

2019 Mat-Su Community Health Needs Assessment Executive Summary

HEARING EVERY VOICE

DECEMBER 2019 — Contributing Authors: McDowell Group Anchorage Office; Strategy Solutions, Inc.; and Mat-Su Health Foundation Staff



Long sunny day to grow sweet and organic carrots.
— Latinx Residents



The future of Williwaw.
— Williwaw Community Residents



Classically AND Traditionally trained.
— Knik Tribe

Every three years, the Mat-Su Health Foundation and the Mat-Su Regional Medical Center conduct a Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) for Mat-Su in partnership with the community. As Mat-Su continues to grow – the population increased from 91,697 in 2011 to 105,743 in 2018 – the health of Mat-Su residents is simultaneously improving, staying the same and worsening, depending on the health issue. In the next few pages, highlights of this change are reported.

At the request of the CHNA Steering Committee, the assessment was led by the following values:

- ▶ State clearly whose voice is being heard when reporting data findings.
- ▶ Strive to hear voices of residents from many different situations/circumstances/cultures in the community.
- ▶ Groups participating must have self-determination.
- ▶ There must be an authentic partnership with the group.
- ▶ Focus on strengths.

The assessment used several different research methods that gathered feedback from different parts of the community in order to hear from many different residents. Telephone and mail survey data (such as the Mat-Su Household Survey, U.S. Census, and Behavioral Health Factor Surveillance System) captured the voices of those who are willing to respond to these types of surveys. A photovoice project was also conducted that relied on community resident groups to take pictures of what enhances or inhibits their health in Mat-Su. The groups included Chickaloon elders, women, and tribal citizens; Knik tribal members; the Filipino community; older residents; parents; the Williwaw community; Mat-Su Health Services clients; and youth. Once they took pictures, they created captions as a group that describe the picture and the message they are trying to convey.

Community health goals were established by looking at the data and the pictures/captions. Then the goals were ranked two different ways: 1) by importance to address for the whole borough and 2) by the feasibility to improve for sub-regions of Mat-Su.



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The goals for Mat-Su that rose to the top in this year's needs assessment are listed below. This executive summary will examine each of these goals. The Steering Committee ranked the goals on the overall importance of achieving the goal to the whole borough and the feasibility to actually being able to reach the goal to different subareas of the borough.

Top Ranked Goals	All of Mat-Su (Importance)	Core Area (Feasibility)	Parks Hwy Area (Feasibility)	Upper Su (Feasibility)	Glenn Hwy (Feasibility)
Resident economic stability	●			○	
Safe and healthy relationships	●	○	●	●	○
Strong social connections	●	●			●
Freedom from discrimination related to race, ethnicity, disability	●				●
Excellent mental health	○				
Affordable/accessible healthy recreation		●	●		●
Accessible behavioral healthcare		●	○	●	
Affordable/accessible preventive care		●	●	●	
Healthy environment			●	●	●
RANKING: Darker color = higher ranking in importance or feasibility					



I feel broken the only solution I can think of is to end everything.
— Kabayan Inc. Filipino Community of Mat Su



Our ideal community cares for all living things.
— Chickaloon Traditional Council, Tribal Citizens



After only one year of those suffering from addiction living on Williwaw property, the devastation left behind is insurmountable. — Williwaw Community Residents

Having a **Healthy Environment** is the second most highly-ranked goal in terms of feasibility in achieving in three Mat-Su areas. Resident groups mentioned how being out in nature is healing and health promoting, whether they are walking, fishing, picking berries, playing, or just sitting. Mat-Su has an abundance of beautiful places to do all these things; residents said that it is important to preserve and take care of our environment. The Mat-Su Trails and Parks Foundation and Valley Recycling Solutions along with tribal partners and others all work to take care of our Mat-Su environment.

Having a community where **All Residents Have Economic Stability that Allows Them to Have Safe Housing and Healthy Food** was ranked as the most important health goal for Mat-Su. Our borough has 44,014 residents who were employed in 2018 and an unemployment rate of 7.6%. In 2017, 11.9% of residents lived in poverty, including 9% of families and 14% of children. Although unemployment has decreased slightly, the percent of residents in poverty has increased. Residents reported that having healthy food and safe and affordable housing are crucial to one's health and fulfilling ones potential. This goal is linked to the healthy environment goal; residents reported that it is important for them to protect the environment that allows access to healthy subsistence food.

Having **Safe and Healthy Relationships** rose to the top five selected in all forms of ranking. Mat-Su youth and adults are experiencing more dating violence, domestic violence, and sexual assault as compared to 2011. Youth are experiencing more bullying at school, including cyberbullying. A bright spot is that substantiated allegations of child maltreatment have decreased. In Mat-Su, Alaska Family Services runs a domestic violence shelter for residents, and does prevention work. Prevention work is also being done by a community group called No More Mat-Su, and is included in the wellness curriculum for the school district. It is clear these efforts need to be augmented to turn these trends around.

Having **Accessible and Affordable Healthy Recreational Opportunities** was mentioned by residents as being important for older residents, youth, and families, and ranked as being feasible to achieve in three Mat-Su areas. This goal is closely linked to the safe and healthy relationships goal. Research has shown that youth who have opportunities to learn, plan, and grow while being connected to each other and supportive adults are less likely to experience substance use, depression, violence, and unsafe relationships. There is a new initiative, Youth360, with pilot sights in Houston and Wasilla that is working to support youth and provide more options for involvement in healthy recreational opportunities.

Having Accessible Behavioral Health Care and Excellent Mental Health are goals that are linked and have shown up prominently in the two past needs assessments as well as this one. Behavioral health includes mental health and substance use disorders. The status of youth mental health is extremely concerning and has worsened since 2016. Currently over 1 in 5 middle school and traditional high school students have considered suicide in the last year, over half of traditional students report signs of depression in the last year, and over one-third report considering suicide. The suicide rate in Mat-Su is higher than in Alaska and 3 times that of the U.S. The bright spot for youth and adults is that binge drinking has lessened since 2011. Access to behavioral health care is still an issue in Mat-Su, especially for residents who have Medicaid – the adult wait is at least a month, and children often need to wait many months. The MSHF has funded a program that places behavioral health providers in 11 schools to help improve access to behavioral health care for students.

Having Strong Social Connections impacts health and is an element of the vision of a healthy community. High levels of social connection may help one live longer and has been associated with a better immune system and faster recovery from disease. Individuals with high levels of social connection may experience less anxiety, depression, and suicide. Since 2016, we have seen an

increase in social connection in Mat-Su related to residents who report helping each other out, being able to ask others for favors, attending public social gatherings, and volunteering.

Many of these goals are related; for example, **Having a Community that is Free From Discrimination** related to race, ethnicity, and disability is crucial for the physical and mental health of residents. When a majority of people, laws, and funding systems systematically discriminate against a group of people based on a characteristic of the group, it can deprive them of equal power and cause inequality in society. This can create a condition that restricts resources that promote health and cause stress and other health-related issues for that group. When asked if there is a significant level of racism in Mat-Su, people of color were more likely to say “yes” and to feel that the level had increased in the last year.

Having Accessible and Affordable Preventive Care was ranked as a feasible goal in three Mat-Su areas. This goal links to preventing falls, getting vaccinations, and health screenings. These are all areas where an increase in the use of preventative care could improve health in general for Mat-Su residents. This is especially true for seniors who report low levels of getting the flu and pneumonia vaccines and who suffer from falls at a higher rate than other age groups.



From forest to table; continued stewardship of wild harvested foods promoting connection and well-being.
— Chickaloon Traditional Council, Tribal Citizens



Our future blossoms!
— Chickaloon Traditional Council,
Sutton Women's Group

For the full 2019 Mat-Su Community Health Needs Assessment report visit healthymatsu.org.