

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Charlotte County Community Needs Assessment 2013

Prepared by United Way of Charlotte County, Charlotte County Human Services and the Charlotte Community Foundation



Photo provided by Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau

In August of 2012, United Way of Charlotte County, Charlotte County Human Services and the Charlotte Community Foundation partnered to conduct a community needs assessment. The partnership was formed after the three agencies noticed an increase in needs, particularly since the economic recession began.

A comprehensive study, such as this one, has not been conducted in more than 10 years. In that time Charlotte County was devastated by, and recovered from Hurricane Charley, and has been affected by the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. With that comes a loss of jobs in the community, in particular the construction industry, and an increase in those living at or below the poverty line.

The purpose of this study was to help identify the most significant needs within the community and to identify the gaps in services that are currently being offered. At a time when funding cuts are the norm, it is crucial that the resources available are directed towards the community's greatest needs and towards programs that will have the greatest impact on all citizens.

We anticipate the community-at large will benefit from this study because:

Gaps in human services will be more easily addressed.

Potential community partnerships will be more easily identified and developed.

Service agencies will be able to utilize this information when applying for and awarding grants.

Policy makers will be able to utilize this information when requesting federal funding and making local decisions.

Needs in the community will be more easily prioritized.

The community will be more informed.

This summary provides a brief overview of the research methodology, findings and recommendations for moving forward.

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY AND THE RESEARCH

The Charlotte County Community

Charlotte County is located on Southwest Florida's Gulf Coast and borders Sarasota and DeSoto Counties to the north, Glades County to the east, and Lee County to the south. Punta Gorda is the only incorporated city in the county.

Charlotte County has grown significantly over the past twenty years. During the 1990s, the county grew by 27.62% and an additional 12.96% during the 2000s, bringing its 2010 population to 159,978 people. Growth is expected to continue over the next decade. The population remains predominantly white (90.05%), but the black population has grown by 46% and the Hispanic population has grown by 97% over the past decade. The county continues to be predominantly a retirement community with the nation's second largest population over the age of 65.

The county continues to have lower levels of educational attainment than state and national averages. Only 19.3% of the adult population has a bachelor's degree or higher. The recession has left 11.9% of the county's population in poverty.

The Community Needs Assessment

The purpose of this study is designed to identify pressing needs in the community. Its intent is to identify areas that need to be addressed to improve the lives of residents and is in no way meant to detract from the effective programs and services that are being provided. The objective is to strengthen and inform the many organizations that work to advance the standard of living for Charlotte County citizens. To achieve this, the research team utilized a multi-faceted approach that focused on six key human service issue areas: Education, Employment, Family Services, Health, Poverty and Transportation.

The components of the study included statistical data collected from sources including the United States Census Bureau's *Decennial Census* and *American Community Survey*, the United States' Departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Florida's Departments of Children and Families, Economic Opportunity, Education, and Health, as well as other national, state and local resources; a survey of local and regional human service agencies; a survey of the clientele using the services provided by these agencies, and a Community Conversation that was open to the community at-large.



KEY COMMUNITY NEEDS

The opportunities identified in this study are based on several key findings about the needs of the Charlotte County community. The opportunities are grouped by the six key human service issue areas. It became apparent during this study that while the needs identified within each human service issue area are necessary for everyone, they are even more crucial for an individual or family living in poverty, as it can be both a cause and an effect of other human service needs.

Education

- ◆ Support early childhood development and kindergarten readiness initiatives.
- ◆ Support Charlotte County Public Schools initiatives for academic success. High percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunches, low test scores and chronic absenteeism are indicators of students at risk of academic failure.
- ◆ Increase opportunities and reduce barriers at the high school level so that students can continue their education.

Employment

- ◆ Encourage educational attainment beyond high school to meet the growing needs for a high skilled workforce.
- ◆ Diversify the local economy.

Family Services

- ◆ Use the results of the Developmental Assets survey to further support youth development activities in Charlotte County.
- ◆ Increase education and awareness about youth and adult domestic and substance abuse.
- ◆ Increase affordability and decrease barriers of youth extra curricular programs.
- ◆ Increase capacity and availability of quality diversion programs for juvenile offenders.
- ◆ Improve the availability and capacity of services for Charlotte County's large but varied senior population.

Health

- ◆ Attract more physicians to Charlotte County and increase the number of Medicaid and Medicare providers to meet the needs of the population.
- ◆ Increase availability of and support existing efforts to provide affordable health care services.
- ◆ Support services that increase access to prenatal care to promote positive birth outcomes.

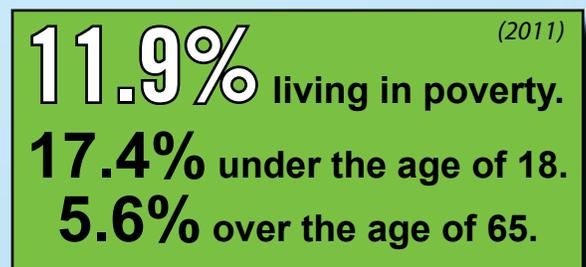
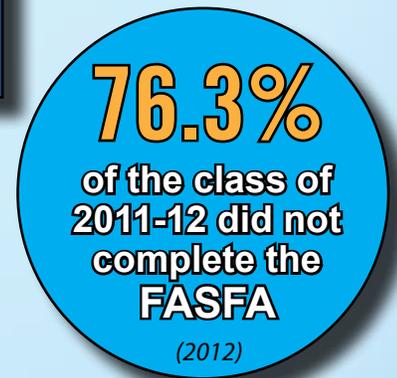
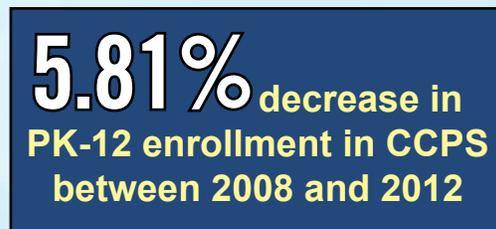
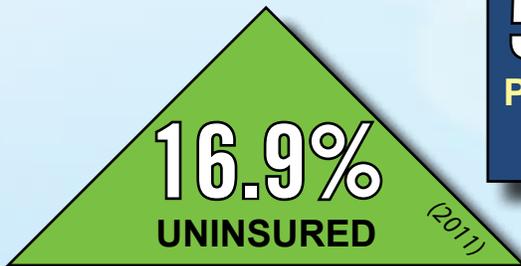
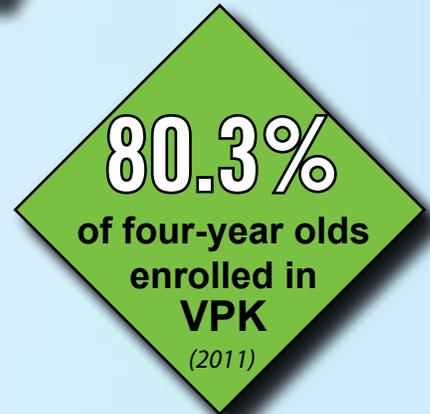
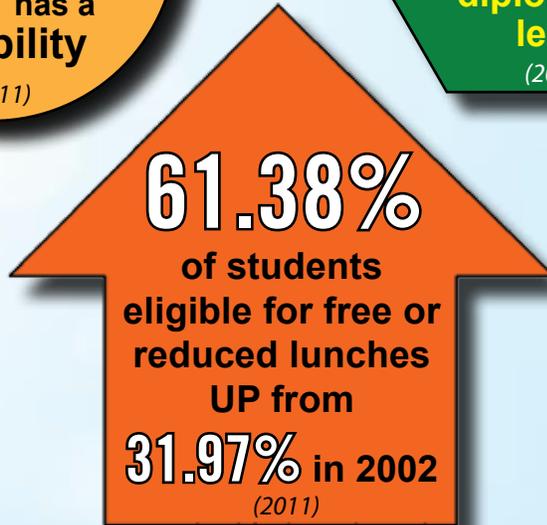
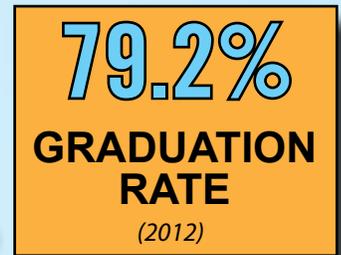
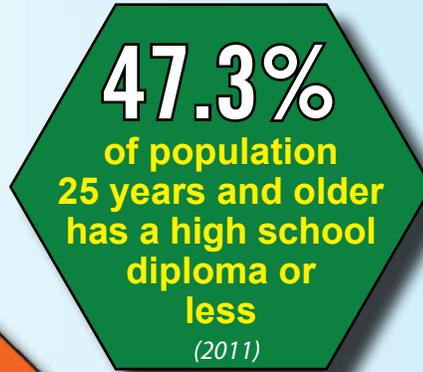
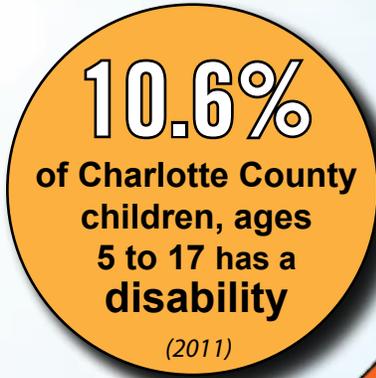
Poverty

- ◆ Explore best practices and innovative solutions for affordable housing in Charlotte County.
- ◆ Increase access to emergency shelter and transitional housing for the homeless population.
- ◆ Increase access to quality affordable childcare services.
- ◆ Increase opportunities for short-term financial assistance and financial self-reliance to help break the cycle of poverty.
- ◆ Support coordinated efforts among local food pantry providers to improve the services between providers addressing food needs.

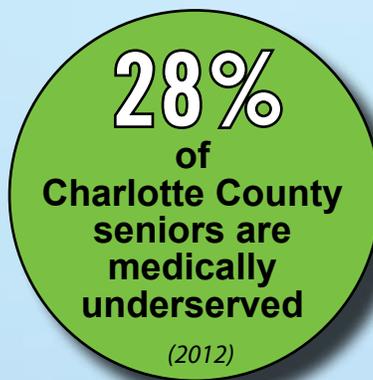
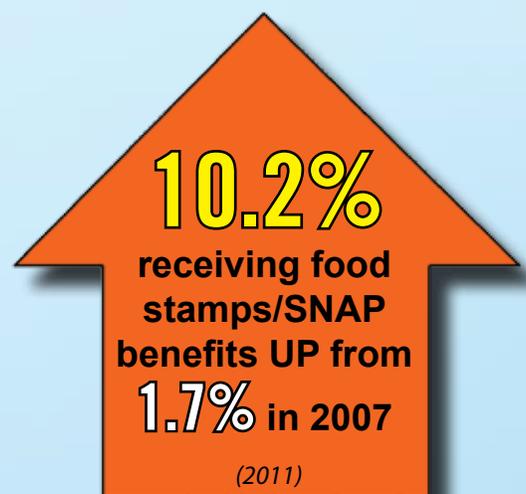
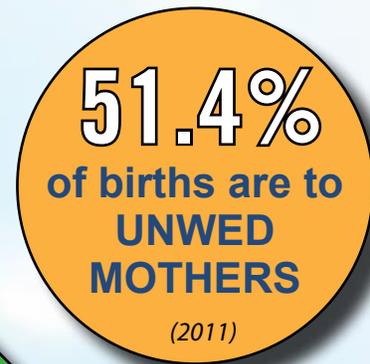
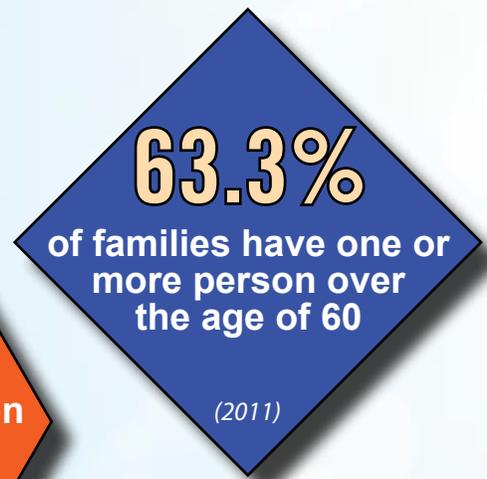
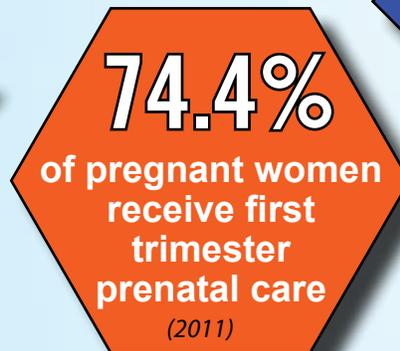
Transportation

- ◆ Embrace the findings of the upcoming 10 Year Transit Development Plan.
- ◆ Consider the options presented in the Transit Latent Demand Study.
- ◆ Form a community consensus on transportation needs.
- ◆ Explore alternative means of transportation.

KEY COMMUNITY NEEDS



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RECOMMENDATIONS

It is apparent from this study that there is no shortage of needs or opportunities in Charlotte County. The number of agencies and individuals dedicated to bringing about change for good is abundant. This study's intent is to help bridge the gap between needs and existing services and bring to light key issues that need to be addressed holistically by the entire community.

Pursue a Theme of Prevention

It became apparent during this study that poverty is both a cause and effect of the other human service area issues. For example, children born into poverty often lack the opportunity to access quality education. Without a quality education, the likelihood of getting a job that earns a sufficient income decreases. Without a sufficient income, it becomes difficult to keep a roof over one's head, food on the table, and to see a doctor when ill. Thus the vicious cycle of poverty becomes nearly impossible to break.

The effects of poverty are detrimental not only to the individual but to the community at-large. By focusing energy and resources into preventative programs the number of people in need of assistance is ultimately reduced in the long run. The return on investment to the community greatly outweighs the initial program costs.

The term 'prevention' spans all areas of the human services sector. Preventative healthcare includes early detection and health promotion as a means to prevent future disease. Preventative education programs include ones that increase high school graduation rates and encourage continued education as a means to obtaining a higher paying job. Homelessness prevention includes programs that thwart crisis situations through financial literacy and budgeting, employment assistance and reducing barriers to affordable housing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase Awareness of Existing Resources and Initiatives

The Charlotte County community has many human service agencies providing vital services to the residents, yet two issues became apparent throughout this study:

- Consistent and effective communications among human service agencies can be approved.
- Individuals in need are not always aware of the services available.

There is a need for better communication and cooperation between agencies about local initiatives that are taking place. Better communication would result in a more seamless delivery system of services and would lead to reduced duplication of services.

Furthermore, Charlotte County has a wide array of services available to our residents to help meet their basic needs. These services are provided through a variety of service providers, both public and private. As part of this study, the research team worked with Charlotte County 211 – the community’s government and non-profit information and referral service, the GIS team from the Charlotte County IT Department and the LIS team from the Charlotte County Community Development Department to develop an online interactive resource map.

This interactive map was developed to assist residents in locating essential human services that are available in our community. The map will provide you with basic provider information for the following service categories: Employment, Education, Housing, Food, Financial Assistance, Family & Youth Services, Senior Services, Transportation, Veteran Services and Health.

This tool can be accessed through Charlotte County Human Service’s website: www.charlottecountyfl.gov/dept/humanservices/Pages/default.aspx

RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote Community-Wide Investment

Poverty is an issue that affects the entire community but one many find uncomfortable to discuss. The issue is one that is often “out of site, out of mind.” At the same time, the issue of poverty is relative for someone who is living it and is surrounded by people with similar circumstances. Left unaddressed, the cycle of poverty will only continue to grow.

As the greatest need identified in this study, the burden of reducing poverty is one that is shared between the individual, local government, human service agencies and the community at-large. It is not enough for human service agencies to provide supportive services to those in need and to expect an individual to continue his or her education as a means to a better future.

The local economy must attract industries so that individuals can seek employment that meets their skill set and pays adequate living wages. Our elected officials and community members must recognize the long-term return on investment that comes with supporting programs in the short term through advocacy, financial support or volunteerism. It is up to the local agencies to communicate the value of this investment.

Human service providers are encouraged to look for ways to work together to attack the issue of poverty holistically through their individual missions. These agencies must work cooperatively to break down their barriers in order to collaborate on programs and initiatives that will bring about measurable change. After all, we are stronger together than we are alone.