

# Focus Group Report

## Introduction

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The COMPASS NOW 2012 community needs assessment included a focus group study to complement the data collected via household surveys and socio-economic indicators. The objective of the focus group study was to increase the understanding of the community's needs and their perception of the main challenges facing the region.

Focus groups are a valuable methodology for obtaining in-depth qualitative information on topics of interest. Qualitative methods in data collection can play an important role in strengthening findings from other data collected. It is important to keep in mind that results from qualitative methods such as focus groups cannot be generalized across an entire population; instead, they are used to describe the findings with greater insight.

## Methodology

The COMPASS NOW focus group study was led by a 5 county team consisting of county health department employees, Great Rivers United Way staff, local healthcare provider staff, and University of Wisconsin Extension faculty. Each team worked independently to coordinate and recruit participants in their county. Overall guidance and coordination was provided by the COMPASS NOW project coordinator and focus group team leader.

The methodology for the focus group study was designed to be a two-step process. The first step convened key stakeholders in each county to identify the main issues facing the region. These issues were discussed in the second step of the study, the community focus groups. The recruitment methods for the two steps are discussed below. The discussion data from both the key stakeholders and the focus groups was transcribed into Microsoft Word and the data was coded and analyzed by issue and themes.

## Identifying the Issues

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### Key Stakeholders

Eight key stakeholder meetings were held from February through March 2011. Each county focus group team identified key community leaders representing a broad range of community interests to participate in these meetings. Potential participants received an invitation letter explaining the purpose of the COMPASS NOW community needs assessment and the objective of the key stakeholder meeting. Two-hundred forty community leaders representing business,

clergy, healthcare providers and staff, elected officials, law enforcement, education, school counselors, United Way partner agencies, farmers, and county officials from the five county area attended the key stakeholder meetings.

### **Key Stakeholder Process**

The key stakeholder meetings in each of the 5 counties followed a nominal group process. Participants were divided into small groups and were guided in limited discussion by a trained facilitator. The nominal group process was selected for its effectiveness in reaching group consensus. The group facilitator gave a brief overview of the process and asked each participant to independently write down their answers to the following questions:

1. What are your hopes and dreams for our region?
2. What are our greatest assets and strengths as a community?
3. What are the bigger challenges and issues that we need to address?

Participants shared their responses to each question one by one providing clarification when necessary. The facilitator encouraged the participants to categorize similar ideas as appropriate. Participants then prioritized the bigger challenges and issues by voting for the most pressing issues facing the community. The community challenges were then ranked based on the number of votes the issue received.

Although each county utilized the same group process, the voting tallies for community issues identified are not comparable between counties since unequal number of people attended the key stakeholder meetings. In key stakeholder sessions where more than one group was meeting at the same time, all the participants were brought together to create one priority issue list. In these cases, participants were led through a second round of voting. This resulted in one aggregate list for all groups meeting in each county.

**Table 1** shows the top ranking issues as voted on by the key stakeholders in each county. It is important to note that the results shown should not be interpreted as the exhaustive list of challenges facing each county but as a top 5 priority list identified at the time of the meeting. Also keep in mind that key stakeholders may have identified an issue as a significant challenge in their county yet due to a limited number of cumulative votes received, the challenge did not make it onto the top priority list.

## Key Issues

The list of key issues facing the region was developed from the key Stakeholder data. The discussion questions for the focus group study were developed from the issues identified. According to the key stakeholders the most challenging issues facing the region are:

1. Unemployment and the economy
2. Access to healthcare including dental and mental health services
3. Access to affordable education
4. Cuts to programs and services

**Table 1: Top Challenges facing the counties in the Great Rivers region.**

Priority issues identified by community stakeholders	La Crosse	Monroe	Trempealeau	Vernon	Houston
Employment and living wage opportunities	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Access to healthcare	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Maintaining funding for public services	✓	✓		✓	✓
Viability of small towns			✓	✓	✓
Mental health services	✓	✓		✓	
Dental care	✓	✓		✓	
Families in need	✓			✓	
Alcohol and drug abuse (legal and illegal)	✓				✓
Access to services		✓			✓
Services for the elderly	✓			✓	
Parenting skills			✓		
Sharing public resources					✓
Public transportation					✓
Resistance to change			✓		

## Community Insight

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### Community Focus Groups

Thirty-seven focus groups were conducted across the 5 counties during the timeframe of April to June, 2011. Participants were sampled by convenience, often recruited from existing community groups such as Rotary clubs, various councils, student groups, college classes, volunteer groups, governmental entities, social service staff and board members. Three hundred twelve community members participated in the focus groups. Participants varied by age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, and income. The focus group size ranged from 3-10 people with the average size group being 7. Groups were kept homogenous when possible to allow for people with similar backgrounds to feel comfortable sharing ideas. During recruitment, the focus group team ensured that the following target groups were represented:

- Youth
- Experienced People/Senior Citizens
- Limited Resource Individuals and Families
- Business and Financial Representatives
- Service Providers
- General Population
- Diverse Populations

Not every county convened a separate focus group for each target group but on a regional level it was ensured that a broad representation of the community was included in the focus group study. For example, based on demographics, not every county identified the need to hold focus groups with ethnic minority groups. La Crosse and Monroe counties held focus groups with their larger minority populations, the Hmong and Latino. Bilingual facilitators as well as an interpreter were used to translate the data from those group discussions. **Table 2** shows the groups held in each county, the target population recruited and the total number of participants.

**Table 2: Focus groups by target group and county**

	Youth	Experienced Adults	Business & Finance	Service Providers	Diversity	Limited Income	General	Total Groups	Total Participants
La Crosse	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	13	109
Monroe	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	9	66
Trempealeau	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	39
Vernon	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	5	44
Houston	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	55
Total								38	313

The focus group sessions were held in a variety of settings based on convenience to the participants. Focus groups were held in community centers, churches, health centers, conference rooms, county offices, restaurants, youth centers, and at service agencies. Meetings were also scheduled at convenient times from early morning to late evening depending on the group.

### Focus Group Process

The focus groups were kept in a semi-structured format with a facilitator leading each group through a set of pre-determined questions. The focus group questions were developed from the issues identified by the key stakeholders. Participants were asked to discuss how their community was affected by:

1. Unemployment and the economy
2. Challenges to access affordable health and dental care, and mental health services
3. Challenges to affordable education
4. Cuts to funding for programs and services

Each focus group team also had the opportunity to add a question based on a specific prioritized issue not included in the list above. Three out of the five counties added an additional question to their discussion script and one county added specific questions only for their youth participants. The additional issues discussed included alcohol and drug use, access to services for the elderly, and barriers to accessing local resources. The youth specific questions were related to bullying and underage alcohol, tobacco and drug use. Focus group participants were also asked to comment on any additional challenges they saw in their community. After each key issue discussion, participants were asked to share their thoughts on solutions to the community problem discussed.

**Note:**

It is worth noting that a majority of the focus groups brought up similar themes when discussing the key issues. Differences in perceived needs or perceived effects of a particular issue occurred more often between target groups rather than between counties. Some groups discussed topics more extensively than others, and in general the issues of unemployment, the economy, and healthcare generated more discussion than education and cuts to programs and services. The extent of the discussion may reflect the knowledge and familiarity that groups had about the issues. Similarly, many groups found offering solutions to community problems challenging.

During the months of this focus group study, discussion about government issues including funding may have been unusually high due to the unveiling of the Wisconsin state biennial budget for 2011-2013 and the widely known Budget Repair Bill. Both of these pieces of legislation highlighted a variety of issues including funding for education, the viability of public services, state funding for medical assistance programs, and taxes. The focus group process does not delineate whether the comments shared by participants resulted from the effects of the recession of the past few years or the media focus on the state budget and repair bill.

**Results**

Focus group data was recorded by the group facilitators or designated recorders. After the data was coded and analyzed, each focus group team was consulted to reach consensus on recurring topics and common themes.

Below are the key findings arranged by the issues that were discussed.

**Key Issue: Unemployment and the economy**

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**Common themes on unemployment and the economy**

- Physical and health effects of a poor economy
- Area jobs pay poor wages
- Need for balance between business and community needs
- The burden of rising costs
- Effects to the community
- The effects to young people and brain drain
- Issues in the housing market
- Higher demand for social services
- It could be worse

Concern and discouragement regarding various aspects of economic stability in the region was a clear theme in all the focus group discussions. Across focus groups, participants described the detrimental effects the economic situation has had on the health of the community. Participants identified increased feelings of hopelessness, stress, depression, alcohol and drug

abuse, child abuse, domestic violence and even suicide as directly being related to the downward economy. Several participants commented that unemployment and poor wages made the community unhealthy as people were no longer able to afford healthy food, had to either choose between food and medications, or put off medical care.

A limited job market and low wages was another common theme discussed across all counties. Comments about the minimum wage not being a living wage were heard often, and participants described many in their community as living pay check to pay check. Many expressed a concern for the elderly and low income families faced with rising costs on limited incomes and described a lower quality of life as a result. Participants also described people having to work jobs they are overqualified for because of the limited choice for employment in the region or to keep a job with benefits. Vernon County participants expressed concern for local farmers who were struggling with rising operating costs. In addition, the challenges for single parent families were singled out by various groups. Some participants commented that rising transportation and childcare costs often made working unaffordable.

Participants said:

"The cost of living is increasing for everyone. I worry about the elderly and others on a limited income."

"There are many jobs that pay about \$7/hour and, after allowing for the basics, there's not much to live on."

"At this point we are forced to choose which bills to pay."

"People come in crying because they had to buy groceries and couldn't get their medicine and they had to go without."

In several counties, participants emphasized their discontent and frustration with the impact of corporate decisions on small communities. The wide spread impact of factories moving out of state or overseas was discussed. La Crosse and Vernon counties highlighted the effects big box stores have on local business owners and described the inability of the small business to compete.

One group described the blame the entire community shares.

"It all comes down to greed. Greed is a short term vision for our community, not a long term strategy, we all give in to the greed by shopping at (big box store)."

“A lot of small businesses have been forced out by the big box stores. It is harder to support local business with gas at \$4 a gallon. People have to shop at the lowest price...”

Empty store fronts and ‘brain drain’ due to the loss of manufacturing and skilled jobs were also highlighted by most counties. Participants explained that increasing education debt is driving college graduates away from the region to areas that can offer higher paying jobs with benefits.

Low wages were sometimes attributed to the imbalance of power between employer and employee. Participants perceived a high demand for few jobs as an advantage to employers that may contribute to driving wages and benefits downward. However, in Trempealeau and Monroe counties, low wages were also blamed on competition from undocumented and migrant workers who were perceived as being willing to work for less.

Several groups made comments related to the disparity among rich and poor or ‘the haves and the have-nots’. Participants from almost every county commented that the middle class was either shrinking or disappearing and several participants described the concept of the “poor are getting poorer and the rich are doing quite well.” This growing disparity also raised concern about increased crime, violence, and illegal activity. The issue of substance abuse and illegal drugs was mentioned in various groups in several counties and will be discussed later.

Participants said,

“It all comes down to violence—people will have to do what they need to do to eat. More crime and more stress...”

“Criminal activity is increasing due to socioeconomic issues; when there isn’t enough money people get creative in getting money. We are seeing this in relation to drugs—selling, obtaining and distributing drugs illegally.”

Issues related to housing were discussed in every county in the region. Participants highlighted foreclosures, evictions, high number of houses for sale, and the lack of affordable housing as problems facing the community. Most counties expressed a concern and awareness that there was a higher demand for social services as a result of a poor economy. Participants emphasized an increase in homelessness locally, even commenting about an increased number of people and families living in cars.



Participants described the problem,

"At a time of economic depression with increased homelessness, domestic violence, etc. (social service) agencies have a decreased capacity to help. There is an increase in demand and a decrease in assistance."

"If you have less money for food, you'll have less food and more hunger."

"People are unable to pay bills. There are limited options in affordable housing. If you don't have a place to live it is really challenging to try to keep a job and forget trying to get a job without an address."

"There are too many barriers for people looking for work because increasingly companies are requiring online applications. Many people do not have computers at home with the latest software to fill out forms, etc. There is definitely limited access to computers in rural areas. There are computers at the library but have you ever tried filling out an application there? It's pretty difficult with all the distractions and people around."

Issues related to youth and young families were discussed during various topics in the focus groups. In relation to unemployment and the economy, young people throughout the region described a need to contribute more to their expenses because parents were stressed financially. Young people also described an increased frustration in not being able to find summer or part-time jobs because they had to compete with adults for the low wage and/or entry level jobs. Many groups expressed a concern that the local job market was not able to sustain young professionals seeking good paying career jobs and this also contributed to stagnant communities and 'brain drain'.

The discussion on the economy was not all negative however. Many participants especially from the business and finance community reflected hope that the economic situation was improving. Several participants had examples of small signs of industry growth while others reminded that the situation in other parts of country has been more devastating than here locally. Participants also shared a great deal of pride in their community and emphasized the need to market their community's strengths to encourage more tourism and local investment.

Some examples of positive comments were,

"We are doing the right things but we have to be patient."

"I think the city has stepped up in pursuing industry to bring in jobs. City administration knows it is a huge concern and they do a good job keeping people informed and updated on issues. I appreciate that fact."

"Kids are giving back to the community as part of their education and have an enthusiasm to do something, so there's hope for the future."

### **Solutions: Unemployment and the economy**

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Focus group participants were also asked to discuss solutions to the unemployment and economic development problems in their community. Overwhelmingly, participants called for local investment both on a personal level by buying local and promoting local businesses; and at the county level as an essential economic development strategy. Many participants mentioned using tax incentives to attract businesses to the area and also discussed the importance of creating a disincentive for companies to leave our area.

#### **Suggested solutions to unemployment and the economy**

- Local investment
- Increase corporate responsibility
- Promote regional cooperation
- Provide life skills and financial literacy training

Many groups throughout the region identified the need to increase corporate responsibility to the local community. Participants emphasized the importance of developing a sense of community among businesses and large employers so their corporate vision reflected more local investment and connectedness. Participants felt that an increased awareness of the issues facing the community was important to developing a new corporate culture. In La Crosse, one group discussion focused on the need to promote and support community oriented employers that would be willing to take a chance with employees that may be considered "at-risk" either because of a disability or a criminal record.

Participants said,

"We need "step-up" programs. Community oriented employers that are willing to take a little chance with at-risk employees, like good employees that happen to have a mental health issue on their record. There are so many people out there that just need a place they can grow their skills."

There were also many comments about the need for communities to collaborate more with each other and function more regionally. Several participants offered ideas for sharing resources such as school buses (when not in use by schools) to improve lacking public transportation

systems and others suggested that fire and police departments share more resources.

In almost every county, participants described a strong need for our community to accept more personal responsibility in various aspects of their lives. Participants described a societal problem of expected entitlement, of not wanting to work as hard as generations past, as well as young people not understanding basic life skills. In many instances, participants agreed that many adults lacked these skills as well and could not serve as good role models for youth.

Participants said,

“Most college students don’t even know how to balance a checkbook.”

“Youth don’t realize that charge cards have to be paid.”

“It is easy to blame different groups for things, but whole money management is not addressed in our society as it should be. We have a spoiled society with a belief that we can have anything we want.”

“Schools don’t teach kids how to live. They know how to read and write but there is lack of critical thinking skills. They are not prepared for life.”

“If the parents do not have the skills to prioritize properly and make sound financial decisions, they certainly can’t teach their kids.”

### **Key Issue: Access to affordable health care**

The second key issue that was discussed during the focus group meetings was access to affordable health care including dental care and mental health services. This topic generated a great deal of discussion and concern for the majority of participants. Many focus group participants emphasized a sense of pride and comfort in having top rated healthcare facilities within the community. However, most participants realized that access to healthcare extends beyond the physical location of a hospital or clinic. For a community to fully have access to health care, the cost of care must also be affordable. The most common theme discussed throughout the entire region was the negative health effects of not having proper access to health care. Participants passionately described their concern for community members unable to afford prescriptions, forced to delay surgeries and needed medical care due to cost, or experiencing stress related to no insurance coverage.

### **Common themes on access to health care**

- Lack of access affects our community’s health
- Limits to benefits and high costs
- Limited access to dental care
- Mental health issues are not adequately addressed
- Misuse of services
- Need for prevention

Participants said,

"[Lack of healthcare] it's destroying us. At 50 my wife and I have no insurance. We are starting from scratch; we both lost our jobs and were unemployed for 2 years. We went into bankruptcy and are now back in school. I have no idea how we would manage a significant health issue. Health insurance coverage is more than our monthly income."

"I know of a resident who was diagnosed with cervical cancer and is stuck with many medical bills. She has nothing to pay for the medical care. It's a huge problem."

"In the Hmong community we tend to have larger families. With the wages parents are making, families have to make tough decisions as to what kids are going to get care. It actually goes in cycles. We have to look at what is the most serious health or dental problem in the family at the time. I know it is sad but that is how it is."

"I know someone who is avoiding an STD (sexually transmitted disease) test because he can't afford it. This could mean the spread of STDs."

The discussions about health care access were often related to employment. Several participants commented that benefits were being reduced by employers either through imposed higher deductible plans, limits to coverage or by dropping vision and dental benefits. Participants indicated that higher health care costs for individuals, regardless of their insurance coverage, often resulted in people avoiding health care. Participants shared examples of people who self-medicated with over-the-counter medications, self-treated injuries, avoided health care or used home remedies all to save the added expense of going to the doctor.

Participants said,

"Even with health insurance, the deductibles are so high. I already have health bills, so I avoid going in."

"Parents expect the school nurse to be their clinic. Students are frequently going to the school nurse for injuries occurring outside of the school day."

"When you have chronic illnesses and a high deductible plan, you get slammed year after year with expensive bills from the hospital and insurance company."

“Are health insurance plans with deductible rates that cost \$5000 to \$10,000 a year really providing health insurance? Entry level workers can’t afford the coverage.”

“We use a lot of home remedies. Like my friend here, she had a problem in one of her eyes. We can’t afford to go to a clinic. The cost of going to the hospital is too much. We know ways to cure things and we pray. We put some chamomile on her eye and thank God it got better. Maybe we put ourselves more at risk (with home remedies).”

The lack of dental coverage was also an important topic of discussion among focus groups throughout the region. Participants related poor dental health with low self-esteem and overall poor physical health. Many comments were made that people let dental problems get so advanced that the only remedy was extraction. Although participants were aware of free dental days, the lack of follow up is seriously lacking in the region.

A participant commented,

“We have one local dentist who provides free dental care for one day a month but what about the follow up? I know of someone who went there and had to get all their teeth pulled but had no help to get dentures.”

The most common complaint related to dental care was the lack of dentists accepting Medicaid or Medical Assistance. The few dentists in the region that do accept Medicaid are completely overburdened and unable to meet the demand. This coupled with high costs obviously leaves many in our community without access to routine cleanings and preventive dental care.

Another important health care issue discussed was mental health services. There were two main themes that arose in relation to mental health; the first focused on the effects of stigma and the second was related to service providers. Several participants felt that mental illnesses are stigmatized in our society and this hindered people from seeking assistance in a timely manner. The suicide death of a high school student in Trempealeau was used as an example of the need for greater understanding of mental health issues in schools. Many participants commented that school staff are unprepared to deal with the mental health issues that commonly develop during adolescence.

Participants explained,

"Mental health is the most significant problem-I think there is access, but people don't move to getting help until they are in trouble."

"Mental health issues are really affecting our community. People do not understand what mental illness even is. There is so much stigma with mental illness and then compound that in a small town where everybody knows everybody. There needs to be awareness that ignoring the issue is not the answer. Communities need to know that people are losing hope, people are suffering from depression and this leads to suicide and other issues."

"It is in middle and high school where many mental health issues start. They (the school staff) do not know how to handle it. These kids are just seen as 'problem kids'. The truth is they might be bipolar or have schizophrenia. There are medications for that but you need to know about it. The kids also need support."

"This is a stressful time for students as their parents need help with mental health services and the parents can't afford the medicines or doctors. It is obvious to school staff that the parents need help but services are not there."

Many participants discussed the lack of mental health providers in the region. Participants familiar with homeless shelters, the judicial system, county health departments and hospitals commented on too few psychiatrists and increasing mental health cases which has resulted in long waiting lists for services, overwhelmed caregivers, and an increase in emergency psychiatric detentions. Participants familiar with mental health issues explained the gap in mental health services for children pointing to a 4-6 week and sometimes 3 month waiting period for a psychiatric consultation. In addition, participants shared the challenges the limits to insurance coverage such as BadgerCare have on mental health care. According to focus group participants, the limited reimbursement for psychiatric visits and no coverage for counseling services, presents a barrier for those needing to access providers.

One participant made the connection to cost by saying,

"There is a huge impact on the tax payer. If mental health services are not provided when needed, then the problem leads to commitment and long term mental health care."

Another issue discussed at length by focus groups from nearly all counties was the lack of public transportation. Rising fuel costs as well as other barriers to driving such as disabilities, revoked licenses, and not being eligible for a driving permit, all contributed to the transportation challenges for many people trying to get to work, school, and to medical appointments. Participants expressed a deep concern for the elderly who find it challenging to get to medical appointments. Participants acknowledged that even though transportation to medical appointments may be covered by special funding it can be difficult to arrange and not everyone is aware of the services available.

A participant in Monroe County explained,

“Scenic Bluffs is a huge plus but accessibility there is a huge problem. There is mental health treatment there but with the cost of gas and (lack of) transportation it is a barrier to access. Do I feed my family or do I get medical care?”

Another theme in several discussions about access to health care was the perception that more and more people are using the emergency room for primary care issues due to a lack of insurance coverage. Participants expressed concern and resentment that this type of misuse of medical services coupled with preventable hospital visits is contributing to higher healthcare costs for everyone.

Participants said,

“People can’t afford to go to the doctor so they wait and wait until the last minute and then it’s a trip to the ER. We all pay for that.”

“Everyone pays for the uninsured because they don’t get preventive care they get emergency room care.”

These discussions about misuse of medical services often led to two additional themes; the perception that there are free services available that are underutilized and the belief that a more preventive health focus is needed in our society and community. These are discussed further in the solutions section of this report.

**Suggested solutions to access to health care**

- Better education on services available
- Education on appropriate use of medical care
- Focus on prevention and personal responsibility
- Vote and be a strong voice in your community
- Expand walk-up clinics and free clinics
- Increase awareness and understanding of Affordable Care Act

**Solutions: Access to health care**

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The discussions about the problems and barriers to health care also led participants to share ideas about what solutions are needed to address these problems. The most common solutions given were the following:

**Better education on services available**

Many participants felt there were free or reduced cost services available that were being underutilized by those in need. Examples of clinics run by non-profits such as Options, Scenic Bluffs, St. Clare's Mission, as well as the county health departments were all given as examples. On the contrary, some participants explained that the free services were in fact overburdened with patients and that their schedules were too limited and should expand their services to meet the greater need.

**Education on appropriate use of medical care**

The shared concern regarding the misuse of emergency room services points to the need for greater community awareness on the appropriate use of medical care. Educating the community about non-urgent medical care that could be treated in primary care settings can reduce costs, improve the coordination of care for patients and preserve the ER for those who truly need emergency care.

**Focus on prevention and personal responsibility**

Many participants identified the need to focus more on preventive health and wellness. Participants felt that the cost savings of prevention coupled with increased personal responsibility of making healthier choices would benefit the community greatly. Increased education and awareness on mental health issues was also identified very important in preventing further burden of mental illness.

**Vote and be a strong voice in your community**

The idea of being politically active was echoed by many groups. Participants identified the need for more community involvement in local issues, advocacy, and exercising the right to vote. Many participants called on young people to become more politically aware of the issues.



### Expand walk up clinics, express clinics and free clinics

Several La Crosse county participants felt that more affordable medical care facilities or express care clinics would better serve the community's health care needs. Monroe, Vernon, and Trempealeau participants discussed the need to expand free services including dental services through additional grants and subsidies. La Crosse participants stressed the importance of promoting free health services at local technical schools.

### Increase awareness and understanding of Affordable Care Act

Some participants expressed hope or held the expectation that the Affordable Care Act would improve access to preventive health services and screenings for the community including those currently on Medicare. Several comments and discussions about the Affordable Care Act highlighted the limited knowledge the community has on the impact of this legislation and points to needed education regarding its implementation and impact.

### **Key Issue: Challenges to affordable education**

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Challenges to affordable education was the next issue that was discussed during the focus group meetings. The issue was framed as an increasing personal and public challenge to fund education for all grades including post-secondary education.

Focus group participants in most counties shared many comments regarding the high quality of the schools in their area. Many commented that there was a good variety of options available at the K-12 level including non-traditional alternatives. The number of options available locally for post-secondary education was also described as a huge positive for the community. These factors were often associated with contributing to the high quality of life in the Great Rivers Region.

However despite having quality education available, many participants expressed concern that community members are undervaluing the importance of education. Several participants identified the need to break the generational cycle of not achieving a high school diploma or not attaining any post-secondary education. Participants however, indicated that one of the greatest barriers to higher education achievement is the rising cost. Several participants emphasized that rising costs are a deciding factor in whether to pursue higher education.

#### **Common themes on challenges to education**

- Good quality schools in the area
- Need to value education more
- Cuts to education will hurt kids
- Rising costs to post-secondary education hurts everyone

Participants said,

"There is a weakness in our community—there is not a desire to get further education. This impacts our philosophy about education in general. Education is not always valued."

"Communities will be divided further into those who can provide further education for their children and those who can't. There will be a wider gap between rich and the poor."

"The rising cost of tuition is taking away the opportunity for kids to go to college."

"Our average income does not allow for residents to afford the high cost of rent. How can people afford additional education?"

"People are discouraged about going to school. It takes a long time to pay off student loans. Is it worth it?"

The remaining discussions on this issue focused on K-12 education and funding.

Participants described their concern for special education programs, art, music and foreign language. Participants felt these programs were the most vulnerable to budget cuts but were each very important to kids learning, development, and global competitiveness.

One La Crosse participant said,

"I fear the state budget cuts to schools will affect the students that need special education services most. Schools and teachers are not equipped to deal with young people with mental health issues. Teachers have increasing behavior issues to deal with and they cannot address mental health issues on top. It is frightening to think how the budget cuts will affect their class size and load. Students with problems will be falling through the cracks."

The following comments from young people in Trempealeau also highlights the issue,

"There is more competition these days for education and jobs. We are competing with students from all around the globe."

"There are so many jobs and businesses leaving the US. We need to build our skill set with foreign languages."

“Cutting foreign language classes is stupid, being bilingual is really important.”

The potential for cuts to the fine arts, PE, and extra-curricular activities also raised concern about limiting access to enrichment activities based on income. Participants commented that at-risk kids would be placed at greater risk by raising fees to sports and other extracurricular activities to amounts families could not afford. Some participants even commented on the health effect of such cuts.

“Participants are paying fees for sports. Art, physical education and music are being cut or reduced. Agricultural programs are being cut and extra-curricular programs aren’t.”

“At a time when obesity is increasing and health and exercise need to be emphasized there are cuts.” “That just doesn’t make sense.”

“I am afraid what will happen is that extra-curricular activities will become ‘club’ activities rather than school funded. The ‘have nots’ will not be able to afford them and will participate in ‘risky’ activities instead.”

Many comments regarding school budgets also highlighted the concern about expanding school voucher programs. The majority of participants who commented on school vouchers expressed a concern about the impact they may have on small rural schools. Several participants also emphasized the need to change the perception of education as an investment not only in the future of our children but that of our communities. Facilitators heard several comments such as this one from a Vernon county participant.

“When businesses are looking for new locations, the education system is a major factor. If you dismantle quality educational programs you will lose the ability to attract businesses.”

Finally, with regards to K-12 education, a theme that was heard often was the concern about low morale among teachers, sudden retirements and the future of the teaching profession in Wisconsin. In Minnesota, participants shared a fear of staffing cuts due to reduced enrollment and possible need to combine classes to keep schools going.

**Suggested solutions to issues in education**

- Youth need life skills
- Improve parenting skills
- Needed fundraising for schools
- Students need to apply for scholarships
- Technical and vocational training is needed

**Solutions: Challenges to affordable education**

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Participants also shared their ideas and solutions to address the community’s challenges regarding education. It is interesting to note that several of the solutions do not directly address the potential for cuts to school budgets, rather the solutions focus on increasing student success by improving personal responsibility. For example, two solutions the facilitators heard most often were to increase the life skills training available to young people. As stated previously, participants in a variety of target groups expressed a great concern for young people being unprepared for the challenges of life. The skills often associated with life skills training are: decision-making skills, social skills, employability and career planning, money management, and issues related to health and family. These skills were often described as lacking not only in young people but in many adults as well. Another solution that was shared by many participants was to promote more parent involvement in education and better parenting skills to improve parent responsibility.

To address cuts to education funding, participants identified the need to increase fundraising activities to help schools supplement program costs and emphasized the need to increase awareness of scholarship opportunities.

Finally, despite comments that the Great Rivers region offers many options for education, several participants felt there was a need for more opportunities to study the trades. Participants cited a need for more technical training and vocational high schools especially for young people who are not college bound.

**Key Issue: Cuts to programs and services**

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The last issue that was discussed in all the focus groups was the potential cuts to programs and services. The comments from focus group participants emerged in four main categories:

**Seniors and the Elderly**

When discussing the potential for cuts to programs and services, a common theme that was raised was the concern for the elderly population. Many participants in all the counties emphasized the vulnerability of seniors in our community. Programs such as Senior Care, senior dining and home care support services were mentioned often as core programs needed to keep our senior citizens healthier.

**Youth**

Participants reiterated their concern that cuts to education would negatively affect at-risk kids and students needing special education

**Common themes on cuts to programs and services**

- Effects to seniors and the elderly
- Effects to Youth
- Effects to middle class and poor
- Quality of life reduced

programs the most. Comments about the impact of cuts to extra-curricular activities have already been discussed. Several participants shared a concern that special programs such as substance abuse education would be cut at a time when substance abuse appears to be on the rise.

### **Middle class and poor**

Several participants commented that the poor and middle class will suffer the greatest hardship if cuts are made to programs and services. An increase in stress and anxiety as programs close and waiting lists become longer was repeated often.

### **Quality of life will be reduced**

Finally, several participants also commented on the potential for cuts to other public services other than human services. A reduced quality of life due to cuts to Park and Recreation programs, reduced public safety measures, or to garbage pick-up were all mentioned.

### **Solutions: Cuts to programs and services**

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Participants focused on three main solutions to cuts to programs and services: increasing funding, increasing awareness of existing services, and promoting disease prevention behaviors. Many participants recognized a great need to raise funds from both private and public sources to provide needed services. Participants felt that businesses needed to make more of a commitment to the community and could do so by providing services either through employee assistance programs, wellness programs or through sponsorship of activities such as health fairs. In addition to promoting more corporate responsibility through services, many participants called for fairness in taxes for both businesses and community members. Furthermore, participants suggested more collaboration among human service agencies and among interested groups in order to seek increased public funding. Grant writing, scholarship searching and applying for federal funding for health services and community development projects were identified as ways to increase funding.

### **Additional Issues**

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Each county focus group team had the opportunity to add an additional question on a particular local issue that had not been addressed previously. The issues discussed were taken from the top issues that surfaced in the key stakeholders meetings. Three counties in the region asked additional questions in their focus groups and Houston County asked additional questions in their youth focus groups only.

#### **Suggested solutions to cuts to programs and services**

- Corporate Responsibility
- Collaboration and Funding
- Utilize and promote more volunteers
- Prevention programs
- Increase awareness of services

The following summarizes the main points discussed regarding alcohol and drug abuse in La Crosse County, access to elderly services in Vernon County, barriers to services and resources in Monroe County, and bullying, under age alcohol, tobacco, and drug use as discussed with youth in Houston County. Although the comments for these issues only provide insight into one county, it is possible that suggested solutions may be adapted to other counties in the region facing similar problems.

### **Alcohol and Drug Abuse**

The majority of focus group participants agreed that a problem of alcohol abuse exists. Many participants also mentioned an increase in the availability in illegal drugs such as crack, heroin, cocaine, and marijuana. The term 'culture of alcohol' was often used to describe the practice of having alcohol at any kind of gathering such as: festivals, family events, graduation parties, and sporting events. Several participants felt that the 'culture of alcohol' contributed to the problem and perceived that La Crosse was unique in its concentration of bars, in its pervasive alcohol consumption, and in how inexpensive alcohol is locally. Youth participants in the focus groups also commented on the availability of a variety of illegal drugs.

Participants said,

"We need to look at this problem as an all community problem not just a problem of those on the fringes. It is easy to pass the blame. Alcohol is promoted too much. Look at all the billboards. There is still a lot of marketing to young people."

[Alcohol use] "It's an expense. Wisconsin is the worst state in terms of binge drinking and La Crosse is the worst county in the state. It affects our courts, jail, and mental health care. It takes a huge toll on our community."

"The mindset in the community is all about drinking. I have lived in Tempe, Arizona and other places in the US and people don't drink there like they do here."

Several solutions were offered with regard to the issue of alcohol and drug use. Many participants suggested making it more difficult to drink by raising the cost of alcohol through an increased alcohol tax. Others called on the community to collaborate more on the issue, enforce zero-tolerance laws and enforce penalties for adults who contribute to under-age drinking. The enforcement of zero-tolerance was discussed for schools as well.

Other solutions included enforcing a county-wide teenage curfew to make it more difficult for teens to be at college parties and for more education regarding the negative effects of alcohol for both adults and young people. Several youth comments were made that substance abuse campaigns of 'just say no' are not effective and that youth need to see and hear more about the consequences of abuse.

Several participants agreed with the following statement made by one young woman,

[Young people] "They need to know why to say no to sex and drugs. I wish I had never used drugs. They messed me up pretty bad."

Finally, several comments were made regarding advertising and marketing of alcohol. Many participants commented that the community receives mixed messages from alcohol advertising that markets drinking as the best way to have fun. Participants suggested limiting advertising and changing the perception of drinking to a negative by showing the health and social consequences of substance abuse.

### **Underage Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drug Use and Bullying**

In Houston County, the focus group team asked their youth focus group participants to discuss the issue of bullying, underage alcohol, tobacco, and drug use. The comments largely focused on alcohol use with youth affirming that underage drinking is a problem. Several comments were made regarding adult and parent involvement in supplying young people with alcohol. Youth in Houston County also suggested more education for adults and young people as well as increased discussion on the consequences of substance abuse.

The same youth groups in Houston County were also asked for their comments regarding bullying and cyber-bullying. Youth agreed that bullying was a problem facing the community and that cyber-bullying was increasingly being used in school. The discussion regarding solutions to bullying focused quite extensively on the fear of retaliation youth have when bullied or when they know of someone being bullied. Youth suggested having a point person in school that they could go to and involving parents more in education about the problem.

### **Access to Elderly Services**

The focus group team in Vernon County selected the issue of elderly care services to discuss with focus group participants. Although many comments had been made previously regarding the elderly, focus group participants had the opportunity to discuss the broad range of

issues facing this growing population. The issues most commonly discussed with regard to the elderly were:

### **Transportation**

Many participants expressed a deep concern for the challenges the elderly face with regard to their need for transportation. Participants explained that taxi services are limited or non-existent and that as a result the elderly have a difficult time getting to appointments. The lack of transportation increases the isolation of the elderly and makes it more difficult for them to live independently.

### **Housing services**

Housing and support services for the elderly were also important issues raised. Participants emphasized the need for meal sites and senior centers and stressed an increasing need for assisted living facilities in the county. Participants in Hillsboro expressed a need for a nursing home in their area.

### **Education and rehabilitation**

Another area of concern regarding the aged was the lack of awareness in the community about the needs of the elderly. Several participants felt there was a disconnect in the general population about the issues facing the elderly and expressed concern over increasing elder abuse. The need for more education and rehabilitation opportunities for the aging was emphasized and ideas to promote senior involvement in schools to create rich inter-generational learning opportunities were also identified.

### **Barriers to services and resources**

In Monroe County the focus group team identified low utilization of existing services as a priority issue to explore with the focus group participants. Overall, participants felt that underutilization of services was based on the lack of knowledge that the services were available. Some participants shared a concern regarding poor treatment of minorities seeking services and described a sense of discrimination against them.

This exchange between participants provides some insight into this issue,

"I would say there is discrimination and that keeps people away. People give you a look, you know the look that they don't respect you."

"Even at some of the places where they are supposed to help you, they too discriminate."



Most of the discussion with regard to barriers to services and resources focused on participant suggestions for improving communication between program providers and the population it is trying to serve. A specific suggestion to provide program materials and flyers in Spanish and Hmong was also made. Participant suggestions can be categorized in the following areas:

1. Increase awareness through all forms of media. Participants in Monroe County suggested utilizing the media including print, radio, and TV to increase awareness about important services. They gave specific examples of local media outlets such as WCOW and Hagen's Sports Network to run public service announcements.
2. Utilize churches and schools. The network of churches in the community was brought up by several participants as an effective way to increase program awareness. Advertising programs in church bulletins and school newsletters was also suggested.
3. Community outreach was also a key component to increasing awareness in the community. Participants suggested creating a jobs bulletin board in a central location such as City Hall, holding a community resource fair, and developing a community resource guide. Participants emphasized the need to promote 211 and involve the Chamber of Commerce and 'Business after 5' meetings to promote human services agencies serving the area.

**Additional Input**

Finally, focus group participants were asked if there were other issues that were of concern to the community. The table below summarizes the topics mentioned and indicates what counties expressed the concern.

	<b>La Crosse</b>	<b>Monroe</b>	<b>Trempealeau</b>	<b>Vernon</b>	<b>Houston</b>
Youth activities	✓	✓		✓	✓
Teen temporary shelter	✓	✓			
Sex education	✓		✓		
Teen pregnancy	✓		✓		
Dating violence and domestic violence	✓				
Human trafficking	✓				
Alcohol and drug abuse	✓	✓	✓		
Address minority needs	✓	✓			
Sick child day care	✓			✓	
Obesity		✓			
Pedestrian friendly cities		✓			