some report skipping meals and worrying about food security adds to stress. Some people reported reduced food benefits when accessing Social Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).

Opportunities for Improvement

Participants identified the following areas for growth:

Continue providing more reliable and varied options for transportation.

Community members with disabilities described how essential transportation is to meeting their basic needs and engaging in their communities. They appreciate the expanded options for transportation yet also emphasize how much additional time it takes to use public transportation. Some described opting out of community or social engagements because reliable transportation wasn't available.

Navigators can help people with disabilities know about and access many different resources.

People with disabilities described how helpful it was to have a disabled friend or peer help them navigate different resources and programs and recommended that this be more available. Navigators with lived experience can provide information about what resources are available and advise on how to use these resources for maximum benefit and/or to avoid the risk of losing benefits.

Commonalities Across Community Workshops

Participant responses shared the following commonalities across communities:

Community Strengths

- **Deep community connectedness.** Community members reported a strong sense of community and connectedness. Participants deeply value safe and recognized cultural spaces and events for their community to gather, celebrate, and cultivate their culture.
- **Trusted cultural community and faith-based organizations.** Participants turn to organizations for culturally relevant material support and resources. These organizations also foster a sense of belonging and cultural identity.
- **Access to government programs and support services.** Many community members are eligible for supportive services that help make ends meet.
- **Suburban neighborhood safety.** Participants who live in suburban neighborhoods feel safe.

Community Challenges

- **Accessibility of services.** Participants reported an inability to access services, resources, and government assistance, highlighting a lack of information about what is available, how to apply a repetitive and confusing application process and inaccessible qualification criteria.
- **Safe, stable, and affordable housing.** Community members shared high rent costs, stagnant wages, low vacancy rates, limited units for large or multi-generational families, and unresponsive landlords, making rental housing inaccessible. Participants who owned homes shared the high cost of maintaining a home is a burden.
- **Employment.** Participants want to access training to secure high-wage jobs.
- **Safety.** Community members fear for their safety in their neighborhoods and are concerned about racial profiling and victimization from law enforcement.
- **Mental health.** Participants are stressed from not making ends meet.
- **Feeling isolated and unaccepted.** In suburban neighborhoods, participants shared that there is a tradeoff: feeling safe from crime or violence, isolated from their cultural community, and unaccepted by their neighbors.
- **Transportation.** Participants want safe, reliable public transit systems with regular bus routes that enable them to navigate their everyday needs. Community members who own cars would like low-cost car maintenance and repair resources.
- **Safe spaces to gather.** Community members want safe spaces to gather for support, a sense of community, and belonging with others in their neighborhoods or people of the same cultural background. Community spaces are, at times, expensive, and free park or outdoor space is not available year-round.

Interviews with Cultural and Community Organization Leaders

The Improve Group interviewed leaders from sixteen community organizations serving the focus communities for this assessment. This section describes community strengths and challenges identified by organizational interviewees that are distinct from those of community members.

Commonalities across Interviews

Service provider interviews shared the following commonalities across organizations.

Key strengths:

- **Network of social service organizations** – a robust network of non-profits, faith-based organizations, and grassroots community groups exists.
 - There is an opportunity for more collaboration between organizations to reduce the administrative burden on individuals and families who seek services from multiple programs.
 - Organizations see collaboratives as one way to better meet community needs, such as “one-stop” events with representatives from multiple programs, without competing for funding.
- **Communities help build social capital** – people rely on social connections to exchange resources, get support, and build relationships.
 - Social support was named as a strength that helps families persevere through economic, social, and health challenges.
 - Information sharing happens through social networks, including referrals to other organizations for resources.
 - Mutual aid has become a more common way for people to meet their needs outside of institutional support systems.
- **Meeting peoples’ multiple basic needs first** – is necessary before they can begin moving out of poverty.
 - People do not have isolated needs; they need stable housing, transportation, food, and basic healthcare before taking advantage of education and job training services that could improve financial stability.
- **Community gatherings and safe third spaces** – are instrumental in connecting people and strengthening cultural assets.
 - Communities develop solutions through grassroots organizing.
 - Several community spaces have opened due to cultural groups identifying the need and collaborating with other organizations to make spaces available.
 - Communities can leverage the strengths of their cultures to meet community needs (e.g., mutual aid)

Challenges:

- **Changes in program funding** – organizations described recent changes in program funding that negatively impact people across communities.

- Pandemic-era funding increases have or will soon run out.
 - Restrictions on how funds are used limit who is eligible for resources.
 - Staff capacity at organizations is threatened.
- **Housing affordability, food security, healthcare, and transportation are critical, interrelated needs not being met** – with additional challenges of navigating multiple resources simultaneously.
 - People struggle with the high cost of living and lack of affordable options for basic needs, resulting in cyclical financial instability.
 - People experience challenges requesting support from multiple organizations and programs.
- **Housing** – there is a significant lack of affordable housing options, with many people living in unsafe or inaccessible housing.
- **Food** – people need more flexible options from food providers, such as increased hours at food shelves and home delivery.
- **Mental health** – people need support accessing culturally relevant mental health services and community education about mental health to reduce stigma.
- **Transportation** – there is a need for both reliable public transportation options and resources to maintain personal transportation, which impacts people's ability to access health services, food, and employment.

"Collaborative work that is functional with community engaged families, and less territorialism, less competition, more unity, with amazing connections help. We saw these collaborations during the pandemic, but afterwards, organizations went back to their silos." - Interviewee

"Having a human centered approach is always a good idea. Data is good...but having a human centered approach so that we know there are real people behind those numbers. Partnerships are great. Multi sector approach is also a good idea. No body comes with just one issue. Whether the issue is housing [or something else], it is impacted by other issues. It is fundamental the voices of the folks who are impacted are at the table where solutions are being created."

- Interviewee

"I think there is a lack of sustainable funding after the pandemic and cliffs due to less resources and deeper needs for people who are low-income. The bounce back post pandemic for people of color is not as strong as in other communities."

- Interviewee

"It goes back to connecting people and people sharing resources with others in the community. It is word of mouth with people sharing resources and being supportive of others. People are resilient, kind, and want to help their neighbors."

- Interviewee

"The social service system is fragmented and does not address root causes and perpetuates intergenerational poverty. We need more holistic community led solutions that are focused on the person or family centered and supports

Opportunities for Action

The following recommendations are based on the needs survey, community member, and cultural and community organization leader feedback. Actions are organized by family-level, agency-level, and community-level, with some actions existing in more than one level.

Family-level

- Provide flexible resources and individualized support, such as “one-stop” shop or mobile solutions.
- Expand support to include families who make just over income eligibility thresholds.
- Increase capacity to support families who do not speak English.
- Increase families’ awareness of resources through timely and accurate information and culturally specific navigators to spread information through word of mouth and trusted relationships. Consider digital literacy and accessibility.
- Connect families to resources not provided by CAPRW.
- Encourage families and individuals to organize and provide input to agencies collectively.

Agency-level

- Provide flexible resources and services to meet the different needs of families and communities.
- Support community members in accessing CAPRW services, government assistance programs, and other resources in culturally responsive ways (e.g., languages other than English, word-of-mouth, navigators).
- Crosstrain CAPRW staff on all CAPRW programs to streamline families’ agency experience.
- Conduct outreach to and develop relationships with community members, including the communities of focus that this assessment engaged.
- Support communities in their need of safe and recognized cultural space and events that foster community connectedness.
- Ask for, listen to, and incorporate family and community input to ensure offerings are responsive to the community.
- Support and collaborate among organizations and service providers, including advocating for policy changes that benefit families and communities.
- Build and deepen relationships and partner with community-based organizations, especially culturally specific and faith-based organizations trusted by community members, to connect families to resources not provided by CAPRW.
- Provide a buffer against funding changes to service providers.

Community-level

In coalition with organizations to solve systemic problems and to improve communities:

- Review and streamline the referral process to leverage the unique strengths of community organizations, minimize service gaps and redundancies, and improve the family experience when accessing services.
- Advocate for increased and more flexible funding in response to the end of COVID-19-19.
- Advocate for policies that improve the lives of families living in poverty, including:
 - Access to job training and living-wage employment
 - Affordable housing that accommodates different family structures (e.g., multigenerational)
 - Public transportation, including bus routes and safety
 - Access to healthy food
 - Neighborhood safety
 - Equitable law enforcement
 - Flexible assistance eligibility to include families who make just above income thresholds
- Partner with suburban cities in Ramsey and Washington County to create and support initiatives to welcome community members, promote inclusiveness, and build a sense of belonging (e.g., Communities of Belonging Initiative in Carver County)