

MIDDLESEX COUNTY 2017 NEEDS ASSESSMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Middlesex County's two community action agencies, the Jewish Renaissance Foundation (JRF) and the Puerto Rican Action Board (PRAB), agreed to produce a countywide needs assessment. Subsequently, it formed a partnership United Way of Central Jersey, Middlesex County Office of Human Services, and WellCare Health Plans joined in the effort. Together, they became the Middlesex County Assessment Planning Group (MCAPG).

In September 2016, MCAPG convened nearly 40 community stakeholders to identify overarching county needs. They identified five (5) areas: *Housing, Education, Healthcare, Transportation* and *Employment*, which became the focus of the county assessment. Throughout 2017, a research team produced the report, and MCAPG reached recommendations. In 2018, MCAPG was prepared to disseminate the report via official releases across the county.

Ultimately, MCAPG seeks to contribute to the growth of the county and other county-serving entities through the development of county plans and collaboration among county residents and institutions. In particular, JRF and PRAB, the county's two CAP agencies, will review the feedback obtained through official releases of the assessment and other events, and will integrate the findings and recommendations into their own community action plans.

WHAT DOES MIDDLESEX COUNTY LOOK LIKE?

Middlesex County is situated in north-central New Jersey, midway between New York City and Philadelphia, and midway between Boston and Washington D.C. It encompasses 322 square miles, and includes 25 municipalities. It is the second most populous county in New Jersey, with a population that grew from 809,858 in 2010 to 840,900 in 2017. Edison and Woodbridge are the largest municipalities, each with over 100K residents. The county is very diverse, with largest percentages of Asians (24%) and Hispanics (20%); Carteret and North Brunswick are among the most diverse. It also is well-educated with 47% of residents possessing at least a two-year college degree.

The county's median household income in 2015 was \$79,593 (7th in the state). Some of its municipalities experience high levels of poverty, with New Brunswick and Perth Amboy being the highest. New Brunswick's poverty rate was 34.7% in 2015, and its severe poverty rate was 18.8% (2016). Perth Amboy's poverty rate was 22.8%, and its severe poverty rate was 10% (2016). In addition, the median household incomes in New Brunswick and Perth Amboy were \$38,435 and \$44,024, respectively (2015). New Brunswick and Perth Amboy also had the highest population density per square mile in the county, as well as the highest concentration of homelessness (2015). The county as a whole represented nearly 5% of the state's total homeless population (2016).

COUNTY NEED 1: HOUSING

Homelessness: In 2017, there were 8,532 homeless people in New Jersey. In Middlesex County, 372 households were homeless, most of whom were either black or white households; over 33% were Hispanic. The majority of these households (69%) were housed in emergency shelters or transitional housing; single women headed most of the families. The Middlesex County Board of Social Services (MCBSS) houses a major share of homeless families in sheltered housing. Most of these families benefit from the Temporary Rental Assistance Program (TRA). Between 2016 and 2017, the county experienced a 19% increase in its homeless population. In addition, it was certified as reaching Functional Zero for Veterans' Homelessness, given that a system is in place to assist homeless veterans in obtaining permanent housing within 90 days.

Affordable Housing: The 4,902 households (33% of households) in Middlesex County that were living either in poverty or below the basic cost of living were in need of affordable housing. Perth Amboy has over 2,430 affordable and voucher units. New Brunswick has 17 low-income housing apartment complexes with 1,513 affordable rental apartments. There are also 636 Project-Based Section 8 subsidized "HUD apartments", as well as 970 other low-income apartments that are not eligible for rental assistance, but are considered affordable housing.

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Families and Children: Housing instability affects the functioning and well-being of families. Important indicators of housing instability were whether a family was receiving Emergency Assistance (EA), and was participating in Work First New Jersey (WFNJ), receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In May 2017, about 6.7% of Middlesex County residents were receiving some type of public assistance: 667 families were receiving Emergency Assistance (EA) payments in Middlesex County; 1,584 adults and children were receiving WFNJ/TANF assistance; and 28,836 adults and 25,641 children were receiving SNAP. In addition, many county families facing housing instability are living in unsafe situations, including overcrowded homes, cars, shelters, or motels. While HUD operates several subsidy programs for low-income county residents, most of them are already at capacity.

Seniors: In 2013, Middlesex County had 104,417 elderly residents 65 years of age or older, (13% of the population). The median annual income was \$22,887 (2015). Most could not afford to make the \$12,648 annual rent payment. Seniors are eligible for various HUD programs in the county, but many still face housing instability. The number of affordable housing units designated to seniors is not proportionate to their share of the population. Piscataway, Sayreville, Woodbridge have sizable affordable senior housing, while South Brunswick, Jamesburg, Monroe, and Plainsboro have less affordable senior housing.

COUNTY NEED 2: EDUCATION

Preschool through High School: In 1985, *Abbott v. Burke* deemed public primary and secondary education in poor communities throughout New Jersey to be substandard. Subsequently, the state has paid for all pre-K students in the designated School Development Authority (SDA) districts. New Brunswick and Perth Amboy Public Schools are the SDA districts in the county. Altogether, 3,142 county children are enrolled in state-funded preschools (2014). For the 2017-18 school year, Jamesburg, Carteret & South Amboy also received designation as SDA districts.

Over, 8,200 county children were enrolled in public kindergartens in 2012 (2014). Of residents 25 or older, 88.8% have a high school diploma or GED, and 41% have a bachelor's degree or higher. These rates are similar to US and NJ rates. Eleven municipalities have higher success rates than the overall NJ average in both categories, while 14 have lower averages. Also, seven municipalities with high school diploma attained were less than the state average. In a number of county municipalities, the percentage of students who did not meet or exceed grade level expectation in grades 10 and 11 for PARCC was high. Also, over 60% of county schools experienced academic shortcomings.

Child Care: In 2015, Middlesex County was in 4th place in the Kids Count ranking for childcare. The county has 250 licensed child care centers with 21,747 children, and 124 registered family child care homes serve 620 children (2016). The cost of childcare varies greatly by municipality. South Brunswick is the most expensive municipality, where centers charge up to \$355 a week for infants 0-18 months. Meanwhile, some Hopelawn centers in Woodbridge Township charge as little as \$125, making it the least expensive municipality.

COUNTY NEED 3: HEALTH CARE

The top causes of death in Middlesex County are heart disease, malignant neoplasms (cancer), all other residual diseases originating from cancers, cerebrovascular diseases (stroke), chronic lower respiratory diseases (CLRD), accidents, and Alzheimer's. The Raritan Bay Medical Center's Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) (2014) found obesity, mental health and substance abuse, diabetes, heart disease and other cardiovascular diseases, and cancer to be the most important health issues. It also found that healthy nutrition/obesity, mental health and substance abuse, diabetes, heart disease and other cardiovascular diseases, and cancer could be addressed by area medical centers. The Princeton HealthCare System CHNA (2015) found the top three causes of death to be heart disease, cancer, and stroke. It also deemed the top three health concerns to be access to care, aging-related health issues, and obesity. Respondents reported having difficulty accessing local providers, especially among seniors.

Uninsured: Middlesex County had the second highest uninsured rate in New Jersey in 2013, with 14% under 65 years of age being uninsured. Many people with low incomes and no health insurance could not afford medical treatment. Consequently, they may postpone necessary care and forgo preventive care, such as childhood immunizations and routine check-ups. In addition, they are more likely to be hospitalized for health conditions that could have been prevented. In 2012, just 40% of New Jersey doctors accepted new Medicaid patients.

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COUNTY NEED 4: TRANSPORTATION

New Jersey is a key transportation hub with a major international airport, two major sea ports, commuter and freight railway depots, interstate and intercity bus centers, ferry terminals and interstate highways. Middlesex County lies at the center of the state, and has more than one hundred roadways, including county routes, U.S. highways, and interstate highways.

Plans and Projects: The North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) launched the pilot Street Smart campaign in Woodbridge to increase pedestrian safety, which involved upholding posted speed limits, stopping for pedestrians in the crosswalk, waiting for walk signals, and heads up, phones down driving. It became the model for the program, with the number of pedestrian fatalities having reduced.

Transit Villages: New Brunswick, the county seat of Middlesex, was designated a Transit Village. South Amboy and Dunellen are the other two transit villages. The county was selected for a CORE study plan to orient new development toward the cultural center of a town where public transit access exists, including pedestrian connections between residential areas, job centers, and cultural and/or recreational sites.

Mobility: Increasingly, millennials, Generation Y, Empty Nesters and seniors are seeking communities with efficient public transportation options. Smart technologies have been in use in county communities, and have played a role in reducing congestion and making roadways safer. They have promoted energy conservation and have helped enhance the environment. Now, some “non-attainment” areas in the county, which had been non-compliant regarding Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Federal Clean Act requirements, are meeting the standards.

Trip Making: Nearly 80% of all trips were within Middlesex County or between the county and an adjoining county. The average number of trips per household per day was 10.5, while the average number of trips per person per day was 3.9 (4.1 for the region). Eight (8) percent of all trips were transit trips, and 25% were work related. The average work trip duration was 33 minutes, while the average non-work trip duration was 17 minutes. Ten percent of all workers used public transit. The largest percentage of commuters, however, drove to work.

Motor Vehicles: Only 39% of New Brunswick’s residents drive alone to work (2016). About one-quarter (24.3%) of county residents have access to at least one car; 40.8% to two cars; 19.1% to 3 cars; 8.2% to 4 cars; and 3.4% to 5 cars (2017). On the other hand, only 3.5% do not have access to a car. Still, the dispersed physical environment hinders considerable public transportation use. Low-income county families who do not own a car and rely on public transportation may be eligible to get assistance from various support programs. However, there is limited access to some of these resources if they fall just above the poverty level. Even for those eligible, access to public transportation is still limited in parts of the county, especially when seeking employment.

Children: During academic year 2012-2013, New Jersey spent \$177,878,057 on transportation, and Middlesex County spent \$9,202,217. In 2008, the Highland Park school district eliminated its school bus services, which led to \$100,000 in annual savings. In its place, the 1.9-square mile town laid out crosswalks, trained new crossing guards, designated walk-to-school routes and poured new sidewalks in order to make walking and biking safer. This approach may not be feasible in larger communities. Yet, sidewalks and bike paths may help revitalize a neighborhood and increase the likelihood of students walking or biking to school. In Middlesex County, both the Highland Park municipality and Metuchen Campbell Elementary School have been recognized at the golden award level, the highest, of New Jersey’s Safe Routes to School Program (SRTS), which encourages safer and more accessible walking and bicycling environments for children through education, training, and research.

Seniors: The New Jersey Travel Independence Program, housed at the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University, offers travel guidance to seniors using public transportation in Middlesex County and throughout New Jersey. It offers one-on-one travel instruction, pairing customers with travel instructors, as well as group seminars. The Middlesex County Area Transportation (MCAT) also provides transportation services to older adults (60+) and people with disabilities for a \$3 fee. It is a predominately reservation-based service, but also has fixed route shuttles that do not require reservations. The fixed route service has a regular schedule with a suggested fare of \$1 for the general public and \$0.50 for residents over 60 years of age. Nevertheless, some shuttles have been discontinued. In 2011, the MCAT shuttles logged nearly 1.9 million miles and served 359,129 passengers. This was 11% higher than the previous year. Ridership on MCAT grew steadily, proving to be an important transportation resource in the county.

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COUNTY NEED 5: EMPLOYMENT

Unemployment rates have fallen substantially in general. Overall, Middlesex County's unemployment rate was 4.4 % (2016). In Perth Amboy, unemployment was highest, with a 7.8% rate, New Brunswick's rate was 4.4%. On the other hand, unemployment in Cranbury was as low as 3.3%.

Making a Living Wage: Unemployed residents are not earning a wage. Among the employed, many jobs pay wages that do not support a family's basic needs. In 2013, New Jersey raised the minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$8.25 an hour. Subsequently, the minimum wage has been adjusted every January 1, according to changes in the cost of living index. The minimum wage rose to \$8.60 on January 1, 2018. Working at minimum wage equates to a gross of \$1,445 per month, which is not a sufficient living wage when rent averages about \$950+. This does not include the cost of transportation, child care, and other family expenses.

Economic Well-Being: The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranked New Jersey 24th in the US for well-being, including nine factors: education, jobs, income, health, safety, civic engagement, environment, accessibility to services and housing. New Jersey scored 1st for disposable income per capita and 10th for access to services, but scored low in the environment (44th in exposure to air pollution) and housing (42nd).

Median household income range from a high of \$128,750 for Cranbury to a low of \$38,435 in New Brunswick. Perth Amboy was \$44,024, the second lowest in the county. Overall, the county median household income in 2015 was \$78,643 (\$72,222 for NJ). Similarly, there were large disparities between municipalities in per capita income, ranging from a high of \$62,966 for Cranbury to a low of \$14,407 for New Brunswick in 2015. Perth Amboy is 2nd with a per capita income of \$19,218. The county's per capita income in 2015 was \$35,941 (\$38,911 in NJ).

Measures of Economic Well-being for Middlesex County: The US average property tax rate is 1.19. New Jersey's average property tax is 2.19, the highest in the country. Municipal property tax rates in Middlesex County are all well above the national average and at least twice the state rate in 16 municipalities. In six (6) municipalities, they are three (3) times the state's averages, with the highest being Dunellen at a 12.176.

Property taxes provide the major source of school funding in several school systems. Not only are high property taxes often associated with negative economic well-being, but, when the school system underperforms, the lack of a feeling of economic well-being is heightened. Indeed, high property tax rates affect the growth, job base, retention of residents and economic well-being of the County.

Families/Children/Teens/Young adults and Economic Well-Being: In 2016, New Jersey ranked 20th on the Annie E. Casey Foundation economic well-being scale. In 2014, New Jersey ranked 16th, and in 2012, 15% of New Jersey's children were living in poverty, 26% had parents who lacked secure employment, 45% lived in households with a high housing cost burden, and 6% of teens were not in school or working.

The high cost of childcare in Middlesex County has also affected families' sense of well-being. The shortfall between a childcare subsidy and the weekly fee at a licensed childcare center can be debilitating on the family budget. This shortfall can be as much as \$45.80 a week in the case of infant care, while the preschool shortfall can be as much as \$57 a week (2016). In addition, the available community-based slots that accept the subsidy has decreased.

Seniors: About 15% (or (1.35 million) of New Jersey's almost 9 million residents are over 65 years of age. In Middlesex County, almost 13.5% or 111,500) of nearly 832,000 residents are seniors. Statewide, many seniors continue to work, with about 31% between the ages of 65 and 74 still in the labor force; in the county, the rate was 29.1%. Among the over 75 years group, the rates were 7.1% statewide, and 5.9% in the county.

Many county seniors cannot meet basic needs without assistance—even when employed. Some depend solely on social security, and need support from family members or social services to survive. Only 16% are employed, while 34% earn \$30,000 or less per year. In addition, 48% of the elderly receive SNAP (2013). The poverty rate for seniors in the state was 8.1% (2016), while it was 7.4% in the county. Eight (8) municipalities had elderly poverty rates that were higher than the state average, including Perth Amboy and New Brunswick (30%).

Nineteen percent (19%) of senior households in New Jersey are poverty-stricken, and 37% of seniors in the state meet the criteria for being an ALICE household. Forty percent (40%) of seniors (19,352) had incomes that were too low to meet their basic needs: healthcare, transportation, housing, food, and miscellaneous expenses, based on locality-specific measures of the cost of living (2014).

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RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to these county needs, the Middlesex County Assessment Planning Group (MCAPG) presents these recommendations, and calls for county institutions to help develop a county plan & contribute to its implementation:

COUNTY NEED 1: HOUSING

- Housing that is safe and affordable should be made available for all residents in Middlesex County, based on the household incomes within the individual municipalities
- Housing that has been foreclosed or abandoned should be rehabilitated rather than removed from the rolls of affordable housing
- Municipalities should be further engaged to ensure housing stock is increased, is affordable, safe and available to its residents
- Increase or create housing subsidies for families facing housing instability due to dire financial constraints

COUNTY NEED 2: EDUCATION

- Quality early childhood education and preschool education programs in every school district should be available at no cost
- Free tutoring programs in schools/centers/libraries should be available for children and adolescents K-12 to improve upon the school level expectations and graduation rates
- Opportunities for career pathways awareness, education completion, and skill building/training should be offered earlier to teens/young adults

COUNTY NEED 3: HEALTH CARE

- Increase awareness, access, and collaboration around comprehensive wellness programs and preventive health services
- Make healthcare affordable and accessible to everyone, including the uninsured
- Increase the number of health care providers who accept Medicaid and Medicare, as well as other insurances

COUNTY NEED 4: TRANSPORTATION

- Increased public transportation vehicles, stations and routes that are accessible, affordable and reasonably priced should be prioritized to allow for more mobility
- Improved, properly maintained and modernized infrastructure is needed to accommodate the growing increase of residents and the transporting of consumables, home goods, fuel etc., while keeping the community safe
- Public/private partnerships like those of Transit Villages are viable options to grow the housing stock, job base, improve local stability and foster a sense of community
- Seven-day shuttle services between residential neighborhoods and public transportation or shopping areas is one option that could improve transportation opportunities for the aforementioned groups

COUNTY NEED 5: EMPLOYMENT

- Everyone who seeks employment, and is able to work, should be able to find employment or be trained in areas that fit their interests and/or skills level in economically viable industries
- Minimum wages should be increased to reflect a living wage for the residents
- Increased opportunities for skill building, educational attainment, vocational training in demand occupations and employment opportunities will assist in family stability and economic well-being of residents and the county
- Individuals who are unable to work, but are at or below the poverty level and in need of resources/support, should be able to access information for assistance in identifying and/or obtaining resources to assist in their needs

For additional copies of the MC 2017 Needs Assessment, please visit www.prab.org or www.jrfnj.org