

Focus Centre County

Summary Report

James R. Ladlee ▶ Centre County Community Foundation ▶ 2007

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 \$22,000,000 in assets and distributed nearly \$4,500,000 in grants to 252 organizations in Centre County.

In an effort to continue leadership on issues important to Centre County and to focus future philanthropic development on a community concern, in late 2006 the foundation received a \$50,000 "Leadership Challenge Award" through the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The purpose of the Leadership Challenge Award was to, "...add a new level of engagement for CCCF in its central role as the community foundation of Centre County" (Ibargüen, 2006). Through the Leadership Challenge Award, the Centre County Community Foundation sought to convene residents across Centre County to identify a singular transformational issue.

Focus Centre County Essentials

The Focus Centre County initiative was the only Leadership Challenge Award in the country, so it 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 build a unique process encompassing the entire County and deliver the Leadership Challenge Award goals, CCCF sought the experience and expertise of Penn State Cooperative Extension and MindShift Consulting as a project management team.

To ground the Focus Centre County initiative in engagement, involvement, and future philanthropic development a five-phase project was developed. The

project phases included awareness building, community focus groups, countywide priority setting, a stakeholder survey, and strategic visioning. At each phase of the project the six Knight Foundation priority areas of: well-being of children and families, economic development, housing and community development, education, civic engagement and positive human relations, and vitality of cultural life were used as discussion guides (John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2002-2008).

Community Focus Groups

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 (Table I). 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.

Countywide Prioritization

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 (Table 1). 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

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 1: Prioritization of Eighteen Issue Areas at Countywide Priority Setting

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.

Stakeholder Survey

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.

Strategic Visioning

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?

Affordable Housing

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 (Figure 1):

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,

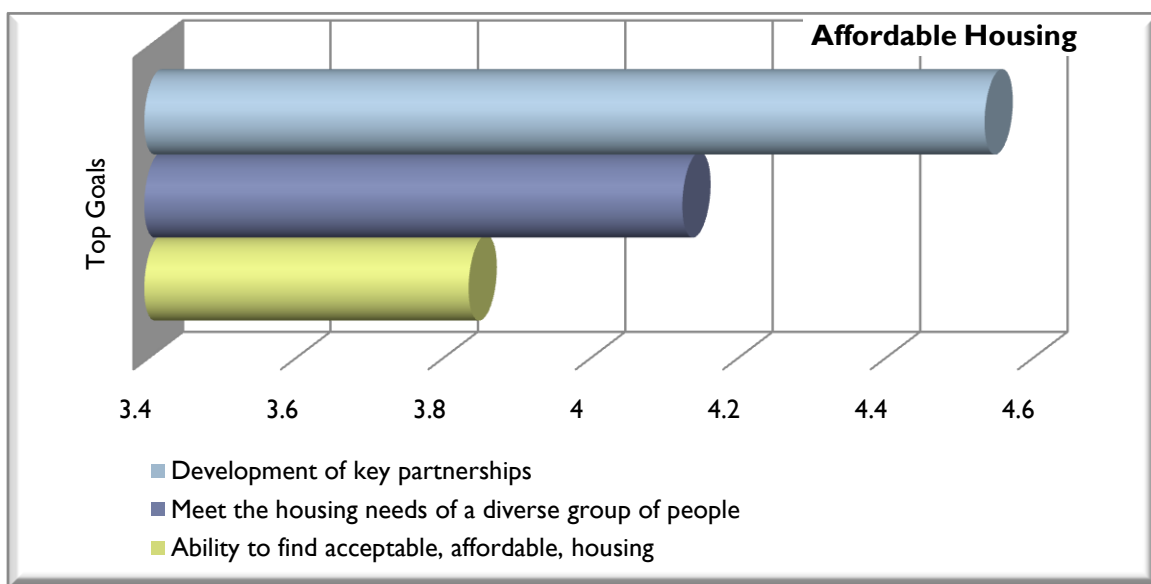


Figure 1: Top Three Affordable Housing Goals

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.

Children Youth and Families

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 (Figure 2):

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.

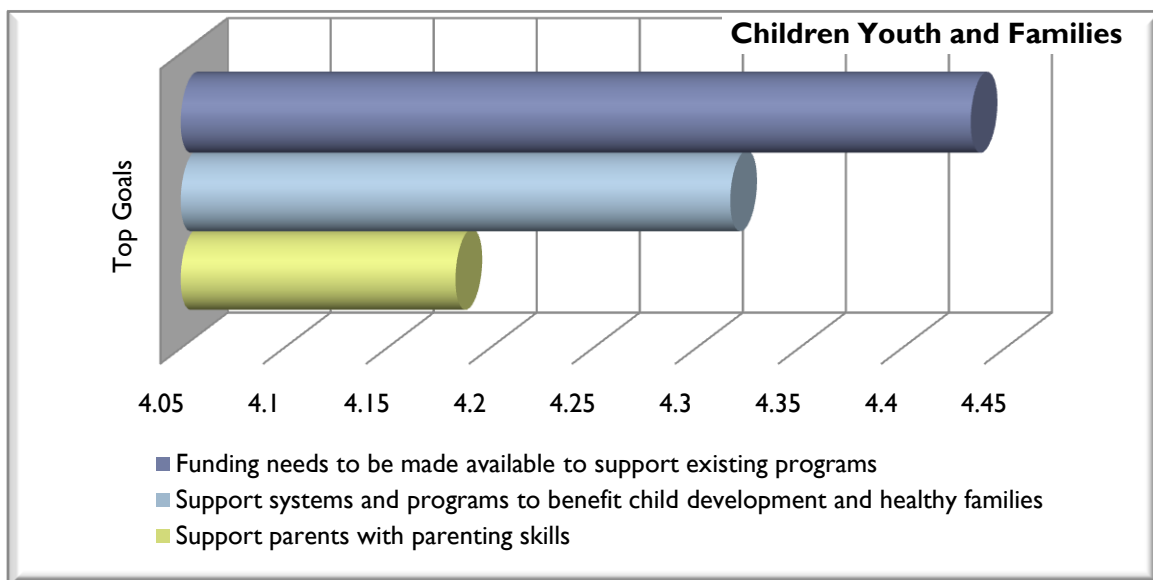


Figure 2: Top Three Children Youth and Families Goals

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.

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Note

The views expressed herein represent the summary 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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