

Executive Summary

Background and Purpose

The Columbia Gorge Health Council conducted a Community Health Assessment (CHA) for Hood River and Wasco Counties in 2024 to identify critical health-related conditions requiring community action. This assessment will inform the 2025 Community Health Improvement Plan and guide funding priorities for the PacificSource Columbia Gorge Coordinated Care Organization.

Community-Driven Process

The assessment employed a comprehensive community engagement approach involving 34 listening sessions with approximately 321 participants, a community survey with 1,100 respondents, analysis of 18 state and national datasets, and review of 20 local reports. The process was guided by three principles, six questions, and the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative framework. Community forums and the Community Advisory Council engaged in sense-making around data and recommended priorities.

Priority Issues

Four social determinants of health priorities were identified:

1. Lack of affordable housing
2. Lack of access to services for behavioral health, mental health, and substance use disorders
3. Lack of access to health care, especially for primary care, oral health, and specialty care
4. Lack of workforce development opportunities across behavioral health services, early childhood, education, economic development, and health care

A common theme across all priorities was the need for more diverse, bicultural, and bilingual services and providers.

Demographics

Hood River and Wasco Counties each have populations around 24,000-26,000. Compared to Wasco County and Oregon overall, Hood River County has more residents who identify as Hispanic/Latino (31% vs. 21% and 15%), more foreign-born residents (15% vs. 9% and 10%), and more households where languages other than English are spoken (29% vs. 17% and 15%). Both counties have similar age distributions, gender ratios, and percentages of residents with disabilities compared to state averages.

Social Determinants of Health

Hood River County demonstrates more favorable indicators for economic stability, including higher median household income (\$80,254 vs. \$61,316), lower poverty rates (7% vs. 12%), and higher employment rates (67% vs. 55%). Hood River also shows better access to health care providers, with 220 primary care providers per 100,000 population compared to 105 in Wasco County. However, Hood River has higher housing costs, with median rent at \$1,281 versus \$925 in Wasco County, and more renters spending 30% or more of income on rent (51% vs. 40%). Both counties face similar challenges with food insecurity, transportation access, and climate impacts from extreme heat and wildfire smoke.

Health Status and Inequities

Hood River County residents experience better health outcomes overall, with a life expectancy of 81 years compared to 76.2 years in Wasco County. Hood River also has fewer premature deaths (4,634 vs. 8,938 per 100,000 people under age 75). The leading causes of death in both counties are heart disease and cancer, though unintended injuries rank third in Wasco County while cerebrovascular disease ranks third in Hood River County. Wasco County shows higher rates of injury deaths, tobacco use, and infectious and respiratory diseases compared to Hood River County.

Assets and Gaps

The Columbia Gorge region has 44 unique assets supporting community health, including public-private collaboratives addressing houselessness, food insecurity, substance use, and health equity. However, both counties face significant gaps in preventive and treatment services for children and adolescents, particularly in access to health care and mental health services. Provider shortages and limited funding compound these challenges. Strong early learning programs and school-based health centers in Hood River and Dufur provide essential support despite these obstacles.

Biggest Gaps in Service and Barriers to Care

Access to Mental Health and Behavioral Health Services

Both counties face significant shortages of mental health providers, with Wasco County having only 150 adults per mental health provider compared to 230 in Hood River County. Approximately 31% of Hood River County 11th grade students and 10% of Wasco County students reported unmet mental health care needs in the past year. Only 30% of community survey respondents reported getting all the counseling or mental health services they needed in the past year.

Access to Primary Care, Oral Health, and Specialty Care

Wasco County has substantially fewer health care providers, with only 105 primary care providers and 83 dentists per 100,000 population compared to 220 and 133 respectively in Hood River County. Approximately 24% of community survey respondents did not receive all needed medical care, and 42% did not receive all needed dental care in the past year.

Services for Children and Adolescents

Both counties face significant gaps in preventive and treatment services for children (0-12) and adolescents (13-18), particularly in access to health care and mental health services. High needs combined with limited infrastructure and resources result in unmet health needs for both age groups.

Workforce Shortages

A critical shortage of qualified health care providers exists across behavioral health, primary care, oral health, and specialty care. This workforce gap was identified as a cross-cutting priority issue affecting multiple service areas.

Lack of Culturally Appropriate Services

A common theme across all priority areas was the need for more diverse, bicultural, and bilingual services and providers to meet the needs of Hood River County's substantial Hispanic/Latino population (31% of residents).

Geographic and Economic Barriers

Despite high insurance coverage rates (95-96% for children, 86-87% for adults), access challenges persist due to provider shortages, geographic distance, and economic factors including high housing costs that affect workforce recruitment and retention.

The Unique Needs of the Community

Diverse, Bicultural, and Bilingual Services

A critical need identified across all four priority areas was for more diverse, bicultural, and bilingual services and providers. Hood River County has a significantly higher Hispanic/Latino population (31%) compared to Wasco County (21%) and Oregon (15%). Nearly 29% of Hood River County residents speak a language other than English at home, and 15% are foreign-born, creating substantial demand for culturally appropriate and Spanish-language services.

Cross-County and Cross-State Collaboration

The Columbia Gorge region requires unique public-private collaboratives that address critical issues such as houselessness, food insecurity, substance use, and health equity across county and state lines (Oregon and Washington). The region benefits from 44 unique assets specifically designed to meet the distinctive needs of Hood River and Wasco County residents.

Rural Service Delivery

Both counties face rural health care delivery challenges with limited provider availability and the need to travel for specialty care. Wasco County particularly struggles with fewer health care providers per capita and higher rates of injury deaths, tobacco use, and infectious and respiratory diseases compared to Hood River County.

Affordable Housing in High-Cost Areas

Hood River County faces particularly acute housing affordability challenges with median rent at \$1,281 compared to \$925 in Wasco County, and 51% of renters spending 30% or more of household income on rent. This creates workforce recruitment and retention challenges that exacerbate health care access issues.

Climate and Environmental Adaptation

Both counties experience similar climate challenges including 27 days of extreme heat annually and poor air quality from wildfire smoke, requiring community resilience and adaptation strategies for vulnerable populations.

Children and Adolescent Services

Despite strong early learning programs and school-based health centers in Hood River and Dufur, both counties face significant unmet needs for preventive and treatment services for children (0-12) and adolescents (13-18), particularly in health care and mental health access.

Strengths of the Community

Unique Public-Private Collaboratives

The Columbia Gorge region has unique public-private collaboratives that address critical issues such as houselessness, food insecurity, substance use, and health equity across county and state lines. These collaborative structures represent a distinctive strength in coordinating regional responses to health challenges.

Comprehensive Asset Infrastructure

The region has 44 unique assets supporting community health improvement organized into four categories: collaboratives, informational resources, physical facilities/infrastructure, and programs. These assets span multiple social determinants of health domains and are specifically designed to meet the unique needs of Hood River and Wasco County residents.

Strong Early Learning Programs

Both counties benefit from strong early learning programs including Four Rivers Early Learning and Columbia Gorge Educational Service District Early Intervention services that provide essential support to local families with young children.

School-Based Health Centers

Hood River and Dufur have school-based health centers operated by One Community Health that provide essential health care and mental health services to students, offering accessible care within the school setting.

High Health Insurance Coverage

Both counties demonstrate strong health insurance coverage with 95-96% of children under 19 years and 86-87% of adults aged 18-64 having health insurance, ensuring most residents have coverage for health care services.

Social Support Networks

Community survey respondents reported strong social support, with 77% having someone who loves them and makes them feel wanted, 72% having someone to help if suddenly ill or disabled, and 71% having someone to confide in about their problems.

Civic Engagement

Both counties demonstrate similar rates of social organization membership and voter participation as the state average, indicating active community engagement and civic participation.

Hood River County Economic Strengths

Hood River County demonstrates favorable economic indicators including higher median household income (\$80,254), lower poverty rates (7%), higher employment rates (67%), and stronger job growth (33.2 net change in jobs per 1,000 residents) compared to Wasco County and Oregon overall.

Hood River County Education Outcomes

Hood River School District's K-12 educational benchmarks are mostly higher than Wasco County and Oregon, with 45% of third graders meeting reading scores, 38% with bachelor's degrees or higher, and a 93% five-year high school graduation rate.

Hood River County Health Care Access

Hood River County has better access to health care providers with 220 primary care providers, 133 dentists, and 230 adults per mental health provider per 100,000 population, exceeding both Wasco County and state averages.