

Forces of Change Assessment Executive Summary

The Forces of Change Assessment (FOCA) is one of four assessments completed as a part of Community Matters: Assessment, Visioning, Planning for a Healthy Jefferson County, a community health strategic planning process. The FOCA identifies trends, factors and events occurring or that are expected to occur over the next five years impacting health and quality of life for people who live, learn, work, worship or play in Jefferson County, Alabama or that impact the Local Public Health System.

The FOCA seeks to answer the following questions:

- *What is occurring or might occur that affects the health of the community or its local public health system?*
- *What specific threats or opportunities are generated by these occurrences?*



During the FOCA focus group sessions, participants engaged in discussions to identify forces of change that are currently or may affect, within the next five years, the community's health and its Local Public Health System. Forces of change can be categorized as:

- **Trends:** Patterns over time, such as migration in and out of a community or growing disillusionment with government;
- **Factors:** Discrete elements such as a community's large ethnic population, an urban setting or its proximity to a major waterway, or
- **Events:** One-time occurrences such as a hospital closure, natural disaster or the passage of new legislation

Considered within the above forces of change are any and all types of forces, including:

- Social
- Economic
- Political
- Technological
- Environmental
- Scientific
- Legal
- Ethical



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To conduct the FOCA, a sub-committee of local stakeholders from the Local Public Health System was assembled. This six-member sub-committee identified, coordinated and developed the structure for this assessment. Six FOCA sessions were conducted at various locations within Jefferson County, Alabama using a formal brainstorming methodology and SWOT analysis. FOCA participants represented the diversity of Jefferson County's population and included community members, representatives of the clergy, mental health and health care professionals, educators, and representatives from governmental, non-profit and other agencies serving Jefferson County residents. Several of the FOCA sessions were held to obtain information from specific key informants or select Jefferson County sub-populations. Among these sessions were those conducted with clergy, health care professionals, and homeless shelter administrators. The remaining FOCA sessions included a variety of local community stakeholders, including community members. The dates and locations for the six FOCA sessions were:

- October 17, 2018 (St. Vincent's Foundation, Forge Office)
- October 26, 2018 (St. Vincent's Health System, Bruno Center)
- November 1, 2018 (Birmingham Central Public Library)
- November 2, 2018 (Greater Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church)
- November 7, 2018 (Western Health Center)
- December 7, 2018 (Children's Aid Society).

Forces of change identified during the assessment session were categorized by participants as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities for improvement or threats. It should be noted that any force of change may be concurrently identified as a strength and weakness or opportunity and threat.

Participant responses were coded for content and categorized into themes using qualitative analysis to assist in the identification and prioritization of potential strategic issues from the FOCA and for the other MAPP assessments for Jefferson County, Alabama. Details on the systematic categorization and prioritization process will be provided in the full community health assessment document.



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Results

The following section outlines the top five reoccurring forces of change identified through the FOCA data assessment process and summarizes the concerns arising from each.

Transportation: Much of Jefferson County is suffering from an inadequate and inefficient public transit system. FOCA feedback suggests many believe the current public transportation system is unreliable. The existing transportation system was noted to frequently fail to provide on-time stops, to be constricted by limited hours of operation, and to include bus routes that do not adequately service and provide access to key city and county destinations such as grocery stores, shopping malls, job sites, churches and local events.

Mental Health: There is a lack of equitable access to mental health care, and available education regarding available community-based mental health services and how to access these services is limited. These issues are barriers to achieving and maintaining good mental health, especially for vulnerable populations, including, youth, the formerly incarcerated and the homeless.

Drug/Opioid Crisis: There is a high prevalence of opioid and other drug dependency, resulting in increasing rates of drug overdoses, deaths and dependency issues. These problems are exacerbated for teenagers and the homeless population. Drug abuse is often believed to be associated with poor mental health and crime in Jefferson County, Alabama.

Access to Services: There is a lack of access to quality health care, health care providers and affordable medications for the uninsured, low-income, elderly and disabled sub-populations. Accordingly, these sub-populations are at a disadvantage for receiving services such as mental health, substance abuse and sub-specialty medical care.

Environmental Concerns: FOCA participants noted poor indoor and outdoor air quality, neighborhood flooding, failure to preserve the ecosystem and its wildlife and green spaces, and poor community sanitation as environmental concerns. These concerns were also indicated as potentially related to health issues.

In addition to these leading concerns, additional concerns identified through the FOCA as impacting the community included:

- Lack of trust in governmental and political leadership;
- Increased rates of crime and violence;
- Lack of affordable, accessible and safe housing for the homeless and those living in poverty;
- Presence of blight, including a growing number of overgrown properties, dilapidated houses and buildings, leading to unsafe neighborhood conditions;
- Limited access to healthy and affordable foods for some sub-populations, including the elderly, disabled and those with low incomes;

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- Changes in neighborhood demographics resulting from migration in and out of communities;
- Need for improvements to Infrastructure such as repair and maintenance of interstates, streets, sidewalks, bridges and some buildings. It was also noted that some existing infrastructure is not designed to accommodate individuals with disabilities;
- Biases based on age, sex, race, ethnicity, country of origin, lawful status within the United States, and ability limit access to services and opportunities for quality of life for many, and
- A lack of job opportunities and job skill training for youth, senior citizens and ex-offenders.

The following section defines the assessed strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities for improvement identified by the participants during the FOCA brainstorming sessions for the top five forces of change.

Transportation

Strength:

City and county officials have ongoing improvement strategies in place or planned for the repair and maintenance of poor quality roads, bridges and interstates.

Weaknesses:

The lack of an accessible, reliable and timely public transportation system with its limited bus routes creates barriers to employment, education and health-related and social services, especially for the elderly, low-income and disabled sub-populations who rely on the transportation services for activities of daily living.

Poor road conditions and new construction in Birmingham have reduced the flow of traffic and increased road rage. There has also been a perceived increase in the number of vehicular crashes on major highways and local streets related to traffic detours related to interstate repair.

Construction and repairs on major streets, highways, interstates and within Birmingham's downtown have resulted in traffic congestion and extensive travel delays. Traffic detours have led to higher volumes of traffic flowing through local neighborhoods.

Higher neighborhood traffic volumes poses a safety issue, especially for children when walking to and from school and for persons waiting at bus stops.

Opportunities:

Increasing the hours of operation of the Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority (BJCTA) and adding bus routes/stops serving more areas outside of Birmingham to improve accessibility to jobs, housing, education, health-related and social services, and affordable, healthy food.



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Development of a more diverse system for public transportation beyond bus transportation to strengthen access to needed services within the county.

Threats:

The existing public transportation system limits access to jobs, housing, education, health-related and social services and affordable, healthy food for non-drivers and those without personal transportation. Inadequate funding of the BJTCA is likely to reduce the effectiveness of public transit.

Mental Health

Strengths:

There is a high level of awareness by community members of the prevalence impact of poor mental health issues and mental health stigma.

Improved linkage and collaboration between community partners providing mental health services, navigation, case management, medication assistance, appointment making, and crisis intervention has enhanced access and utilization of services.

Neighborhood Associations are supporting residents and connecting community members to needed mental health services.

Community resources such as the Dispensary of Hope, Equal Access and Federally Qualified Health Centers offer transportation and medication assistance for low-income and uninsured individuals.

The Crisis Center offers text and hotline support options for children and youth in crisis.

Weaknesses:

Stigma related to mental health diagnoses is a barrier in seeking treatment, especially for men of color.

Long wait time for mental health care appointments and poor medication affordability negatively impact youth.

Inadequate number of outreach programs and services for young adults with dual diagnoses transitioning out of Department of Human Resources care negatively impact continuity of care.

Unmet mental health needs can lead to other overarching issues such as homelessness, poor school performance, suicide and substance use.

Access to mental health and other specialty care services are not affordable for many underserved populations. In addition, the rising cost of health insurance coverage, premiums, co-pays and deductibles are barriers to care.

Geographic concentration of mental health services within Birmingham limits accessibility for those living in outlying portions of Jefferson County



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Perception that the University Health Care Authority will reduce access to mental health and other services for residents of Jefferson County.

The current number mental health care providers and the criteria for accessing mental health services, such as acceptance of only select types of health insurance, are inadequate to meet the needs of vulnerable residents living with mental health and substance abuse issues.

Opportunities:

Development and implementation of integrated plans of care for physical and mental health services for disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, regardless of the ability to pay for such services.

Provision of mental health care navigators and advocates.

Strategies to increase the number of mental health professionals and programs for training health care providers.

Increase collaboration with churches and religious organizations in identifying and linking individuals impacted by mental health issues to treatment and support.

Creation of employment strategies for the recruitment and retention of mental health providers to work in rural areas.

Creation of additional programs in schools and colleges for universal screening to identify students in need of counseling or mental health treatment services.

Increased dialogue at the local, regional and national levels to improve mental health, employment, education and stable housing for newly emancipated youth from the Department of Human Resources.

Threats:

Perceived risk of the reduction of services for county residents if the University Health Care Plan is implemented.

Misdiagnosis and improper medication prescribing leading to poorer mental health, self-medicating and risky behaviors.

Multiple organizations competing for limited funding for the provision of mental health services.

Potential for increased commitment of crime related to inadequate housing, lack of employment, and inadequate physical, mental health and substance abuse services for young adults transitioning or aging out of the Department of Human Resources care.

Drug/Opioid Crisis

Strengths:

There is increased awareness by community members of the opioid crisis, drug and alcohol dependency and use of illicit drugs.



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Organizations such as the Recovery Resource Center and Crisis Center are collaborating to combat alcohol abuse and drug use in the community.

Pharmacies are increasing accountability for appropriate prescribing of prescription pain medications and reporting providers suspected of improper prescribing to regulatory boards.

Weaknesses:

The number of deaths from drug overdose, especially from opioids has increased.

The percentage of infants born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome from the mother's drug use during pregnancy has increased.

As a result of drug and alcohol abuse in the family unit, children are experiencing a lack of security, and children are being removed from the care of their parents.

Opportunities:

Development of other alternative treatment and drug diversion programs for drug abusers rather than incarceration.

Provision of ongoing education for health care providers on opioid prescription management.

Provision non-medication based treatment options for individuals with substance abuse and dependency.

Access to Services

Strengths:

Improved linkage and collaboration between community partners providing health care services, navigation, case management, medication assistance, appointment making, and crisis intervention has enhanced access and utilization of services.

Neighborhood Associations are supporting residents and connecting community members to needed healthcare services.

Community resources such as the Dispensary of Hope, Equal Access and Federally Qualified Health Centers offer healthcare, transportation and medication assistance for low-income and uninsured individuals.

Weaknesses:

Access to medical services and other specialty care services are not affordable for many underserved populations. In addition, the rise in cost of health insurance coverage, premiums, co-pays and deductibles are barriers to care.

Geographic concentration of health care services within Birmingham limits accessibility for those living in outlying portions of Jefferson County.

Perception that a University Health Care Authority will reduce access to health care and other services for residents of Jefferson County.



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Opportunities:

Development and implementation of integrated plan of care for health care and physical services for disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, regardless of the individual's ability to pay for such services.

Provision of healthcare navigators and advocates.

Creation of employment strategies for the recruitment and retention of physicians, allied health professionals, nurse practitioners and community health workers to serve rural areas.

Increase dialogue at the local, regional and national levels to improve health care, employment, education and stable housing for newly emancipated youth.

Provision of non-medication based treatment options for individuals with substance abuse and dependency.

Environmental Concerns

Strengths:

Community members value the development of walking trails and green spaces and have awareness of the Parks Rx program.

Weaknesses:

Normalization of illegal dumping of trash and debris in some communities.

Lack of well-designed systems to prevent flooding in neighborhoods.

Inadequate recycling options.

Lack education on developing and maintaining recycling programs.

Lack protection from poor air quality created by second-hand smoke, asbestos, vehicle combustion and diesel fuel, etc.

Opportunities:

Increase funding for storm water management.

Advocate for comprehensive smoke-free protections, limitations on vaping and the sale of vaping products.

Increase penalties for violation of regulations related to illegal dumping, illegal burning and air and water pollution.

Creation of stronger laws and regulations by city and county municipalities,

Threats:

Air and water pollution harm the natural environment and may negatively impact health.

The county's water system may become compromised and unsafe, creating a public health crisis.

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Summary:

The information gathered through the FOCA in conjunction with information from the three additional MAPP Assessments will be used to identify key strategic health issues for Jefferson County and inform the creation of a comprehensive community-wide community health improvement plan (CHIP) to improve health and quality of life for people who live, learn, work, worship or play in Jefferson County, Alabama.



The work of Community Matters is supported by the Jefferson county Department of Health.

Sub-committee members included David Hooks, UAB School of Public Health, Leslie Plaia, Recovery Resource Center, Brett Isom, Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, Susan Sellers, St. Vincent's Foundation, Brandon Johnson, City of Birmingham, Sonja Lewis and Bryn Manzella, Jefferson County Department of Health.