RWJF Culture of Health Community Portrait

Allegheny County, Pennsylvania
ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Sentinel Communities Surveillance project, conducted by RTI International in collaboration with the RAND Corporation, is sponsored by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The project, which began in 2016, will monitor activities related to how a Culture of Health is developing in each of 30 diverse communities around the country for at least five years. This community-specific report follows from the initial Snapshot report for Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, and provides insights into drivers of a Culture of Health in the community. The report is not intended to comprehensively describe every action underway in Allegheny County, but rather focuses on key insights, opportunities, and challenges as a community advances on its journey toward health and well-being for all residents.

The information in this report was obtained using several data collection methods, including key informant telephone interviews, an environmental scan of online and published community-specific materials, review of existing population surveillance and monitoring data, and collection of local data or resources provided by community contacts or interview respondents. Interviews were conducted with individuals representing organizations working in a variety of sectors (for example, health, business, education, faith-based, and environment) in the community. Sector mapping was used to systematically identify respondents in a range of sectors that would have insights about community health and well-being to ensure organizational diversity across the community. We also asked original interviewees to recommend individuals to speak with in an effort to supplement important organizations or perspectives not included in the original sample.

A total of 12 unique respondents were interviewed during spring 2017 for this report. All interviews (lasting 30–75 minutes each) were conducted using semistructured interview guides tailored to the unique context and activities taking place in each community and to the role of the respondent in the community. Interviewers used probes to ensure that they obtained input on specific items of interest (for example, facilitators and barriers to improved population health, well-being, and equity) and open-ended questions to ensure that they fully addressed and captured participants’ responses and perceptions about influences on health and well-being in their communities. Individuals who participated in a key informant interview are not identified by name or organization to protect confidentiality, but they are identified as a “respondent.”

Information collected through environmental scans includes program and organizational information available on internet websites, publicly available documents, and media reports. Population surveillance and monitoring data were compiled from publicly available datasets, including the American Community Survey; Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System; and other similar federal, state, and local data sources.

We will conduct ongoing surveillance and monitoring activities in these communities through 2020 and report updated information on their progress, challenges, and lessons learned in improving health and well-being for all residents.

Data collection and monitoring thus far has revealed common themes among otherwise distinct communities. The next phase of this project will be cross-community reports. These will examine common themes across subgroups of the 30 communities (for example, rural communities, communities experiencing large demographic shifts, and communities leveraging local data for decision-making). These reports will also be posted on cultureofhealth.org.
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Introduction

In our snapshot profile of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, we described a vibrant, forward-thinking region in which the blight of a hollowed-out industrial sector, racial disparity, environmental degradation, and poverty remain in stubborn contrast to measurable progress. In the early 20th century, the county was one of the most populous in the United States, but the steel industry's collapse in the 1970s and 1980s led to significant population decline. Today, Allegheny County is undergoing an economic and physical transformation. Young people attracted by the region's medical, educational, and digital technology industries have fueled gentrification in downtown neighborhoods, while older, lower-income residents are struggling with high rates of unemployment, poor housing options, and high rates of chronic illnesses. In this report, we draw insights from the region's transformation after the collapse of steel, the redevelopment of some neighborhoods, and Allegheny County's efforts to remove long-term barriers to health for low-income minority and rural residents. We also examine the county's efforts to improve population health and build a healthier and more equitable community using the Culture of Health Action Framework to interpret and organize key findings. The Framework prioritizes four broad areas: 1) Making Health a Shared Value; 2) Fostering Cross-Sector Collaboration to Improve Well-Being; 3) Creating Healthier, More Equitable Communities; and 4) Strengthening Integration of Health Services and Systems, within which activities and investments can advance population health, well-being, and equity in diverse community contexts. Using the
Framework, we draw insights about the cross-cutting facilitators that support Allegheny County’s efforts and the community-specific barriers that limit their success.

ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

With 1.2 million residents and 130 municipalities, Allegheny County is the second-largest county in Pennsylvania and anchors the state’s 11-county southwestern region. Pittsburgh, the county seat and largest city, is garnering national recognition as a symbol of post-industrial re-emergence. The region has a long history of tackling environmental and economic challenges. The coal and steel industries modernized and empowered the region, but also contributed to urban poverty and air pollution extreme enough to earn Pittsburgh the dubious nickname “The Smoky City.” Pittsburgh’s 1960s renaissance emphasized private-public cooperation and influenced the regional foundations active today. When the 1980s collapse of the steel industry resulted in mass unemployment and population drain, collaboration between public and private organizations increased as groups sought to help struggling communities. Two industry sectors—professional, scientific, and technical services; and health care and social services—account for one-quarter of all jobs in Allegheny County, and both sectors are projected to grow by 12 percent over the next decade. Many of these jobs require extensive schooling or training, which many long-time Allegheny residents lack. New arrivals and graduates fill most of the best jobs, which feeds concerns that locals are being left behind as the new technology-based economy matures.

Among U.S. populations of at least 1 million, the Pittsburgh metropolitan area is one of the nation’s whitest. Despite modest growth in the area’s Hispanic population and a recent increase in refugees arriving from Africa and Asia, more than four of five Allegheny County residents are white. Black residents, who make up 13 percent of the county, are largely segregated in low-income neighborhoods. Disenfranchisement among black residents in Allegheny County has deep roots and has contributed to their exclusion from more recent economic prosperity. Historically, black residents were prohibited from joining worker support organizations, such as unions and settlement houses, and their housing options were limited by “redlining” practices that systematically denied mortgages to black residents. In Pittsburgh, black neighborhoods underwent further destabilization during the city’s mid-20th century urban renewal, including the destruction of the prosperous Lower Hill business district, which was cleared to construct a new civic arena. Today, unemployment among black county residents stands at 16 percent (the county’s overall unemployment rate is 7%). There are no concentrated black middle class neighborhoods, and many of the community’s most ambitious members are leaving to seek opportunities elsewhere. Meanwhile, gentrification in historically black neighborhoods by young, high-income residents is displacing long-time residents.

Tax incentives for redevelopment have benefitted some distressed neighborhoods, but tax abatements favoring new, upscale development in Pittsburgh at the expense of older neighborhoods remain a concern. The current stock of affordable housing is insufficient, with only 30 to 45 units available for every 100 extremely low-income households. Twenty-eight percent of renters and homeowners spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, while 13 percent spend at least 50 percent. The ring of Pittsburgh’s suburbs and the small, rural sections of Allegheny County present distinct and pressing problems. Sixty-one percent of Allegheny County residents who live below the poverty line reside in the suburbs where housing is cheaper, but where transportation and social services are harder to access. When these residents relocate, it can create logistical problems for the agencies that serve them. Allegheny County has three public housing authorities, and residents in need of housing services can be difficult to track when they move. In addition to ongoing poor health outcomes, both suburban and rural areas are experiencing a spike in drug abuse; opiate-related deaths, which jumped by nearly 70 percent between 2008 and 2014, overwhelmingly affect young to middle-aged white residents. The many isolated and rural communities in the county highlight the region’s transportation challenges and opportunities. Although the city and county park system has succeeded in making the urban center more biking and walking friendly, the majority of residents in Allegheny County’s outer regions still rely on cars that must travel over aging roads and bridges. The county’s public transit system, the Port Authority of Allegheny County, operates buses, light rail, and trolleys that serve more than 214,000 weekly riders. Many residents without cars must use long bus routes—with recent cutbacks, often more than one—to commute.

The region’s industrial past created poor environmental conditions that linger throughout Allegheny County. Air and water quality have improved, but Pittsburgh and Allegheny County still rank in the top 20 nationally for particulate-matter air pollution. Current pollution levels are linked to elevated risks of asthma, lung cancer, and other illnesses. “Hot spots” of high cancer risk are found near river valleys in the region, exacerbating health problems in many low-income communities, such as the Monongahela River Valley. The region’s fractured, aging wastewater infrastructure occasionally discharges raw sewage into area waterways during heavy rains.

Allegheny County has an extensive infrastructure for promoting and pursuing health and well-being for its residents. This includes the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD), one of the few county health departments in Pennsylvania; robust philanthropic foundations; 35 universities; prominent medical institutions; and a growing high-tech industry that employs a highly skilled workforce. The county boasts a strong history of collaboration between public and private interests to advance common ideals and objectives. These collaborations have become well established since the steel industry’s collapse, and their objectives and methods have evolved over time. Many governance and community engagement efforts focus on a built environment that supports healthy behaviors, fresh food, physical activity, storm water management, green infrastructure, and, increasingly, issues of equity.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC INTERESTS COORDINATE HEALTH PROMOTION EFFORTS

Allegheny County and Pittsburgh both have strong, progressive...
executives who are committed to promoting health and well-being and are building partnerships to increase awareness of their objectives. The centralized authority of these agencies is particularly important given the size and heterogeneous nature of the county government. Allegheny County has the largest number of municipalities of any Pennsylvania county (130), which creates an innate challenge to scaling health initiatives. Most of these municipalities have between 1,000 and 25,000 residents; the need to provide services in so many small municipalities has resulted in a plethora of agencies across the county, including 111 police agencies, 43 school districts, and three housing authorities. Adding to this complexity, 19 municipalities and the county itself operate under home rule, meaning that these local governments can regulate issues that are not explicitly managed by the state.16

The formation of county council districts is one positive outcome of Allegheny County's adoption of home rule. Council districts provide a means through which county officials and agencies can work directly with small groups of municipal leadership to collaborate on county-wide initiatives. Several other vehicles exist for engagement between disparate municipalities, including Councils of Government, which convene geographically connected municipalities; the Congress of Neighboring Communities, which convenes Pittsburgh and its surrounding municipalities on common policy challenges; and the Allegheny League of Municipalities.7 Through coordinated efforts, local and regional government initiatives work to counter the risk of fragmentation posed by the large number of municipalities.

Use of Data and Collaboration Prioritize Equity and Other Health Issues

Allegheny County has undertaken a wide array of initiatives involving multiple stakeholders to positively affect health and well-being. Notably, its health department has played a pivotal role in convening stakeholders and using data from multiple sectors to establish priority areas for the Plan for a Healthier Allegheny (PHA).19 Although legacy challenges affect efforts to improve environmental quality and transportation options, county stakeholders are addressing these issues through an established network of cross-sector collaborations and an abundance of data to better inform policy and economic decisions. Local stakeholders are working with struggling communities that have not benefited from the region’s renewal and are focusing specific efforts on policy solutions that address the intersection of poverty and racial equity.

Until recently, Allegheny County had lacked a cohesive, “overarching way to talk about health and wellness,” according to one government official. In the absence of a coordinated approach, inconsistent policies emerged across the county’s sprawling municipalities, city neighborhoods, and school districts, diluting the impact of data-informed strategies to enhance county-wide health and well-being.19

However, a five-year effort sponsored by the ACHD with the involvement of numerous regional cross-sector partners is working to transform the status quo. Unveiled in 2015, the PHA establishes broad priority areas that contain specific goals and objectives, strategies for action, and recommendations for community participation. PHA’s five priority areas are: 1) improving access to health care; 2) decreasing chronic disease risk behaviors; 3) improving the local environment; 4) improving maternal and child health; and 5) reducing risks to health.
associated with mental health and substance abuse disorders. These priority areas emerged from data gathered in the health department’s 2015 Community Health Assessment and from input at community meetings and from a diverse advisory coalition. Workgroups initially identified health disparities and social determinants of health as potential priority areas, but these issues were considered significant enough to emphasize across each of the five priority areas.

As part of the implementation process, workgroups were convened to develop strategies within each priority. Members were selected from the cross-sector advisory coalition, which now includes almost 100 organizational members, to finalize baseline and outcome metrics, collaborate on data collection activities, and identify areas that need additional work. The ACHD also developed internal plans to ensure that its resources support the priority areas and will provide annual updates on progress toward the PHA’s goals to guide ongoing implementation.

**MULTIPLE SECTORS CONVERGE TO HELP RESIDENTS ‘LIVE WELL’**

Although implementation has just reached the midway point, the PHA has spurred many public and private efforts that are building the momentum needed to achieve sustained progress. For example, to decrease chronic disease risk behaviors, the PHA aims to lower Allegheny County’s cigarette smoking rate among all residents and to reduce racial disparities associated with cigarette smoking. PHA leadership strongly supported the Pennsylvania General Assembly’s 2016 passage of a revenue bill that included a $1 increase in the cigarette tax and levied the first tax on smokeless tobacco, e-cigarettes, and other tobacco products. The cigarette tax came on the heels of a 2015 amendment to Pittsburgh’s code of ordinances that limited the use of smoking and tobacco products in city parks.

The PHA also prioritizes greater opportunities for physical activity to reduce obesity in school-age children. The Pittsburgh Public Schools and Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh, both members of PHA’s advisory coalition, partnered with the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy to establish a Parks Rx program, which focuses on getting children to use local parks through more connections with their schools, community, and health care providers. During the 2015–2016 school year, pilot programs were launched in two schools with a total enrollment of 466 students.

Although the ACHD’s leadership on the PHA has helped to forge new cross-sector partnerships and promote a greater awareness of how their efforts can enhance health, the department’s strong influence may foster complacency among some partners and even adversely affect coordinated efforts, according to some stakeholders. They report a perception that the PHA and associated activities are “owned” by ACHD and do not adequately represent the views of the advisory coalition. One social service respondent reported that “there’s not a shared decision-making model” in the PHA advisory group.

Live Well Allegheny is Allegheny County’s other signature initiative to promote community-wide health and well-being. Launched in 2016 by Allegheny County’s County Executive and operated by the ACHD, Live Well promotes a holistic view of health that involves the participation of schools, restaurants, workplaces, and communities. Stakeholders can gain Live Well certification by setting goals such as creating smoke-free environments or improving opportunities for good nutrition and physical activity. The campaign also includes initiatives to promote healthy food choices at corner stores, enable payments from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program at farmers’ markets, and increase physical activity in after-school programs.

As of 2017, 49 communities (including Pittsburgh), 13 school districts, 13 workplaces, and 41 restaurants have gained Live Well status, spreading a consistent message about healthy living across Allegheny County.

Live Well Allegheny has prioritized outreach to vulnerable communities, such as the Monongahela Valley and, as a result has fewer participants in wealthier communities. Support for specific components of the campaign remains strong: In 2016, the Richard King Mellon Foundation awarded the ACHD a $1.5 million grant to continue Live Well’s efforts to enhance food access by eliminating food deserts and expand opportunities for physical activity through changes to the built environment. The grant provides resources for a continued emphasis on serving the needs of disadvantaged communities in Allegheny County.

The practical interpretation of Live Well’s positive message and its guidelines varies, as does the capacity of individual stakeholders to promote healthy lifestyles and awareness of the campaign. At this stage, the initiative is focused on creating a common value around health in the communities it reaches. Metrics for evaluating the effectiveness of communities’ efforts have not yet been implemented.

**CREATING A CLEANER ENVIRONMENT AND STRONGER INFRASTRUCTURE**

Allegheny County’s legacy of smokestack industries coupled with heavy rainfalls that trigger sewage overflows into surrounding waterways has contributed to high levels of water and air pollution. And although there has been improvement by some measures, pollution continues to pose health risks, especially within vulnerable populations.

Although many in Allegheny County recognize that the region depends on a clean environment to provide a high quality of life, this awareness is tempered by the realities of the current and future costs of remediating industrial pollution. Many environmental initiatives are long-term projects. However, there are several examples of efforts that are fostering more collaboration among county stakeholders.

As the most high-profile example, Allegheny County and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reached a consent decree in 2007 that included a multiyear strategy to upgrade sewage systems serving Pittsburgh and 82 surrounding municipalities. The settlement required the county to pay a $1.2 million penalty for previous violations of the Clean Water Act and to undertake $3 million in environmental projects. The deadline to comply with the decree, originally set at 2026, was recently extended by 10 years to allow the county to incorporate natural water retention methods, also known as “green infrastructure,” to slow and capture untreated sewage overflows.

Efforts to coordinate the county’s wet weather overflow problems are led by 3 Rivers Wet Weather, a nonprofit organization founded by
the ACHD and the Allegheny County Sanitary Authority and funded by federal, state, and local partners, including local foundations.\textsuperscript{27} The organization coordinates the Green Infrastructure Network, a collaboration of regional partners—including universities, businesses, and government agencies—that recognize the environmental benefits of using green infrastructure to manage Allegheny County’s storm water problems. The network encourages municipalities and property owners to use green infrastructure where feasible and cost effective.

Pittsburgh’s “Green First Plan” also uses green infrastructure to address the ongoing problem of storm water and sewage overflows.\textsuperscript{28} The plan aims to manage storm water runoff from more than 1,800 acres by 2032.\textsuperscript{29} In 2017, the city began to establish implementation plans for the highest priority areas. Given the costs, existing land use, and other factors, expectations for these initiatives are modest. Budget constraints also have impeded environmental improvements to storm water management infrastructure.\textsuperscript{30}

Air quality standards may have improved in Allegheny County, but a recent report from the American Lung Association found that it still has a long way to go. Based on data from 2013 to 2015, Allegheny County experienced the fewest days on record with high levels of particulate matter in the air, but still received an overall “F” grade.\textsuperscript{14,23} Current high levels of ozone and concentration of particle pollution are associated with higher levels of asthma and lung cancer.

Allegheny County’s aging transportation infrastructure has benefited from state and federal investments. Although Pittsburgh was cited in 2011 as having the highest percentage of failing bridges for a metropolitan area of its size,\textsuperscript{27} state and federal funding is working to address many of the critically needed repairs.\textsuperscript{33,34}

More recent efforts to improve the county’s infrastructure extend beyond maintenance to emphasize sustainability and better health. For instance, Pittsburgh’s Complete Streets policy, which promotes road sharing for cars, bikes, and pedestrians, received unanimous approval from the city council in November 2016. The municipal region has expanded trails,\textsuperscript{35} and the county adopted an Active Allegheny plan in 2010.\textsuperscript{36} Improving public transportation options to downtown Pittsburgh is a goal shared by the Port Authority of Allegheny County, the City of Pittsburgh, and Allegheny County, which are collectively backing a proposal for a new bus rapid transit system run on electric vehicles.\textsuperscript{37} Private sector leaders also agree with this vision for increased transit options; the Regional Transportation Alliance of Southwestern Pennsylvania recently recommended a series of transit principles based on the input of more than 1,000 groups across the region and offered policy recommendations to support these goals.\textsuperscript{39}

Despite these signs of progress, the current limits of public transportation adversely affect many Allegheny County residents. Respondents described the lack of mobility of suburban county residents as a source of economic instability, which creates challenges to accessing jobs and health care, particularly in Pittsburgh’s inner-ring suburbs.

**FACING EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSING ISSUES**

Older, inner-city Pittsburgh neighborhoods with good access to public transportation and new jobs are undergoing gentrification and attracting young, highly skilled workers. Simultaneously, many low-income residents are at risk of being priced out of the same communities in which they were born and raised. To address this inequity, efforts are underway by public and private organizations to fund training programs and provide resources to improve the job and housing opportunities for low-income residents. Although these efforts could produce beneficial effects for the county’s overall well-being, in scope they are focused on Pittsburgh specifically rather than Allegheny County at large.

Some directly address racial and ethnic inequities around employment, such as the nonprofit Vibrant Pittsburgh, which works to ensure that minority workers feel welcome in the area, including coordinating with employers and sponsoring networking and affinity groups for minority job seekers and area newcomers.\textsuperscript{38} Other organizations are focused on employment readiness for all residents. The 3 Rivers Workforce Investment Board funds job training and educational work experience opportunities. The p4 initiative, a partnership between the City of Pittsburgh and the Heinz Endowments, fosters community participation, consensus building, and initiative development to promote an all-inclusive definition of city resilience.\textsuperscript{39} The community engagement of p4 includes an annual conference with committees that work on collaboration and collective goals for the city.

An organizing agent for sustainable and equitable economic development in Pittsburgh, p4 initiatives support affordable real estate development undertaken in cooperation with local residents.\textsuperscript{40} Measures of success are linked to availability of public subsidies for development efforts in the future. Pittsburgh is also working to fund and implement recommendations from its Affordable Housing Taskforce\textsuperscript{41} to stabilize the availability of affordable housing.

Place-based initiatives draw on local groups and partners for a targeted geographic impact. Examples include UPMC’s Center for Engagement and Inclusion, which facilitates neighborhood-based screenings and preventive care; the Heinz Endowment’s efforts to revitalize the Hazelwood neighborhood; and a new Eco-Innovation District in Pittsburgh, which aims to promote equity, sustainability, and job growth in the city’s Uptown neighborhood.

Several new initiatives that address housing and job issues for low-income residents are examining the intersection of poverty and racial equity; these include Just Pittsburgh, 100 Percent Pittsburgh, and the Pittsburgh Peace and Justice Initiative. The Heinz Endowment’s Just Pittsburgh is developing a framework to guide the city’s redevelopment that embraces equity as a core principle,\textsuperscript{42} and puts the concept of equity at the core of the philanthropy’s grantmaking mission. 100 Percent Pittsburgh, launched in 2016 by the Pittsburgh Foundation, explicitly targets inequality and the goal of helping disenfranchised residents more fully participate in Pittsburgh’s economy.\textsuperscript{43} The foundation committed 51 percent of its unrestricted funds to this initiative and emphasized the need to canvass local communities to determine their most pressing needs.\textsuperscript{44} Organizers acknowledge that specific objectives have yet to be identified, but a focus on economic opportunity and alleviating poverty has already been established.
Locally elected black officials in 2016 launched the Pittsburgh Peace and Justice Initiative in response to concerns about the safety and quality of life in Pittsburgh’s black neighborhoods. Work began with a series of community meetings to establish policy priorities and propose improvements to safety and quality of life in conjunction with each community’s residents.

Overall, these efforts indicate that equity, particularly racial equity, is a high priority for new and established stakeholders. Public conversations about structural inequities that have produced housing discrimination, poor health outcomes, and exclusion of black residents from higher paying jobs are taking place in many sectors, and place-based initiatives are focusing on communities with multiple needs. Although promising, this approach does not offer quick solutions to inequities that have been decades in the making. Some respondents observed that participants in community and planning meetings represent “usual suspects” and that “people are brought to the table after decisions are made.” And an obvious and often uncomfortable power imbalance persists between large swaths of Allegheny County’s black community and the region’s wealthy philanthropies, observers said. Such efforts can make initiatives to address equity concerns feel “very token,” one philanthropic sector respondent commented.

Because Pittsburgh is the economic hub of the county, the initiatives and organizations focused on the city ultimately may impact the entire region. However, most are currently confining their scope to the well-being of Pittsburgh and its residents; county-wide efforts to improve job prospects and housing options are lacking. Although the county examined housing in 2010’s Allegheny Places, further plans are needed to determine how current county housing initiatives interact with Pittsburgh’s plans to create housing and economic stability for low-income residents.

INTEGRATING LOCAL DATA SYSTEMS
Allegheny County’s technologically advanced local and regional governments, universities, and health systems have a wealth of data at their disposal to inform targeted decisions, such as identifying and predicting communities with high levels of crime or chronic disease. However, these entities have traditionally operated in data silos that have constrained their ability and willingness to share information. Organizations are building on long-standing capabilities in regional data collection and analysis, and recent efforts are underway to share data across sectors to improve targeted areas of health and well-being.

Regional resources, such as the University of Pittsburgh’s Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center, generate, analyze, and evaluate rich troves of data that are funneled into studies of social determinants of health and urban policy issues. A partnership between the university, Allegheny County, and the City of Pittsburgh, the data center supports community initiatives by making public information easier to locate and use. For example, in 2016, the data center developed and released a user’s guide for the 311 non-emergency complaint data and also published a guide to crime, courts, and corrections in Pittsburgh to make it easier to understand and use data about public safety in Allegheny County.

Allegheny County was designated as one of 10 national grantees for the Data Across Sectors for Health (DASH) program, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The DASH initiative aims to identify barriers, opportunities, and promising practices for multisector collaborations working to connect information systems and share data for community health improvement. The grant is being used to create an integrated warehouse of data from multiple sectors to assess the environmental, social, and economic factors that affect the cardiovascular health of Allegheny County residents. This effort brings together collaborators from multiple sectors, including public health, transportation, economic development, health plans, and human services, and provides a structure to advance future collaboration.

“WE CAN LOOK AT THE IMPACT ON RETURN [MEDICAL] VISITS AND THE COST OF CARE, BUT WE HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING IF THESE MEASURES IMPROVE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE FOR HIGH-RISK KIDS.”

HEALTH CARE SECTOR RESPONDENT

Large regional health systems, notably the UPMC and AHN, maintain their own data sets. Representatives of these health systems and their associated health plans (UPMC Health Plan and Highmark) participate in working groups for county and city efforts, including the PHA and p4, and commit community benefit dollars to various health improvement activities. However, competition between the two systems and mistrust among some community stakeholders about their motivations limits their effectiveness. The health systems are working on how to integrate with outside data systems but acknowledge the limits of those efforts because of patient privacy requirements and competitive pressures.

Impediments to data sharing, on both institutional and regulatory levels, also limit engagement with county residents, several respondents said. “We can look at the impact on return [medical] visits and the cost of care, but we have no way of knowing if these measures improve school performance for high-risk kids,” said one respondent from the health care sector. Respondents also acknowledged the many challenges associated with more robust data sharing—including ensuring that data can operate across systems; making data easier to use by multiple audiences; and generating more comprehensive, real-time data that responds to current conditions.

Summary of County’s Efforts to Build a Culture of Health

Based on the Culture of Health Framework used to guide Sentinel community data collection and monitoring in Allegheny County, evidence
FACILITATORS TO A CULTURE OF HEALTH

County initiatives prioritize cross-sector collaboration on health. ACHD’s efforts to engage and foster collaboration among many stakeholders in the PHA and the Live Well initiatives have fostered a commitment to county-wide health improvement. One service sector representative who was involved in the PHA process noted that it helped to “broaden my view of our partners and will enable us to work more collaboratively and develop new partnerships.”

An involved network of nonprofits and foundations. The region’s history of economic downturn and industrial pollution have produced collaborative efforts by local organizations to address wide-ranging problems. Allegheny County’s combination of economic resources, expertise, strong data collection, and organizational collaboration has provided the foundation for health to become a community-wide priority. Importantly, a focus on equity is becoming more common among groups and initiatives within this network.

Infrastructure and commitment to share data. Efforts surrounding the Allegheny County’s DASH grant illustrate the progress that stakeholders are making in moving beyond collecting and sharing data to making data-informed decisions about multifaceted health issues, such as the community’s high rates of cardiovascular disease. However, few metrics exist to determine how often Allegheny residents make use of the current data systems or if they are aware of their availability. “The data is out there, and it is assiduously collected,” one social service worker stated. “But its relevance to the immediate problems is uncertain, or perhaps even absent.” Despite this and other challenges, the growing use of data within the county is an important enabler in efforts to improve health and well-being.

Barriers to a Culture of Health

Disconnected political systems. Implementing policies across 130 municipalities remains one of Allegheny County’s fundamental challenges. The effectiveness of the many organizations that aim to coordinate among various governmental entities is difficult to measure.

Aging regional transportation infrastructure. Although efforts like Pittsburgh’s Complete Streets policy and proposed new Bus Rapid Transit are welcome, they have yet to show measurable impact on increasing multimodal transportation usage. Because these efforts would not measurably improve transportation access in underserved suburbs of the city, current problems like access to medical care, road safety, and air pollution remain.

Jobs and housing surpass health concerns. For many low-income Allegheny County residents, jobs and housing take precedence over healthy food choices, exercise, and other health-promoting behaviors. The redevelopment of downtown Pittsburgh and gentrification of old city neighborhoods have occurred while high unemployment rates and poor housing are still common to low-income residents, particularly in Pittsburgh’s black community. Poor living standards and job prospects also impede health efforts among Allegheny County’s suburban and rural populations.

Inadequate engagement with minority communities. Many respondents believe community members, particularly black residents, do not feel adequately represented, and that little cooperation exists between the community and the people running programs. Since the collapse of the steel industry, distressed communities have been “studied and studied. People go to listening groups, and whatever becomes of them?” asked one respondent from the social services sector.

Imbalance of jobs and job training. Many low-income, long-time Allegheny County residents do not qualify for the growing availability of well-paying jobs, which poses a significant barrier to efforts to attain equity. Until more racial minorities and low-income residents see their prospects improve, the county will struggle with unfulfilled promise.

Supports the coordinated, focused efforts by many organizations to bring a comprehensive experience of health to its residents and communities. Notably, Allegheny County is leveraging the resources of a strong health department and a large and committed group of businesses and philanthropic organizations. There is notable progress in advancing the action area of Making Health a Shared Value through the county’s engagement of a wide cross-section of community partners to address the PHA’s key priority areas and through its continued involvement of stakeholders in the goals of the Live Well campaign. Despite layers of local and regional government and competing agendas, a wide array of public and private entities have made strides in Fostering Cross-Sector Collaboration to Improve Well-Being. These and other initiatives, including those that address equity concerns and job training, demonstrate Allegheny County’s determination to respond to the needs of all residents and to Making Health a Shared Value.

Concurrently, Allegheny County faces stubborn, ongoing challenges to its health and well-being in the form of long-standing environmental issues, racial disparities, and little evidence of collaboration among its major health systems. Initiatives to improve the natural and built environments are making some progress, but poor communities in the rural and suburban areas remain isolated from Pittsburgh’s economic dynamism, and communities across the region still face environmental hazards and suffer associated health consequences. These constraints, although not insurmountable, will play a significant role in Allegheny County’s efforts to create healthier, more equitable communities.

There is growing support in Allegheny County for a holistic approach to health that embraces collective action, uses data to identify and shape priorities, and has the capability of taking successful approaches to a larger scale. A growing awareness of equity as a fundamental element not just to health, but to the overall well-being of individuals and communities, is evident in the work of county agencies, foundations, and health systems. New efforts of institutions to partner with and engage communities are still emerging but show promise. Increasingly, both the communities and the institutions working within them perceive the value of collaboration and concentrated action.

To deliver measurable improvements to community health, county stakeholders will need to continue to surmount challenges held over from decades of decline, fragmented governance and research efforts, and systematic disenfranchisement of Allegheny County’s black community. For health to become a truly shared value, the economic fortunes of lower-income residents must improve. Modern problems are unfolding as well, in the form of gentrification and a new economy that benefits the highly educated while leaving the futures of many long-term residents uncertain, unsafe, and outside the scope of improvement.
To reduce economic inequities in the community in which many minority and rural residents lack adequate jobs, financial stability and work training, Allegheny County must continue to search for approaches that address the health and well-being of all residents.

The efforts to promote, study, and advance health demonstrate both the advantages and disadvantages of the county’s circumstances. Allegheny County's public health, foundations, hospitals and research institutions are compiling and repurposing data while creating many new streams of information. Yet data collection presents complex new challenges, and institutions with a history of competition are still learning to work in concert and overcome fragmentation.

“... THE PHA PROCESS ... HAS HELPED TO BROADEN MY VIEW OF OUR PARTNERS AND WILL ENABLE US TO WORK MORE COLLABORATIVELY AND DEVELOP NEW PARTNERSHIPS.”

SERVICE SECTOR RESPONDENT

In recent years, Allegheny County has taken important steps toward a broader, more comprehensive view of health. Like many resurgent American communities, it is at risk for becoming a divided landscape in which the highly educated, younger, and mostly white residents enjoy high quality of life, while poorer and minority residents face decline and hardship.

The county and its institutions must continue to address long-standing, stubborn inequities that keep many poor residents from sharing in the improving fortunes of greater Pittsburgh and its top industries. There are, however, many stakeholders who are motivated to address this challenge, and environmental and infrastructural problems, through innovation and collaboration. Whether Allegheny County’s health systems and stakeholders can overcome entrenched mistrust within communities they seek to help remains an important question. The progress of many initiatives launched in recent years should be monitored to determine if messaging and collaboration begin to generate tangible results in the communities they target.

It will also be essential to observe how new conversations around health spread throughout the county and whether they impact Allegheny County’s suburbs and smaller, more economically distressed municipalities, and rural communities in particular. Such conversations may also influence community engagement opportunities and policy development. Greater insights are needed into the dynamics that shape Allegheny County’s rural communities, where new economic forces like natural gas extraction may affect the well-being of residents.

Considering the county’s environmental challenges, the creation and use of alternative energy could be an important development in the future. In Pittsburgh and other urban areas, topics for examination include possible linkages between affordable housing plans, and the impact of tax codes in different neighborhoods. Initiatives to train youth and low-income residents for jobs in Allegheny County’s technology industry will also be important to watch.
References

6. Grant T. The Black Middle Class. Pittsburgh’s black middle class has learned to navigate a city that is still segregated in many respects. February 26, 2017.


