

# Focus Centre County

## Comprehensive Report

**CENTRE COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION**

March 2008

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### Acknowledgements

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The staff, board, and volunteers of the Centre County Community Foundation (CCCF) gratefully acknowledge the significant and enabling role of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, \$50,000 Leadership Challenge Award. Through the Leadership Challenge Award, Focus Centre County was created and reached out to all areas of Centre County, gathering important information on issues vital to participants. In addition to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, CCCF wishes to thank Penn State Cooperative Extension and MindShift Consulting for their creation and successful implementation of the Focus Centre County initiative. The Foundation is also appreciative of the Penn State Team Innovation Center for enabling the use of their decision-making software and computer lab. Internal to the Foundation it is important to note the significant contributions of Dolores Taricani, Tom Songer, Albert Jones, Ellie Beaver, and Norman Lathbury in championing the implementation and success of Focus Center County. Finally, the Foundation wishes to express its gratitude to the residents of Centre County. The Foundations philanthropic mission to help Centre County would not be possible without the open, honest, and civil dialogue created by the resident participants in Focus Centre County. It is with a sense of humility we thank the many people of Centre County who enabled the success of Focus Centre County.

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## Background

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The Centre County Community Foundation (CCCF) was created in 1981 to focus local philanthropic efforts and provide, "... support for the arts, social and health concerns, education, and the environment. The Foundation tries to target funds toward the community's most pressing needs and projects that will have the greatest impact." (Centre County Community Foundation, 2003-2007). Over the last 25 years the Centre County Community Foundation development efforts have topped \$20,000,000 in assets and distributed nearly \$4,500,000 in grants to 252 organizations in Centre County (Potter & Taricani, 2007). In just 2006, the foundation distributed nearly \$940,000 in grants to 87 organizations, and ranked as the top community foundations in Pennsylvania for single year growth 2005-2006 (p. 4).

In an effort to continue leadership on issues important to Centre County residents and focus future philanthropic development on an issue, in 2006 the foundation began discussing the possibility of receiving a "Leadership Challenge Award" grant through the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation of Miami, Florida. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation selected 26 communities across the United States, "...to improve the quality of life...where the Knight brothers owned newspapers. In every community, Knight Foundation's program directors look to local advisory committees to provide critical insight and help identify big ideas and transformational opportunities" (John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2002-2008a). Specifically, the Knight Foundation focuses its transformational efforts on six priority areas: well-being of children and families, economic development, housing and community development, education, civic engagement and positive human relations, and vitality of cultural life (John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2002-2008b).

On October 24, 2006, the Knight Foundation approved a \$50,000 "Leadership Challenge Award" grant for the Centre County Community Foundation to enhance community connectedness and engagement. Specifically, the Leadership Challenge Award stated,

"This grant will add a new level of engagement for CCCF in its central role as the community foundation of Centre County. It is expected that within six months, CCCF will have worked internally with its board and externally through at least two community-wide and leadership convening's to identify a community issue or opportunity. It will then play a leadership role in working with individuals and organizations in Centre County to develop a strategy to address the issue and see the project through implementation..." (Ibargüen, 2006).

With the Knight Foundation approval of the Leadership Challenge Award, the seeds of what would eventually become Focus Centre County were sown. The Leadership Challenge Award was officially received by the Centre County Community Foundation on December 14, 2006. Within the Centre County Community Foundation, the volunteer led, Project Development Committee was tasked with meeting the award requirements. To accomplish their goal, in March 2007, the Project Development Committee contacted representatives of Penn State Cooperative Extension and MindShift Consulting to investigate strategies to meet the deliverables of the grant while maximizing opportunities for community input. In early April, a framework was suggested by the consulting team and on April 16, the Centre County Community Foundation approved the plan to form the Focus Centre County initiative.

## Focus Centre County Begins

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As the only Leadership Challenge Award in the country, the Focus Centre County initiative was unique from its inception. The Focus Centre County visioning activities were designed to focus community and individual engagement, organizational involvement, and future development efforts, to make a lasting impact on an issue facing

all of Centre County. To carry out Focus Centre County, the Centre County Community Foundation Executive Committee transformed the project design consulting team into a project management team. The core members of the project management team were Mr. James Ladlee and Mr. Walt Whitmer of Penn State Cooperative Extension and Ms. Mary Kay Williams of MindShift Consulting. Additional members of the project team included Ms. Dolores Taricani, Centre County Community Foundation Chairman; Mr. Thomas F. Songer II, Project Development Committee Chairman; Ms. Ellie Beaver and Mr. Alfred Jones, Project Development Committee members; and Mr. Keith Duclou, Centre County Community Foundation Interim Executive Director.

## Focus Centre County Essentials

As soon as the project plan and project team were in place, work began in earnest on the core components of the Focus Centre County initiative. To ground the Focus Centre County initiative in engagement, involvement, and philanthropic development a five-phase project was developed. The project phases included awareness building, community focus groups, countywide priority setting, stakeholder survey, and strategic visioning.

### Awareness building

The awareness building effort included a multi-pronged, full-partnership effort designed to inform the community and CCCF partners of the components, timing, and rationale for its 2007 priority setting efforts (Ladlee, Whitmer, & Williams, 2007). The awareness-building phase included attendance at the five previously scheduled foundation receptions to announce the Knight Foundation grant and distribute date saver information via postcards for the five upcoming community focus groups. The awareness phase also necessitated the creation of a large contact database. The database contacts were derived from a combination of personal recommendations collected at the foundation receptions, selected members of the Centre County Community Foundation donor base, and local municipal elected/appointed officials. Ultimately, the database was used for targeted direct mailing of invitations to community focus group sessions. In addition to direct mail and direct contact, a combination of paid and public service announcements were used in the print media, a public blog was established, an internal WIKI was developed, several editorial columns were written in local newspapers, and a formal press conference was held as a Focus Centre County official kick-off.



The awareness-building program was both planned and evolved as Focus Centre County grew. Successful components of the awareness-building program included:

- 4,000 focus group announcement postcards distributed
- Five Foundation Receptions across Centre County
- 2,400 piece direct mailing
- \$2,000 in print media advertising
- One formal press conference for print, radio, and television
- Four local radio talk shows
- Creation of a blog at the Centre Daily Times website with approximately 800+ reads
- A viral marketing campaign through approximately 300 emails and posting on nearly 300 external web pages

- Distribution of public service announcements prior to major project activities
- Centre County Community Foundation board members were requested to make five personal invitations to the community focus group meetings
- Multiple editorials and articles in at least three print media outlets

## Community Focus Groups

To meet the Knight Foundation grant goal of community engagement and the project team’s goals of being representative of Centre County, enhancing the openness and integrity of the process, and building community throughout the process, five regional focus groups were held, one in each of the five Centre County school districts, as follows:

- State College Area, June 25, Mt. Nittany Middle School, 7-9:00 pm
- Bald Eagle Area, June 28, Bald Eagle High School, 7-9:00 pm
- Phillipsburg-Osceola Area, July 16, Philipsburg High School, 7-9:00 pm
- Bellefonte Area, July 30, Bellefonte Middle School, 7-9:00 pm
- Penns Valley Area, July 31, Penns Valley Middle School, 7-9:00 pm

The focus group sessions were designed to gather structured input from community members, businesses, service providers, local government officials, and others related to a wide range of issues that the Centre County Community Foundation might provide leadership in addressing over the next three years. Focus groups were professionally facilitated to ensure reliable data was gathered around six Knight Foundation priority areas of education, well-being of children and families, housing and community development, economic development, civic engagement, and the vitality of cultural life. It is important to note that while the Knight Foundation priority areas provided a structure for initiating conversation, participants were not limited to those outlined priorities for their comments.

Attendance at the focus groups varied widely across the county, from 22 to over 130 participants, with a total involvement of just over 250 participants. While the number of participants may have varied from location to location, the quality of participation never lagged, generating literally hundreds of positive ideas for improvement in Centre County. To minimize the impact of community coalitions and agencies “stacking the deck”, as meeting participants signed in they were automatically assigned to one of six groups.

Participants were asked to stay in their assigned group, as their input was valuable and contributed to the process no matter which group they participated in; however, if an individual felt strongly about a particular topic the project team did remain fairly flexible.



To increase community building of the Focus Centre County project, all focus group meetings followed a structured two-hour program outlining the purpose of Focus Centre County, Knight Foundation priority areas, meeting guidelines, contact information, and provided three opportunities to evaluate and prioritize suggestions on how Centre County could improve. Participants were also asked to sign in at each event so the project team could capture email addresses and continue the community building connection to the project in follow-up email reports to participants.

A moderator training session was held approximately 1-hour before all of the regional focus groups. While all moderators had previous experience leading focus groups, the project team felt it was imperative to introduce the moderators to the project goals, meeting format, need for community building, and specific methods of gathering data. To enhance the moderator training, a short power point presentation was utilized to insure consistency and a post community focus group evaluation was utilized for participant issue prioritization and moderator evaluation.

To focus the participants' ideas, the project team used the six Knight Foundation priority areas as a guide for a facilitated discussion and mind mapping activity. Participants were asked two questions: "What is working well in Centre County relative to their groups' assigned Knight priority areas," and "What do we need to improve in Centre County relative to their groups Knight Foundation priority areas." Participants individually jotted down their ideas, in six to nine words, on a large (5x7) post-it note, using one post-it note for each idea. With the moderator leading the discussion and a note taker capturing themes of discussion, participants read their idea, grouped their idea on a wall with any other similar thoughts from the small group, creating columns/groups of similarly themed ideas. After all the ideas were captured, the group was given a set of numbered dots, weighted with three (3) representing the most powerful vote and one (1) representing the least powerful vote. Participants could place all dots on one item for a total of six (6) points or spread their votes out across two or three separate columns/groups of issues. The dot prioritization represented the participants first voting opportunity related to the "needed improvement" ideas.

Following the small group work, participants reassembled as a large group and were given a brief presentation reporting the evenings top results from each of the small group sessions. After the presentation, participants received an evaluation that included two final prioritization questions. The questions were, "Now that you've had the opportunity to hear from all our groups this evening we'd like you to identify one specific issue or idea in each category that you think is the most important for CCCF to play a role in addressing in the next 1 – 2 years", and "If you had \$6,000 to invest to increase the quality of life in Centre County, how would you allocate it?... You are free to distribute your \$6,000 investment evenly across all categories or make a larger investment in one or more – just be sure that your total investment across all six categories does not exceed the \$6,000 you have to spend". After each regional focus group, the prioritization and evaluation results were summarized and used to track issue importance in each region and to compile the stakeholder survey. At the conclusion of each regional focus group meeting, a summary report was compiled and emailed to participants from each region. To keep the regional groups as independent as possible, the reports were only emailed to the participants of the specific community group (i.e. Penns Valley participants only received the Penns Valley email report).

### **Countywide Priority Setting**

Based on the findings from the five community focus groups, a countywide prioritization session was conducted to establish a final set of priorities. On September 10, 2007, the countywide prioritization meeting was held at the Central Pennsylvania Institute of Science and Technology with 80+ people in attendance. The prioritization session was advertised at each of the community focus groups, in the community focus group follow-up email reports, and through public service announcements in local media outlets.

To organize the massive amount of data generated by the regional focus groups, the project team utilized a qualitative grouping technique. The technique assigned three different individuals the responsibility of independently grouping the 83 issue ideas. Following the solitary grouping, the individuals met to jointly review and insure the consistency among the three individual lists, and through consensus decision-making, consolidated the 83 ideas into 18 focused issue areas.

To accomplish the task of discussing 18 issue areas and 83 idea subcategory areas with 80+ people, the project team turned to the Penn State Team Innovation Center and their portable computer lab. Again, as participants registered they were randomly assigned to one of 19 groups. The Team Innovation Center staff loaded all data (no data was eliminated) into their “Group Systems” software. At each group table there was a single laptop containing all of the summarized data. The Team Innovation Center software allowed each participant to not only see the 18 summary issue areas, but all 83 priority ideas used to create the summary issues. After exploring and discussing the issues, the participants were asked to “rank order” or prioritize, the 18 issue areas and the six Knight Priority areas from most important to least important.

## Stakeholder Survey

The final leg of the Centre County Community Foundation Focus Centre County stakeholder analysis included a survey of service providers, municipal officials, and other community leaders. The electronic survey was distributed to 330 local government officials, non-profit organizations, agency directors, business organizations, and other local leaders between August 26 and September 15, 2007. Discounting non-deliverable surveys (34), 137 recipients completed the survey for an effective response rate of 47%. Survey questions were derived from the regional focus group results and numerous quality of life surveys (Ladlee, Williams, Duclos, & Whitmer, 2007).

## Strategic Visioning

As a result of the regional focus groups, the countywide prioritization, and stakeholder survey, which all indicated Centre County residents held equal enthusiasm for the issues of affordable housing and children youth and families, the Centre County Community Foundation Board agreed to proceed to strategic planning with both issues. In an effort to develop a strategic roadmap for future Centre County Community Foundation programs, projects, and partnerships, 22 key stakeholders were invited to attend a one-day strategic visioning session at Penn State’s Team Innovation Center. The purpose of the strategic visioning session was to engage experts in each issue area to co-develop the goals, objectives, and action steps necessary to address the priorities that emerged during the community engagement process.

On October 8, twenty-one community leaders from across the county, with expertise related to either children youth and families and/or affordable housing, were brought together at Penn State’s Team Innovation Center (one person was absent). At the center, participants were first asked to develop a list of potential stakeholders related to the issues. Next participants defined unmet needs, followed by goal development related to the children youth and families and affordable housing. After goal development, participants prioritized their goal list two ways. First, participants prioritized based on their personal perception of importance to Centre County. During the second round of goal prioritization, participants were asked to reprioritize the top three goals from the first round of goal prioritization through the lens of three questions: (1) Does it meet the CCCF mission and will the CCCF have a clear role to play? (2) Does it address a genuine countywide need? and (3) Can substantial progress can be realized within three years? After goal development and prioritization, participants were asked to create potential objectives for each goal, resulting in over 140 project/objective comments for just the three top goals for housing and children youth and families (six total goals). Next participants were asked to identify ideas that may have been omitted from or informed by the visioning conversation. Finally, the planning group was asked to identify any potential linkages between the affordable housing and children youth and family issues.

## What Focus Centre County Learned

The strength of Focus Centre County evolved from a commitment to an open process of integrity. Participants' actual ideas were always used, the Centre County Community Foundation attached no hidden agendas or priorities to the project team, and the project team felt strongly the process should build upon the positive social capital of the Centre County Community Foundation through community engagement and involvement. To maintain the openness and integrity of the process, Focus Centre County provided eight distinct opportunities to learn what the residents of Centre County felt the "Focus" of the Foundation should be. The five community focus groups afforded the opportunity to glean broad ideas from each area of Centre County. The countywide priority setting session encouraged the narrowing of priorities to issues affecting the entire county. The stakeholder survey reinforced the community focus groups and priority setting sessions and informed the strategic visioning conference. Finally, the strategic visioning meeting further focused the needs of the community into actual goals and actions.

### Community Focus Groups

The success of Focus Centre County hinged upon the success of the five community-based focus groups. Fortunately, the community focus groups were well attended with an average attendance above 50 participants per location. Areas where media coverage seemed to be more prevalent appeared to have a better turnout than communities missing a major media outlet.

While the Focus Centre County project was charged to find a singular need in which to focus Foundation time and resources, it is extremely important to note the project also focused on what is working well in Centre County relative to the six Knight Foundation priority areas. All totaled more than 450 positive comments were noted through the five community focus groups. A quick scan of the "what's working well" comments reveals a few of the more frequent suggestions included:

1. Public education and adult education opportunities (Penn State, CALL, and Central Pennsylvania Institute for Science and Technology, School Districts)
2. Historic areas, art, culture, and natural resources, while balancing urbanizing and very rural character
3. Positive economic development and organizations (low unemployment, CBICC, Moshannon Valley Economic Partnership; PSU Business Incubator, PVCA)
4. Nonprofit and service organizations (Habitat for Humanity, United Way, Communities That Care, YMCA's, Libraries, Housing Transitions, Museums, PASA, RSVP Volunteers, CVIM, and the Women's Resource Center)
5. Penn State (access, culture, diversity, World Campus, and Cooperative Extension)
6. Pride in community, diversity of people and ideas, low crime rate, and citizen involvement
7. Faith-based organizations, churches, and ministries

It is noteworthy to mention participants in the community focus groups developed more than twice as many positive comments and ideas as they did suggestions for improvement. Although not a formal evaluation of scope or magnitude, the response rate certainly may serve as an indicator that participants in the focus groups saw more good than bad within their communities.

Turning to the question of what could be improved in Centre County relative to the six Knight Foundation priority areas. Each community, in a facilitated, small group, mind-mapping, discussion, was asked to cover the six priority areas and provide need-based suggestions for each area. While time constraints dictated a division of the six priority areas among small groups, everyone in attendance did have an opportunity to provide input on at least two of the six Knight Foundation priority areas. After a comprehensive list was made in each small group, each group prioritized

their results, with the top two results being forwarded on to the final community focus group presentation on the same evening and to the countywide prioritization session held in September. Listed below you will find the consolidated top results across all five community focus groups.

## The Economic Development

- Affordable housing
- Better coordination for agencies dealing with economic development
- Bring more manufacturing to county & remote areas
- Enhance farmland preservation
- Expand affordable housing to allow workforce to be closer to jobs
- Improve workforce affordable housing
- Improve workforce training especially for non-college graduates
- Increase conservation of open space
- Increase educational level of workforce for new and emerging businesses
- Increase local voice and control in economic development decisions
- Partnerships and cooperation
- Promote workforce training
- Provide better leadership from local government
- Public transportation to all areas of the county

## Community Education

- Affordable & accessible youth activities and camps
- Develop leaders with a vision for affordable accessible education
- Developing community leaders & a vision for affordability/accessible education
- Educate citizens regarding resources already available
- Education starts with parents
- Encourage civic engagement and political discourse – in meaningful ways
- Increase affordable accessible youth activities & camps
- Land use issues
- Need hi-speed internet service in rural communities
- Need more parent education via multiple methods
- Parenting issues
- Provide education for school boards, commissioners and other local government officials
- Provide more child care for low income populations to get an education
- Reality education

## Civic Engagement/Positive Relations

- Better inter-community relations
- Church
- Create easier community access to PSU and its res.
- Educate, educate, educate
- Encourage voting & participation in government
- Expand volunteer access throughout county
- Find specific community projects to rally support from all
- Improve all transportation bike paths, walking, and services to events
- Improve availability of information about events, activities, etc.
- Increase affordable housing in county
- Increase diversity & inclusiveness in cultural activities
- Mentor youth & less experienced people in civic activities
- Need to teach and model and request that people are respectful in public discussions
- No county identity/broad perspectives
- Ownership in your area – everyone being part of the community
- Work together NOT against

## Vitality of Cultural Life

- Accessibility and transportation to cultural events
- Accessibility to youth activities
- Encourage stewardship across generations
- Expand arts in schools
- Funding cultural life activities in rural areas
- Improve transportation and access – especially with respect to public transportation for all ages/needs
- Increase public support & funding for cultural activity
- Increase transportation to events and activities for those outside Centre Region
- Lower costs to events and activities (esp. for low income children)
- More diversity of programs
- Preserve & celebrate rural characteristics & heritage
- Share resources, talents and communications
- Transportation to activities
- Use RSVP vol. to keep facilities open more often

## Children Youth & Families

- Better schools
- Develop a system to hold parents accountable for good parenting and provide the services necessary to assist this system
- Develop new ways to ensure youth & connected to our communities – including facilities, community building opp., youth center etc. For all income levels
- Engage in community civic volunteerism & neighborly communication - mentoring, volunteering, instilling values in our youth
- Enhance preschool quality and availability
- Improve business and employment opportunities that keep youth and adults in community
- Improve child care quality and uniformity
- Increase awareness of potential growth in crime as a result of growing transportation
- Increase funding for family and youth programs
- Increase housing for low to moderate income families
- More affordable, quality day care
- Outdoor recreation community opportunities by funding greenway projects, & encouraging children & families to use them

## Housing & Community Development

- Affordable housing with public transportation
- Better workforce housing
- Buy local – stiff Wal-Mart
- Create more economical housing
- Improve transportation to rural areas
- Improved upper floor housing in business districts
- Increase community support/openness for affordable/mixed housing
- Increase use of green practices and materials in housing
- Neighborhood improvement districts
- Preserve farms and open spaces
- Public transportation/connectivity
- Smart growth/preservation and cooperation
- We should provide funds for revitalization of existing communities– rather than building on open space

Following the presentation of the top prioritized issues to the community group, the participants were given an evaluation and asked how they would invest a mythical \$6,000 in the six broad Knight Foundation priority areas. The individual allocation of the mythical \$6,000 provided the project team the first indication of a possible divide within Centre County around the areas of children youth and families and housing and community development (Table 1). From the community focus groups forward, the two issues would remain in a statistical dual.

	State College	Bald Eagle	Phillipsburg-Osceola	Bellefonte	Penns Valley	Ave. Rating	StDev	Overall Rank
	June 25	June 28	July 16	July 30	July 31			
<b>Adult Education</b>	3	2	2	3	5	3	1.22	3
<b>Civic Engagement</b>	6	4	5	6	4	5	1.00	5
<b>Economic Development</b>	4	5	1	4	2	3.2	1.64	4
<b>Housing &amp; Community Dev.</b>	1	3	3	2	3	2.4	0.89	2
<b>Vitality of Cultural Life</b>	5	6	6	5	6	5.6	0.55	6
<b>Children Youth &amp; Families</b>	2	1	4	1	1	1.8	1.30	1

Table 1: Six Knight Foundation Priority Area Investment Strategy Ranking from Community Focus Group Evaluation

## Countywide Priority Setting

Upon completion of the community focus groups, the project team moved immediately to a countywide priority setting session. The five community focus groups yielded 83 priority ideas (listed previously) from across Centre County. To manage such a large number of priority ideas the project team grouped the 83 ideas into 18 issue areas. Interestingly, when the six Knight Foundation priority areas were taken out of the evaluation system, the issue areas with the most related comments were affordable/accessible adult and youth education, transportation, parenting and childcare, open space, and housing. The 18 summary issue areas were:

### 18 Issue Areas

1. Affordable and accessible adult and youth education (10)
2. Church attendance
3. Community identity and relations (7)
4. Community and business development (2)
5. Crime (1)
6. Cultural events (5)
7. Education of local officials(2)
8. Housing (10)
9. Intergenerational opportunities (2)
10. Open space (8)
11. Parenting and childcare (7)
12. Participation and cooperation (5)
13. Partnerships and cooperation (3)
14. Resources availability (2)
15. Schools (2)
16. Transportation (8)
17. Volunteerism (2)
18. Work and workforce development (5)

\*Note: The number in parentheses represents the number of supporting ideas from the 83 original community focus group priority ideas

To assist in handling the large volume of data in a short period of time (2-hours), the Focus Centre County project team also called upon The Penn State Team Innovation Center. The Innovation Center supplied 20 wireless laptop computers and the accompanying Group Systems software. The newly created 18 issue areas and all 83 original community priority ideas used to support the creation of the 18 issue areas, were preloaded on the computers. After a short project update and orientation to the software, the 80+ participants were divided into 19 small groups with one computer per group. The participants were asked to discuss and “rank order” or prioritize the 18 issue areas from one (most important) through 18 (least important). Unlike the fictitious investment of \$6,000 during the community focus groups, the participants at the countywide prioritization clearly identified housing as the top issues with parenting and childcare, affordable/accessible adult and youth education, transportation, and work/workforce development rounding out the top five respectively (Table 2).

Issue Area	Score	Mean	StDev	Rank
Housing	295	3.47	3.04	1
Parenting and childcare	283	4.11	3.54	2
Affordable and accessible adult and youth education	263	5.16	3.69	3
Transportation	262	5.21	3.38	4
Work and workforce development	253	5.68	3.40	5
Open space	213	7.79	5.14	6
Schools	186	9.21	4.09	7
Community and business development	182	9.42	5.05	8
Community identity and relations	174	9.84	4.19	9
Participation and cooperation	157	10.74	3.16	10
Volunteerism	157	10.74	3.68	11
Partnerships and cooperation	154	10.89	3.43	12
Resources availability	154	10.89	4.14	13
Education of local officials	137	11.79	4.38	14
Cultural events	134	11.95	4.30	15
Crime	115	12.95	4.16	16
Intergenerational opportunities	106	13.42	3.47	17
Church attendance	24	17.74	0.93	18

Table 2: Prioritization of Eighteen Issue Areas at Countywide Priority Setting

Further highlighting the county enthusiasm for both affordable housing and children youth and family issues, and reinforcing the community focus group voting, was when the participants at the prioritization session were asked to rank the Knight Foundation priority areas, and again the well-being of children, youth and families was on top, although statistically tied with affordable housing (Table 3).

Choices	Score	Mean	StDev	Rank
Well-being of Children, Youth, and Families	96	1.95	1.08	1
Housing and Community Development	94	2.05	1.27	2
The Economic Development	66	3.53	1.54	3
Community Education	65	3.58	1.39	4
Civic Engagement/Positive Relationships	51	4.32	0.75	5
Vitality of Cultural Life	27	5.58	0.90	6

Table 3: Prioritization of Knight Priority Areas at Countywide Priority Setting

Following the prioritization of the 18 issue areas and the six Knight Foundation priority areas, the countywide prioritization participants were asked what they felt the next steps should be. The nineteen small groups elicited 48 separate responses. Process next steps dominated the comments with roughly 35 comments relating to additional process next step suggestions such as, “assemble experts from the community in each area to define problems”, “be sure to include diverse group of stakeholders/decision makers at the planning table”, “Look for commonalities among the topics and combine action e.g., housing and transportation”, and “Study existing programs and look for how partnerships can be implemented to accomplish defined missions”. In addition to process suggestions, the remainder of the ideas focused on applied or practical projects (i.e. creation of a land trust or development for a specific

purpose) and funding of projects (i.e. the affordable housing coalition, recreational areas, workforce development, etc...).

### Stakeholder Survey

Analysis of the electronic stakeholder survey both reinforced the results uncovered during the community focus groups and countywide prioritization phases of the project and highlighted several important areas for future consideration. Looking at the six Knight Foundation priority areas and the issues suggested for improvement by the community focus groups, several interesting relationships appear (Tables 4-9). Perhaps not surprisingly the survey again revealed a Centre County equally supporting the issues of housing and children youth and families. As during the community focus groups and countywide prioritization meetings, the Knight Foundation priority area of children youth and families was rated the highest in the survey. However, when asked what the greatest challenges facing Centre County in the future were, affordable housing was mentioned the most by far. Additionally, the stakeholder survey respondents consistently highlight the needs of affordable housing and parenting and childcare even across the Knight Foundation priority areas. Housing issues are named seven times as a top five “high priority” issue across four different Knight Foundation priority areas, and children youth and families issues are mentioned six times as a top five “high priority” issue across four different priority areas.

<b>Community and Adult Education</b>	<b>High Priority Rating</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1. Getting parents involved with education	60.2%	<b>3.47</b>
2. Providing more child care for low income populations to get an education	49.3%	<b>3.34</b>
3. Educating citizens regarding educating citizens regarding	41.9%	<b>3.22</b>
4. Expanding affordable & accessible youth activities and camps	42.5%	<b>3.13</b>
5. Developing community leaders with a vision for affordability/accessible education	38.0%	<b>3.09</b>

Table 4: Community and Adult Education Stakeholder Survey Results

<b>Well-Being of Children Youth and Families</b>	<b>High Priority Rating</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1. Mentoring, volunteering, instilling civic values in our youth	56.2%	<b>3.49</b>
2. Increase housing for low to moderate income families	51.5%	<b>3.33</b>
3. Expanding/improving affordable, quality day care	49.2%	<b>3.32</b>
4. Improving business and employment opportunities that keep youth and adults in community	43.8%	<b>3.23</b>
5. Enhance preschool quality and availability	40.8%	<b>3.06</b>

Table 5: Well-Being of Children Youth and Families Stakeholder Survey Results

<b>Community Development and Housing</b>	<b>High Priority Rating</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1. Preserving open space and farms	63.8%	<b>3.56</b>
2. Providing funds for revitalization of existing communities—rather than building on open space	57.5%	<b>3.47</b>
3. Creating more economical housing	52.4%	<b>3.34</b>
4. Increasing affordable housing with public transportation options	50.0%	<b>3.29</b>
5. Developing smaller housing developments on, or extending bus routes and/or alternative mass transit options outside of the Centre Region	46.5%	<b>3.24</b>
5. Initiating smart growth/preservation and cooperation	46.5%	<b>3.24</b>

Table 6: Community Development and Housing Stakeholder Survey Results

<b>Economic Development</b>	<b>High Priority Rating</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1. Expanding affordable housing	53.7%	<b>3.35</b>
2. Increasing conservation of open space	53.7%	<b>3.34</b>
3. Enhancing farmland preservation	46.7%	<b>3.25</b>
4. Providing more, more accessible and improved workforce housing	42.6%	<b>3.24</b>
5. Providing public transportation to all areas of the county	45.1%	<b>3.13</b>

Table 7: Economic Development Stakeholder Survey Results

<b>Civic Engagement and Positive Community Relations</b>	<b>High Priority Rating</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1. Increasing affordable housing in county	52.5%	<b>3.26</b>
2. Encouraging voting and participation in government	46.3%	<b>3.26</b>
3. Improving all transportation including bike paths, walking, and services to events	42.3%	<b>3.13</b>
4. Working together more NOT against each other	34.4%	<b>3.06</b>
5. Mentoring youth and less experienced people in civic activities	30.0%	<b>3.04</b>

Table 8: Civic Engagement and Positive Community Relations Stakeholder Survey Results

<b>Vitality of Cultural Life</b>	<b>High Priority Rating</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1. Improving transportation and access to services – especially with respect to public transportation for all ages/needs	42.1%	<b>3.13</b>
2. Encouraging stewardship across generations	30.0%	<b>2.96</b>
3. Sharing resources, talents and communications	28.9%	<b>2.96</b>
4. Preserving and celebrating rural characteristics and heritage	28.3%	<b>2.81</b>
5. Lowering costs to events and activities (esp. for low income children)	20.0%	<b>2.80</b>

Table 9: Vitality of Cultural Life Stakeholder Survey Results

The stakeholder survey also confirmed what is working best in Centre County. Similar to the community focus groups, survey respondents generally indicated positive areas as good/great schools, educational opportunities, lots of civic engagement and volunteerism, maintenance of green and open space, low crime rates, service providers cooperate well, inter-governmental cooperation, many cultural opportunities, good human services, and Penn State resources and presence. The stakeholder survey also was able to inquire as the areas participants felt would improve and/or become worse over the next five years. Those areas most frequently cited as becoming worse were crime, housing affordability, environmental quality, and scenic beauty. Those areas respondents expected to improve were recreational opportunities, schools, housing affordability, and historic and cultural opportunities.

Although never rising to the top, it is also important to note the significance transportation played in the Focus Centre County initiative. Transportation issues underpinned or interrelated with several of the key issues including affordable housing and parenting and childcare. Although beyond the scope of the Focus Centre County initiative, transportation related issues and solutions should be investigated more broadly as a component of resolving several of the top priority issues.

### **Strategic Visioning**

Continuing the process of engagement and involvement, the final phase of the Focus Centre County project was to create a strategic vision for the singular issue identified. However, given the divide in Centre County around the issues of affordable housing and children youth and families, the Centre County Community Foundation executive committee decided to move both issues to the strategic visioning phase. During strategic visioning, participants were asked to identify key stakeholders for each issue area, develop goals and objectives, and identify potential interactions between the two issues. The following is a summary of the strategic visioning session for both children youth and families and affordable housing.

## Children Youth and Families Visioning

Starting a broad based strategic visioning activity with a diverse group of stakeholders can be a daunting task. To allow participants to engage quickly with the issues, participants were first asked, “What are the most effective services or organizations currently addressing children youth and families issues and are the most logical partners to help develop a plan to address children youth and families issues?” The strategic visioning participants identified the following beginning list of stakeholders.

4-H	Bellefonte Family Resource Center
Big Brother Big Sister	Burrowes St. Youth Haven
Cen-Clear	Centre County Children and Youth Services
Centre County Women's Resource Center	Child care providers
Child Development and Family Council	Churches/ministries/faith-based youth organizations
Community Help Center	Communities That Care (Centre County & State College)
CVIM	Easter Seals
Kiwanis	Libraries
Mental Health/Mental Retardation	Mid State Literacy Council
Mount Nittany Medical Centre	Municipalities
Parent teacher associations and organizations	Parenting Plus
Penn State College Health & Human Development	Penn State College of Education
Penn State Cooperative Extension	Rotary
School districts/parents	Scouts
Second Mile	Smart Start Centre County
Snow Shoe Youth Centers	State College Little League
Stepping Stone Transitional Living Program	Stormbreak Girls Group Home
Teachers and coaches	The Meadows
Transportation providers	United Way
YMCA's	Youth Service Bureau
Zerby Gap Boys Group Home	Youth Sports Organizations-- soccer, baseball, parks etc.

Next, the participants were asked to identify, “What are the greatest unmet needs within the children youth and families area”. The 21 visioning participants quickly identified more than 100 unmet needs. The 100+ ideas were then grouped by the participants into eight broad areas of accessibility, bonding, education/marketing, external support for families, funding, health and wellness, parenting, and sense of community.

Based on the foundation of unmet needs, the participants were then asked, “What should be the primary goals to address the children youth and families issue”. Again, the group responded with approximately 45 potential goals. The 45 goals were reviewed by participants for duplication and narrowed to 18 goals. After a brief discussion, the group ranked the goals based on what they individually felt was the highest priority for Centre County. The top three individually ranked children youth and family goals were: (1) Support parents with parenting skills; (2) Funding needs to be made available to support existing programs; and (3) Provide support systems/programs to benefit child development and family values (Table 10).

Goals	Score	Mean	StDev	Rank
Support parents with parenting skills	289	4.55	4.71	1
Funding needs to be made available to support existing programs	276	5.20	3.24	2
Provide support systems/programs to benefit child development and family values	270	5.50	4.48	3
To develop new, and sustain and enhance existing programs that families/individuals can access	249	6.55	3.97	4
Make people more aware of services, programs, and activities that are available in Centre County	247	6.65	3.76	5
Integrate efforts of schools, parents and supportive governmental and non-profit agencies	247	6.65	3.77	6
Assist families with interpersonal difficulties	206	8.70	3.87	7
A countywide effort to identify the 3 most critical youth related issues & develop a strategy (6 months) that will fund and implement ident. services	196	9.20	5.85	8
Accessibility to all people regardless of income.	192	9.40	3.82	9
Non-duplication of resources. Combine programs?	169	10.55	4.91	10
Expanded educational opportunities through high schools, PSU, and CPI	166	10.70	4.54	11
Increase inter-generational activities.	141	11.95	4.87	12
Need to change the paradigm that education begins with kindergarten or first grade; education begins at birth.	139	12.05	4.63	13
Assess programs that are effective vs. those that aren't	134	12.30	4.54	14
Develop partnerships with faculty doing research in these areas	131	12.45	3.58	15
Foster volunteer support of existing programs.	131	12.45	5.10	16
Form a coalition of impacted parties design a strategy to prioritize issues and allocation of resources within 6 mos. Implement programs over 3 years	119	13.05	3.93	17
Bench mark with other areas who have similar issues and who are transitioning towards achievement	118	13.10	5.12	18

Table 10: Children Youth and Family Goal Prioritization

Upon completion of the initial individual goal prioritization, participants were then asked to reflect on and evaluate the top three goals framing their response using three questions. The framing questions were: (1) Does it meet the CCCF mission and will the CCCF have a clear role to play? (2) Addresses a genuine countywide need (not a perceived need)? and (3) Substantial progress can be realized within three years? Based on the framing questions the top three goals were reordered as follows: (1) Funding needs to be made available to support existing programs; (2) Provide support systems/programs to benefit child development and family values; and (3) Support parents with parenting skills (Table 11). Somewhat surprising is the fact that support for parents and parenting skills dropped from number one on the general prioritization to number three on the framed prioritization; however, given the short relative timeframe requirements and countywide criteria the change appears to have many plausible explanations.

Goals	Framing Questions	CCCF Mission (1)	StDev	Genuine Countywide need (2)	StDev	3-Year Progress (3)	StDev
Funding needs to be made available to support existing programs.		SA(4.65)	0.49	SA(4.50)	0.51	A(4.15)	0.67
Provide community support systems and programs to benefit child development and healthy families.		A(4.40)	0.88	SA(4.60)	0.50	A(3.95)	0.83
Support parents with parenting skills.		A(4.10)	0.91	SA(4.55)	0.76	A(3.90)	0.64

Table 11: Children Youth and Family Goal Prioritization with Framing Questions

- (1) Meets the CCCF mission and the CCCF has a clear role to play
- (2) Addresses a genuine countywide need (not a perceived need)
- (3) Substantial progress can be realized within three years

### **Children Youth and Family Goal and Objective Ideas**

Perhaps the richest information from the Focus Centre County effort began to take form when the participants were asked to identify projects that would help address the three children youth and family goals. There were 22 potential ideas presented as ways to address the goal “Funding needs to be made available to support existing programs”. The group strongly suggested education/marketing and partnership approaches. Specifically, the participants recommended “Identify partnerships between agencies to access public and private funds”, “Create a new funding stream in the CCCF to fund partnerships between agencies and organizations working with children, youth and families”, and “Educate and market the need of children and youth to adults in the community who have the financial means to take ownership of their community and financially support programs for which there is little to no governmental funding but which are cost effective and produce results”. Other ideas included the creation of funding databases, specific funding projects, and specific funding requests (i.e. Big Brothers Big Sisters, Communities That Care, diversity education, and intervention programs).

The goal of “providing support systems/programs to benefit child development and family values” again generated 22 ideas. This time however the suggestions fell strongly on the side of countywide program review, gap analysis, and benchmarking. The comments provide a palpable sense of wanting to fill gaps and reduce any redundancy in programs. Comments included, “...analyze current services available to children and families. Identify gaps and redundancies” and “provide a clearinghouse for countywide systems and programs to eliminate duplication of services”. Partnerships were seen as an integral part of support systems for child development and family values. Often the partnership comments included analysis of what is available; inclusion of faith-based organizations, schools, community organizations, schools, agencies, and the justice system; and incentives to partner. Also unique was a concentration on pre-K and childcare support, “Start with education- show the benefits of quality pre-K instruction vs. non-educational daycare, meet needs of children and families at each stage of development”. Finally, the ideas were rounded out with suggestions of marketing and the creation of a “parenting manual”.

Support for parents with parenting skills as a goal generated the most ideas (26) and the most practical ideas (16). Practical ideas included the creation of an online parenting resource center; educational programs in partnership with Penn State; targeting parent education in medical centers and high school child development classes; marriage license

requirements; and a combination of volunteerism, mentoring, consultants to coach or role model for children, parents, childcare providers, and first time parents. Further suggestions included parenting classes, identifying funding streams, increasing partnerships (i.e. “Enhance and strengthen the Nurse/family partnership”), and benchmarking and gap analysis of parents and parenting programs.

### ***Additional Thought on the Well-Being of Children Youth and Families***

Realizing the visioning discussion may have spurred additional idea creation, participants at the visioning session were asked, and “What other suggestions do you have for effectively addressing the children, youth, and families area”. Several great ideas came up for further discussion. Perhaps the biggest insight for future discussion was around the issue of engaging children, families, businesses, schools, and other community partners in youth peer programs, community action and activity, and support groups. One respondent supporting engagement provided a very specific example reflective of many of the comments, “In Bloomington, Indiana, there is a Teen Night Club called Rhino. It is run, under the auspices of the YMCA, entirely by the kids. The only "rules" are that there be no drugs and no alcohol. Otherwise, they decorate the place (it's a fright), they choose the bands; they completely run the place, getting valuable experience in working together on a "business", and in working toward agreement on management decisions. The place is mobbed on Friday and Saturday nights, when it is open from 6-11 or so”.

In addition to engagement, the group also recommended further investigation of benchmarking and gap analysis to help direct limited funding. Representative of this theme were comments such as, “We need a true assessment of where funding is going now, what programs are offered, and how, as a county, these groups can help each other toward this common goal” and “What are other progressive communities doing in other parts of the US or world to address family and youth issues”. Partnerships continued to be a topic of tremendous discussion, and included suggestions for partnerships with schools, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, youth organizations, Penn State Prevention Research Center, parents, teachers, and others for projects related to education, cost effectiveness, and accountability. Workforce development issues were mentioned several times and the theme was summed up best by one respondent who stated, “...human capital is the most important kind of capital investment in the future”. Finally, several comments suggested awareness building or advocacy programs for children youth and family issues.

## Affordable Housing Visioning

At the completion of the children youth and families strategic planning session, participants were provided with lunch and the process began anew, but this time focusing on affordable housing. Again, participants were asked to identify the most effective services or organizations currently addressing housing and who are the most logical partners to help develop a plan to address the housing issue. The strategic visioning respondents noted the following organizations and potential partners:

Affordable Housing Coalition	Banks
Builders	CATA
Central Pa. Builders Association	Centre County Community Foundation
Centre County Government	Centre County Housing Authority
Centre County Housing and Land Trust	Centre County Women's Resource Center
Community Action	Conservationists
County Planning Office	Developers
Employers	Habitat for Humanity of Greater Centre County
Housing Transitions, Inc.	Interfaith Mission
Land preservation groups	Local real estate owners
Penn State	Philipsburg Revitalization Corp.
State College Community Land Trust	Stepping Stone Transitional Living Program
The Affordable Housing Coalition	Township officials
Youth Service Bureau's	Moshannon Valley Economic Development Partnership

The participant next moved to a discussion about the greatest unmet needs within the affordable housing area. The group quickly came up with more than 50 perceived unmet needs in Centre County. Of the 50+ needs, the participants grouped them into the following categories: lack of accessibility, lack of very low-income housing, diverse needs, regulatory issues, education/marketing, and financial resources.

From the 50+ unmet needs, the planning group was asked to define, "What should be the primary goals to address the housing issue". Based on the discussion, the group in turn was able to devise 23 overall goals. After duplication and commonalities among the goals were discussed, the participants formulated nine overall goals. Once the goals were determined, the participants ranked the nine goals based on individual perception of importance. Based on the initial rank order the planning group selected their top three goals as: (1) Meet the housing needs of a diverse group of people across Centre County; (2) The development of key partnerships that include local government, community leaders and businesses, for profit and nonprofit entities; and (3) Children, families, special needs populations and low-income individuals will be able to find acceptable, affordable, housing as close to their home communities as feasible, spending no more than 30% of income to sustain housing (Table 12).

Housing Goals	Score	Mean	StDev	Rank
Meet the housing needs of a diverse group of people across Centre County.	155	2.62	2.40	1
The development of key partnerships that include local government, community leaders and businesses, for profit and nonprofit entities.	147	3.00	1.84	2
Children, families, special needs populations and low-income individuals will be able to find acceptable, affordable, housing as close to their home communities as feasible, spending no more than 30% of income to sustain housing.	132	3.71	2.55	3
Educating all parties as to what is affordable housing and how to provide it.	105	5.00	1.82	4
Infrastructure development including transportation (public and private), utilities and resources	99	5.29	1.74	5
To provide affordable housing that is accessible via public transportation and/or is in close proximity to the work place	89	5.76	2.47	6
While it is well understood that economics, not domineering people, drive the market, people in leadership have to be willing to just do the right thing.	83	6.05	1.83	7
Determine how extensive is the need for more low-income housing in the county as a whole. How many people are affected?	80	6.19	2.48	8
To set up a repository to accept gifts for affordable housing. This would best be the CCCF. There is load of private donors seeking a place to give to affordable housing	55	7.38	2.06	9

Table 12: Housing Goal Prioritization

Upon completion of the initial individual prioritization, participants were again asked to reflect on and evaluate the top three goals framing their response using the same three questions. Again, the framing questions were: (1) Does it meet the CCCF mission and will the CCCF have a clear role to play? (2) Addresses a genuine countywide need (not a perceived need)? and (3) Substantial progress can be realized within three years? Similar to the framing results for children youth and families, the affordable housing top three goals were reordered slightly. The new order of

affordable housing goal prioritization turned out to be: (1) The development of key partnerships that include local government, community leaders and businesses, for profit and nonprofit entities; (2) Meet the housing needs of a diverse group of people across Centre County; and (3) Children, families, special needs populations and low-income individuals will be able to find acceptable, affordable, housing as close to their home communities as feasible, spending no more than 30% of income to sustain housing (Table 13).

Goals	Framing Questions	CCCF Mission (1)	StDev	Genuine Countywide need (2)	StDev	3-Year Progress (3)	StDev
Meet the housing needs of a diverse group of people across Centre County.		A(4.10)	1.04	A(4.48)	0.93	A(3.81)	1.03
The development of key partnerships that include local government, community leaders and businesses, for profit and nonprofit entities.		SA(4.52)	0.60	A(4.48)	0.68	SA(4.62)	0.67
Children, families, special needs populations and low-income individuals will be able to find acceptable, affordable, housing as close to their home communities as feasible, spending no more than 30% of income to sustain housing.		A(3.71)	1.19	A(4.38)	0.97	N(3.43)	0.98

Table 13: Housing Goal Prioritization with Framing Questions

- (1) Meets the CCCF mission and the CCCF has a clear role to play
- (2) Addresses a genuine countywide need (not a perceived need)
- (3) Substantial progress can be realized within three years

### Housing Goal and Objective Ideas

Perhaps not surprising for a goal focused on developing partnerships, that 11 of the 22 objectives suggested related in some way to forming a task force, partnership, brainstorming group, identifying key stakeholders, or strengthening organizations such as Affordable Housing Coalition, Centre County Housing and Land Trust, Chamber of Business and Industry of Centre County, etc... A second prominent thrust of the objectives identified for the partnerships goal was the concept of awareness building supported by comments such as, “Combine this goal with an education process. Bring partners together in a housing summit to educate and build relationships” and “Educate people on the high cost of infrastructure development and how this cost impacts the overall cost of housing”. Finally, a few comments were directed toward funding specific groups, identifying land for affordable housing, or focused on financial resource development (i.e. grants, gifts, etc...).

In order to achieve the goal of meeting the diverse housing demands across Centre County the planning group proposed 31 possible actions. Predominately the solutions focused on needs assessment and planning. Of the evaluation and planning related suggestions, most focused on the creation, review, or update of a county housing needs assessment. Still others related to additional strategic planning or comprehensive affordable housing planning as noted in the following quote, “Develop a countywide housing plan, linked to countywide transportation and economic development plans”. The second noticeable group of suggestions related to grants, subsidies, government funding, and private funding of affordable housing projects. Underpinning the funding/subsidy suggestions were comments such as, “Build in incentives so that it becomes worthwhile for developers to focus on cheaper housing”, “Develop a housing finance program for work-force and low-income potential home buyers”, and “Find reinvestment funds for existing properties, ex. - residential reinvestment from DCED...”. In addition to needs assessments and funding the participants also recommended bringing people together, “Bring together the people who NEED more affordable housing WITH the people who can PROVIDE it in a setting in which they can discuss possible solutions”. Expanding on the idea of bringing people together was the concept of education and awareness building, “I think the best way to accomplish this is through educating the public and private sector, as well as county residents as to what the need is, and how they can help”. It should be noted the participants also suggested some very practical ideas such as an affordable housing informational website, building 30 housing units per year through 2010, and focusing on zoning changes to encourage affordable housing.

Turning to the final top affordable housing goal of “Children, families, special needs populations and low-income individuals will be able to find acceptable, affordable housing ads close to their home communities as feasible, spending no more than 30% of income to sustain housing” the group generated an additional 16 objective ideas. Of the 16 responses, it was very difficult to derive a clear direction. Several ideas focused on the creation of an affordable housing agency within local government, a single organization in charge of affordable housing, and tracking current affordable housing conditions. Additional suggestions focused on identifying the “special needs” populations and needs assessment, summed up by the following response, “Determine needs among diverse populations within the communities of Centre County; match need with availability to determine what additional housing needs there are by the communities in county; set priorities around greatest need...”. Further objectives espoused the virtues of educating new residents; providing incentives for builder, developers, and homebuyers; and collaboration with landlords to help people find affordable housing.

Finally, the participants were asked one last time if they had other suggestions to address affordable housing. Perhaps the clearest comments related to the issue were the concepts of planning and leadership, which can be summed up in the following comments, “One organization needs to take the lead on this and this organization should engage people from the public and private sector to assist with preparing an action plan” and “Strong leadership is needed to achieve the goals”. Another theme that appeared in the final suggestions was the concept of linking and education. Two people suggested linking affordable housing to other issues such as geographic location, quality of life, and economic development. Still others suggested more education on affordable housing such as, “Develop hard facts/statistics and present in a way so as to easily explain the affordable housing issue to everyone, including existing homeowners who may end up living near affordable housing” or “Create a marketing plan that would educate every citizen about their individual stake in creating affordable housing for every citizen, even if they don't see themselves as having a stake in the issue”. Perhaps the best summary of the complexity of the affordable housing issues was stated by the person making the following comment, “We have not dealt with the underlying cause, the root source, of the housing problem in Centre County. That is that the economic engine that drives the county is the Centre Region. That has developed the conundrum that as the economic engine has grown, the cost of living and doing business in the Centre Region has correspondingly risen. The further outside the region you go, the more affordable housing that is

available. If the county is to work as a county to solve the problem two sides of a coin need examined. Job development outside the Centre Region in order to move the people to the housing or transportation development to get the people to the Centre Region”.

### ***Connecting Housing and Children Youth and Families***

The equal passion in Centre County around the issues of affordable housing and the well-being of children youth and families spurred several requests from multiple individuals and organizations to investigate the possibility of tying the two issues together. As part of the visioning exercise, participants were asked, “How do we connect or “tie together” the two issues today...housing and children, youth, and families”. Many of the comments reflected on the ability of a home to create a stable, healthy, safe, and/or reduced stress environment for children. Other comments reflected the systemic nature of the connection between housing and the well-being of children and families, “Nothing stands in a vacuum...Stability for families requires stability in their housing. Unfortunately, these are also related to economic development, transportations systems development, community/cultural development and more. I'm not sure isolated issues can be addressed without a more systemic approach that takes all into consideration...”. Still other comments suggested the issues intertwined through the stigma applied to those who cannot afford adequate housing, “When parents can't provide permanent housing for their families, those families are always in crisis and likely to experience many of the negative effects of that”. Finally, several comments reflected the opinion that funding or community resources may help link the issues. The essence of the funding community resources comments revolved around the concepts of good communities, good neighbors, and supporting existing positive programs including extending the State College Land Trust.

## **Summary**

Focus Centre County evolved from a simple, two meeting, public engagement activity into a major opportunity to talk with resident of Centre County about their ideas, thoughts, perceptions, and proposed solutions to real world issues facing Centre County. Perhaps most importantly, the Focus Centre County project stuck to the original principals of openness, involvement, integrity of the process, elimination of agenda building, and building on the positive social capital of the Centre County Community Foundation. As a result, each community engagement phase lead to greater understanding of the needs of Centre County and generated even more ideas for future evaluation.

From the five community-based focus groups, one held in each Centre County school district, CCCF was able to engage more than 250 residents in a dialogue about community accomplishments and needs. The focus group participants noted over 450 community accomplishments, but were particularly proud of the following: educational opportunities, historic areas, art, culture, natural resources, economic development, nonprofits and service organizations, Penn State, diversity, civic engagement, and strong faith-based organizations. Discussion of what could be improved in the County led to the creation of 83 priority ideas. The 83 priority ideas identified during the focus groups were sorted and designated into 18 issue areas. Within the issue areas, the community focus groups appeared to put the highest emphasis on the issues of affordable/accessible adult and youth education, community identity/relations, housing, open space, parenting and childcare, and transportation. The community focus groups also provided insight into a potential secondary set of issues related to cultural events/activities, civic engagement/participation, and work and workforce development.

Furthermore, the community-based meetings presented an early opportunity to explore participants overall interests based on their prioritization of the six Knight Foundation areas. Interestingly, the prioritization provided the first insight into the potentially differing needs across Centre County. Housing clearly was a high priority in many areas of Centre County, but the Centre Region held the strongest affinity for housing related issues. The well-being of

children youth and families was also clearly a high priority; however, the issue was the strongest in areas outside the Centre Region. In addition to the apparent geographic nature of the top two issues, the focus group participants also appeared to uncover possible sub-regional differences. The Phillipsburg-Osceola, and to a lesser degree Bald Eagle Area and Penns Valley, meetings identified slightly different priorities. Bald Eagle and Penns Valley participants agreed the well-being of children youth and families was a top issue; however, they also found adult education and economic development high priorities. Additionally and somewhat more telling is the Phillipsburg-Osceola participants found economic development and adult education more important than housing or the well-being of children youth and families issues.

Following the completion of the community focus groups, over 80 residents participated in the countywide prioritization meeting on September 10, 2007. Using the 18 issue areas, with the 83 priority ideas as subcategories, at the meeting participants clearly identified housing as the top priority followed closely by parenting and childcare, affordable/accessible adult and youth education, transportation, and work/workforce development. The top results were consistent with the community focus groups, in maintaining strong support for housing and parenting/childcare issues. Nevertheless, perhaps the most notable change between the community focus groups and the countywide prioritization meeting was the emphasis on open space and land use appeared to decline, while interest in work and workforce development issues seemed to increase.

When the participants turned their attention to the six Knight Foundation priority areas, the prioritization results were identical to the community focus groups. The well-being of children youth and families was again the highest priority, followed closely by housing and community development. Even though issues remained in the same order, it is important to note they were in fact statistically tied. Given the consistency of the top two Knight Foundation priority areas, combined with the new top two issue areas, the meeting further demonstrated the equal passion the residents of Centre County have for the issues of housing and the well-being of children youth and families.

As a nearly independent phase of Focus Centre County, the stakeholder survey reaffirmed the results of both the focus groups and the prioritization meeting. The stakeholder survey was sent out to 330 community leaders, agency directors, and government officials to help validate the information learned in the public process of Focus Centre County. Discounting non-deliverable surveys (34), 137 recipients completed the survey for an effective response rate of 47%.

Again, in the evaluation of the six Knight Foundation priority areas the well-being of children youth and families ranked the highest followed by housing and community development. However, when the survey respondents turned to specific challenges facing Centre County, affordable housing issues were mentioned more frequently and often rated higher than other competing issues. Interestingly, in the survey results, housing issues were named seven times as a top five “high priority” issue across four different Knight Foundation priority areas, and children youth and families’ issues are mentioned six times as a top five “high priority” issue across four different priority areas.

Through the survey, respondents were asked to evaluate all 83 priority ideas from the community focus groups assembled in the six original Knight Foundation categories. The highest issue response for each category was:

- **Adult Education:** Getting parents involved with education
- **Children Youth and Families:** Mentoring, volunteering, instilling civic values in our youth
- **Housing and Community Development:** Preserving open space and farms
- **Economic Development:** Expanding affordable housing
- **Civic Engagement:** Increasing affordable housing in county

- **Vitality of Cultural Life:** Improving transportation and access to services – especially with respect to public transportation for all ages/needs

Even in this survey format, the enthusiasm respondents have for parenting/youth development and affordable housing issues, still shows through. In addition to the two key issues, survey respondents also identified other future challenges for Centre County would include growth, sprawl, loss of open space, public transportation, increasing crime rates, and parenting skills.

Specifically looking at well-being of children youth and families and housing and community development, several interesting interactions appear to occur. The top five responses for well-being of children youth and families included:

1. Mentoring, volunteering, instilling civic values in youth
2. Increase housing for low to moderate income families
3. Expanding/improving affordable, quality day care
4. Improving business and employment opportunities that keep youth and adults in community
5. Enhance preschool quality and availability

Perhaps most interesting is the fact that under the children youth and families topic, respondents rated increasing housing for low and moderate income families as one of only two issues with more than 50% of respondents ranking it as a high priority.

Looking at the respondents' feelings about the priority issues related to housing and community development, the top five responses were:

1. Preserving open space and farms
2. Providing funds for revitalization of existing communities– rather than building on open space
3. Creating more economical housing
4. Increasing affordable housing with public transportation options
5. Developing smaller housing developments on, or extending bus routes and/or alternative mass transit options outside of the Centre Region
5. Initiating smart growth/preservation and cooperation

It is interesting to note that affordable housing issues actually ranked first under the economic development and civic engagement areas, but third or lower in the housing and community development area behind two priority issues related to preserving open space. Open space and land use issues were among the stronger areas in the community focus groups, dropped back during the countywide prioritization, and reemerged strongly during the survey.

Actually, preserving open space received more high priority votes (63.8%) than any other of the 83 priority ideas on the survey. Even as the results of the survey reinforced the focus group and prioritization meeting results for housing and children youth and families, further investigation will be needed to better understand the conflicting results for open space and land use issues.

As a culminating effort to complete the Focus Centre County initiative, two strategic planning sessions were held on October 8, 2007. Twenty-two Centre County residents with expertise in housing and/or children youth and families were invited to the Penn State Team Innovation Center, to assist in developing goals and objectives/actions for the affordable housing and children youth and families issues. To frame and focus goal development, participants first individually ranked goals based on perceived importance, and then ranked the top three goals using three focusing questions: (1) Does it meet the CCCF mission and will the CCCF have a clear role to play? (2) Does it address a genuine countywide need? and (3) Can substantial progress can be realized within three years?

When the focus of the strategic planning session turned to affordable housing more than 50 unmet needs were quickly identified, which the participants grouped as a lack of accessibility, lack of very low-income housing, diverse needs, regulatory issues, education/marketing, and financial resources. Based on the unmet needs identified the participants created nine overall goals. The top three individually prioritized affordable housing goals were:

1. Meet the housing needs of a diverse group of people across Centre County
2. The development of key partnerships that include local government, community leaders and businesses, for profit and nonprofit entities
3. Children, families, special needs populations and low-income individuals will be able to find acceptable, affordable, housing as close to their home communities as feasible, spending no more than 30% of income to sustain housing

When the framing questions were applied to the top three individually prioritize goals, the three goals were ranked as:

1. The development of key partnerships that include local government, community leaders and businesses, for profit and nonprofit entities
2. Meet the housing needs of a diverse group of people across Centre County
3. Children, families, special needs populations and low-income individuals will be able to find acceptable, affordable, housing as close to their home communities as feasible, spending no more than 30% of income to sustain housing

The participants felt a few strategies to address the goal of developing key partnerships included: forming a task force, partnership, or brainstorming group; identifying key stakeholders; strengthening specific organizations; awareness building; and specific funding/projects of practical concern. The planning group proposed needs assessment, strategic planning, and comprehensive planning; grants, subsidies and incentives; coalition building/networking; and education/ awareness building as ways to help achieve the goal of meeting the diverse housing demands across Centre County. Finally, in order to help achieve the goal of children, families, special needs populations, and low-income individuals will be able to find acceptable affordable housing, the planning group suggested a variety of ideas. While no clear theme was apparent, a few ideas included the creation of an affordable housing agency within local government, a single organization in charge of affordable housing, tracking current affordable housing conditions, identifying the “special needs” populations, needs assessment, education, builder incentives, and collaboration.

The children youth and families plan identified more than 100 unmet need ideas, which the participants grouped as follows: accessibility; bonding; education/marketing; external support for families; funding; health and wellness; parenting; and sense of community. The planning group then developed the unmet needs into 18 potential goals. The top three individually prioritized children youth and family goals were:

1. Support parents with parenting skills
2. Funding needs to be made available to support existing programs
3. Provide support systems/programs to benefit child development and family values

Using the top three individually prioritized goals in combination with the framing questions, the top three goals were ranked as:

1. Funding needs to be made available to support existing programs
2. Provide support systems/programs to benefit child development and family values
3. Support parents with parenting skills

To address the funding goal, participants recommended several strategies that included partnerships, creation of funding streams through CCCF, education/marketing about community needs, and creation of funding databases. Ideas to support the goal of providing support to benefit child development and family values included a countywide program review, conduct a ‘gap’ analysis, benchmarking, enhanced or the creation of partnerships, and the value of

quality pre-k and childcare experiences. The ideas for the goal to support parents with parenting skills generated the most discussion and practical action recommendations. Ideas included the creation of an online parenting resource center; program partnerships with Penn State; targeting parent education in medical centers and high schools; marriage license requirements; and a combination of volunteerism, mentoring, and consultants to coach or role model for children, parents, childcare providers, and first time parents.

Participants were also asked to identify any other suggestions to address either affordable housing or the well-being of children youth and families. Overwhelmingly, participants indicated the affordable housing issues could be better addressed through more planning, leadership, education, and understanding the root causes of the lack of affordable housing. For the well-being of children youth and families perhaps the biggest insight for future discussion was around the issues of engaging children, families, businesses, schools, and other community partners in youth peer programs, community action and activity, and support groups; benchmarking; gap analysis; partnerships; and workforce development.

Finally, in an attempt to find commonality in the enthusiasm around the issues of affordable housing and the well-being of children youth and families, participants were asked to brainstorm ideas related to how the two topics overlap. The participants focused much of their discussion on the ability of a home to create a stable, healthy, safe, and reduced stress environment for children. While the terms and definitions of what constitutes a stable, safe or healthy home were not discussed, the comments certainly reflect a common public perceptions for consideration. In addition to a safe home, some participants noted a systemic nature of the connection (i.e. economic development, transportation, culture, community, etc...). Finally, participants suggested the issues were related through a stigma of inadequate housing impacting children and families and the concept of community resources such as the value of good communities and good neighbors.

## **Focus Centre County “Lessons Learned For Future Projects”**

Focus Centre County evolved into a highly successful project with benefit, not only for the Centre County Community Foundation, but also for the community in raising specific issue awareness across the county. As with any project, there is always room for improvement. Areas the project team recognized for improvement included: engagement of the CCCF Project Development Committee, focus group moderator training/screening, stakeholder survey timing, specificity of strategic visioning, CCCF administrative role in project, confusion over \$50,000 planning grant award for CCCF versus a \$50,000 grant available through CCCF, the short overall grant timeline, and increasing the early relationship with the Knight Foundation Community Advisory Committee.

To increase the participation and effectiveness of the awareness building and focus group phases of the project stronger engagement of the CCCF Project Development Committee may have been useful. Due to health concerns of the first Project Development Committee chair and exceptionally busy schedules of the Project Development Committee membership, further engagement of the committee simply was not possible. However, in the absence of a strong engagement from the Project Development Committee a true Focus Centre County visioning champion emerged in the eventual chairperson, Mr. Tom Songer. In addition to Mr. Songer as the project champion, administrative champions developed through the nonstop efforts of Ms. Dolores Taricani and Mr. Al Jones, the CCCF Board Chairman and Treasurer, respectively (Rowley & Sherman, 2001). Future foundation visioning activities may need to take on a stronger board development or engagement plan prior to a large-scale visioning program.

Although not an overwhelming problem, the project team soon discovered that some community focus group moderators were having difficulty building an environment conducive to focusing ideas and community building in a

short time frame. The moderator issue manifested itself through evaluation comments related to not having enough time or limiting discussion. To address this issue, during each of the five focus groups a project team member was assigned to a rover position. When the rover spotted a moderator needing assistance, they would spend more time in the group attempting to keep the group on track and build community. If time permitted, increased moderator training and potentially a moderator screening or an application procedure for paid moderators may have enhanced the project.

The Service Providers/Community Leaders survey turned out to be very useful in verifying the results of the focus groups and community prioritization. However, moving the survey timeline up to before the final countywide prioritization session may have enabled the project team to focus more discussion on the top issues. With greater specificity in earlier discussion, perhaps the community stakeholders could have more efficiently discussed and parsed issues at the prioritization meeting and strategic planning sessions.

During the strategic visioning session, the project team noticed the planning group became very general in their goal development, limiting the potential benefit of the strategic visioning process. A more focused approach with 22 youth-serving professionals and 22 housing/affordable housing professionals may have afforded a better alternative as opposed to a combined effort that mixed youth and housing expertise.

Transition marked 2007 for the Centre County Community Foundation with the search for a new foundation executive director and the replacement of the Project Development Committee chair due to health concerns. Given the somewhat tumultuous times that gripped the Foundation, it was not surprising the Focus Centre County Team had unfettered rein over the project. Ultimately, the project succeeded but the lack of administrative oversight could have caused the overall failure of the effort if an unscrupulous project team manipulated the process, consultants billed by the hour and ran up costs, or a project team was not intimately connected to the area and/or lacked community context.

Early in the project, confusion set in regarding the role of the \$50,000 Leadership Challenge Award versus a grant for \$50,000 to be offered by the Centre County Community Foundation. While no \$50,000 grant was being offered by the Centre County Community Foundation, several individuals and organizations did not understand the funds were being utilized internally by the Centre County Community Foundation to establish the number one need within the community. Despite several attempts to remediate this misperception, the rumor was so pervasive that even the Centre Daily Times, which was heavily engaged in reporting on the project, actually published an editorial reflecting on how to spend the \$50,000 after the project ended.

For any foundation or organization contemplating a future visioning project, one major consideration must be timeline. The Centre County Community Foundation was able to complete a successful visioning project thanks in no small part to the commitment of the visioning champion found in the Project Development Committee chairman, administrative champions in the board chairman and treasurer, and the commitment of three member project team. Even with this significant commitment from multiple individuals, completing the visioning project in just over seven months proved a significant time challenge. In reality, to accomplish the core components of a successful visioning project, the project should be planned, implemented, and evaluated over a 12 to 18 month timeline.

As the project team discovered, focusing on fewer priority issue areas might have increased the quality of the information gathered throughout the visioning process. To enhance the focus of the visioning process two recommendations may be useful. First, an alternative to focusing on all six Knight Foundation priority areas would be narrowing of topics down to one or two priority areas or even placing no categorical or topical limitations on the discussions and the input requested. In either event, it is important for the future grantee to clearly understand which

Knight Foundation priority areas the organization feels meet their mission, has the prospect of enhancing its mission, can benefit the community, and holds philanthropic development potential. Second, the future grantee should work to establish a relationship with the Knight Foundation Community Advisory Committee early in the project. Through this early relationship, the grantee can utilize the community connections and experience of the Community Advisory Committee to enhance the community-visioning project and establish the potential for future funding priorities of the Knight Foundation.

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## Note

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The views expressed herein represent the views of the participants in the Focus Centre Country project and may not represent the mission, focus, or priorities of the Centre County Community Foundation.

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