

Executive Summary

Overview

Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Ontario conducted a Community Health Needs Assessment for Malheur County, Oregon through a social determinants of health framework. Data collection occurred between July and November 2022 through surveys (88 respondents), focus groups, and interviews, with emphasis on underserved populations. The assessment was approved by the Saint Alphonsus Health System Board on June 5, 2023.

Key Priorities

Three top priorities emerged from community input and data analysis:

Safe, Affordable Housing and Homelessness

Rising housing costs, extremely low vacancy rates, and limited shelter resources create significant challenges. The majority of survey respondents ranked housing costs as their top concern. Malheur County has higher rates of crowded housing than the state average, and homelessness increased notably during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among adults.

Access to Affordable Health Care, Including Oral and Vision Health

Residents report difficulty accessing health care due to long appointment waits, service costs, insurance coverage gaps, and lack of linguistically and culturally appropriate services. Malheur County has only 38 primary care physicians per 100,000 residents (one-third the state average). Barriers are particularly acute for immigrant populations, non-native English speakers, and Medicaid/Medicare recipients.

Safe, Reliable Transportation

Rising transportation costs and lack of non-driving options particularly affect older adults and those needing to travel outside the region for services. While vehicle ownership has increased, the aging population faces growing challenges accessing health care and services, especially during inclement weather.

Community Profile

Malheur County has a population of 31,313 with significant diversity—nearly 40% of residents are non-white, including 34.7% Hispanic or Latino residents. The county experiences higher poverty rates than the state average (highest in Oregon as of 2021), with more than half of households struggling to meet basic needs according to ALICE thresholds.

Health Outcomes

Malheur County ranks 28th out of 35 Oregon counties for health outcomes. Key concerns include higher rates of diabetes, obesity, and self-reported poor health compared to state averages. Mental health emerged as a top community concern, with residents reporting increased depression, anxiety, and isolation since the pandemic. Substance use, particularly methamphetamine and youth vaping, remains problematic.

Implementation

Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Ontario will develop and publish implementation strategies by the end of 2023 to address these priorities. Community resources are available at findhelp.org.

Biggest Gaps in Service and Barriers to Care

Insufficient Health Care Services

Mental health care services, primary health care and specialty care, substance use services, and oral health care services are reported as insufficient by community members. The county has only 38 primary care physicians per 100,000 residents, compared to the state average of approximately 115. Mental health providers are also limited at 604 per 100,000 residents.

Access Barriers

The most frequently reported barriers include cost of services, insurance problems (lack of coverage or inadequate coverage), long waits for appointments, lack of available providers nearby, language or cultural differences, and lack of awareness about available services. Inconvenient operating hours and lack of transportation also create obstacles.

Provider Shortages

Workforce shortages cause long wait times for establishing care with providers, particularly for mental health and behavioral health services. While Lifeways provides behavioral health services, high demand and limited staff result in extended waiting periods.

Insurance Coverage Issues

More than 10% of residents are uninsured. Approximately 24% of Indigenous or Native American residents lack insurance coverage. Many providers do not accept Medicaid or Medicare, further limiting access for low-income populations. More than half of children under 18 are enrolled in Medicaid.

Disparities for Vulnerable Populations

Immigrant populations and non-native English speakers face significant barriers due to language differences, lack of culturally appropriate services, and fear of mistreatment related to immigration status. These populations report the greatest lack of awareness about available resources.

Preventive and Routine Care Gaps

Malheur County residents report lower rates of routine checkups (below state average) and seniors receiving preventive services. Only 60% of adults reported seeing a dentist in 2020, compared to 66% statewide.

The Unique Needs of the Community

Large Hispanic and Latino Population

Nearly 35% of residents are Hispanic or Latino, the fastest-growing demographic in the state. This population experiences barriers requiring more translation services, culturally appropriate health care providers, adequate housing, and greater representation in public fields.

Rural and Geographic Isolation

Residents must travel outside the region to access specialty care and critical services not available locally. Mean travel time to work is lower than the state average, but limited local services create challenges for accessing comprehensive health care.

Border Community Dynamics

Ontario has the largest number of marijuana dispensaries per capita in Oregon, creating an influx of visitors from neighboring Idaho. Community members expressed concerns about impacts on crime, housing availability, and infrastructure strain.

High Poverty and Economic Marginalization

Malheur County has the highest poverty rate in Oregon as of 2021. More than half of households (55%) fall below the ALICE threshold, struggling to meet basic needs. Median household income (\$49,708) is significantly lower than the state average (\$72,708).

Aging Housing Stock

The median year homes were built is much older than the state average, with housing needing more repairs and updates. Crowded housing rates exceed state averages, and residents report problems including water leaks and bug infestations.

Agricultural and Seasonal Economy

The community's employment base creates specific workforce and economic stability challenges that affect access to consistent health care and housing.

Immigration-Related Fears

Many residents report difficulty accessing services due to fear of mistreatment related to immigration status, creating unique barriers beyond typical language and cultural differences.

Limited Public Transportation

Very low public transit usage (far below state average) combined with an aging population creates significant challenges for those unable to drive, particularly for accessing health care and social services.

Youth Population Needs

Higher percentages of children and youth compared to the state average, with mental health concerns specifically for middle and high school students emerging as a priority. School-aged children face higher rates of homelessness and poverty.

Recent Population Growth Pressures

After years of population decline, the county experienced growth between 2019-2021, primarily from within-state migration, intensifying housing costs and infrastructure strain.

Strengths of the Community

Collaborative Community Partnerships

Strong partnerships exist among hospital systems, community health centers, local public health departments, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and health and human service organizations. A dedicated Steering Committee with 15 institutions works collectively to address community needs.

Active Community Organizations

Multiple organizations provide services including Lifeways (behavioral health services), Oregon Food Bank, Community In Action (winter shelter program), Northwest Housing Alternatives (affordable housing development), and Four Rivers Healthy Communities.

Educational Resources

Treasure Valley Community College provides local access to higher education, nursing programs, and medical assistant training. The community supports nursing student clinical rotations in partnership with Oregon Health Sciences University and provides scholarships for students pursuing health care careers.

Affordable Housing Development

A 52-unit affordable housing development was completed in August 2022 through partnership between Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Ontario and Northwest Housing Alternatives, including units for extremely low-income residents and those with severe mental illness.

Community Health Workers

Saint Alphonsus employs Community Health Workers who assess social needs of patients and connect them to community resources through a standardized screening process and CHW Hotline available Monday-Friday.

Food Security Programs

The Western Treasure Valley Food Coalition works to establish food resources, and multiple food assistance programs operate in the region to address food insecurity.

Health Care Facilities and Services

Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Ontario provides comprehensive services including emergency care, maternity care, cancer care, surgical services, tele-stroke services, and multiple specialty services. The 49-bed acute care hospital serves Ontario and surrounding communities in eastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho.

Lower Unemployment During Pandemic

Malheur County experienced less unemployment spike during COVID-19 compared to the state, demonstrating economic resilience.

Housing Task Forces

Active Malheur County United for Housing Task Force and Eastern Oregon Workforce Housing Task Force work to establish pipelines for affordable and workforce housing opportunities.

Lower Food Desert Rates

Lower percentage of residents living in food deserts compared to the state average in 2019.

Community Engagement in Assessment

Strong community participation in the assessment process with 88 survey respondents, five focus groups, and three key informant interviews, demonstrating community investment in health improvement.