



Needs Assessment

MVAC partnered with the Minnesota State University, Mankato Master of Social Work program to conduct the Community Needs Assessment in the summer of 2022 for South Central Minnesota. Students conducted surveys with clients, staff, and stakeholders to provide feedback and inform the agency on local needs, resources, and opportunities in a combination of closed and open-ended questions.

Demographic Trends and Highlights

The 9 Counties in the South-Central Region of Minnesota cover 5,128 square miles, with a population of 237,155. This is a 2.53% increase over the 2010 census. While overall the region shows growth, it is not a homogenous area. Some counties are growing, others are shrinking, and some remain virtually unchanged:

Increase: Blue Earth, Le Sueur, Nicollet Counties
Decrease: Faribault, Martin, Sibley Counties
Unchanged: Brown, Watonwan, Waseca Counties

The regional poverty rate of just over 12% is slightly lower than the national average. Blue Earth County has over 17% of residents living below the poverty line, while Brown, Le Sueur, Nicollet, Sibley, and Waseca Counties are all below 10%.

Seniors age 65+ make up 17.27% of the region's population, compared to 15.64% nationwide. Counties vary widely as Blue Earth County brings down the average at 13.27%, while 23% of Faribault and Martin County residents and nearly 21% of Brown County residents are over 65.

On average, 12.28% of children in South Central MN are in poverty, but there are pockets that are much higher and lower. Watonwan County reports 21% child poverty and Martin County has 19%, while Brown County has the lowest child poverty at 8%.

The regional labor force participation rate sits at 69.45% compared to 62.4% nationwide. This number represents the percent of the population that is either working or actively looking for work. Martin County has a lower participation rate at 64.2%, likely related to the number of residents over the age of 65, which both Nicollet and Blue Earth County, with a population that skews younger, has a participation rate of over 71%

Families that spend over 30% of their income on their housing costs are considered cost burdened. The regional average remained unchanged in recent years at 23.5% being cost burdened, with counties ranging from 16.81% in Brown County to 29.89% in Blue Earth County.

Participants

63 stakeholders responded to the survey, including MVAC board members, community partners, and local leaders.

55 staff responded to the survey, representing all 9 counties and departments within the agency.

685 clients responded to the survey, representing all 9 counties and an array of programs. The largest number of participants received Energy Assistance, following by Weatherization, Head Start, Family Homeless Prevention, and Employment & Training services.

Survey Results

Communication: What is your preferred method of contact for services? (Clients only)

1. Text
2. Phone
3. In person
4. Zoom

Barrier: What are the barriers to access services in your community?

Clients	Stakeholders	Staff
Eligibility	Knowledge of services	Limited internet
Knowledge of services	Transportation	Lack of access to computer
Transportation	Mental health	Transportation

Many clients identified the benefits cliff of being just above eligibility levels but still unable to meet all basic needs as a barrier to service. Additional responses included paperwork and complex income requirements.

Unmet Needs: What are the 3 most critical unmet needs in your community?

Clients	Stakeholders	Staff
Housing	Mental Health Services	Housing
Health Care / Dental	Affordable Housing	Childcare
Food	Transportation	Employment

After identifying broad categories of unmet needs, respondents were asked to specify within each of those categories what the unmet needs or resources are in their community.

Education:

Clients	Stakeholders	Staff
Parent involvement	Affordable training and education for adults	Affordable childcare during work hours
Community knowledge of resources	Preschool for school readiness	Transportation
Affordable training and education for adults	Community knowledge of resources	Affordable training and education for adults

All three groups identified the need for affordable training and education for adults. While there are current programs available, some have strict eligibility requirements, and families find it difficult to meet basic needs while taking time out of the workforce for education and training. Additional comments included the need for employment supports for individuals with felony records, seniors and in securing apprenticeships.

Housing

Clients	Stakeholders	Staff
Affordable housing	Affordable housing	Affordable housing
Home ownership programs	Rental assistance	Community supports for homelessness
Rental assistance	Safe living conditions	Rental assistance

All three groups identified the same issue as the primary concern – affordable housing. In addition, all groups identified rental assistance as an issue. This is consistent with the data that shows nearly 24% of households are cost-burdened and paying over 30% of their income for housing.

Additional comments regarding unmet housing needs include: rent is more expensive than buying in some areas, but credit is a challenge; help with home improvement and repairs, and housing for large families.

Health

Clients	Stakeholders	Staff
Dental	Affordable medical and dental care	Affordable medical and dental health
Mental health care	Mental health care	Transportation to appointments
Food / nutrition	Transportation to appointments	Food / nutrition Dental care that accepts MA

Dental care emerged as the primary need for clients in healthcare in this assessment. Many identified that there are no providers that take their insurance. One respondent called over 15 dentists offices but could not secure an appointment for her child due to payment.

Economic Stability / Asset Building

Clients	Stakeholders	Staff
Assistance with low-income loans	Financial counseling	Financial counseling
Financial counseling	Disseminate financial resource info	Education on asset building
Educational assistance	Access to low interest loans	Dissemination of financial resources info

Open ended responses provided a wide range of answers, including the need for first-time homebuyer classes and budgeting 101.

Support Services

Clients	Stakeholders	Staff
Senior supports	Life skills programs and services	Transportation
Life Skills programs and services	Transportation	Life skills programs and services
Legal services	Child support	Legal services

Support services is a broad category that is up for interpretation. But all groups identified life skills support and services, later specified as skills for keeping up a home or apartment, budgeting / financial skills, and other independent living skills.

Transportation

Clients responded the greatest needs were to have an operational vehicle and senior transport. Public transportation was identified as something that is lacking, but due region being largely rural, clients identified a personal vehicle as being crucial to getting to work, school and appointments.

Additional Comments – open-ended response

Several needs stood out from previous need assessments. This includes the impact of inflation on buying power. Clients identified that their wages haven't changed, but their ability to pay for basic needs is less than it used to be. In addition, as wages slowly increase in response to inflation, clients find themselves just above eligibility levels, falling off the benefits cliff where they now make too much for assistance, but not enough to pay bills. Home repair costs, gas prices and the cost of food were also specifically identified.

Clients	Stakeholders
Parent involvement	Affordable training and education for adults
Community knowledge of resources	Preschool for school readiness
Affordable training and education for adults	Community knowledge of resources

Additional Staff Questions

What is the best way to spread knowledge about services with potential clients?

1. Staff outreach
2. Client self-referrals
3. Social media
4. Brochures

What is one service you believe MVAC should offer to address clients' unmet needs?

1. Financial planning/ mentoring
2. Better coordination of services
3. More unmet needs funds
4. Transportation assistance

What existing MVAC service do you feel as been most impactful?

1. Energy Assistance
2. Head Start
3. Unmet Needs