COMMUNITY & FAMILY SERVICES

Empowering People to Improve

2024 Community Needs Assessment

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Introduction

Community Action Agencies throughout the country are required to conduct a community needs assessment every three years. This needs assessment relies on relevant and current research literature, data from client surveys and community partner surveys, as well as data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics. This community needs assessment is intended to guide Community and Family Services in developing its strategic plan to improve the economic security and well-being of low-income Hoosiers in its service area.

About Community and Family Services

Since 1966, Community and Family Services has been helping people and changing lives in eastern Indiana. Community and Family Services is an independent, non-profit organization that provides valuable services and assistance to individuals and families, most of whom are low-income. Community and Family Services nurtures self-sufficiency by providing health, housing, nutrition and asset development services that change lives, empower families, and improve the communities that they serve.

Service Area & Programs

Community and Family Services' primary service area is Adams, Blackford, Huntington, Jay, Randolph and Wells Counties. The agency also offers some services in Delaware, Grant, Madison, and Wabash counties.

Programs offered include:

- Community Needs Assessment
- Energy Assistance Programs
- Food Pantry and Food Box Delivery
- Women, Infants & Children (WIC) Program
- Section 8 Housing Voucher Program (also serves Wabash County)
- Senior Community Service Employment Program (Blackford, Delaware, Grant, Jay, and Madison Counties)

Direct Service Area Statistics
In 2023, Community and Family Services served 2,397 households, which included 8,913 individuals.

- 6,217 individuals received support from WIC
- 304 individuals received Housing Choice Vouchers
- 50 individuals participated in the Senior Community Service Employment Program
- 2,537 individuals received support from our food pantry
- 2,432 individuals received support with utilities
- $1.3 million was invested in rental assistance
- 43,000 Meals Provided via the HOPE food pantry and HOPE food box programs

Overview of the Causes and Conditions of Poverty

Poverty has existed in every society, and scholars, government leaders, and social service providers offer a wide variety of thoughts about how best to tackle this multi-faceted epidemic. By better understanding poverty, how it is measured, and the causes and conditions of it, Community Action Agencies and their partners will be better equipped to develop interventions that are responsive to community conditions. We strive to make our communities places in which all Hoosiers can meet their basic needs and achieve financial well-being, enabling each person to reach their full potential and better contribute to their families, communities, and the world.

What is Poverty?

Both domestically and globally, scholars, nonprofits, politicians, and countless others have made different, and sometimes opposing efforts to end poverty. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty in his State of the Union address, proclaiming, "Our aim is not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it." He launched a movement that resulted in the development of Community Action Agencies, which still carry forward the mission of ending poverty and promoting community development today. Community Action Agencies fight poverty by providing direct services for education, employment and family-centered support to low-income families. Sargent Shriver, who led the development of solutions, described the War on Poverty as "a means of making life available for any and all pursuers. The War on Poverty tries only to create the conditions by which the good life can be lived."

> *"Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and across time, and has been described in many ways. Most often, poverty is a situation people want to escape."*
>
> *-The World Bank*

How is Poverty Measured?

In the United States, poverty is measured by comparing a person's or family's income to a poverty threshold. This threshold is set at three times the cost of a minimum food diet in 1963, adjusted for inflation, and is responsive to family size. The U.S. Census Bureau is the government agency in charge of measuring poverty. As *Overlooked and Undercounted: Struggling to Make Ends Meet in Indiana* shows, this method of measuring poverty fails to count many who struggle.[i] When a county- and family-specific basic needs budget is compared to family incomes in Indiana, the scope of income inadequacy in our state comes into sharper focus and includes many more individuals than are captured in traditional poverty measures.

Understanding the Causes and Conditions of Poverty

While poverty is most simply a shortage of income, teasing apart the causes and associated conditions of these income shortfalls can be much more challenging and will vary based on local, state, and national policy choices as well as variations in communities, institutions, and individuals. Understanding the causes and conditions can assist in the development of effective solutions. Theories about the causes of poverty fall into three broad categories: political, structural, and behavioral.[ii] These focus attention on different sets of actors and interventions to address poverty. Community Action Agencies tend to work across all categories. Whether explicit or implicit, an individual's or organization's theories about the causes of poverty can shape decision-making about approaches.
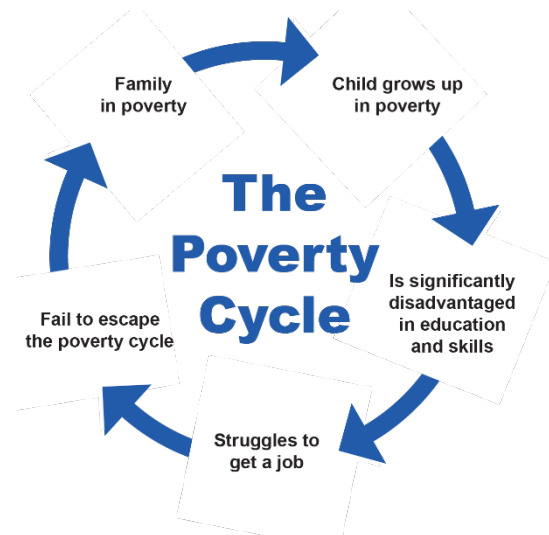
Because employment is so central to a household's ability to make ends meet in the United States, job loss, a decline in earnings, a lack of education, a disability, and the presence of children and/or caregiving responsibilities can cause poverty.[iii] Lack of access to foundational resources such as transportation, child care, health care, and decent, affordable housing, as well as interaction with the justice system, can also cause poverty.[iv] This can trap children and families in a cycle that is difficult to escape.[v]

There are disparities in the prevalence of poverty by race, gender, ability, age, and other identities. Historic and ongoing discrimination at all levels of society - from policies that prevented Black families from accruing wealth through homeownership to discrimination in employment[vi] to differing expectations about who should provide care to young children[vii] - contribute to these disparities. In turn, poverty can lead to low education levels, lack of or under-employment, poor housing conditions, food insecurity, mental and physical health challenges, and an inability to access additional resources to live a happy and healthy life that show up disproportionately for certain groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated issues intersecting with poverty such as housing, education, food, reliable income, and perhaps most importantly our most precious asset, our children. It increased housing and food insecurity, reduced familial income, impacted children's school performance and mental health, and increased abuse and child maltreatment. School closures contributed to many of these factors as students were unable to access meals provided at school, social support systems, and a safe environment away from abusers. Brown University projected, based on learning patterns of five million students, that school-aged children in the United States learned less than 50% of math skills and less than 70% of language art skills than they would have acquired with in-person learning the previous spring.[viii] The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has estimated that school closures will result in approximately a 3% lower income for children affected by the closures over their entire lifetime, but it will be even more deeply felt by vulnerable children who will have larger learning losses, and therefore deeper losses in lifetime earnings.[ix] Remaining mindful of the new landscape and challenges COVID-19 created will be necessary in efforts to address poverty.

Finally, poverty leads to associated conditions that can compound the challenges of providing support to help individuals reach and maintain self-sufficiency. These include hunger, limited access to education and other services, discrimination, exclusion, and lack of opportunities for civic participation.[x] Physiological effects such as toxic stress and poor physical health can create additional barriers. Evidence suggests that these can be particularly damaging for young children, as they impact brain development and cognitive function.[xi] Addressing these conditions – as well as the root causes of poverty – are critical to achieving widespread well-being.

Community Action Agencies can:

- Engage staff in reflection on assumptions about the causes and conditions of poverty
- Ensure that all individuals receive fair and equitable treatment through ongoing internal and external evaluation
- Be responsive to disparities in poverty through programming selection
- Collect data on the causes and conditions of poverty in their service area

Methodology

Client and Community Partners Surveys

Between September and December 2023, the Indiana Community Action Poverty Institute created and conducted both a client and community partner survey using SurveyMonkey for Community and Family Services. The client survey consisted of 76 questions that were reviewed by Community and Family Services staff and revised according to their needs. The survey consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions. The Institute texted clients of Community and Family Services an invitation and link to the survey and included only those responses from individuals still living the primary service area. There were 73 respondents, and the majority were from Blackford (39.7%), Huntington (15.1%), Jay (15.1%), and Wells (15.1%) counties. The community partners survey consisted of 23 multiple choice and open-ended questions. It was sent by email to a list provided by Community and Family Services in December of 2023 and completed by 21 participants.

During the data analysis process, incomplete surveys were included in the findings to honor the time spent by all participants in their attempt to complete the survey. Survey responses were filtered by the counties that the agency serves through Community Action. Due to respondents not having to answer all the questions, some tables will not include all participants. The survey team utilized SurveyMonkey analysis software to analyze multiple choice survey questions. Open-ended survey questions were exported to NVIVO for further analysis.

Secondary Data

While a primary focus of the community needs assessment is elevating the voices and expressed needs of low-income Hoosiers, secondary data drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey and other sources provide valuable supplemental information about the service area throughout the report. The American Community Survey is conducted yearly and sent to a sample of approximately 3.5 million addresses in the 50 states, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. It asks about a range of topics, including education, employment, internet access, and transportation and typically achieves a high response rate (84.4% in 2022). Local, state, and national leaders depend on the American Community Survey to understand local issues, develop programs, and distribute funding. These secondary data are intended to help speak to the scope of needs facing local communities and thereby assist in strategic planning.

Service Area Demographics & Poverty Statistics

Demographic data offer a snapshot of who lives in particular communities at a given time and can provide a basis for understanding the needs of a community. For example, communities with a large proportion of older Hoosiers may require more services related to aging while those whose communities vary greatly on ethnicity and primary language data may require more translation and interpretation services.

Population for Whom Poverty Status is Determined[1]

	Service Area	Adams	Blackford	Huntington	Jay	Randolph	Wells
POPULATION							
Total	154,079	35,257	11,864	35,293	20,170	24,042	27,453
AGE							
Under 5 years	10,330	3,181	558	2,040	1,465	1,378	1,708
5 to 17 years	28,413	7,945	2,029	5,649	3,659	4,075	5,056
18 to 34 years	30,286	7,183	2,255	7,045	3,888	4,519	5,396
35 to 64 years	58,142	11,731	4,520	14,339	7,577	9,334	10,641
65 years and over	26,908	5,217	2,502	6,220	3,581	4,736	4,652
GENDER							
Male	77,383	17,773	5,748	17,938	10,182	12,035	13,707
Female	76,696	17,484	6,116	17,355	9,988	12,007	13,746
White alone	145,488	33,342	11,295	33,503	19,170	22,389	25,789
Black or African American alone	924	165	123	265	40	52	279
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	141	9	13	74	24	19	2
Asian alone	561	51	17	242	87	110	54
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	75	0	0	58	0	17	0
Some other race alone	1,832	397	20	387	144	476	408
Two or more races	5,058	1,293	396	764	705	979	921
Hispanic or Latino origin (of any race)	5,395	1,673	141	989	693	983	916

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

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[1] The population for whom poverty status is determined excludes individuals living in Institutional group quarters (such as prisons or nursing homes), college dormitories, military barracks, living situations without conventional housing (and who are not in shelters), and unrelated individuals under age 15 (such as foster children).

Poverty Rates

Across the counties Community and Family Services serves, approximately 17,589 Hoosiers experience poverty (11.4%). Poverty was highest in Blackford County (17.0%) and lowest in Wells County (6.4%). Hoosiers in poverty in the service area are more likely to be female, age 35-64, and White.[2] At the same time, a higher proportion of children under 5 (18.5%), children age 5-17 (13.2%), individuals age 18-34 (13.4%), Black (17.4%), Asian (26.7%), Other Race (31.6%), Two or More Races (23.5%), and Hispanic/Latino (29.0%) Hoosiers in the service area experienced poverty.

Poverty Rates by County

Adams	Blackford	Huntington	Jay	Randolph	Wells
11.5%	17.0%	11.1%	13.5%	13.0%	6.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Service Area Poverty Rates

	Number in Poverty	% in Poverty	State % in Poverty
Total Population	17,589	11.4%	12.3%
Male	7,575	9.8%	11.1%
Female	10,014	13.1%	13.5%
Under 5	1,913	18.5%	18.4%
5 to 17	3,756	13.2%	15.3%
18 to 34	4,045	13.4%	15.8%
35 to 64	5,790	10.0%	9.7%
65+	2,085	7.7%	8.1%
White	15,469	10.6%	10.1%
Black	161	17.4%	25.1%
American Indian / Alaska Native	*	*	17.2%
Asian	150	26.7%	14.8%
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	34	45.3%	14.2%
Other	579	31.6%	19.9%
Two or More Races	1,189	23.5%	17.3%
Hispanic / Latino[3]	1,565	29.0%	18.3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

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[2] At the county level, particularly when disaggregating by gender, race, or age, sample sizes tend to be smaller and therefore results have a wider margin of error. Use caution in interpreting results.
[3] In addition to questions about race/ethnicity, the Census Bureau asks individuals if they identify as Hispanic/Latino or not Hispanic/Latino.

Community Satisfaction and Needs

Local governments, community programs, and advocates are constantly working to understand the needs of their residents. This is particularly important in light of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowing what needs are most important to residents can ensure that community members are able to live happy, healthy, and productive lives. Our primary method of establishing needs was through direct consultation with low-income Hoosiers in the service area. We used a client survey to identify the top five needs in their community using a pre-established list of 19 common needs. They were then asked to write what their top choice was and why along with a blank entry. The blank entry allowed us to capture needs not represented in the list and to represent Hoosiers' needs in their own words. For each identified need, a selection of the respondents' own words are used to explain the perceived need, while research studies and secondary data provide additional perspective on the need's relationship to poverty.

## Client Survey Participants

Among the 73 survey respondents:

- Ages ranged from 18-24 (4.1%), 25-34 (24.7%), 35-49 (24.7%), 50-64 (19.2%) 65-69 (15.1%), and 70+ (12.3%).
- 87.7% were female and 12.3% were male.
- 89.0% of survey participants identified as White, 2.7% as Black, 2.7% as two or more races, and 5.6% as other.
- 2.8% identified as Hispanic or Latino/a.

Master's degree or higher **4.6%**

Bachelor's degree **9.1%**

Some college, associate's degree **20.5%**

Less than high school diploma **13.6%**

High school diploma or equivalent **52.3%**

- 58.5% of survey participants stated that there are children who live in their household at least part-time, and of those, 20.0% stated that the children in their household are their grandchildren.
- 45.3% indicated they were single and 50.9% that were married, and 3.8% live with a roommate.
- Of the 44 respondents who answered optional questions about food security, 13 (30.0%) reported that someone in their household cut the size of their meal or went hungry at least one to two days each week and nine (20.5%) said they experienced this three or more days each week.
- Of the 39 respondents who answered optional questions about disability status, 20 (51%) reported that they or a member of their family had a disability. Eleven receive SSI, SSDI, or VA benefits, two have applied for benefits and are waiting to hear back, and two applied for benefits and have been denied.
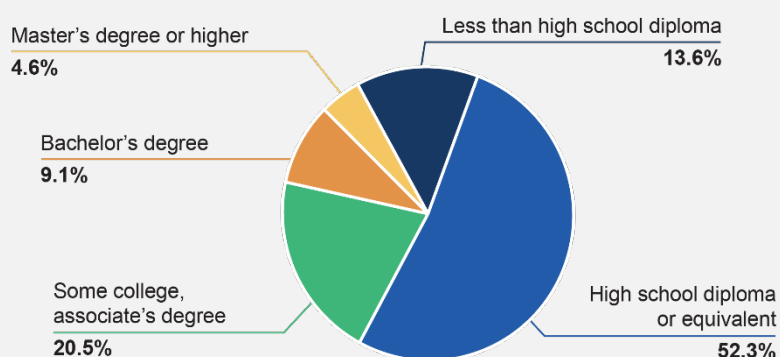
Community Partners Survey Participants

Gathering information from key sectors of the community can provide valuable information in assessing needs and resources. These sectors include community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, private sector, public sector, and educational institutions. We engaged community partners in a survey to understand the effectiveness and scope of assistance being provided to deal with the causes and consequences of poverty in the service area. Thirty-one community partners responded to the survey. Below are the ways in which community partners identified themselves on the survey (note that respondents could select more than one affiliation).
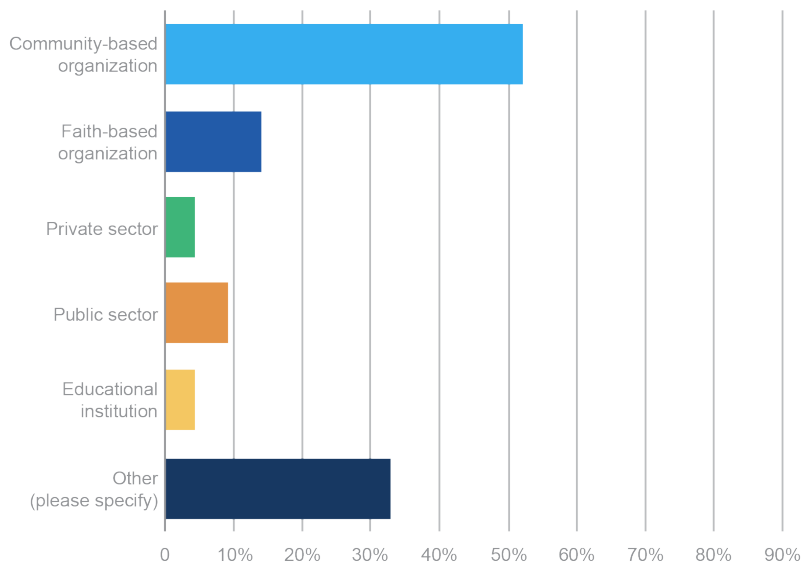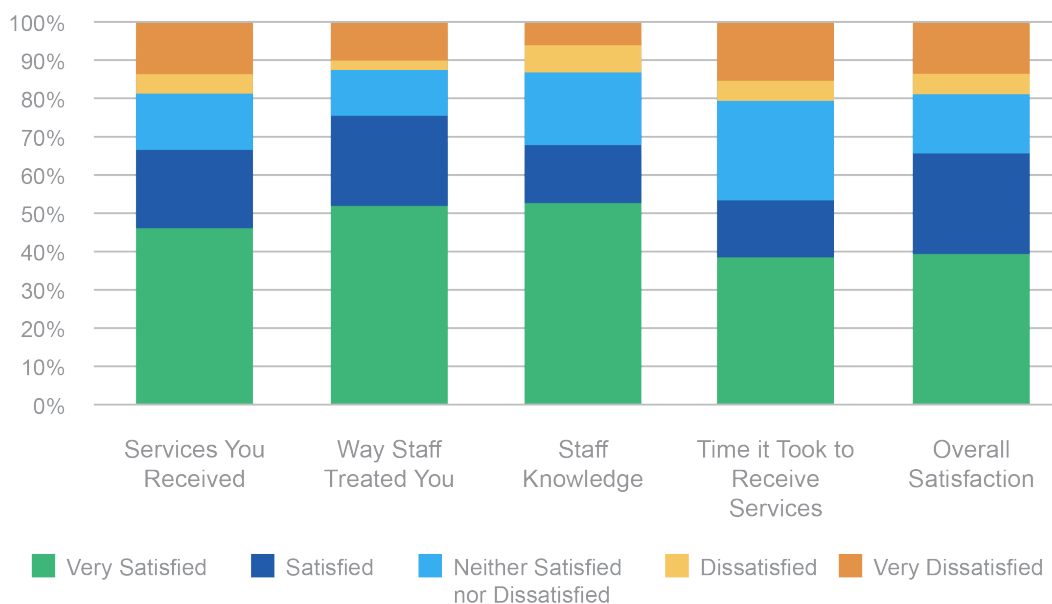
Community Satisfaction

Clients of Community and Family Services were asked five agency-specific questions to assess customer satisfaction of the agency. Satisfaction was assessed by having clients rank how satisfied they were with the services, time it took, staff knowledge and treatment, and overall satisfaction of the agency.

Client Satisfaction

Top Community Needs

The following top five needs were identified based on client and community partners' responses, and are compared to the needs identified in Community and Family Services 2021 needs assessment. They are listed in order from greatest to least. The clients' top five identified needs are discussed in depth below.

	Comparison of the Top 5 Needs Identified on Current and Previous Surveys		
	2024 Client Survey	**2024 Partners Survey**	**2021 CNA**
1	Food assistance	TIED: Affordable and accessible Childcare Quality and affordable housing	Programs for youth
2	Quality and affordable housing		Good jobs with adequate wages, benefits and opportunities
3	Good jobs with adequate wages, benefits and opportunities	TIED: Transportation support Good jobs with higher wages, benefits and opportunities	Legal services
4	Mental health and/or counseling		Addiction treatment
5	Transportation support	Addiction treatment services	Weatherization

Food Assistance

In clients' own words:

"Food assistance is a blessing. I have canned what I could and put some in the freezer."

"Food, because I don't have enough for myself."

"Food that is sustainable to life and keeping healthy."

In community partners' own words:

"Need more resources to help families with food."

"A lot of food banks do not give food to people that they can actually use. People deserve to eat good nutritious meals."

One of the most common conditions in the lives of those experiencing poverty is suffering from food insecurity and undernourishment. Food insecurity occurs when people do not have adequate access to sufficient and nutritious food, which can lead to malnutrition.[xii] The cycle of malnutrition, food insecurity, and poverty fuel each other. Economic stability is affected when individuals' undernourishment harms their physical and mental development, intellectual capacity, productivity, and economic potential. The intergenerational cycle of poverty and malnutrition is evident as malnourished women are at a higher risk of giving birth to malnourished children or having their children grow up to be malnourished. When poverty is experienced in early childhood, the likelihood of malnutrition increases and can cause impaired cognitive development and mental illness as an adult. Therefore, intervention to support the nutrition needs of children are especially important.[xiii]

Interventions targeting nutrition can be specific to an individual's needs, but community engagement and delivery strategies can be equally beneficial if they reach those in the greatest need and incorporate disease and infection prevention.[xiv] Ensuring that individuals in poverty access programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), can also promote access. Communities that lack access to nutritious food and those who serve them will find great success at combating poverty when food access is addressed.

SNAP Participation Rates

	% of Households below poverty not receiving SNAP
Adams	8.5%
Blackford	11.7%
Huntington	6.9%
Jay	9.0%
Randolph	7.5%
Wells	6.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Community Action Agencies can:

• Continue referrals to and/or offer direct food assistance, such as through pantries or boxes
• Offer mobile pantry and box food services
• Connect clients with programs like SNAP and WIC

Quality and Affordable Housing

In clients' own words:

"So many people are homeless or living out of hotels. I believe every child should have a home, not a hotel, car, or staying with friends/family.

"There's no houses or places for people to live."

"If I needed to move I'd be forced out of the county due to unavailable or inaccessible housing."

In community partners' own words:

"There aren't many homes for rent."

"Home repair help for low-income families."

Poor housing quality and lack of stable housing can be both a cause and condition of poverty. Researchers find that low-cost, decent quality housing in areas with job opportunities can make a significant difference in addressing poverty.[xv] Conversely, poor-quality housing can lead to poor health outcomes, increasing poverty as individuals struggle to access healthcare.[xvi] Weatherization is a strategy for addressing housing quality that also contributes to reduced utility costs, improving a household's financial position.[xvii]

Survey participants who lived in their home for at least one year reported an average rent increase of $106 in the past 12 months. The U.S. Census Bureau asks Hoosiers about housing quality and affordability as part of the American Community Survey. Table 1 shows the estimated number of housing units in the service area and the percent that have one or more of following conditions: 1) lacking complete plumbing facilities, 2) lacking complete kitchen facilities, 3) with 1.01 or more occupants per room, 4) selected monthly owner's costs as a percentage of household income greater than 30 percent, and 5) gross rent as a percentage of household income greater than 30 percent.

Units with Poor Housing Affordability/Quality Conditions in Community and Family Services Service Area

Owner-Occupied Units:	39,357
% Owner-Occupied Units with One or More Condition:	18.5%
Renter-Occupied Units:	11,419
% Renter-Occupied Units with One or More Condition:	36.2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Fair Market Rents are estimates of the 40th percentile gross rents for standard quality units within an area.[xviii] Spending more than 30% of income on rent is considered being 'cost-burdened.' In the table below, the 2023 FMRs for the service area and the percent of renters experiencing cost burden are provided.

Fair Market Rents and Renters Paying 30% or More Of Household Income

	Fair Market Rent 2023 One Bedroom	Fair Market Rent 2023 Two Bedroom	Renters paying 30% or more of household income
Adams	$628	$826	30.8%
Blackford	$727	$826	56.1%
Huntington	$666	$826	39.9%
Jay	$628	$826	41.2%
Randolph	$628	$826	47.1%
Wells	$635	$836	33.5%

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2023 FMRs, U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
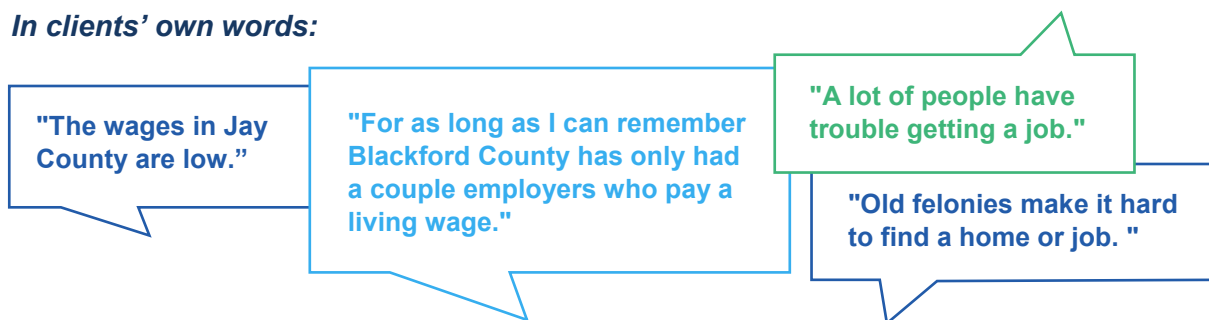
Community Action Agencies can:

- Offer HUD housing counseling
- Connect individuals with Individual Development Accounts so they can save to purchase a home
- Provide weatherization and other housing quality improvement services
- Continue to invest in or collaborate to create affordable housing options
- Connect Hoosiers in need with Housing Choice Vouchers and other housing stabilization or homeownership programs
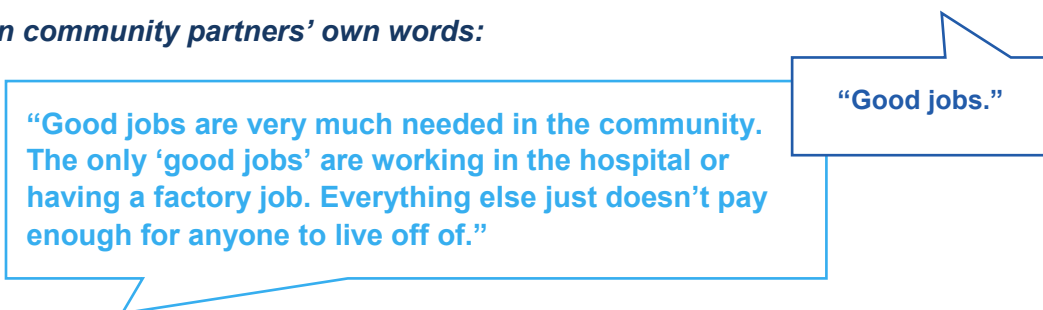
Good Jobs with Adequate Wages, Benefits and Opportunities

In clients' own words:

"The wages in Jay County are low."

"For as long as I can remember Blackford County has only had a couple employers who pay a living wage."

"A lot of people have trouble getting a job."

"Old felonies make it hard to find a home or job. "

In community partners' own words:

"Good jobs are very much needed in the community. The only 'good jobs' are working in the hospital or having a factory job. Everything else just doesn't pay enough for anyone to live off of."

"Good jobs."

Addressing unemployment, underemployment, and low-wage work through pathways to high-wage jobs is a key mechanism to address poverty. Paid employment is the primary mechanism through which individuals in the U.S. receive income. Unfortunately, pre-Covid, 44% of the workforce worked in low-wage jobs, earning at or below 200% of the federal poverty threshold.[xix] While some workers in low-wage or unstable jobs adopt a second job or "side hustle" to help make ends meet,[xx] these added hours can be unsustainable, especially for families with caregiving responsibilities.

Most Common Occupations in Northern Indiana nonmetropolitan area

Occupation	Estimated Number Employed	Median Hourly Wage
Miscellaneous Assemblers and Fabricators	9,930	$18.80
Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	6,920	$16.95
Fast Food and Counter Workers	5,390	$10.94
Office Clerks, General	4,980	$17.22
Cashiers	4,970	$11.28

*Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics May 2022*

Job search supports and other supportive services such as stabilizing housing and providing childcare and transportation are essential to creating pathways to good jobs. Preserving attachment to the workforce also requires addressing mental and physical health, as concentration and productivity can be affected by health concerns, and the social stigma of mental illness may further worsen employment prospects or outcomes.[xxi] Survey respondents listed childcare issues, inability to find jobs with adequate wages, flexibility needed to attend appointments, and criminal history as among the reasons they were not working or were only working part time.
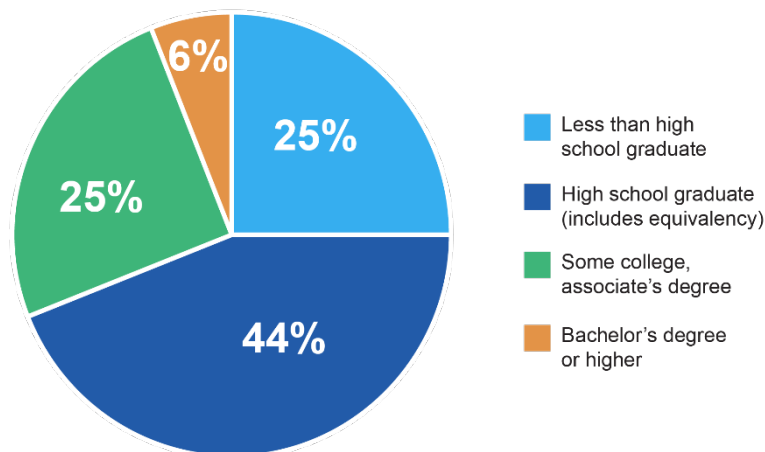
Helping workers think beyond wages to the benefits they will need to maintain employment and financial stability may also prove productive. For example, new parents can experience large income gaps around the birth of a child[xxii] while lack of health insurance coverage or underinsurance can lead to medical debt.[xxiii] Attending to benefits like health insurance, paid leave, and savings options can insulate families from falling back into poverty in the future. Survey participants were asked to rank what makes a good job good, the weighted average of responses showed that health insurance coverage, high wages, training and opportunities to advance were the top choices.

What Makes a 'Good' Job Good?
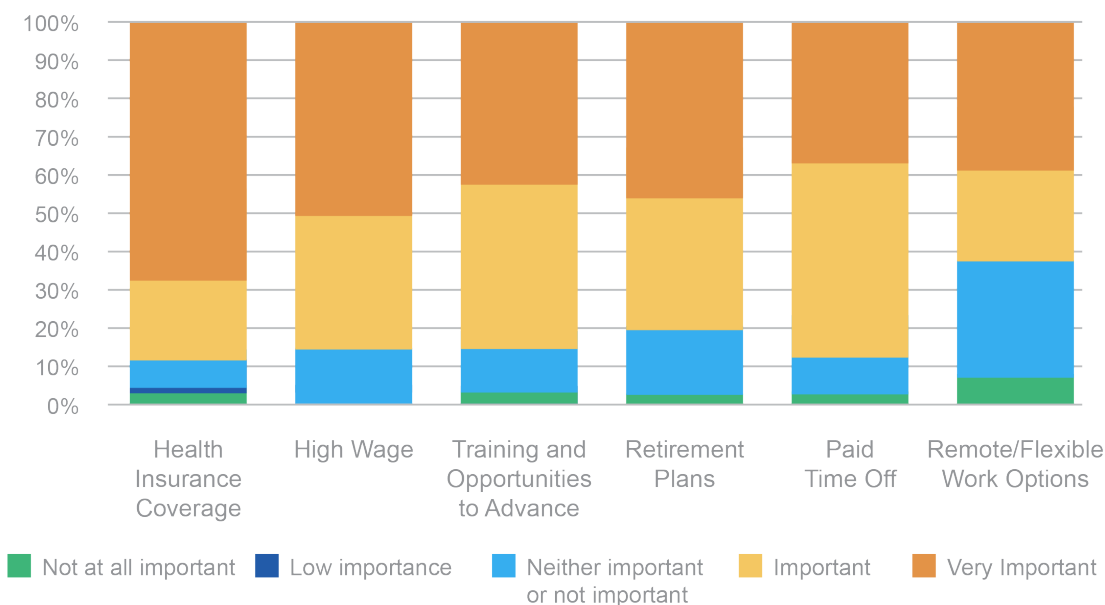
Lacking the skills necessary for certain types of employment may also be a barrier, as 83% of businesses in Indiana report that they are struggling to fill open positions, with 48% reporting that applicants lack the skills and qualifications they need.[xxiv] Among individuals in poverty in the service area, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that more two-thirds have a high school degree or less. The figure below represents the estimated breakdown of educational attainment among individuals in poverty in the service area.

Legend:
- Less than high school graduate — 25%
- High school graduate (includes equivalency) — 44%
- Some college, associate's degree — 25%
- Bachelor's degree or higher — 6%

Community Action Agencies can:

- Use the Self-Sufficiency Standard calculator or other tools to help individuals understand what wages will be needed to meet self-sufficiency
- Help individuals plan for benefit cliffs as they move into higher-wage jobs or receive promotions
- Continue to serve as a model employer in the community by offering high wages, attractive benefits packages, and flexibility

Mental Health and/or Counseling

In clients' own words:

> "Mental health, because I personally struggle."

> "I feel with proper help most other issues will right themselves for people with such challenges."

In community partners' own words:

> "Our services for those with mental health or addiction needs doesn't seem very effective."

Mental and physical health conditions are both a cause and condition of poverty.[xxv] There are vicious cycles at work that allow people to continually stay in poverty and ultimately produce intergenerational effects related to a person's mental and physical health. Those experiencing low income or poverty are one and a half to three times more likely to experience depression or anxiety. A loss in income can produce stress and anxiety for a person and their household while mental illness can also worsen economic outcomes.[xxvi] The effects of depression and anxiety such as a loss of attention span and distorted memory are likely to influence a person's economic decisions regarding their work and consumption habits.

Interventions to address mental and physical health and poverty must be complementary in order to make progress. In order to be economically productive, mental equilibrium is essential. On a positive note, interventions such as cash transfers and broader antipoverty programs have been shown to reduce depression and anxiety.[xxvii]

Community Action Agencies can:

Connect with, co-locate, or offer health services to ensure that clients can receive treatment for physical and mental health

Embed screening and referral systems for physical and mental health in other client services

Equip frontline staff to be responsive to physical or mental health needs

Transportation Support

In clients' own words:

> **"Transportation support."**

In community partners' own words:

> **"Transportation has been listed as a continual need in our community. Difficult to get to services and relying on Huntington transportation, which has limited drivers."**

> **"Huntington Area Transportation is available, but there is a larger need than what is being covered."**

Transportation is a complex issue, and the barriers to transportation vary both by individual and by location. Currently there are few resources for individuals struggling with transportation in Indiana. These disparities are even greater in rural areas where 20-25 counties do not have any form of transit.[xxviii] COVID-19 induced unemployment and financial insecurity, in turn contributing to households losing access to cars, forcing them to depend on unreliable and infrequent transit services.[xxix]

Access to a car plays a crucial role in enabling greater participation in society, accessibility to amenities, and social interactions compared to public transportation. Car-less households face tangible disadvantages, and episodes of car-lessness are common among low-income households. Losing access to a car typically results in decreased activity participation, and lower quality of life, while regaining a car plays the opposite role.[xxx] Individuals with access to a car experience better employment and economic outcomes,[xxxi] eat a wider variety of foods,[xxxii] shop for food more frequently, and consume more produce.[xxxiii] Limited transportation access has been associated with lack of regular medical care, uncompleted referrals or follow-up appointments, appointment cancellations, and missed appointments.[xxxiv]

Household Access to Vehicles

	No Vehicle Available	1 Vehicle Available	2 Vehicles Available	3 or More Vehicles Available
Adams	1,732	2,985	4,587	3,045
Blackford	484	1,437	1,929	1,130
Huntington	481	4,794	6,250	3,640
Jay	785	2,214	2,810	2,282
Randolph	559	2,833	3,853	2,946
Wells	362	3,018	4,293	3,482

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-22 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Survey participants were asked what they find most difficult about getting where they need to go: 52.6% of respondents said the cost of gas, insurance, and monthly payments while 15.8% percent chose paying for repairs. Additionally, some participants commented that they needed reliable public transportation. Survey participants were also asked if they missed one of the following appointments due to transportation issues. The chart below shows the results of missed medical appointments, work, job interviews, and court appointments. Medical appointments and work were the most commonly missed appointments.

Missed Appointments Due to Transportation Issues

Legend: ■ Never ■ Once or twice ■ Multiple times
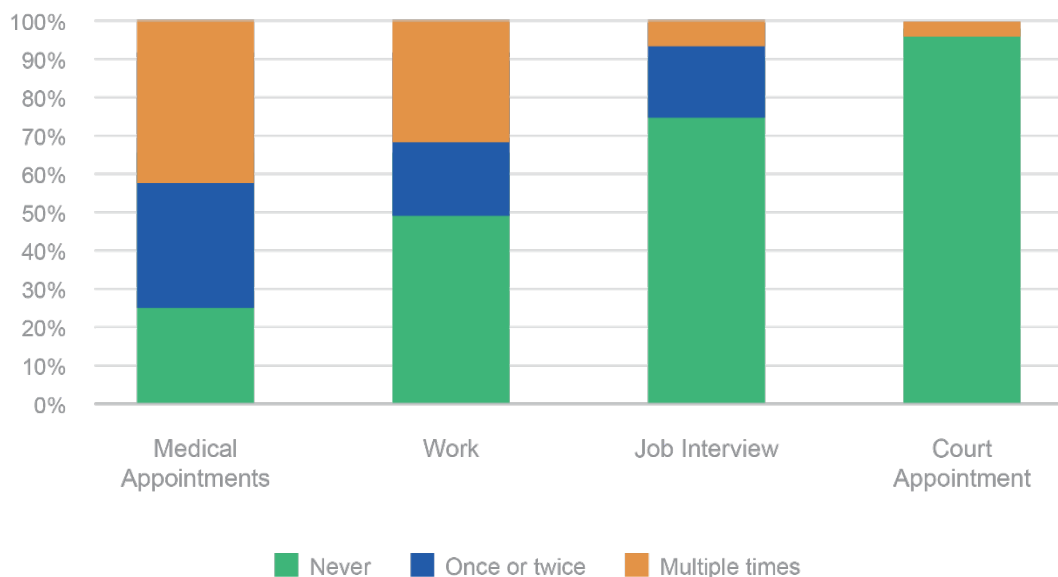
Community Action Agencies can:

- Continue to provide transportation to clients and improve accessibility
- Provide license reinstatement support
- Partner with local mechanics to provide reliable client referrals, and car donation programs
- Help individuals plan for benefit cliffs as they move into higher-wage jobs or receive promotions
- Partner with local insurance companies that provide affordable rates for individuals that may have had a lapse in coverage
- Offer gas cards

Additional Community Needs

In response to the open-ended question, participants also expressed a variety of other needs. Listed below are statements from clients on community needs 6-10:

Quality and Affordable Childcare

"Lots of children are on a waiting list to get in, especially infants and toddlers." "Hard to find anything for under one year old." "Everyone has a long waitlist or you have to take your children somewhere that you're not comfortable with so you can work. Then you worry all day at work if your children are being cared for the way you'd expect because you're not comfortable with who is watching them."

Legal Services

"Expungement needing to go forward quickly." "Spousal abuse." "My Apartment Rusting Heating Covering, Bathroom Ceiling, Water Smell of Mold, Ants. I have pictures."

Programs for Youth

"Affordable youth programs." "There are very limited choices of activities for kids."

Addiction Treatment

"Addiction services that addresses ALL THE FAMILY NOT JUST THE ADDICT. It is a family disease." "Support for addiction. Too many people addicted and need help."

Services for those with Physical and Mental Disabilities

"Disability and mental health, because I personally struggle with them." "Companionship for shut-ins or those with no transportation."
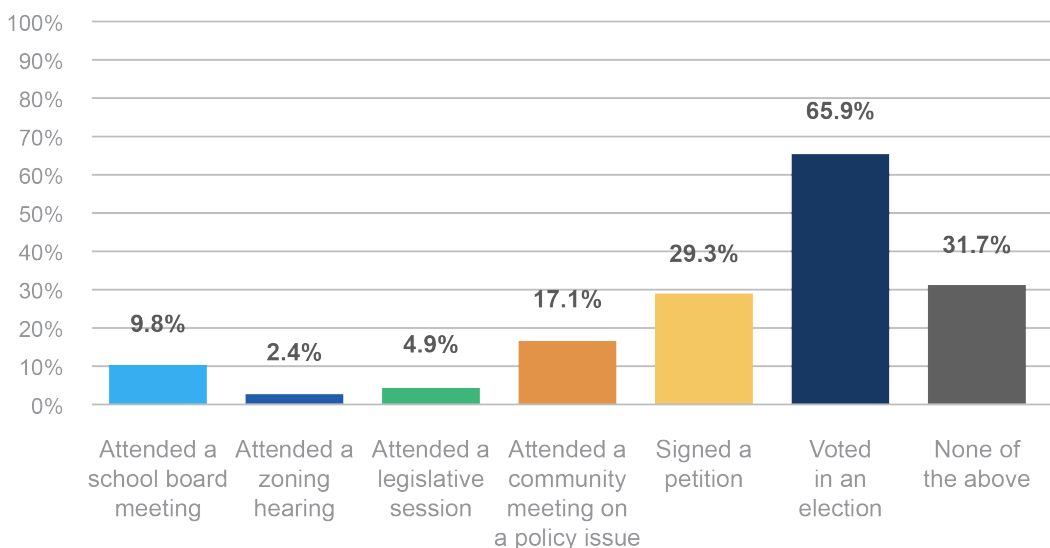
Civic Engagement

Community Action has a long history of dedication to civic engagement. As has been noted by the Community Action Partnership,[xxxv]

> *A primary goal of the original Community Action Program was to empower all residents of a community to create opportunity-rich environments where they could thrive – "to help people help themselves and each other." The architects of the program recognized that effectively fighting poverty required not just coordinating services, but also the "maximum feasible participation" of groups receiving those services. They understood that poverty and political exclusion are intertwined, partially by design. Throughout our history, and even today, the persistent and violent disenfranchisement of the customers and communities we serve has exacerbated that exclusion.*

> *The first programs also understood that restoring inclusivity required programs to instill a sense of political empowerment in their customers. Actual, meaningful access to the polls gives people experiencing low incomes the chance to help shape their own futures. In the words of Robert Kennedy, "maximum feasible participation means giving the poor a real voice in their institutions."*

For the first time, the 2024 Community Needs Assessment survey asked questions about civic participation. Of the types of civic engagement we asked about, participants were most likely to have voted in an election (65.9%) but nearly a third (31.7%) of respondents in the CSBG service area did not engage in any civic engagement activities listed.

Civic Engagement Activities in the Past Two Years

A bar chart showing civic engagement activities in the past two years:
- Attended a school board meeting: 9.8%
- Attended a zoning hearing: 2.4%
- Attended a legislative session: 4.9%
- Attended a community meeting on a policy issue: 17.1%
- Signed a petition: 29.3%
- Voted in an election: 65.9%
- None of the above: 31.7%

Among those who reported that they did not vote, the most common reason given for not voting was "It feels like my vote doesn't matter."

Non-Voters Reasons for Not Voting
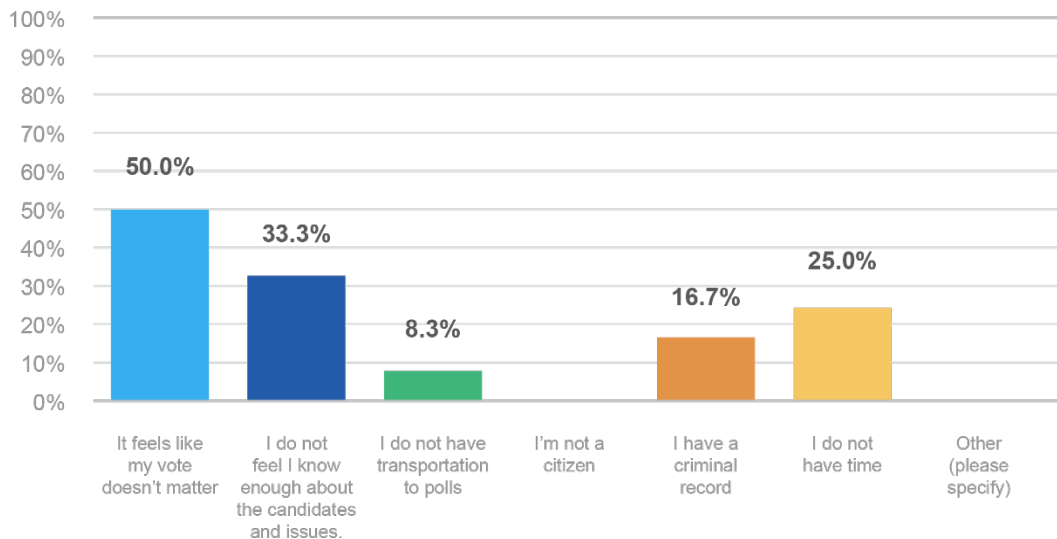
Community Action Agencies can:

- Provide opportunities for clients and community members to meet and learn about elected officials and opportunities for engagement
- Offer leadership development or civic engagement programming to empower residents

Final Thoughts

Community and Family Services is already actively working to address the top needs through its programs and referrals to its robust network of community partners. Continuing to address the top identified needs will require resources and interventions at the family, agency, and community levels.

Family

- Resources to better meet basic needs such as housing, transportation, child/family care, and food
- Connection to existing community supports and services

Agency

- Funding to expand programming
- Partnerships to meet community needs
- Professional development and networking opportunities to build staff capacity

Community

- Greater supply of affordable housing
- Employers offering family-sustaining wages/benefits and education/skills pathways to good jobs
- Programs and services to provide greater access to nutrition, transportation, child care, and employment services
- Coalitions to advocate for policy change related to foundational needs, jobs, and social programs

Community Action Agencies are leaders in the complex and ever-changing work of addressing the causes and conditions of poverty in Indiana. Through deep understanding of the contexts in which Hoosiers are born, grow up, work, and raise families, they innovate, adapt, and serve. When Hoosiers are financially stable, they can reach their full potential and better serve their families and communities. All Hoosiers owe a debt to these agencies as they continue to fight on the front lines of the War on Poverty.

Appendix 1: Client Survey Questions

Question 1:
What county do you live in?

Question 2:
Your age group: [18-24] [25-34] [35-49] [50-64] [65-69] [70+]

Question 3:
Your gender: [Male] [Female] [Non-Binary] [Prefer not to say]

Question 4:
Your race: [White/Caucasian] [Black/African American] [American Indian or Alaskan Native] [Asian] [Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander] [Two or More Races] [Prefer not to say] [Other]

Question 5:
Do you identify as: [Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin] [Not Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin] [Prefer Not to Say]

Question 6:
What Community Action Agency have you used or requested services from most recently?

Question 7:
How did you learn about this Community Action Agency?

Question 8:
What services have you used? Check all that apply. [Business Loan/Assistance] [Case Management] [Covering Kids and Families] [Energy/Utility Assistance Program] [Head Start or Early Head Start] [Health & Wellness Program] [Housing Assistance Program] [Meals and Nutrition Program] [Senior Programs] [Support Groups] [Supportive Services for Veteran Families] [Transportation Services] [Weatherization] [WIC] [Youth Programs] [Other (please specify)]

Question 9:
How satisfied are you with: [Scale: Very satisfied to very dissatisfied]
>   The services you received
>   The way staff treated you
>   Staff knowledge
>   Time it took to receive services
>   Overall satisfaction

Question 10:
Is there a service you wish this agency had, but does not?

Question 11:
Please share anything else you would like us to know about this agency and their services.

Question 12:
What is your household status? [Single] [Married] [Partner] [Living with roommate/s]

Question 13:
Are there children who live in your household at least part of the time? [Yes] [No]

Question 14:
How many children are in your household? [1] [2-3] [4-5] [6 or more]

Question 15:
Are any of the children in your household your grandchildren? [Yes] [No]

Question 16:

What are the age ranges of the children in your household? Check all that apply. [less than 1 year old] [1-5 years old] [6-12 years old] [13-17 years old]

Question 17:
Do you use child care services? [Yes] [No] [No, but I need child care]

Question 18:
Why do you not have child care? Check all that apply. [I cannot afford it] [There are no opening where I want to enroll my child] [There is not a child care facility close by] [My child has a disability that cannot be accommodated] [Other (please specify)]

Question 19:
Are you satisfied with the child care you receive? [Scale: Very dissatisfied to very satisfied]

Question 20:
How important is it that your child care has the following: [Scale: Not at all important to very important]
        Long/Flexible hours
        Reasonable cost
        Is close to home
        Have certified teachers
        Have similar ideas about raising children

Question 21:
What are the TOP 5 needs in your community? Choose only 5. [Legal services (e.g. family law, evictions, expungement, debt collection)] [Crime awareness / crime reduction] [Debt relief] [Good jobs with higher wages & benefits and/or opportunities to advance] [Education/job skills training] [Internet & computer access and skills] [Budgeting classes and/or credit counseling/repair] [Domestic violence supports] [Food assistance] [Mental health and/or counseling services] [Youth programs] [Senior citizen programs] [Addiction treatment services] [Second-chance hiring programs for those with criminal records] [Housing assistance (e.g. rental assistance, weatherization)] [Child care that is affordable and accessible] [Transportation support (e.g. gas cards, help with repairs, transit services)] [Programs that teach English, or translate official documents] [Services for those with physical or mental disabilities]

Question 22:
Which is your TOP choice and why?

Question 23:
Is there something that was NOT on the list that you and your community need?

Question 24:
How connected do you feel you are with your local community? [Scale: Very Connected to very disconnected]

Question 25:
What would make you feel more connected to your community?

Question 26:
Do you feel safe in your community? [Yes] [No]

Question 27:
What is the MONTHLY income of all household members combined? [$0-500] [$500-1,000] [$1,000-2,000] [$2,000-3,000] [$3,000 or more]

Question 28:
What are the sources of income for your household? Check all that apply. [Wages/Salary] [Small Business] [Social Security / SSI] [Pension] [TANF] [Unemployment] [Other (please specify)]

Question 29:
As a child, did your family receive government assistance or any other type of public assistance? [Yes] [No] [Don't know]

Question 30:
Have you or someone in your household experienced a life-changing event that suddenly changed your financial status? Check all that apply. [An accident that led to you or a household member being disabled] [Severe illness] [Caring for a loved one who is sick or disabled] [Lost job/lay off] [A significant expense that made it difficult to meet your basic needs] [Loss of child care] [Death of a family member who contributed to your income] [Extreme medical debt from a serious illness] [A tragic event (housefire, death of a child, mental illness, etc.)] [No] [Other (please specify)]

Question 31:
In the past year, have you received support from any of the following? Check all that apply. [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)] [SNAP (formerly Food Stamps)] [Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program (WIC)] [Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8)] [Emergency Rental Assistance] [Medicaid / HIP] [Child Care Vouchers / CCDF / On-My-Way PreK] [Food Banks] [Free Health Clinics] [Township Trustees] [Other (please specify)] [None of the above]

Question 32:
What types of debt does your household currently have? Check all that apply. [Medical Bills/Debt] [Credit Card] [Auto Loans] [Student Loans] [Payday Loans] [Mortgage] [Property Taxes] [Income Taxes] [Utility Debts] [None] [Other (please specify)]

Question 33:
Why did you take out a payday loan? Check all that apply. [Unexpected expense (car repair, etc.)] [Household expense (to pay for rent, groceries, etc.)] [Leisure (to pay for a vacation, Christmas gift, etc.)] [Other (please specify)]

Question 34:
What was the APR on the loan?

Question 35:
How many times have you renewed the loan? [1-2 times] [3-4 times] [5-6 times] [6 or more times] [None]

Question 36:
Are you behind on payments or in collections on any of your debts? [Yes] [No]

Question 37:
Are your wages currently being garnished? [Yes] [No]

Question 38:
What is your highest level of education completed:
[Less than a high school diploma]
[High school diploma or equivalent]
[Associate's degree]
[Bachelor's degree]
[Master's degree or higher]

Question 39:
Is there anything holding you back from additional education or training? Check all that apply. [I do not want any more education or training] [Cost of tuition] [Child care] [Transportation] [Other (please specify)]

Question 40:
Are you working or looking for work? [I am currently working] [I am looking for work] [No, I am not working or looking for work]

Question 41:

What makes a 'good' job a good job? [Scale: Not at all important to very important]

       High wages
       Paid time off
       Health insurance coverage
       Retirement plans
       Remote/flexible work options
       Training and opportunities to advance

Question 42:

What else is important to you in a job?

Question 43:

Have you ever declined a raise or promotion because it would mean losing benefits like Medicaid, CCDF, SSD, or SNAP? [Yes] [No]

Question 44:

In the last 12 months, have you worried if you'd run out of food before you got money to buy more? [Often] [Sometimes] [Never]

Question 45:

How often do you or someone in your household cut the size of meals or skip meals because there isn't enough money for food? [1-2 days a week] [3-4 days a week] [5 or more days] [Never]

Question 46:

Have YOU needed or wished you had legal assistance with any of the following in the past two years? Check all that apply. [Problems with landlords or mortgage companies] [Problems with employment] [Government services (e.g. Medicaid, SNAP, TANF)] [Debt and or wage garnishment] [Problems related to injury or illness] [Being the victim of a crime] [Being arrested or charged with a crime] [Family matters, such as divorce, custody, child support or wills] [Immigration] [Suspended license] [Criminal record expungement] [Eviction record expungement] [Other (please specify)] [None of the above]

Question 47:

Are you registered to vote? [Yes] [No] [Unsure]

Question 48:

In the past 2 years have you: [Attended a school board meeting] [Attended a zoning hearing] [Attended a legislative hearing] [Attended a community meeting on a policy issue] [Signed a petition] [Voted in an election] [None of the above]

Question 49:

If you have not or do not vote please share why? Check all that apply. [It feels like my vote doesn't matter.] [I do not feel I know enough about the candidates and issues.] [I do not have transportation to the polls.] [I'm not a citizen.] [I have a criminal record.] [I do not have time.] [Other (please specify)]

Question 50:

What motivated you to vote?

Question 51:

Please rate your current housing situation: [Very high quality] [High quality] [Neither high nor low quality] [Low quality] [Very low quality]

Question 52:
Are you facing housing challenges? Check all that apply. [Lack of affordable rental options] [Landlords won't make needed repairs] [I cannot afford needed repairs on a home I own] [Need emergency shelter for homeless individuals] [Need help finding housing after an eviction or foreclosure] [Other (please specify)]

Question 53:
Have you been homeless in the last 12 months? [Yes] [No]

Question 54:
Please describe the housing arrangement where you currently live. [I am currently without housing]
[I live with family or friends (not an owner or listed on the rental contract)] [I rent my home] [I own my home]

Question 55:
Have you lived in the same place for at least 1 year? [Yes] [No]

Question 56:
How much has your rent increased in the last 12 months? [0 – 1000]

Question 57:
How have rent increases affected you?

Question 58:
Have you ever received an eviction or foreclosure notice? [Yes] [No]

Question 59:
Do you experience challenges with transportation? [Yes/Sometimes/No]

Question 60:
What do you find MOST difficult about getting to where you need to go? [The cost of gas, insurance, or monthly payments] [Finding someone reliable to fix your vehicle] [Paying for repairs] [I have to share a car with someone else] [I do not have a license or my license is suspended] [I have a disability that prevents me from driving] [Other (please specify)]

Question 61:
In the past 12 months, have you or anyone in your household missed any of the following due to transportation issue? [Scale: Never, Once or twice, Multiple times]
       Work
       Job Interview
       Medical Appointment
       Court Appointment

Question 62:
If you missed any of the above because of transportation issues, please share how missing an appointment affected you or your household?

Question 63:
Do you or someone in your household NOT have health insurance? [Yes/No]

Question 64:
Why do they not have health insurance? [Too expensive] [Don't know how to get it] [Don't care to have it] [I don't know] [Other (please specify)]

Question 65:
Do you or someone in your household have a disability? [Yes/No]

Question 66:

Do you/they receive any of the following benefits: [SSI] [SSDI] [Veterans Disability Compensation] [I/We have applied and am/are waiting to hear back from social security or the VA.] [I/We applied for SSI or SSDI and was/were denied.]

Question 67:
What services would make your/their life better?

Question 68:
Do you have high speed internet in your home?
[Yes, it always works]
[Yes, but it doesn't always work]
[No, I cannot afford it]
[No, I do not need it]
[Other (please specify)]

Question 69:
Do you have a personal computer or laptop at home? [Yes] [No]

Question 70:
If you were asked how to do the following how confident would you be that you could do it [Scale: Not at all confident to extremely confident]:
> Search for jobs and submit a resume online
> Find reliable health and medical information
> Access online banking and financial services
> Apply for government services
> Use Zoom for work, school, or telehealth
> Check, send, or delete email
> Create a document in Microsoft Word or Google Docs

Question 71:
How would you like to receive help learning digital skills? Please slide to rank the following options from most helpful to least helpful. [I'd like a place I can call for help] [I'd like for someone to visit my home and walk me through the task] [I'd like a course at a place in my community] [I'd like an instructional video] [I'd like a support person or help desk at a place in my community]

Question 72:
If you had one wish for yourself or your community what would it be?

Question 73:
Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your community, social services, or the Community Action Agency that you visit?

Question 74:
From time to time, the Indiana Community Action Poverty Institute offers paid and unpaid research studies. Would you be interested in participating in other research studies? [Yes] [No]

Question 75:
Would you be interested in Indiana Community Action Poverty Institute newsletters and advocacy opportunities? [Yes] [No]

Question 76
If you said 'yes' above, please provide your contact info here: [NAME:] [EMAIL]

Appendix 2: Community Partners Survey Questions

Question 1:
I am a (check all that apply):
[Current or former board member of a community action agency]
[Donor or funder of a community action agency]
[Leader or staff member of a local organization]
[Local business owner]
[Government official]
[Other (please specify)]

Question 2:
Your organization's name (if applicable):

Question 3:
What is the zip code of your organization's main office?

Question 4:
How would you classify your organization? [Check all that apply]
[Community-based organization]
[Faith-based organization]
[Private sector]
[Public sector]
[Educational institution]
[Other (please specify)]

Question 5:
Which counties do you serve?
STATEWIDE
[County Selection]

Question 6:
Which best describes your role within the organization?
[Leadership team (e.g. Executive Director, principal)]
[Staff (e.g. community health worker, teacher)]
[Other (please specify)]

Question 7:
What are the top places in the community that you regularly refer individuals to for help?

Question 8:
On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "not needed" and 5 being "needed very much", how much do you think each of the following are needed in your community? If your community already has this resource, select "our community already has this."

Assistance with legal services (e.g. family law, evictions, expungement, debt collection)
Crime awareness / crime reduction
Good jobs with higher wages & benefits and/or opportunities to advance
Debt relief
Learning English or receiving translation services for official documents
Services for those with physical or mental disabilities
Education/job skills training
Budgeting classes and/or credit counseling/repair
Nutrition education / healthy eating workshops
Mental health and/or counseling services
Programs and activities for youth
Programs and activities for seniors
Transportation support (gas card, help with repairs, transit services, etc.)
Housing assistance (e.g. rental assistance, weatherization, home repairs)
Addiction treatment services
Second-chance hiring programs for those with criminal records
Internet and computer access skills
Domestic violence support
Food assistance
Childcare that is affordable and accessible
[Other (please specify)]

Question 9:
Which of the above is the top need in your community and why?

Question 10:
Which of the above is the second most important need in your community and why?

Question 11:
Are there any additional needs in your community that you'd like to share?

Question 12:
Which Community Action Agencies/programs have you worked with?
[Drop Down List of Agencies, Other, None of the Above]

Question 13:
Which Community Action Agency/program are you providing feedback on:
[Drop Down List of Agencies, Other, None of the Above]

Question 14:
What impact has community action had on your community?

Question 15:
Can you give a specific example to illustrate why you provided that answer?

Question 16:
What else could community action be doing to end poverty in your community?

Question 17:
How would you describe your level of engagement with this agency?

Question 18:
Rate the following for the agency you work with [Scale: Very Dissatisfied to Very Satisfied]:

The way the staff treats clients.
The reliability and timeliness of the staff in following through
The knowledgeability of program staff
Overall satisfaction with the agency

Question 19:
What other feedback would you like to give about this agency's programs/services?

Question 20:
What else would you like us to know about this agency specifically?

Question 21:
Would you like to be added the Institute's email list to keep up to date on research and advocacy related to poverty and financial well-being in Indiana?

Question 22:
If yes, please provide your contact information.

Question **23:**
Which policy area(s) is/are most important to you?
[The quality of jobs (e.g. wages, paid leave, scheduling practices)]
[Safety net programs (eligibility, benefit levels, cliff effects)]
[Consumer protections (interest rate caps, cost of credit, debt collection, bankruptcy laws)]
[Asset development (creating opportunities to build wealth)]
[Wage & wealth gaps]
[Housing]
[Tax and budget issues (tax credits, state priorities for spending)]
[Other (please specify)]

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