The Vermont Community Health Equity Partnership

IMPACT REPORT
BENNINGTON DISTRICT

VT CHEP Community Health Equity Partnership
Vermont Public Health Institute

BCRC

Prepared by the Bennington County Regional Commission

2023

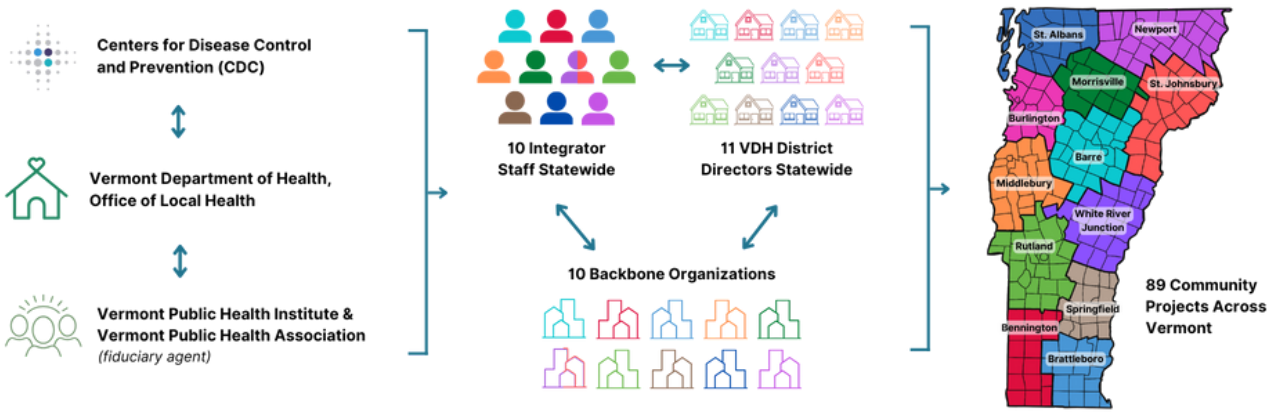
About VTCHEP

What is VTCHEP?

The Vermont Community Health Equity Partnership (VTCHEP) is a statewide partnership dedicated to advancing health equity in Vermont and funded by a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to address health inequities exacerbated by Covid-19. **$28.5 million** was granted to the Vermont Department of Health (VDH) and VDH then granted **$4.1 million** to the VT Public Health Institute (VTPHI) to develop the VTCHEP. The VTCHEP is a network of 10 local "backbone" organizations across the 12 VDH health districts in Vermont that received funding from the VTPHI to support health equity learning collaboratives and initiatives in their communities. Each backbone organization received funding for the following:

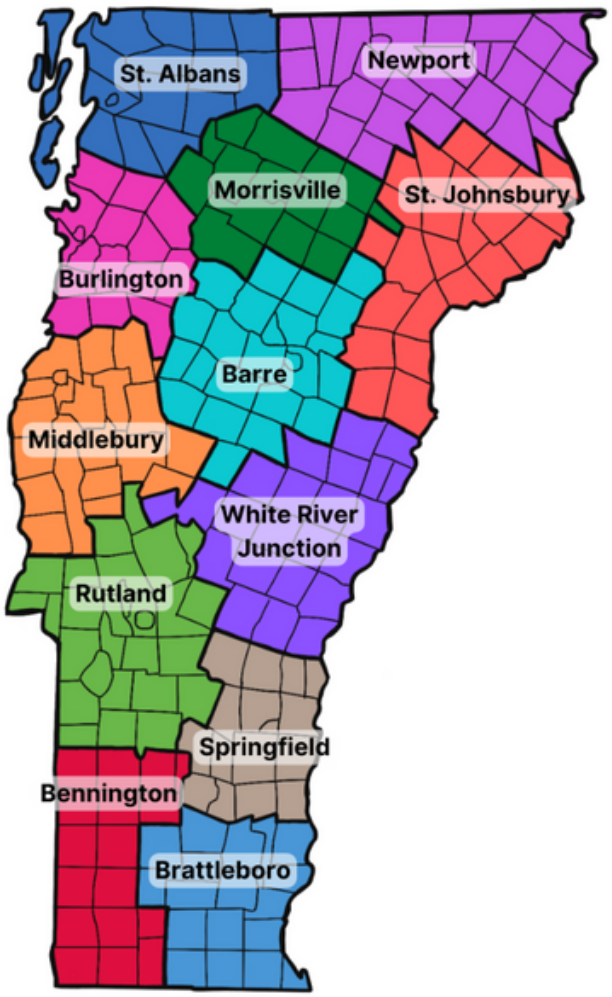
- A part-time staff person known as the "integrator".
- Stipends to compensate community members for participation in the VTCHEP.
- $150,000 to subgrant to local community projects to address health equity.

The VTCHEP began in January 2022, and backbone organizations were identified throughout the winter and spring. The grant funding that supported the VTCHEP officially ended on November 30, 2023.



Backbone Organizations

Barre - *Central VT THRIVE*
Bennington - *Bennington County Regional Commission*
Brattleboro - *United Way of Windham County*
Burlington - *N/A*
Middlebury - *Porter Medical Center*
Morrisville - *Lamoille Health Partners*
Newport & St. Johnsbury - *Northern Counties Health Care*
Rutland - *Social Tinkering*
Springfield - *Southeastern VT Community Action*
St. Albans - *Abenaki Nations of Missisquoi*
White River Junction - *Public Health Council of the Upper Valley*



Vermont Department of Health Districts

Each backbone organization was tasked with developing a data-driven problem statement specific to their region.

Bennington District Problem Statement:

Previous public health initiatives in the Bennington region have not adequately addressed the root causes of health inequities, specifically poverty and the economic systems that keep people in this condition. A significant portion of the Bennington population lives at or below the poverty level, and the design of the current economic system is a large contributor to this rate of poverty and associated negative health outcomes. Economic development and reform efforts that center human dignity, lived expertise, and health equity are essential to improving the wellbeing of the Bennington community.

Health Inequities in Bennington County

In Bennington County...

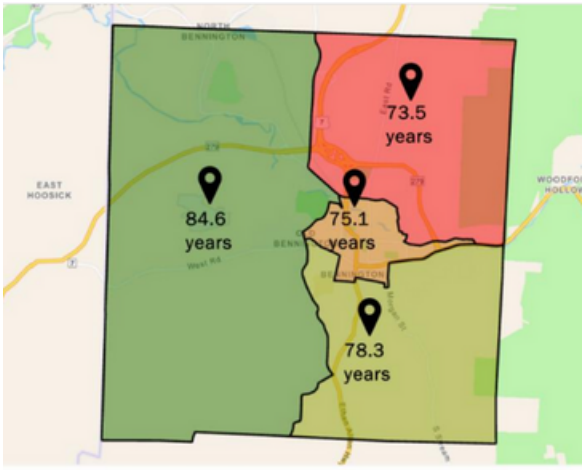
- 11.3% of people live in poverty; 18% of youth live in poverty
- Median household income is $10,000 less than the state median ($63,448 vs. $73,991)

In the Town of Bennington...

- 15.1% of people live in poverty; 33.7% of youth live in poverty
- Median household income is $51,851
- 40% of the population rent their home; in downtown Bennington, 40% of households spend more than one third of their income on rent.

Where You Live Impacts How Long You Live

Census Tract	Poverty Rate	Life Expectancy
Downtown Bennington	18.8%	75.1 years
Northeastern Bennington	28.3%	73.5 years
Western Bennington	9.9%	84.6 years
Dorset/East Dorset	8.4%	89.0 years



Life expectancy by census tract in the Town of Bennington.

Data Sources:
U.S. Census
2022 Community Health Needs Assessment

Community Engagement

Some of the core tenants of VTCHEP are centering community voices and empowering community members to address health inequities. In addition to the quantitative data pulled from the Census and Community Health Needs Assessment, we wanted to hear directly from community members about their lived experiences.

In 2022, BCRC and the Bennington Office of Local Health organized two community meetings in partnership with local organizations. For the first meeting in July, we partnered with Sunrise Family Resource Center, which offers a broad range of educational and support services to Bennington County families. Childcare was provided by Sunrise and all participants received dinner and $100 compensation.

For our second meeting in September, we partnered with Greater Bennington Community Services which is home to the Bennington Free Clinic, Kitchen Cupboard food shelf, and other supportive services. All participants received a meal and $100 compensation.

At each meeting, participants worked in small groups to answer several questions (see below), followed by a full group report out. In the last part of the meeting, participants collectively chose a specific problem to dig into deeply via a Problem Tree activity.

Questions Asked at Community Meetings:

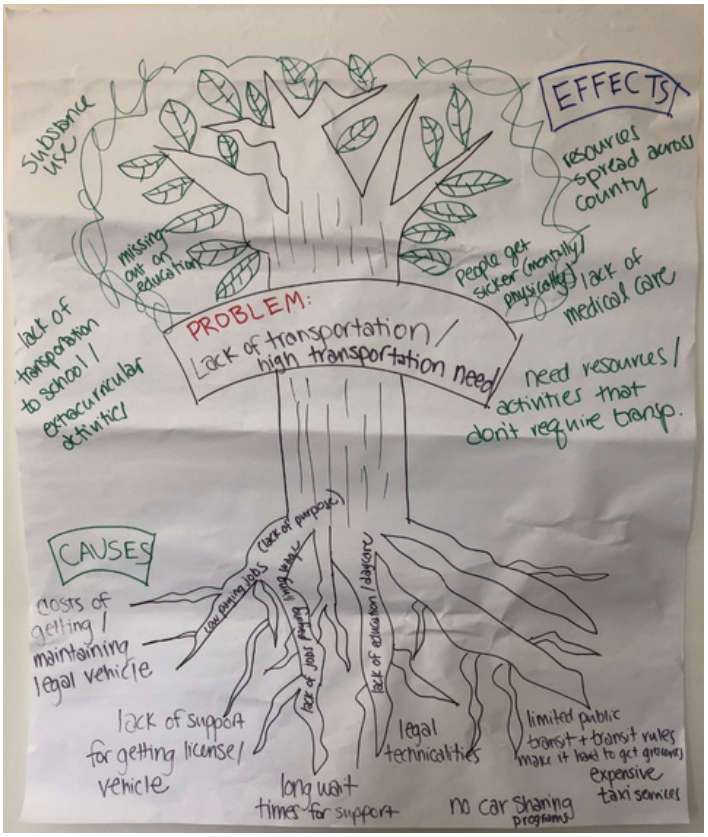
1. What do you think are the biggest stressors for you family and/or other families in Bennington?
2. Do you feel like your community cares about your wellbeing? Why or why not?
3. What does wellbeing mean for you and your family?
4. Problem Tree Activity

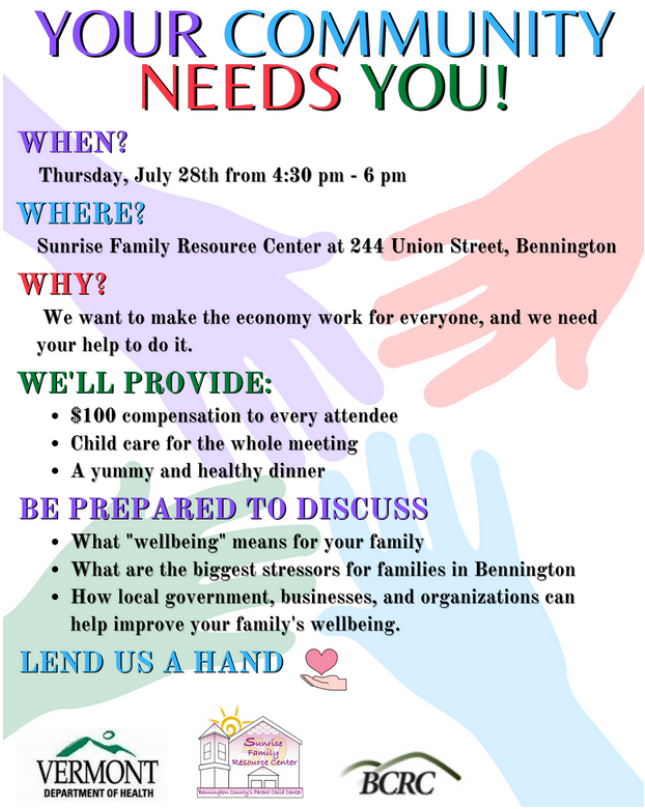
Community Meeting at Sunrise Family Resource Center

Date: July 28, 2022
# of Participants: 10

What We Heard:

- Access to basic needs including transportation, housing, childcare, and food are major challenges.
- There is significant lack of healthcare in Bennington (medical, dental, mental health, and substance use treatment).
- There is a general distrust of authorities, particularly law enforcement and the Department of Children and Families.
- Participants generally defined wellbeing as having security (housing security, food security etc.)



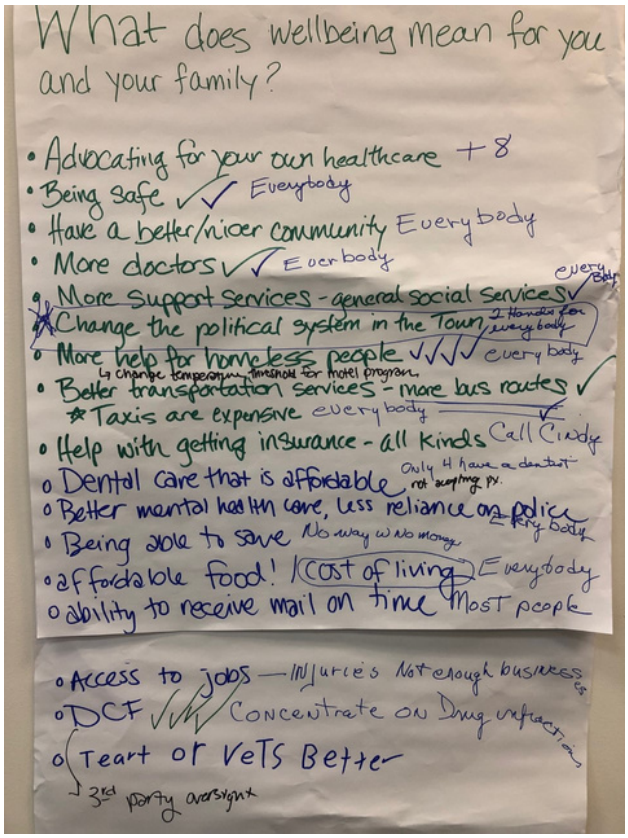


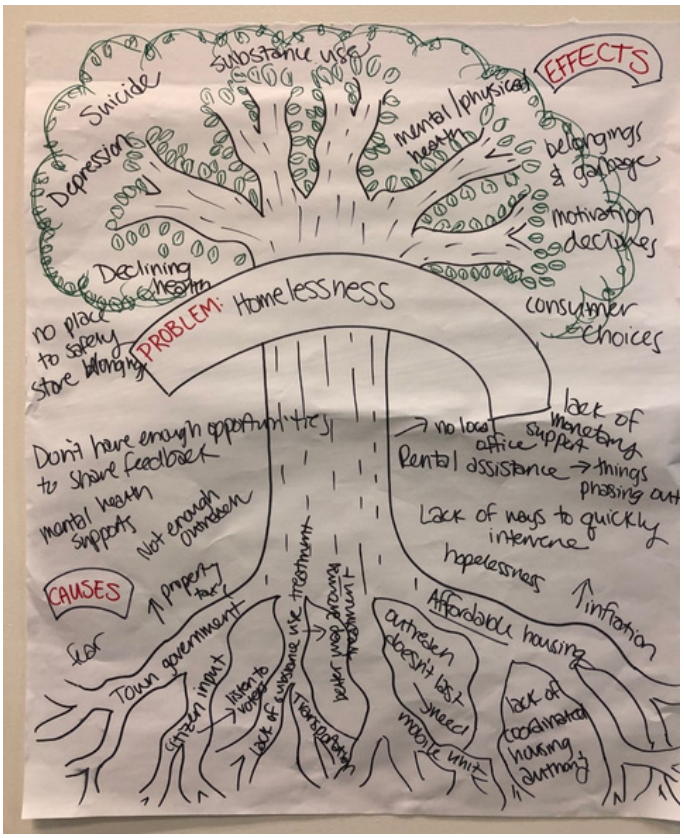
Community Meeting at Greater Bennington Community Services

Date: September 28, 2022
# of Participants: 32

What We Heard:

- Access to basic needs including transportation, housing, childcare, and food are major challenges.
- Homelessness and substance use are serious problems facing Bennington.
- There is pervasive crime and negative perception of the police.
- Emergency food programs are abundant and helpful.
- Participants generally defined wellbeing as being able to access and afford basic needs and services.





Community Projects

Each district received $150,000 to subgrant to community organizations to address health equity. Each district was responsible for developing their own application and review process. VTPHI provided a basic application template which districts could modify to fit their community.

The Bennington District application was released in August 2022 and due at the end of the month. The application was advertised broadly in Bennington via local listservs and direct outreach to specific organizations that might be interested in applying. The integrator staff person at BCRC and the Public Health Specialist at the Office of Local Health were available to provide technical assistance to applicants, and the option of a "verbal application" via an interview was also available.

11 Applications Received

$673,059 requested in funding

In September 2022, BCRC convened a community grant review committee to review the applications and make award decisions.

Members of the grant review committee:

- Bill Colvin, Bennington County Regional Commission
- Jonathan Cooper, Bennington County Regional Commission
- Megan Herrington, VT Department of Health
- Patricia Johnson, Community Member and ER Nurse
- Kelley Legacy, Bank of Bennington
- Charlie Murphy, VT Center for Independent Living
- Michael Nigro, Local Business Owner

Awarded Projects

Alliance for Community Transformations (ACT): $17,000 for the Take Care Project which provides free personal hygiene products to low-income community members.

Impact:

22,000 free period and hygiene products were distributed across 15 sites in Bennington County.

Bennington County Open Arms (BCOA): $30,000 to help cover housing costs for newly arrived refugee families.

Impact:

- Eight families were housed in Bennington.
- Ten families were able to access culturally appropriate food.

The Bike Hub: $24,000 to expand access to, use of, and maintenance of bicycles among low-income individuals.

Impact:

- 66 bikes provided to those in need including the unhoused and people with disabilities.
- 200 safety items distributed for free to those in need.
- 16 educational events offered; over 600 people engaged.
- Outreach coordinator was hired to connect with local organizations about Bike Hub services.
- Additional grant funding secured to continue the Bike Hub's equity & access work.

Greater Bennington Community Services (GBCS):
$75,000 to work with Remote Area Medical to offer a pop-up clinic in Bennington that offered no-cost medical, dental, and vision care to the community. A two-day clinic was held in August 2023.

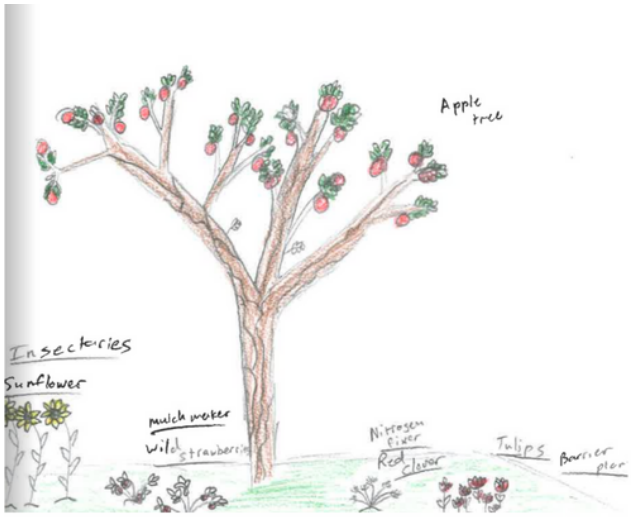
Impact:

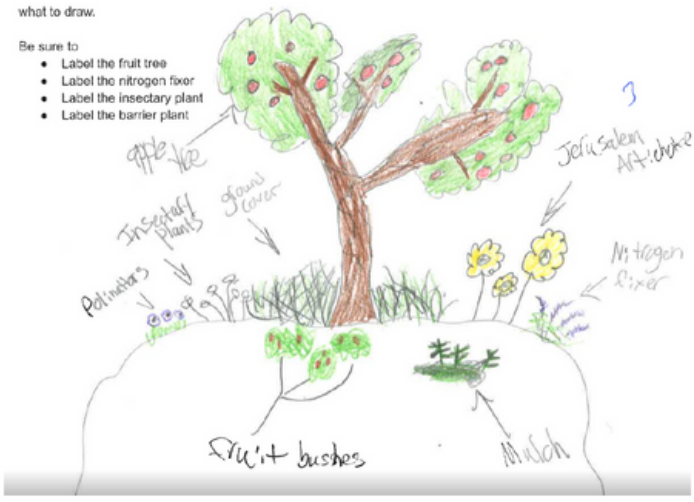
- 173 individuals received free medical, dental and vision care.
  - 115 people received dental services including filings, extractions, and cleanings.
  - 81 people received medical care.
  - 51 people received vision care; 43 left with a new pair of glasses made on site.

Mount Anthony Union Middle School (MAUMS):
$4,000 to establish an orchard for educational purposes and to provide produce to the community.

Impact:

- Students planted 14 blueberry plants and 7 fruit trees.
- 115 students participated in sustainability cooking classes using produce from the orchard.





Orchard drawings by MAUMS students

Lessons Learned & Recommendations

- Work with trusted community organizations to reach marginalized community members.
- Identify opportunities to connect with other existing equity initiatives in the community.
- Use varied data sources to understand a problem including qualitative and quantitative data.
- Stipends are a good way to drive community engagement but are not a guarantee. Trust needs to be built with the community.
- This type of flexible community funding should not be a one-time event in response to a crisis (i.e. the pandemic). Funding for health equity should be made available at the federal and state level on a yearly basis or at least for an extended period of 3-5 years.

Appendix

Feedback Collected at Community Meetings: Sunrise Family Resource Center

What do you think are the biggest stressors for your family and/or other families in Bennington?

- Transportation to childcare, work, grocery shopping etc.
- Mental health services for adults & youth
- Housing; there's no housing available and such a high demand
- High gas prices, especially for people living on a budget
- Drugs; widespread usage, dirty needles in the community
- Dept of Children and Families don't do their jobs properly
- Formula shortages; stores are running out of supplies
- Finding doctors/dentists
- Crime rates
- Quality of/access to education for everyone
- Food security/access to food/ability to store & transport groceries
- Dealing with Economic Services and other community services: low staff, high turnover, poor communication
- Fear of DCF/intimidation by DCF
- Lack of social capital: not having friends or family support, not knowing the resources needed or where to go
- Worry about shutoff notices
- Bus system for schools/safe bus stop locations
- Lack of children's programs

Do you feel like your community cares about your wellbeing? Why or why not?

Yes

- Some local organizations care and help (Sunrise, WIC, the library, splash pad)
- Sunrise has many programs that are helpful and supportive
- Early intervention/Head Start
- Public transit, social services/welfare – good programs, poor support

No

- Police, court system, DCF do not do their jobs properly
- Healthcare is disorganized and confusing sometimes
- Law enforcement is not helpful and dismissive
- Can't find primary care providers or dentists in the area, or they don't accept insurance or there's no transportation to get there.
- No jobs, low pay and high costs
- Feel judged!
- Neighbors/mandated reporters/DCF are too involved – do not make positive changes
- Water quality/water & utility bills
- Not enough services available to people who lack supports (housing, transportation, lack formula etc.). It feels like you reach out to the community for help and get nowhere.

What does wellbeing mean for you and your family?

- Access to dental & healthcare (including transportation)
- Funding for Neighborhood Watch
- Better/more police funding
- Housing security, food security
- Better public transit – more routes, more lines
- More activities – destinations for children and elderly care
- Having reliable transportation
- VOC rehab is helpful & supports wellbeing
- Access to clothing
- School transitions (ex. elementary to middle school)
- Being heard by our community
- Access to things our families need
- Access to education
- Domestic violence help
- A safe place for pregnant teens or youth using substances. This would include housing and 24 hour care – so many young people are dying from this issue.

Greater Bennington Community Services

What do you think are the biggest stressors for you and your family and/or other families in Bennington?

- Racism
- Being a single parent
- Covid-19
- Housing – rent is going up, need more affordable housing, and landlords need to be accountable
- Jobs
- Buses – not enough
- Prevalence of drugs
- Financial difficulties
- Camp sites – no place to set up tent
- Finding a doctor or dentist – bad experience with healthcare provider
- Mental health care
- Break-ins/assaults
- Needles – waste contamination
- Need a one-stop-shop for services
- More grocery stores and other retail stores
- Nighttime rebels – unsafe to walk day or night
- Rehab for people who are caught committing crimes, not catch and release

Do you feel like your community cares about your wellbeing? Why?

Yes

- Adequate flow of food through assistance programs
- Cheap transportation and medical care are available
- Should maybe offer other transportation options like Uber.
- Public assistance
- Work programs
- This program
- Helpful services:
  - St. Francis (HIS pantry)
  - BROC
  - GBCS
  - Harvest House
  - Harwood Hill Church

No

- We need more awareness of what is available
- Can't work because you'll lose more in benefits that you make
- Change the determination of benefits; change the threshold and way income is approved.
- Need more senior housing and supports
- No place for kids to play
- Doctors and dentists are unavailable
- Need a warming and cooling center
- Can't get into the emergency room or wait for hours
- Transportation throughout town
- Better communications between organizations
- Not enough housing especially for seniors
- High crime leading to hopelessness
- Substance use is high – fentanyl and heroin, need a methadone clinic
- Many people are judgmental, and the police don't care/have no sympathy
- Police are too militarized

What does wellbeing mean for you and your family?

- Advocating for your own healthcare
- Being safe
- Having a better/nicer community
- More doctors
- More general support services
- Change the political system in town
- More support for homeless people
  - Change the temperature threshold for the motel program
- Better transportation services – more bus routes
  - Taxis are expensive
- Help with getting insurance
- Affordable dental care
- Better mental health care, less reliance on police
- Being able to save money
- Affordable food and general cost of living
- Ability to receive mail on time
- Access to jobs – not enough businesses, need jobs for people with injuries/disabilities
- Dept of Children & Families (DCF) – should focus on drug infractions
  - Need third party oversight
- Better treatment of veterans

MAUMS Student Quotes About Planting the Orchard

“I learned a lot about planting trees. I think it is really cool that we’ll have trees that we planted for a really long time. It makes me happy knowing that I helped the planet and that I can keep helping it.”

“I think that it is really cool that in many years we will be part of the reason that there will be a farm.”

“It was good for me to get outside, planting was fun and people can eat off them and make new trees.”

“I think it is very motivational that my actions in planting trees will feed many people to come.”

“Planning where to plant trees and what to plant near them was a great experience. It was hard work, but the effort was worth it.”

“It's good that the trees, can make more trees and we will get more food.”

“I think it is pretty cool that you can take cuttings from the fruit trees and make other trees.”