COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES FOR SHELBY COUNTY:

ABRIDGED REPORT

Debra M. McCallum[1]   Erika Steele[1]
Lauren E. Kois[2]   Shelby Hunter[2]

[1]Institute for Social Science Research, [2]Department of Psychology,
University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL

In 2018, Shelby County engaged the services of the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at the University of Alabama to conduct an assessment of the current and anticipated social services needs of the citizens of Shelby County. The project comprised three components: interviews with Shelby County community leaders; interviews and an online survey with directors of key social service agencies serving Shelby County; and a survey of the general adult population of Shelby County. This abridged report presents brief descriptions and summaries of the findings of this assessment. The complete results of the investigation and all project materials are presented in the companion report, *Community Assessment of Social Services for Shelby County.*

Interviews with Community Leaders

Twenty-six key community leaders participated in open-ended interviews to explore their perceptions of the status of social services in Shelby County and their concerns related to meeting the needs of its citizens. These respondents reported growing concerns for children's welfare and safety, as well as increased demand for senior services, as the population of seniors has increased. Another recurring theme was mental health, which has become a pressing issue over recent years. They also identified rising problems with substance use. Regarding criminal justice issues, respondents reported both problems and progress within the last five years, and they cited significant overlap in the increased problems with mental health, substance use, and crime.

Community leaders felt that dedication and commitment to collaboration across agencies and leaders are relative strengths of the county, and that the leadership was particularly good at responding to the needs of the community. In spite of some strong collaborations, a commonly reported issue was a lack of continuity of care for individuals with intellectual disability, mental health, and substance use problems, as well as for those being released from jail or court-mandated alternatives. Although some respondents believe the public is aware of services that are available in the county, citing numerous avenues for disseminating information about the services, quite a few do not believe the public has a good sense of available services. In addition, respondents cited stigma, pride, or other personal reasons as factors that could prevent residents from accessing services. Others identified the location of services and noted that respondents in rural areas were at a particular disadvantage, as well as those with limited transportation.

By far, the most prominent suggestion for how resources could be more useful was to increase public awareness of social service availability and raise their visibility. In addition, de-stigmatization of social service utilization was a commonly offered solution from respondents. Several also suggested creating a "gatekeeper" or clearing house service that could help residents navigate agencies in order to meet all of their needs. The community leaders reported that although there were good partnerships and collaborations across agencies and interests, there was room for improvement in cross-agency communication and collaboration, in terms of planning for services and with respect to funding. Mental health services were the most frequently identified future need for the county, with special emphasis on the overlap of mental

health, substance abuse, and criminal justice issues. Respondents also anticipated the future need for additional preventive and rehabilitative substance abuse services for children and adolescents and the future need for services targeting the growing senior population, especially services related to caretaking.

Interviews and Survey with Service Providers

The service provider component of the project involved two data collection steps: first, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with directors of eighteen key community service agencies; then these directors were asked to complete an online survey in which they indicated the services provided by their agency and utilization of these services. Participants represented a wide range of human services organizations including medical assistance, emergency assistance, mental health care, veterinary care, transportation, conservation and preservation, education, recreation, and a variety of counseling and advice, such as career services. As the population of Shelby county has grown, the agencies have seen increases in the social needs being addressed by their programs. Agencies are adding staff and programs, increasing the number of clients, and adopting technology to address the increasing needs for the services they provide.

Overall, the agency directors felt their agencies were effective at meeting the community's needs. They described their agencies as having professional staff who are passionate about their jobs and the individuals who come to them for help. They felt the public was generally aware of their services, especially if they were in need of them; and the directors listed many ways in which they spread the word about their programs. After acknowledgment of funding limitations, transportation was identified as the primary barrier preventing people from accessing services. In addition to being a barrier to obtaining help, some directors felt the lack of transportation prevented clients from becoming self-sufficient and maintaining employment. Some respondents mentioned stigma, mistrust, and/or denial as reasons that prevented some people from seeking help. Many agency directors acknowledged that inadequate outreach or marketing was an additional barrier that prevented agencies from reaching the public. Some directors expressed the intention to address this issue by increasing their agency's social media presence, improving agency websites, and outreach (e.g., engaging with schools, improving engagement with board of directors).

There are many ways in which agencies work to coordinate their services, both at an organizational level and at the individual case level. Referrals were the most frequent way in which agencies coordinated services for their clientele, but the directors also mentioned numerous partnerships and collaborations for coordinating services. Despite such efforts and attending joint meetings, some directors felt that the planning and coordination of social services could be improved. Several respondents felt it would be helpful to have a platform where agencies could easily communicate agency activities and ideas for which they could use help from other agencies or would like to collaborate, to be more effective and avoid duplicating services in areas that are already being well served. Some respondents felt that better communication among agencies would also improve continuity of care provided through mental health services and programs for other at-risk populations.

In describing the future directions for their agencies, the directors indicate that first and foremost, they anticipate continuing their current programs with the current target populations. Beyond that, they have many ideas of how they would like to grow and develop. Future directions for many of the agencies included expansions and capacity building, such as adding more space and facilities or adding more employees. Both forms of growth would allow them to be more effective in providing their clients with their current services or those they plan to offer in the future. Respondents described a variety of additional programs and services to help address current and future issues in areas of physical resources (e.g., food, housing), community

infrastructure (e.g., transportation, information dissemination), programs for special populations (e.g., seniors, minority groups, people with disabilities), prevention and intervention programs for at-risk populations (e.g., mental health, substance use), and education programs. Another future direction described by agency directors was to improve the way agencies advertise or distribute information about their services through increased social media presence, making agency websites more accessible, and involving churches. Targeting specific populations of people so they can be provided with better services was another way agencies wanted to improve community outreach.

Community Survey

A survey made available to all residents of the county assessed the experiences and opinions of the general population of adults in Shelby County with respect to their needs for social services. People learned of the survey via newspaper advertisements, radio announcements, community news announcements, community newsletters and newspapers, digital marketing, word of mouth, and emails. There were 2,267 surveys completed and included in the analyses for this report.

Following are some of the background characteristics of the survey participants.

In the past year:
- 36% have volunteered time to a non-profit organization in Shelby County, other than a church or school
- 55% have given money to a non-profit organization that serves Shelby County, other than a church or school
- 12% have served on the board of directors or been employed by a non-profit organization in Shelby County, other than a church or school
- 12% have been the primary caregiver for someone 60 years or older
- 41% have been the primary caregiver for a child, 18 years or younger
- 13% have been the primary caregiver for someone with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities

Respondents indicated which of the services on a list of 31 types of programs and social services they or a household member *had used* in the past year, felt they *needed but did not use* or receive in the past year, or felt they *would need* in the next two to three years. They further indicated if the service was used or needed by children and youth, adults, or seniors. The 31 services were grouped into seven loosely defined categories: (1) quality of life, (2) physical resources, (3) mental health services, (4) expertise and professional advice, (5) community infrastructure, (6) positive development programs, and (7) special populations. For each of these categories, a third or more of the survey respondents had used, needed, or expect to need one or more of the services included in the category, indicating a high need for these services. The percentages for each category follow:

- 90% --*quality of life services*, including health and recreation programs, library services, creative and cultural programs, faith-based programs, animal services, and volunteer opportunities
- 52% --*expertise or professional advice programs*, including career services, financial counseling, legal assistance, and parenting education and caregiving programs
- 49% --services related to *community infrastructure*, including resource information, conservation, transportation, and advocacy or outreach
- 47% --*positive development programs*, such as day care programs, education programs, and prevention or intervention programs for at-risk populations

- 41% --*physical resources*, including clothing, food assistance, emergency financial help, shelter and housing
- 40% --services and programs for *special populations* including in-home assisted living services, free or income-based medical care, special needs or adaptive sports facilities or related issues, prevention/intervention programs for survivors of neglect or violence
- 36% --*mental health services*, such as behavioral health care, outpatient services, emergency mental health care, inpatient treatment, and substance abuse treatment.

For each of the following needs or concerns, ten percent or more of survey respondents indicated they had experienced this issue in the past year:

- Trouble with transportation for getting where they needed to go
- Having enough money to pay their bills
- Trouble paying for medications for themselves or family members
- Felt lonely and would like someone to talk with
- Needed help with anxiety, depression, or other psychological problems
- Needed information about services available to residents in Shelby County

Nearly one in five respondents (18%) said they or someone in their household had thought about trying to get help with a need in the past year, but decided against it. Similarly, 17% said they are not able to get all the help they need from local resources to care for themselves and their families. Many barriers were noted by those who decided not to seek help. The top five barriers cited by this group were:

- 37% -- Did not know what was available
- 27% -- Could not afford the service
- 27% -- Thought they were not eligible for the service
- 18% -- Embarrassed
- 16% -- Concerned about the quality of service

Asked where they would look for information to get assistance if they had a need, the top five strategies endorsed by respondents were:

- 60% -- Internet search for local agencies
- 60% -- Ask friends, family, and co-workers
- 38% -- Ask at church
- 21% -- Look on social media
- 18% -- Shelby County government website

In open-ended questions asking respondents about their unmet needs or suggestions for additional services for Shelby County, the ten most frequently identified services were:

- Information about resources
- Transportation
- Recreation facilities and programs, outdoor parks, trails
- Programs for seniors and senior centers
- Mental health education and treatment
- Services and programs for individuals with special needs/disabilities and their caregivers
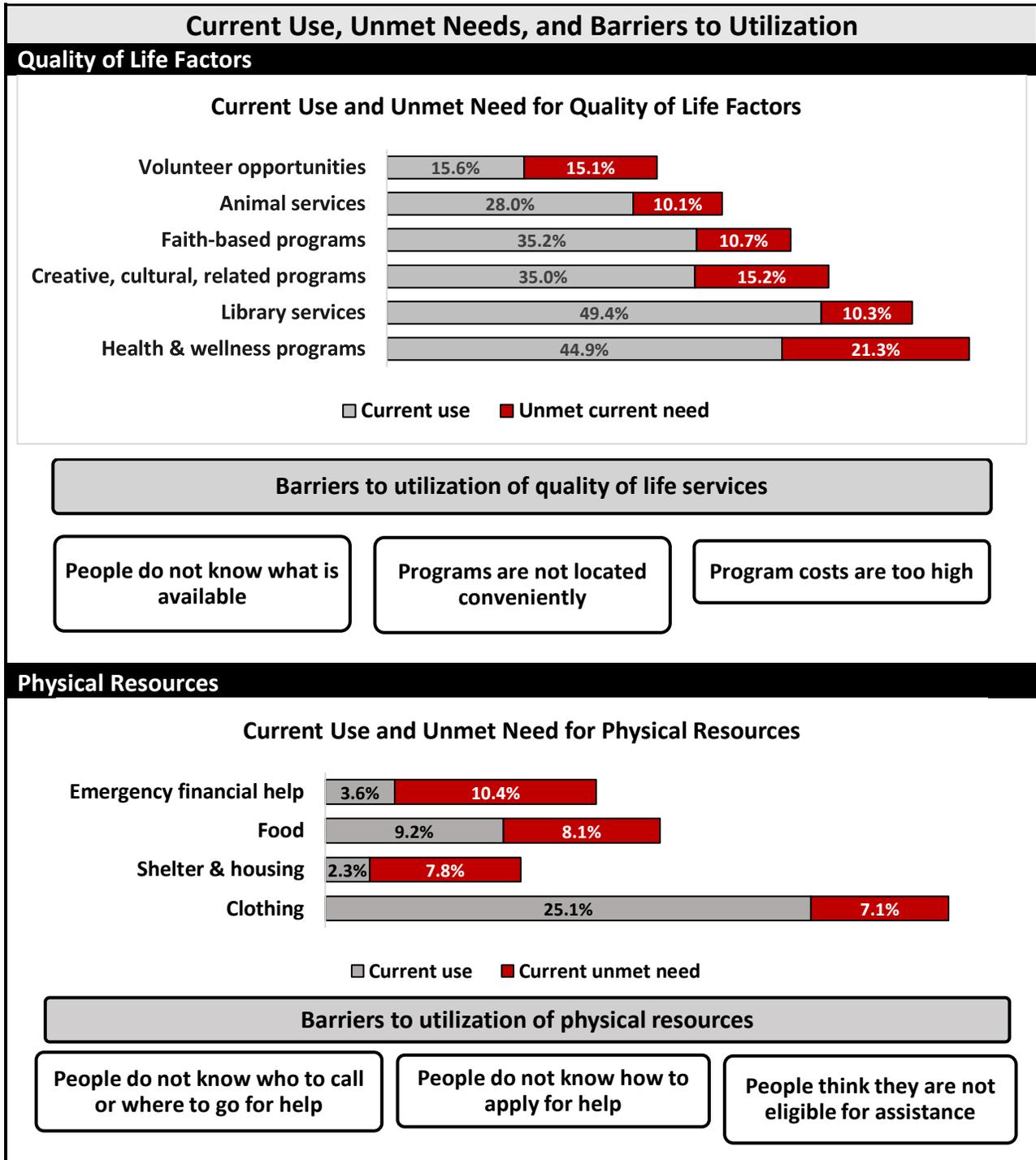- Financial needs

- Home repairs, yard maintenance
- Waste management – trash, recycling
- Health care

Areas of Need and Barriers to Service Utilization

The patterns of use and unmet needs identified in the community survey help identify service areas that appear to have large gaps between current use and stated or anticipated need. These areas may offer fertile ground for considering an increase in capacity of current programs or developing completely new programs. This information is enriched by considering age group comparisons for patterns of use and need, open-ended comments from respondents, information about barriers to use of services, and input from the service providers and community leaders.

Services related to **quality of life** factors were the most frequently used services; however, these areas also had among the largest percentages of unmet need and anticipated need among survey respondents. The residents of Shelby County use all of these services to a substantial degree, and they would like to have even more of them. Primary barriers to use of these resources were lack of information about what is available, services not being located conveniently, and costs for participation in some programs. In the area of **physical resources**, the most frequently used service was clothing through thrift stores or clothes closets. All services in this category had unmet current needs in the community survey, with the largest gaps for shelter/housing and emergency financial help, where unmet need was approximately three times the level of current use. The need for affordable housing was also mentioned by agency directors and community leaders as an important issue for the county. Lack of information about services, how to apply for help, and eligibility requirements were cited as barriers to receiving assistance in the area of physical resources. The most frequently used and needed of the **mental health care services** was behavioral health care, with somewhat lower levels of use for emergency, short-term and/or long-term inpatient mental health care, and substance abuse treatment. However, the level of unmet needs in these areas were two to three times as large as the current use levels, thus identifying important gaps in services. The service providers predicted that projected growth in the senior population, the increased need to provide group homes for adult children with physical or intellectual disabilities, and the continued need to provide support for people with mental illness and/or substance abuse issues would contribute to continued or increased need for these services. The most common barriers to seeking help with mental health were the lack of availability, cost, and stigma. There were substantial gaps in service in the area of **expertise and professional advice**, with career services and financial counseling being the areas of greatest unmet need. The primary barriers to people using the career services, financial counseling, legal assistance, or parenting and caregiver education were cost, transportation, and the perception that services fitting their needs were not available in Shelby County. The unmet need for services of **community infrastructure** was also substantial, exceeding the level of current use. In particular, transportation was described by survey respondents, agency directors, and community leaders as being very much needed in the area. Information about resources was another area with a large unmet need. That is, many respondents indicated they were lacking in essential information about community services. In the area of **positive development programs,** day care programs were the most often used of these services, but there was some unmet need, particularly for programs with extended hours, serving older children, or serving special populations such as adults with disabilities. Lack of information about programs that were conveniently located and affordable presented barriers to using these services. Although the use of programs for at-risk populations was relatively low, the unmet need was nearly three times the size of the current use. The current use of services in the category for **special populations** was relatively low, because these populations themselves are relatively small; however, there was a substantial
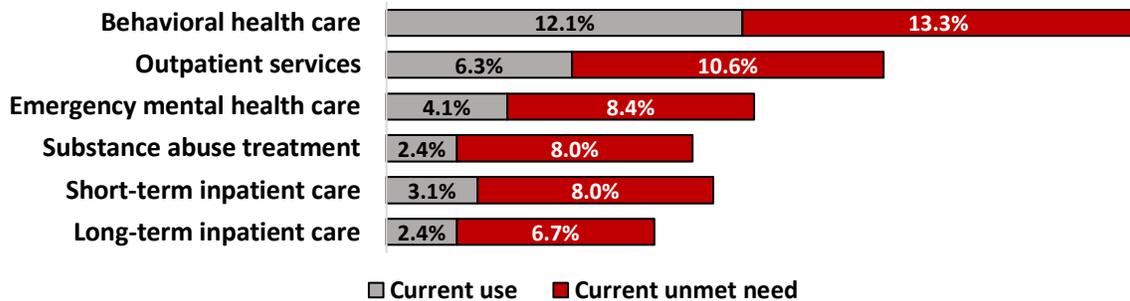
amount of unmet or future need in all areas. For example, the current unmet need for in-home assisted living, needed particularly for seniors, was nearly twice the rate of current use, and the future need was four times higher than the current use. Survey respondents felt there were not enough agencies who provided free or income-based medical care in Shelby County, yielding the largest level of unmet need in this category. The biggest barriers to service utilization in this area were the belief that services are not available in Shelby County and the cost of services that are available.

Current Use, Unmet Needs, and Barriers to Utilization

Quality of Life Factors

Current Use and Unmet Need for Quality of Life Factors

Factor	Current use	Unmet current need
Volunteer opportunities	15.6%	15.1%
Animal services	28.0%	10.1%
Faith-based programs	35.2%	10.7%
Creative, cultural, related programs	35.0%	15.2%
Library services	49.4%	10.3%
Health & wellness programs	44.9%	21.3%

■ Current use   ■ Unmet current need

Barriers to utilization of quality of life services

People do not know what is available	Programs are not located conveniently	Program costs are too high

Physical Resources

Current Use and Unmet Need for Physical Resources

Factor	Current use	Current unmet need
Emergency financial help	3.6%	10.4%
Food	9.2%	8.1%
Shelter & housing	2.3%	7.8%
Clothing	25.1%	7.1%

■ Current use   ■ Current unmet need

Barriers to utilization of physical resources

People do not know who to call or where to go for help	People do not know how to apply for help	People think they are not eligible for assistance

Current Use, Unmet Needs, and Barriers to Utilization

Mental Health Services

Current Use and Unmet Need for Mental Health Care

Service	Current use	Current unmet need
Behavioral health care	12.1%	13.3%
Outpatient services	6.3%	10.6%
Emergency mental health care	4.1%	8.4%
Substance abuse treatment	2.4%	8.0%
Short-term inpatient care	3.1%	8.0%
Long-term inpatient care	2.4%	6.7%

□ Current use   ■ Current unmet need

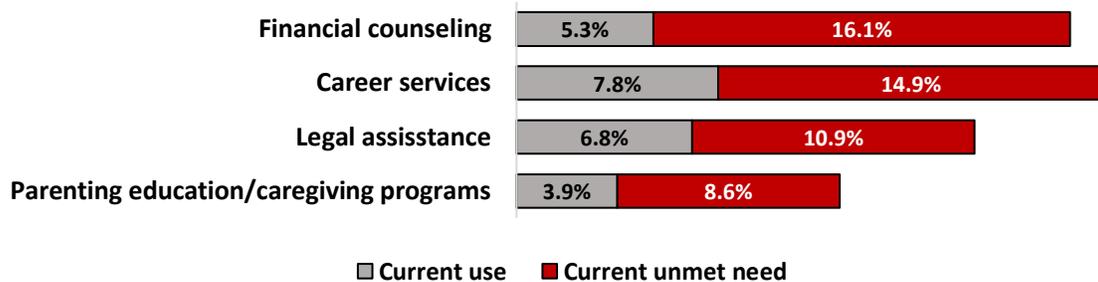### Barriers to utilization of mental health services

Respondents report a lack of local facilities and service providers for mental health care	Respondents feel the cost of care is high	Stigma, pride, and fear prevent people from seeking help

Expertise and Professional Advice

Current Use and Unmet Need for Professional Expertise and Advice

Service	Current use	Current unmet need
Financial counseling	5.3%	16.1%
Career services	7.8%	14.9%
Legal assisstance	6.8%	10.9%
Parenting education/caregiving programs	3.9%	8.6%

□ Current use   ■ Current unmet need

Barriers to utilization of expertise and professional advice

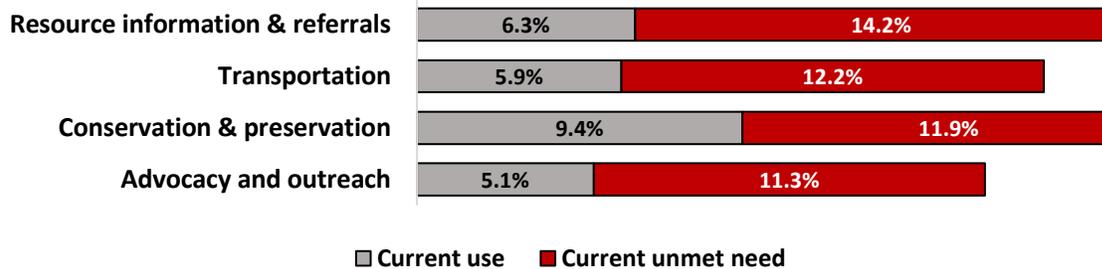| Respondents are unaware of services in the area	Respondents feel the available services do not fit their needs	Respondents feel they can not afford the services

Current Use, Unmet Needs, and Barriers to Utilization

Community Infrastructure

Current Use and Unmet Need for Community Infrastructure

	Current use	Current unmet need
Resource information & referrals	6.3%	14.2%
Transportation	5.9%	12.2%
Conservation & preservation	9.4%	11.9%
Advocacy and outreach	5.1%	11.3%

■ Current use　■ Current unmet need

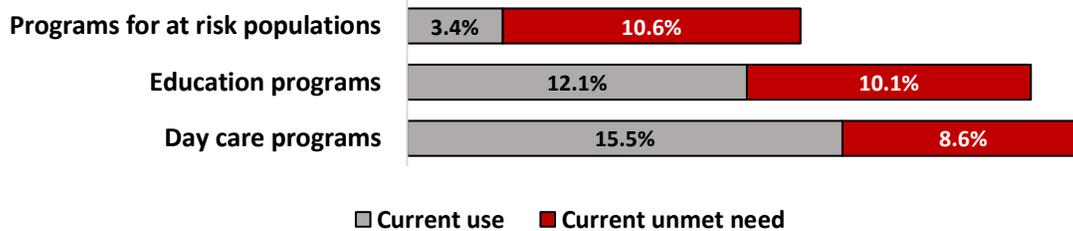### Barriers to utilization of community infrastructure

People do not know where to go to find information	People are not aware of advocacy and community outreach efforts	Available transportation services are limited and expensive

Positive Development Programs

Current Use and Unmet Need for Positive Development Programs

	Current use	Current unmet need
Programs for at risk populations	3.4%	10.6%
Education programs	12.1%	10.1%
Day care programs	15.5%	8.6%

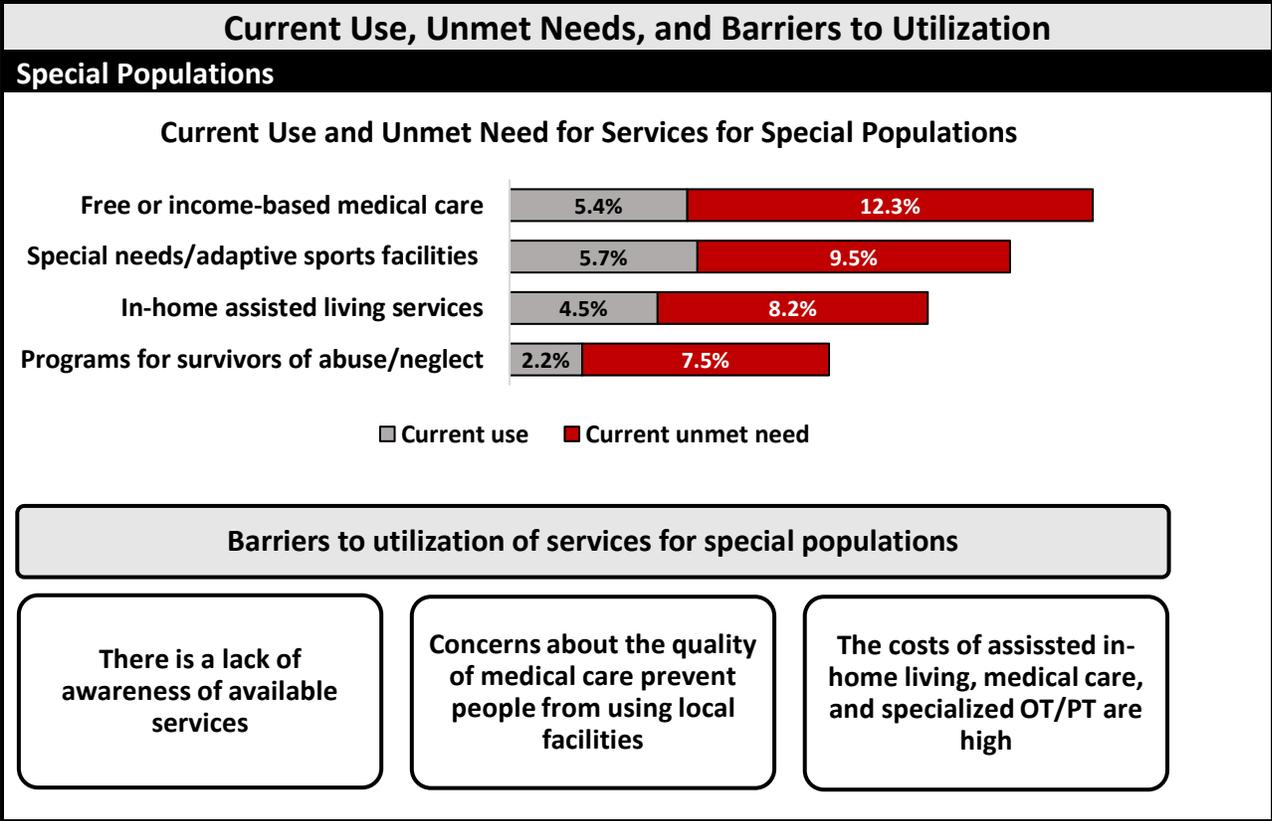■ Current use　■ Current unmet need

Barriers to utilization of positive development programs

Respondents are unaware of services in the area	Respondents want services available closer to their community	Respondents feel day care services are limited and expensive

Current Use, Unmet Needs, and Barriers to Utilization

Special Populations

Current Use and Unmet Need for Services for Special Populations

Free or income-based medical care	5.4%	12.3%
Special needs/adaptive sports facilities	5.7%	9.5%
In-home assisted living services	4.5%	8.2%
Programs for survivors of abuse/neglect	2.2%	7.5%

☐ Current use   ■ Current unmet need

Barriers to utilization of services for special populations

There is a lack of awareness of available services	Concerns about the quality of medical care prevent people from using local facilities	The costs of assissted in-home living, medical care, and specialized OT/PT are high

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this section, we present a number of general conclusions that can be drawn from material included in the report, and we make several recommendations that follow from that information. We expect others who review the report in its entirety will develop additional recommendations for the community.

Conclusions

The community leaders, social service agency directors, and the respondents to the community survey each provided information from their unique perspectives and experiences. Following are several conclusions we have drawn from the vast amount of information we obtained from the participants in this study:

Perceived strengths
- Shelby County leaders and community members are motivated to meet the mutual goal of improving the quality of life for its residents.
- Social service agencies benefit the community through a range of specialized programs.
- Community leaders and agencies work together to provide comprehensive social services in Shelby County.

Perceived trends in needs and gaps in social services
- Service providers and community leaders emphasized the increasing needs of child and elder populations, as well as general mental health and substance use needs.

- Coordination of care (across agencies) and continuity of care (in terms of follow-up) across a number of issues and populations were identified as weaknesses in the social services system.
- Community members indicated service gaps in housing, emergency financial help, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, career services, resource information, transportation, programs for at-risk populations, and free or income-based medical care.

Perceived barriers to utilization of social services
- Community members voiced a need for increased amounts and easier-to-find information about social services.
- Some people identified self- or other-judgment, such as embarrassment or stigma as barriers to social service utilization
- Current transportation service, ClasTran was identified as a strength, but transportation could be made more affordable, more widespread, and easier to access.
- Some communities in the county are lacking local resources to meet the community members' needs, requiring people to go without services or to travel long distances to gain access to them
- Program funding was viewed as inadequate and unstable by key informants.
- Consumers reported that some services were not affordable.

Future directions proposed by agencies to address unmet needs
- Improving continuity of care
  - Increase capacity, coordination, and collaboration especially for mental health and in the overlapping spheres of mental health, substance use, and criminal justice system
  - Increase preventive and rehabilitative substance use services
- Meeting the needs of the senior population
  - Increase in-home assisted living services and mental health care
  - Increase services and support for caregivers
- Meeting the needs of at-risk children and youth
  - Increase education for suicide prevention, anti-bullying, abuse prevention
  - Increase services for youth with behavioral issues
- Improving outreach
  - Increase visibility of social services and transportation to access services
  - Increase support and outreach to minority communities, men, boys, military veterans, people with disabilities

Recommendations

The participants in this project – community leaders, agency directors, and the residents of Shelby County – offered many thoughtful, discerning ideas and suggestions for services, programs, and resources that could be improved and for ways to make those improvements. Following are several of the most prominent areas of concern and suggestions for further consideration.

In all aspects of this project, there were expressions of significant need for improved **dissemination of information** among agencies and with the public to increase the visibility of the agencies and awareness of services available from them. Among survey participants, not knowing what is available, and not knowing how to find out what is available, were the most often cited barriers to seeking help. Recommendations for addressing this need include (1) creating a comprehensive, user-friendly website or hotline for social services where people can obtain information that could help them identify and locate the

services they need, and (2) opening central hubs in communities where people can receive in-person assistance and information about and referrals to social service agencies.

Throughout this study, community leaders, agency directors, and survey respondents reiterated that fear of stigma can be a key barrier to seeking mental health and substance use services. Stigmatization may also hinder people from reaching out for help with physical resources, as suggested by stigmatizing and discriminatory comments made against people who might need help with housing, food, and utilities. Community outreach to educate and reduce perceived and actual stigma and discrimination associated with some aspects of social services would be an investment in the community that might reduce the number of people who do not reach out for help. This work could be done by engaging consultants with a specialty in **stigma and discrimination reduction** to develop a formal community anti-stigma campaign.

Shelby County agencies have already successfully coordinated services in some areas, particularly for children and youth, to provide **continuity of care** through certain situations. Increased efforts in this regard are recommended, with a focus on people with mental health and/or substance abuse issues, people with special needs and physical or intellectual disabilities, at-risk populations, and senior adults. Creating a platform for agencies to coordinate services would help directors to identify gaps, prevent duplication of services, and coordinate care across individuals' multiple needs.

Transportation was a frequently mentioned need in the area of community infrastructure, affecting access to services as well as other aspects of community life. Expanding transportation programs to increase availability and affordability could help improve access to social services and other community resources. Increasing the presence of rideshare services and developing more bicycle lanes and sidewalk initiatives in some communities were also suggested as efforts that might be helpful for improving the transportation situation.

There are quite a few areas where current unmet needs and expected needs appear to be large, frequently exceeding by several times the current use of services. It is important to look for areas where capacity can be increased or barriers to use can be decreased, so that the **gaps between use and need** can be reduced. Following is a list of some of these areas:

- More affordable and available local mental health care services
- Improved continuity of care for mental illness and substance abuse
- Affordable health care for people who are uninsured and do not qualify for free or income-based services
- Comprehensive care for senior adults and for children and adults with disabilities (e.g., behavioral health care, mental health care, OT/PT, group homes, in home health care, affordable housing)
- Expanded day care services for all ages including people with disabilities
- Affordable sports and recreation services, especially in rural areas
- Increased prevention and intervention education for at-risk populations and caregivers

As growth continues, the expanding population of Shelby County will generate increasing problems and increasing need for services, such as health care, addiction treatment, mental health care, and affordable housing. In addition to creating more or larger service capabilities, one way to address increasing need will be to provide more preventive services for certain problems, thus reducing the need in the long run.

The following graphic summarizes these recommendations.

Information Dissemenation

- Create a centralized, well-publicized, comprehensive, user-friendly website or hotline for social services where people can obtain information that could help them identify and locate the services they need.
- Open central hubs in communities where people can receive in-person assistance and information about and referrals to social service agencies.

Outreach and Stigma Reduction

- Engage consultants with specialty in stigma and discrimination reduction (SDR) development and implementation. A formal anti-stigma campaign could indirectly encourage social service utilization.

Coordination of Care

- Create platforms to make it easier for social service to plan and coordinate care across individuals' multiple needs, monitor individuals' continued needs and progress, and plan and develop additional programs and services for the community.

Transportation

- Expand transportation programs to increase availability and affordability. This could help improve access to social services and other community resources.
- Increase the presence of free/tax incentive based ridshare services and develop bike lane and sidwalk initiatives.

Filling the Gaps

- Identify areas where resources are adequate and unmet need can be filled by increasing current use levels through information dissemination, stigma reduction, and transportation issues.
- Identify areas for potential capacity bulding efforts where current resources are inadequate and unmet need is large.
- Consider additional opportunities for innovative prevention services to reduce long-term needs.