

Executive Summary

Purpose The assessment describes and prioritizes critical health conditions to inform Wheeler County's Health Improvement Plan and support funding efforts.

Process Wheeler County Public Health contracted with Insight for Action to facilitate the assessment. A seven-member steering committee reviewed data from federal/state datasets, local reports, interviews with 11 knowledge holders, and surveys from 169 residents using the Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being framework.

Priority Community Health Conditions The steering committee identified six critical health conditions:

- Access to health care services
- Functioning county-wide emergency medical service system
- Access to nutritious and affordable food
- Access to housing
- Access to childcare and early childhood education opportunities
- Opportunities for greater community engagement

Community Action Goals and strategies to address these priorities are detailed in the 2025 Wheeler County Community Health Improvement Plan.

Biggest Gaps in Service and Barriers to Care

Emergency Medical Services No EMS in Fossil. Mitchell and Spray EMS volunteers are aging out with insufficient replacements.

Primary Care Access Need for more primary care providers. The current ratio shows 1,450:0 people to providers for Wheeler County (note: data may be incorrect as Asher Community Health Center employs primary care providers).

Mental Health Services Limited mental health provider availability with a ratio of 360:1 people to providers in Wheeler County.

Specialty Services No hospice, home health programs, community paramedicine, x-ray imaging, hearing/vision services, or specialty care available in the county.

Health care Coordination Lack of coordinated health services across providers.

Workforce Capacity Low health care workforce capacity overall, making it difficult to recruit and retain providers.

Service Navigation Inadequate support to help residents navigate and access available health care services.

Resident Perceptions 27.2% of survey respondents identified "getting quality health care services" as a big challenge, ranking it as the second-highest concern after housing.

The Unique Needs of the Community

Geographic Challenges Long travel distances to access services and amenities. No full-service grocery store; residents must drive to Bend or Prineville. Remote, rural location makes recruitment difficult.

Aging Population 36.2% of residents are 65 or older. Need for senior support services including in-home care, hospice, and outreach for isolated seniors. EMS volunteers are aging out.

Housing Crisis High cost and low availability of housing. Limited land available for building. Poor quality of many existing homes. 34.3% of residents identified affordable housing as their biggest challenge.

Small Population Total population of only 1,434 people spread across three towns (Fossil, Mitchell, and Spray), limiting economic viability of services.

Workforce Limitations Low workforce capacity due to older population and limited skills. Few jobs paying living wages. Many residents live in poverty (10.0% poverty rate, 46.0% ALICE status).

Childcare Desert No formal childcare options available for residents, only programs for school district staff and HeadStart preschools.

Emergency Services Need for functioning county-wide EMS system. Concern about emergency preparedness including fires.

Health Care Workforce Difficulty recruiting health care providers due to rural location and limited housing. Low overall health care workforce capacity.

Social Isolation Some seniors and teenagers are socially isolated. Decline in volunteerism. Need for greater community engagement opportunities.

Economic Development Limited job training and employment opportunities. Some resistance to economic development within the community.

Food Access While small grocery stores exist in all three towns, residents lack access to full-service grocery stores with fresh, nutritious options.

Strengths of the Community

Strong Sense of Community 123 mentions of "sense of community" as the most valued aspect of Wheeler County. Culture of helping people in need. 66.3% of residents said getting help from neighbors is "not a challenge at all."

Community Assets and Organizations Neighbors Helping Neighbors volunteer group. Churches in all three towns. Spray General Store and Spray Grange serve as gathering venues.

Health Care Infrastructure Asher Community Health Center (FQHC) with clinics in all three towns. Community Counseling Solutions with clinic in Fossil and telehealth. Wheeler County Public Health provides vaccinations. Mental health counselors in Fossil and Mitchell school districts.

Education System Three K-12 school districts in Fossil, Mitchell, and Spray with low student-to-teacher ratios. HeadStart preschool programs at all three school districts. North Central Education Service District. County-wide school district athletic program.

Health Coverage Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization (EOCCO) serves approximately 450 Wheeler County residents with Oregon Health Plan (Medicaid).

Food Support Programs Grocery stores in all three towns. Food bank in Fossil (monthly). Weekly congregate senior meals in Fossil and Spray. Weekly senior food box drops. Free breakfast and lunch programs in schools. EOCCO Frontier Veggie Rx for 50 families.

Housing Initiatives Fossil and Mitchell School Districts and Asher Center purchased six houses for employees.

Transportation Services Wheeler County Community Transportation provides on-demand service for seniors and persons with disabilities, scheduled routes, and non-medical emergency transport for EOCCO members.

Youth Programs 4-H Clubs. Girl's Circle Program and Sources of Strength Groups in Fossil school. County-wide school district athletic program.

Civic Engagement 79.4% voter participation in 2022 biennial general elections, significantly higher than statewide (66.9%).

Natural Environment and Quality of Life Peaceful, quiet, safe environment. Beautiful landscape. Small town atmosphere valued by residents.

County Actions to Address Issues

Community Health Improvement Plan The county has developed the 2025 Wheeler County Community Health Improvement Plan, which contains goals and strategies to address the six priority health conditions identified in the assessment.