

Executive Summary

Assessment Overview This Community Health Needs Assessment for Wallowa County, Oregon, follows a 2022 study and was sponsored by Wallowa Memorial Hospital and Medical Clinics, Building Healthy Families, Helping Hearts, Wallowa Valley Center for Wellness, and Winding Waters Medical Clinic. The assessment used mixed methodology including 408 community surveys and key informant input.

Community Characteristics Wallowa County is a rural, frontier community with a population that is 93.6% White and 3.8% Hispanic. The county faces significant social determinants of health challenges including limited childcare availability for ages 0-2, housing shortages, and geographic isolation affecting access to services.

Key Health Findings

Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Mental health emerged as a critical concern. The community has implemented multiple suicide prevention programs including Youth Save, Oregon CALM, SafeTalk, ASIST, and QPR training. A fully staffed two-person crisis response team has been established with 72-hour follow-up services and transitional housing units.

Substance Use Disorder Services Wallowa Valley Center for Wellness has developed a recovery-oriented system of care coordinating substance use services, mental health treatment, psychiatric services, and peer support. The center now offers dual diagnosis treatment in outpatient and intensive outpatient settings, with transitional housing for individuals facing housing barriers.

Health care Access Access to health care services remains a challenge. Initiatives include connecting residents to community health workers, supporting OHP eligibility determination, and ensuring well-child visits and immunizations through age 18. All program registration forms now include questions about health care access.

Community Strengths Strong collaborative partnerships exist among local organizations. The community has established comprehensive support systems including peer mentorship programs, veteran support groups, and integrated school-based services with a Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner.

Ongoing Initiatives Current efforts focus on expanding full-day preschool slots across all three communities, increasing childcare provider support, connecting families to housing resources, providing substance use prevention programs for youth and families, and distributing life-saving stations with Narcan education countywide.

Biggest Gaps in Service and Barriers to Care

Health care Service Gaps

- Lack of specialty care services requiring travel outside the county for most specialty treatment
- No internists in Wallowa County
- Most cancer treatment unavailable locally
- Limited mental health counselors accepting Medicaid
- Limited providers experienced in transgender/LGBTQ care, chronic pain conditions, and addiction
- Minimal services for individuals with disabilities
- Minimal handicapped accessible services and activities
- Limited substance use disorder counselors
- No orthodontist requiring travel for services

Geographic and Distance Barriers

- Must travel far to access specialized care

- Specialty providers who visit (e.g., cardiologists) offer limited appointment windows with no choice of provider
- Travel difficult for much of the population
- Remote location with limited access to activities, especially in winter
- Distance from health resources affects preventive care and treatment

Financial Barriers

- Cost prevented physician visits for 8.6% of residents in past year
- Dental care costs too high even with insurance coverage
- Chronic pain treatments (acupuncture, massage) lack affordable options, particularly for Medicare population
- High costs of health care limit affordability of nutritious food and other health necessities

Provider Shortages

- 131.0 primary care doctors per 100,000 population (vs. 203.0 statewide)
- Substance use counselors are limited
- Peer support not always available when needed
- Care providers experience burnout quickly
- Difficulty getting patients into rehabilitation facilities outside the county

Mental Health Access Barriers

- 14.2% of women and 6.2% of men unable to obtain mental health services when needed in past year
- Access to crisis intervention not timely
- Stigma presents huge barrier to accessing services
- Limited success rates due to small community size

Social and Systemic Barriers

- High rates of food, housing, and transportation insecurity
- Many community members live alone or lack supportive family members nearby
- Elderly residents often cannot drive, lack funds for treatment, or are confused by options
- Limited awareness of available resources or how to navigate the system
- Discrimination against those with mental illness for housing and employment
- Lack of indoor recreational facilities for physical activity

The Unique Needs of the Community

Aging Population

- At least one-third of the population is over age 65
- Wallowa County has an average age much older than the state of Oregon
- 28.7% worry about elder care access
- Many older adults live alone and are isolated or live outside of town
- Elderly often cannot drive, lack funds for treatment, and may be confused by options
- Limited and expensive elder care facilities with no foster homes for elderly
- High rates of chronic pain limiting daily activities and resulting in isolation

Rural and Remote Geography

- Living in a remote area with limited access to activities, especially in winter
- 25.1% of population has low food access (living more than 10 miles from nearest supermarket in rural areas)
- Extreme weather conditions limit outdoor exercise
- Difficult to travel within the community or receive in-home care
- Distance from health resources affects preventive care and treatment access

- Isolation for seniors is a significant stressor

Economic Characteristics

- Tourism economy driving housing costs up
- Careers around construction, natural resources, and tourism
- Low income area with lack of high-paying jobs
- Minimum wage does not cover living expenses for most families
- High inflation stretching family budgets

Childcare Shortages

- 30.5% worry about having childcare when needed
- 27.2% worry about affording childcare
- Still working on filling 0-2 age childcare needs
- Exploring Early Head Start slots in licensed provider home settings

Small Community Stigma

- Fear of accessing local providers due to small town interactions
- Barrier is the small town itself where you likely know the person who will help you personally
- Limited success rates for substance use treatment due to small community size
- Difficult to stay away from others who use substances in small community

High Youth Vaping Rates

- Teenagers vaping in very high numbers
- Many teens are vaping with fruity flavors and products deemed non-harmful
- Smoking increased in school-age kids across the county
- Addiction to nicotine products at young ages

Suicide and Mental Health Crisis

- Suicide deaths at 26.8 per 100,000 (exceeds state and national rates)
- Developed high risk registry to identify clients needing wraparound supports
- Weekly veteran support group and STAIRS Program for veteran population
- GOBHI training focused on elderly adult suicide risk

Specific Population Needs

- Native Americans (mostly Nez Perce) facing racial discrimination
- LGBTQ+ population facing discrimination and threats
- Veteran population requiring specialized support services
- Need for licensed counselors experienced in transgender/LGBTQ care

Housing Crisis

- Record number of evictions and homeless individuals
- Existing and new housing aimed at tourism economy rather than residents
- Housing costs have gone up dramatically
- Lack of affordable housing is the number one hurdle for workforce recruitment

Strengths of the Community

Emergency and Routine Care Services

- Emergency care (getting stabilized then sent to another facility) and routine maintenance health care are rated as great
- Chemo station available at the hospital with oncologist who visits
- 79.3% of adults had routine checkup in past year
- 96.3% of children had routine checkup in past year

Expanded Specialty Services

- Orthopedics added

- Podiatry added
- Increased number of visiting specialists
- Cardiologists travel to the community
- Cardiac rehab program established

Technology Investments

- MRI purchased to serve a wider variety of patients
- Sterile processing expansion to offer more surgical services

Strong Collaborative Partnerships

- Collaboration among Wallowa Memorial Hospital and Medical Clinics, Building Healthy Families, Helping Hearts, Wallowa Valley Center for Wellness, and Winding Waters Medical Clinic
- Network of Care meetings facilitating coordination
- Implementation of Unite Us platform for resource coordination
- Multiple partnering organizations working together on health initiatives

Community Health Workers

- Community health workers providing connections to resources
- CHW attending hospital rounds
- Community health workers partnering with organizations to address food insecurity
- CHW connecting patients to legal aid, housing assistance, and health care enrollment

Substance Use and Mental Health Services

- Multidisciplinary team for substance use services with quick response capability
- Recovery-oriented system of care coordinating substance use, mental health, psychiatric, and peer support services
- Dual diagnosis treatment in outpatient and intensive outpatient settings
- Transitional housing units available for clients
- Two-person crisis response team fully staffed and trained
- Peer support staff working as mentors
- Weekly veteran support group and STAIRS Program

Fall Prevention and Safety Programs

- Balance classes for older adults
- Outdoor fitness equipment for older adults
- First aid and fall prevention courses free to public
- Reduction in ground level falls in the community
- Gun locks and safes available for safety planning during crisis situations

Food Access Initiatives

- Harvest Share providing fresh food (including refrigerated food) in public locations across all three communities
- Food resource guide published and circulated
- Food boxes available for urgent needs
- Food task force convened

Tobacco Cessation Resources

- Designated tobacco cessation specialist (Respiratory Therapist trained)
- Community tobacco cessation classes offered
- Individual tobacco cessation coaching available
- Tobacco-free campus policy in place

Preventive Health Services

- Vaccine clinics held within the county, including outlying areas
- Antimicrobial stewardship program implemented

- Air purifiers distributed to schools and community centers
- Clean air spaces established with published hours

Youth and Family Programs

- Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner added to Wallowa School
- Suicide prevention training programs (Youth Save, Oregon CALM, SafeTalk, ASIST, QPR)
- Increased counseling time in Alternative Education classroom
- Progress opening additional full-day, school-based preschool slots in all three communities

High Health Insurance Coverage

- Only 5.7% of adults age 18-64 lack health insurance (better than state and national rates)