Children are our future. If we don’t encourage them, things will get worse.”

“Children are our future. If we don’t encourage them, things will get worse.”

We don’t have a lot to offer young, positive people. They live here, go away to college, and then they don’t want to come back.”

“I remember when Niagara Falls was so vibrant....”

INSIGHTS FROM RESIDENTS

CITY OF Niagara Falls

OCTOBER 2019

Numbers in Need IN BUFFALO NIAGARA

A Mobile Safety Net Team initiative established by The John R. Oishei Foundation

Prepared by University at Buffalo Regional Institute School of Architecture and Planning
INSIGHTS FROM RESIDENTS
2019

City of Niagara Falls

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About this Report

This report offers a snapshot of findings for the City of Niagara Falls, with new data on the community’s population that lives in or near poverty. It includes the perspectives of human services providers, the landscape of providers, and strategies that could strengthen the safety-net for individuals and families.

Research in this report was led by the University at Buffalo Regional Institute in partnership with the Mobile Safety-Net Team. It was commissioned by The John R. Oishei Foundation. This work updates and expands upon a community report completed by the research team in 2014.

Defining Need

Over 23,700 residents in the City of Niagara Falls live in or near poverty with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line. The federal poverty line (FPL) is $12,490 for a household of one, $16,910 for a two-person household, $21,330 for a family of three and $25,750, for a family of four. A single parent of two who works full time, year round at the minimum wage in NYS ($11.10 per hour or $23,088 a year) earns an income just above the FPL in 2019.

The FPL is adjusted annually by the federal government and varies by household size. It is often used to determine eligibility for programs that assist individuals and families with basic living expenses such as food, utilities, and rental housing. Households with incomes that exceed two hundred percent of the FPL (up to $51,500 for a family of four) generally do not meet income guidelines for most programs.

Federal Poverty Guidelines, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal Poverty Level</th>
<th>200% of Federal Poverty Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Person Household</td>
<td>$12,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Person Household</td>
<td>$16,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Person Household</td>
<td>$21,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Person Household</td>
<td>$25,750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Reports for this Community

This report is part of a comprehensive suite of reports for the City of Niagara Falls, one of 12 representatives communities in the Buffalo Niagara Region selected for assessment and investment as part of the Numbers in Need project.

Each of these reports for this community is available online at NumbersInNeed.org

Insights from Residents

This report, Insights from Residents, presents a more detailed look at the community’s vulnerable populations, their needs, urgent concerns, and barriers to programs and services. A survey of residents and conversations with residents inform findings in this report. Agency and community leaders can use this document as they develop programs and services that respond to the needs of residents and remove barriers to jobs, programs and services faced by residents.

Insights from Providers

Insights from Providers explores the perspectives of service providers in the community with respect to gaps in the landscape of services, barriers to reaching residents, promising developments, and strategies for strengthening the landscape of programs and services. A focus group with agency leaders informed the findings presented in this document. Agency and community leaders can use this report to shape programs and services that respond to identified gaps and barriers, while leveraging system strengths and promising developments.

Community Snapshot

Community Snapshot presents an overview of findings from the research in this community, with new data and information on the people living in or near poverty, their barriers to programs and services, the landscape of service providers, and strategies for strengthening the community so that all residents can thrive economically. This report draws from more detailed findings available on the Numbers in Need website, as well as from Insights from Residents and Insights from Providers. Agency and community leaders can use this report to understand key findings and identify topics for further exploring.

Visit us online at NumbersInNeed.org

NumbersInNeed.org is an online tool that leaders can use to understand economically vulnerable populations in the Buffalo Niagara Region, their urgent needs and concerns, barriers to services and factors that matter such as access to good paying jobs, educational attainment, and transportation options. The website features individual stories, community and regional indicators, interactive lists and maps of service providers, strategies for strengthening communities and models to consider.
Exactly 332 residents from the community and users of community services completed a two-page, 28 question survey over a three month period in mid 2019.

To ensure representative input from those living in or near poverty in the community, surveys were conducted at 23 locations across the community including libraries, schools, community centers, senior centers, food pantries, housing sites and more.

The resident survey was available in Spanish and Arabic, in addition to English. An online version of the survey was also made available beginning in March and shared by community groups through email and social media.

To better understand the challenges identified by survey respondents and formulate priorities and solutions, two one-hour long conversations were held with 17 residents. Participants received a $10 gift card as an incentive and thank you for participating.

### About the Resident Survey and Conversations

#### Resident Surveys were conducted at 23 locations

1. Carolyn's House
2. Cataract Elementary Veggie Van
3. Community Missions of Niagara Frontier, Inc.
4. Doris W. Jones Family Resource Building
5. Harry S. Jordan Gardens
6. Heart, Love & Soul
7. Isaiah 61
8. John A. Duke Senior Center Veggie Van
9. Henry J. Kalfas Elementary School Veggie Van
10. Niagara Community Action Program
11. Niagara Falls Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative
12. Niagara Falls High School Health Fair
13. Niagara Falls Housing Authority
14. Niagara Falls Public Library Veggie Van
15. Project Connect Niagara
16. St John de LaSalle Community Care
17. The Magdalene Project
18. The Salvation Army of Niagara Falls
19. WorkSourceOne - Trott Location
20. Niagara Falls City School District Events
21. Niagara County Fair
22. Veterans One-Stop Center of Western New York
23. North Tonawanda Summer Blast Off Event at Payne Park

### Percent of Survey Respondents by ZIP Code

- 0%-1%
- 1.1%-10%
- 10.1%-20%
- 20.1%-40%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Survey Respondents</th>
<th>Survey conducted at this location</th>
<th>Resident Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Resident Focus Groups were held at 2 locations

1. Heart, Love & Soul
2. The Connection

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**Numbers in Need | Insights from Residents: City of Niagara Falls**
Residents facing challenges in Niagara Falls come from a diverse range of backgrounds. Surveyors made every effort to attain a representative sample of the target population. Nevertheless, older residents, women, and black residents are overrepresented in this sample. Households without children are also more prevalent in this sample.

About one in five respondents is employed full time, and just as many are unemployed but currently looking for a job. Almost 40% of respondents are out of the labor force. This includes retired individuals and those who say they are unemployed and not looking for work. A third of respondents have no training or education beyond high school, and one in five started college but didn’t finish it.

Although a quarter of respondents are homeowners, a majority rent their home. Less than half of these renters receive housing cost assistance.

Respondents are both long-time residents and people who have recently moved and may be new in the community. About a third moved to their current residence within the last year, while another third has lived in the same place for more than five years.
### Key Findings from Resident Surveys and Conversations

#### Transportation in the community is inadequate.

Programs, services, and jobs are only effective if the people who need them most can get to them. The most common barrier to services among survey respondents is difficulty traveling to them. More respondents say they walk or bike as their primary transportation mode than those who drive, and far fewer use the bus to get around. Respondents who said they’ve used the bus say it takes too long to get to destinations, and service is not provided where or when they need it. Those with cars face repairs they can’t afford and failed vehicle inspections.

Focus group participants echo the findings of the survey; many described how difficult it can be to reach jobs or healthcare providers outside the immediate city without a car.

#### Residents face a shortage of money for necessities which may lead to outstanding debts.

Survey responses show that some of residents’ biggest concerns are not having enough money for food, utilities, housing costs, and childcare. But above all of those, respondents are challenged by factors such as low incomes and outstanding debt.

About half of respondents reported having a financial issue. Almost 40% of those face either consumer/credit card debt, or student loans. A third said they have outstanding medical bills.

Respondents likely have a hard time paying these expenses and debts with low incomes. Over half of respondent households earn less than $15,000 per year ($1,250 per month), and only a third of respondents have income from employment. This means that residents are relying on other fixed sources of income from social security programs and retirement just to get by.

#### Many residents receive assistance, but their need is still great.

About three quarters of respondents said they receive assistance from some kind of program. Such high percentages of respondents receiving assistance and also experiencing financial challenges may indicate that existing programs and services are simply not enough. Barriers to self-sufficiency include unemployment, low income, and disabilities that prevent people from working or furthering their education.

One of the top barriers faced by respondents seeking assistance is being turned away because of income limits. Even though 57% of respondents qualify for Medicaid, income thresholds for programs and services can disqualify residents from receiving additional help regardless of legitimate need.

#### Youth are the future of Niagara Falls, but they don’t have the supports needed to succeed.

Resident focus group participants strongly advocated for improved and expanded youth services in Niagara Falls. Adults suggested that the young people living in Niagara Falls today could be the generation that turns the city around. But to do so, residents say that kids need leadership skills. They need to be guided away from negative influences like violence and drugs, and given the tools they need to be successful. At the same time, residents recognized the need to make Niagara Falls a place worth staying in or coming back to for youth.

Young focus group participants articulately explained that there aren’t many opportunities for young people to be engaged or focused in positive ways outside of sports. They believe the key to changing the future of the city’s youth is investing in programs that give kids a chance to explore hobbies, higher education, career paths, creative recreation and artistic outlets, all under the guidance of people who genuinely care for their well-being. Investing in people and places that give kids hope for the future and the tools to turn that hope into action is one way to ensure youth stay on a positive path to success.
Two in five respondents has an urgent concern. Residents primarily say they are worried about issues related to lack of money for food or utilities. These challenges may be part of the reason why outstanding debt is the number one concern among respondents.

More than a quarter of respondents reported facing some kind of barrier in accessing needed services. More than half of those who experienced a barrier said they were turned away because they did not meet the income criteria for assistance, which indicates that simply having a certain income does not always negate the need for help. Difficulty traveling to service providers is also a common barrier.

**TRENDS**

In 2014, one in two residents reported difficulty getting services. Today, this has significantly improved to one in four. However, the challenges faced are still similar. In 2014, income limits and difficulty traveling were the top barriers faced by respondents.

The landscape of residents with urgent concerns has not changed much since the 2014 survey; about the same proportion of respondents had an urgent concern then as today. However, a smaller proportion of residents are concerned with foreclosure/eviction today than in 2014, but not having enough money for food or utility bills remain top concerns.
**Detailed Findings:**

**Disabilities and Health Care Access**

More than half of respondents said that they or someone in their household is disabled. Out of that group, the vast majority say that the disability limits that person’s ability to go to work or school. Most disabilities are related to physical ability and mental health. While most children have some kind of health insurance, more than one in ten adults do not. Most respondents have some kind of public insurance through Medicaid or Medicare. However, the survey also shows that simply having insurance isn’t enough for many people. Even though most respondents are covered by insurance, two in five said they need some kind of healthcare that they can’t afford. Respondents reported needing dental care, medical-related transportation, prescriptions, optical care, and other healthcare services they cannot afford.

**TRENDS**

In 2014, about one in four respondents said that an adult in their household lacked health insurance. Today, this number has greatly improved to a little more than one in ten. The percentage of respondents with Medicaid or Medicare has also grown significantly, from around 65% in 2014 to 84% today.

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**Disabilities in Households**

- **57%** of respondents reported some type of disability in the household
- **71%** say that disability limits them from going to work or school.

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**Type of Disabilities Reported in These Households**

- **54%** Physical
- **49%** Mental health
- **26%** Mobility
- **10%** Developmental
- **5%** Sensory

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**Healthcare**

- **13%** Adults lack of health insurance
- **3%** Children lack of health insurance

Most children in respondent households have health insurance. More than one in ten adults in respondent households lacks health insurance. Strategies creating better awareness of health insurance options, or that decrease the cost of health insurance could help shrink this gap.

**Top 5 Types of Health Insurance Coverage Used Among Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Insurance</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medicaid</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicare</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private insurance</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed care (HMO, PPO)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**39%** of respondents were in need of some type of healthcare but can’t afford it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Healthcare</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dental</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription medicine</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optical care</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation to appointments or services</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health care or counseling</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Detailed Findings: Transportation

The way in which residents get around and the associated challenges of these modes of traveling affect how easy it is for people to reach services, jobs, stores, school, recreation and more.

Respondents commonly walk or bike, and almost as many drive their own car. More people rely on family and friends than use public transit, possibly due to issues that make public transit inconvenient or not practical. Car owners face challenges too, including expensive repairs and keeping up with inspections, registrations, and insurance.

TRENDS

Not much has changed since 2014 when it comes to how respondents go places. The percentage of respondents who bike/walk and drive is almost the same. Use of public transportation is less common now (10%) than it was in 2014 (17%), although this may be a side effect of significant route eliminations in the past few years. In 2014, the most common reason residents didn’t take public transit was that it was too expensive, something that is still an issue today but to a lesser extent compared to other issues.

Survey respondents most commonly get around by biking or walking, although within that group, most people walk. Driving is the next most common method of transportation. Only one in ten respondents uses public transportation, a proportion smaller than those who rely on friends and family, an indication that public transit may not be a viable or convenient option for many residents.

Although only 10% of respondents say public transit is their primary form of transportation, nearly half of respondents say they have used public transit and experienced some kind of issue. Most of these issues relate to inconvenience, impracticality, and the costs of using transit.

Top reasons respondents don’t take public transportation more often

1. Takes too long to get to places
2. No service to destination
3. Buses don’t run often enough
4. Too expensive
5. No weekend/evening services

Even though people who drive may find the experience more convenient and practical than other ways of traveling, owning a car comes with its own challenges. A quarter of respondents say they own a vehicle and experienced some kind of issue with it. A majority of those with issues identified car repairs they can’t afford, which may also explain why a third of those with issues say their vehicle didn’t pass inspection.
FINANCES AND ASSETS

A majority of respondents make less than $15,000 per year, which is just above the Federal Poverty Line for a one-person household and just below the poverty level for a two-person household.

### Household Income, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $1,250</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1,250 to $1,999</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2,000 to $2,999</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$3,000+</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employment is the most common form of income. Although 84% of respondents are working age (18-64) only 32% of respondents receive income from employment. Other common income sources include Social Security and Supplemental Security Income. One in ten respondents has no income at all.

### Sources of Household Income

- Employment: 33%
- Supplemental Security Income: 22%
- Social Security Disability: 22%
- Social Security (Retirement): 19%
- Other: 12%
- No income: 10%
- Child support: 4%
- Unemployment Insurance: 3%
- Worker’s compensation: 2%

### Top 5 Financial Challenges Households Experience

- Student loan debt: 42%
- Consumer/credit card debt: 42%
- No bank account: 32%
- Medical bills: 32%
- Other: 23%

With low incomes and employment, it’s no surprise that half of respondents are dealing with some kind of financial challenge. Respondents have debt from student loans, consumer/credit card accounts, and medical bills. Many do not have a bank account, which makes saving money for the future more difficult.

### Confidence to Handle a $500 Emergency

- Not confident: 37%
- Very confident: 35%
- Confident: 16%
- Somewhat confident: 7%
- Somewhat not confident: 5%
Detailed Findings: Programs, Services and Supports

Surveys indicate that respondents have a lot of need, but also that most respondents are getting assistance in some form. The fact that so many are in need while also receiving assistance may indicate that programs and services are not adequate enough to meet all household needs.

Three quarters of respondents are getting some kind of help, while about a fifth are waiting for approval from an assistance program. Programs and services most frequently used are related to food, health, and utility costs.

TRENDS

The percentage of respondents receiving assistance is nearly identical to 2014, but the percentage of respondents with pending applications doubled from 2014 to today.

Food stamps/SNAP is still the top assistance program among respondents, but a larger portion of respondents are receiving this type of assistance today. In 2014, about half of respondents received rental assistance, but today only about a quarter get help with rent. A larger portion of respondents have Medicaid than in 2014.

HOUSEHOLDS RECEIVING SERVICES THROUGH PROGRAMS

Nearly three quarters of respondent households receive assistance from some kind of program. Most frequently, respondents said they get help with the cost of food, healthcare, and utilities.

74% of households receive one or more services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Services Received</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Stamps/SNAP</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicaid</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Pantry/Meal Service</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEAP</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSI</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSD</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash Benefits</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIC</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HOUSEHOLDS WITH PENDING APPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Far fewer respondent households currently have pending applications for programs. Food assistance is still the top priority, but applications for direct financial assistance through SSI/SSD and cash benefits are also common.

22% of households have pending applications for assistance programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Services Pending</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Stamps/SNAP</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSI/SSD</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash Benefits</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicaid</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEAP</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Pantry/Meal Service</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIC</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During resident focus groups, participants completed a brief exercise where they chose the programs and services they felt were strongest in the community, and those they believed need the most improvement.

Programs/services residents felt were the strongest typically related to services provided by the locations in which focus groups were conducted. But both groups agreed there is a dearth of mental health and addiction programs, things for youth to do, and assistance for seniors in the community.

Programs/services residents identified as...

...the strongest
#1 Food
#2 Health/Wellness
#3 Clothing
#4 Education/Training

...in need of improvement
#1 Mental Health/Addictions
#2 Youth Programs
#3 Legal
#4 Senior Programs
**Strengths and Assets of the Community**

There is a strong sense of community in Niagara Falls. Several youth talked about how the city is small, and everyone knows each other. While one resident said this was a detriment, some others said that it contributes to a sense of community.

Some of the city’s service providers are invaluable to residents. Younger and older residents alike said that some of the service providers in Niagara Falls play an important role in supporting residents’ well-being, including the Social Services Department; Heart, Love, & Soul; Doris W. Jones Family Resource Building; The Connection; and various health facilities.

Niagara Falls is diverse in culture, ethnicity, and race. Many participants said the city’s diversity makes it a good place to live. Residents and visitors from around the world make Niagara Falls a more interesting place to live.

Niagara Falls has a rich history. Though small, the city has produced notable figures and technological advances throughout history, played an important role in the Underground Railroad, and hosts one of the natural wonders of the world. The area is also significant in its role in Native American history.

New York State is making much needed investment in attractions and infrastructure in and near Niagara Falls State Park. Residents in the focus group see investments as key to bringing more people to Niagara Falls to support the tourism economy, as well as improving the quality of life for residents.

Healthcare facilities in Niagara Falls are an important asset. Residents named places like the Heart Center of Niagara, Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center, Golisano Center for Community Health, Community Health Center of Niagara and others as places where residents can receive quality healthcare.

**Challenges in the Community**

Niagara Falls does not offer enough opportunity for youth. Perhaps the biggest commonality between the youth and adult focus groups was that Niagara Falls lacks opportunity for young people. Many felt that there are not enough supports to keep kids away from negative activities involving drug abuse, violence, teen pregnancy, and others. Others said kids turn to those things because they don’t have positive outlets or things to do, and there isn’t enough guidance from teachers, counselors, and parents. Some adult participants said that kids don’t see enough opportunity in Niagara Falls, so those who leave for college rarely return. But adults also felt that youth were the best hope for the city’s future, expressing the importance of making Niagara Falls more appealing for young people, encouraging them to stay and improve the city.

Getting a good-paying job is difficult. Older residents in one focus group reminisced about the Niagara Falls they grew up in, where jobs were plentiful, commercial districts were vibrant and full of people visiting, shopping, and dining at locally-owned establishments. These residents see the lack of good-paying jobs as the main reason why the Niagara Falls of the past no longer exists. They say there simply are not enough good-paying jobs available anymore. Although some services will help you find a job, it can still be tough to find one that pays the bills. Young residents said that even though they were employed, it was really tough to find a job, and without the guidance of The Connection, they might not have been able to get the job they have.

Inadequate transportation is a barrier to jobs and services. According to focus group participants, one of the biggest reasons it’s hard to find a good job is poor transportation options. Many residents face a catch-22; they can’t afford a car because they don’t have a good-paying job, but they can’t get to a good-paying job because they don’t have reliable transportation. Those without cars face difficulty getting to jobs, services, and education. A participant in the youth focus group mentioned that many youth work at the mall, but buses don’t run to the mall early enough on Sundays for people to arrive on time for the opening shift. Other participants talked about how buses are infrequent or don’t have reliable service to enough locations. Some described how it can be very difficult to get to Buffalo for certain services or employment.
Challenges in the Community, cont’d.

The city’s infrastructure is in dire need of repair. Residents discussed how a lot of the city’s streets are full of potholes, sidewalks are crumbling, and properties are not maintained. Some residents feel that for the amount of taxes they pay, the city should do more to improve the infrastructure in the community.

Housing is expensive and poor quality. Despite the fact that it is losing population, Niagara Falls is a city where many residents say rents are not affordable, and landlords ask for first and last month’s rent plus a security deposit to move in. Residents say that people can’t afford to buy homes, let alone rent. Some focus group participants noted how programs such as Habitat for Humanity are helping to create affordable homes in Niagara Falls, but that these programs should be bolstered to better meet needs.

Crime and drug abuse are common. Several participants talked about violent crime being prevalent in Niagara Falls, especially among younger adults. Both focus groups said better guidance and things to do for youth could help keep kids away from drama and violence. Drug and alcohol abuse is also common in the community according to participants. Residents in the focus groups said that young people get caught up in drugs as an easy way to make quick money. Others noted how grandparents end up raising their grandchildren, because parents are caught up in alcohol and drug abuse. A few residents also talked about how there are a lot of sex offenders living in the community, which makes them worry about the safety of children in the city.

Ideas for Change in the Community

Find ways to get more people involved in their community. Some young focus group participants feel that a lot of community members complain about all the things wrong with Niagara Falls, but few are actually involved in ways that would help improve the community. Some youth said they see apathy in their schools among some teachers and counselors who either don’t push students to their potential, or may actively discourage students from dreaming big. Older residents said they wished the government was more actively trying to improve the community. One resident suggested these challenges could be solved by having more conversations between community groups, block clubs, residents, and government leadership to talk about the issues residents face. Some participants cited how successful Buffalo has been in recent years, and lamented that if Niagara Falls had leadership like Buffalo, the city’s situation would be much better.

Improve the supports and opportunities for young people in Niagara Falls. Most participants agree that Niagara Falls desperately needs more support for youth, and they offered a broad range of ways to achieve that goal. These ideas include increased funding for youth programs in schools and at Boys & Girls Club, increasing participation in and support for scouting programs, funding for YMCAs, building a new youth-focused community center, expanding existing college-prep programs, and funding community organizations that offer services like The Connection, The Casey House, and others.

Increase the diversity of educators, counselors, and service providers to be more representative of the community. One student in the youth focus group shared that in all of her years as a student up through senior year of high school, she had three teachers who were black, and only four who were people of color. Other youth agreed that teachers at the school were not representative of the student population. Young residents felt that having better representation would help build more empathy between students and teachers, stronger relationships, and trust. They believe that teachers who live in and actively participate in the community that students live in would have a better understanding of the lives of their students.

Open a youth center with recreation, guidance, arts, technology, and more. According to the focus groups, one way to better support youth is through a new youth center that offers recreation, guidance, help with school, art and media programs, technology, and other activities that could help kids escape and release the negative energy in their lives.

Create or expand programs that offer people a second chance. Among the adult focus group, residents talked about the importance of guiding community members who are returning to society after getting out of jail. Without the right support, former inmates may fall back into old habits and end up back in jail. Residents said that some people want to change but don’t know how to reintegrate into society and revert back to the life that resulted in their incarceration.
After her recovery from addiction, an older resident seeks new opportunities through job training and shares her story to help others.

Today Leah lives in an upstairs apartment not far from the Falls and the Gorge. She is 75 years young. She really likes the location and her apartment with a patio but is less keen on the long staircase leading up to her space. They are challenging but she manages for now. “Once I’m up, I’m up, when I’m down, I’m down.”

Leah shared her story while riding the bus across town. A lifelong resident of Niagara Falls, she has children and extended family in the area, not to mention long-time friends. “I have a very good support team.” Leah describes one friend in particular who has been in her life, through thick and thin, since they were 12 years old. “I’m so thankful to God for people like that in my life. I have several people I can say that about. I’m blessed, all the way around, I’m just truly blessed.”

Leah has much to be thankful for, but her life has had its ups and downs. Not long ago Leah lost nearly everything to drugs and addiction. It pulled her in slowly, over years, and away from the things that mattered most. It came to a head after she retired, when the kids where grown and her life was less structured. “It’s a very important thing, to keep myself busy, doing positive and constructive things in my life. Before I got into drugs, that’s what helped me a lot... before I entered this world of darkness.”

As a younger, single mother Leah was busier than most, balancing work and child rearing. She started her career in health care but she left when a job opened up at the largest manufacturing plant in town. Back in the day, it employed nearly a fifth of workers in Niagara Falls. “[N]urses got part of their pay in gratitude, but it’s hard put gratitude on the table for a meal,” Leah states in explaining why she jumped at the chance for the job in manufacturing.

Today Leah is exploring ways to help those in addictions recovery and encourage them through her story. Her time battling addiction included a run-in with the law, a stint in rehab, over a year in transitional housing, Narcotics Anonymous meetings, counseling, meals at Heart, Love and Soul, church groups, and her faith in God. “God is good. He is my life.”

Leah speaks highly of the supports available through Access-VR (formerly VESID). They help individuals find a job. They pay for training. They cover the cost of uniforms and a monthly bus pass. “It’s a great program,” explains Leah. “But you have to put the work in. You have to do a lot of footwork. You have to be fully committed to getting your life back together.” Leah learned the training she seeks is available Lockport. “I don’t mind taking the bus. It takes a little longer on the bus but anything worth having is worth fighting for.”

Reflecting back on her experience and the wide range of programs that supported her recovery, Leah says, “It’s so hard to pull yourself up. It took a lot of courage...Coming out of treatment and away from addiction, we tend to think we are ready to try our wings long before we are...It’s a whole new life [that I have now]. I’m so grateful.”
Despite challenges, a young student works towards a better future for himself.

Maurice is a 17 year-old senior at Niagara Falls High School. He aspires to go to college after graduation, but feels as though he does not have the support he needs to get there. Growing up in Niagara Falls, opportunities for exploring careers, cultivating interests, and trying hobbies were scarce.

Maurice feels there is no positive motivation from adults. “I know what I want to do, but I don’t know what I want to do. I wanted to be a history professor but a lot of people told me that’s not realistic.” Maurice suggests that schools could have a more diverse teaching staff and organize more inclusive college fairs and career planning programs so that youth can develop ideas of what they want to do in the future.

Sometimes school has been hard for Maurice, especially when things aren’t going well at home. Many of his teachers don’t seem to understand or care about the challenges that Maurice is dealing with outside of school. His mom is disabled and can’t work, but has had issues getting assistance through certain programs. Money is tight. Although the landlord hasn’t maintained their home in years, they still pay a lot in rent. Maurice even has friends whose family was recently evicted.

Along with a need for more support and career guidance, Maurice says that youth in Niagara Falls need more creative outlets outside of school. Maurice doesn’t see anywhere for youth to be expressive. “There’s just a park and a basketball court but not everybody plays basketball.” There are some programs for youth, such as The Casey House and The Connection, but not many that give kids a positive outlet. “You’ll have fun with your friends, but in most situations it’s the wrong kind of fun, and we’re labeled as bad kids.” Other programs, like Cribs, have closed down due to lack of funding. The young resident suggests that one of the best ways for the city to address this problem of limited youth spaces is by purchasing city property that has been lying vacant and converting the abandoned buildings into youth centers or other spaces that youth could utilize as safe spaces.
Data Sources & Notes

Defining Need, Page 2
Minimum Wage: New York State Department of Labor, Minimum Wage (effective 12/31/18).

Resident Survey
The resident survey was conducted from April 2019 through July 2019. Surveys were gathered at various sites across the community, all of which are listed on page four. Surveys at these locations were completed in person, administered by a Mobile Safety-Net Team Community Impact Coordinator or an agency staff member. The survey was made available in English, Spanish and Arabic. Twenty three online surveys were also completed, with a link to the survey distributed through partner agencies in the community through email and/or social media.

The analysis of the 332 responses included standardizing open ended responses and cleaning data for accuracy. Not all surveys were completed in full, and response rates for questions ranged from 202 responses to question 28 to 331 responses to question one. In cases where percentages are used, these numbers represent the percent of people who answered the question, not the percent of all people who took the survey.

Although some questions asked for respondents to choose one answer, there were several instances where respondents chose multiple responses; in these cases, all answers were included. For instance, respondents could report more than one type of disability, financial challenge, urgent concern, medical need, challenge in owning a vehicle, and barrier to programs and services.

Resident Focus Group
Resident focus groups were held on May 9th, 2019 and August 13th, 2019. Participants were recruited through the resident survey, where respondents could opt to provide contact info if they were interested in participating in a focus group. Additional participants were identified through collaboration with community partners and service providers. The focus group held in August was conducted with the Niagara Falls Youth City Council. Residents who participated in the focus group were given a $10 gift card to Walmart as appreciation for their time. Public notes were taken during the meeting, then later transcribed.

Detailed Findings: Programs, Services and Supports, Page 10
Programs/services residents identified as strongest and in need of improvement.

Resident focus group participants were asked to identify the strongest types of programs and services in the community as well as the program and service types where need for expansion and/or investment was greatest. Each resident had three yellow dots for placing next to the strongest programs and three blue dots for identifying where need was greatest across 16 categories of programs and services. Dots could be used to identify up to three strengths and weaknesses or several dots could be allocated to fewer categories. The top strengths and needs/gaps are those program and service types that generated the largest number of dots from all residents.

Trends: As of December 31, 2018, minimum wage in NYS was $11.10 per hour. A resident who works 30 hours a week for 4 weeks will earn $1,356 a month, versus $960 a month at a wage of $8.00 per hour, the minimum wage in 2014, when the resident survey was last conducted. Minimum wages are provided by the NYS Department of Labor.

Social Security benefits also get adjusted over time for cost of living changes. The average monthly payment under the Social Security Disability Program was less than $1,250 in 2014 but is now, in 2019, more than $1,250 per month, according to average monthly benefit data provided by the Social Security Administration.

Stories of Need
Stories of need reflect the voice and experience of actual residents living in Niagara Falls. Names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the identity and confidentiality of those who were interviewed. Interviews took place in July and August 2019. Interviews were conducted over the telephone and/or in person. Interviewees were recruited from the focus group with residents, or represent individuals who volunteered to share their story. Interview questions explored challenges around topics covered in community reports such as access to jobs, job training, affordable housing, healthy foods, transportation, and other barriers to jobs and services. The are intended to paint a picture of how these challenges play out in the lives of individuals and show how issues are interrelated.
### Resident Survey - English version

#### MOBILE SAFETY-NET TEAM COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your answers will assist us in better understanding the needs in the community and help us build a stronger safety net that more readily connects residents to the human services they need. Please select one response unless indicated otherwise. Your answers will remain completely confidential.

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<td>Zip Code</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Survey Location</td>
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5. Including yourself, how many people are in your household?
   - Adults (18 and up) ______ 1
   - Children (under 18) ______ 2

6. Has anyone in your household ever served in the armed forces?
   - Yes ______ 1
   - No ______ 2

7. What is your current employment status? Select all that apply.
   - Student ______ 4
   - Retired ______ 5
   - Employed full time ______ 6
   - Employed part time ______ 7
   - Unemployed, not looking ______ 8
   - Unemployed, looking ______ 9
   - Other: _______ 10

8. What is your current living situation?
   - Own ______ 1
   - Rent, with assistance ______ 2
   - Rent, without assistance ______ 3
   - Staying with friends/family ______ 4
   - Homeless/shelter ______ 5
   - Other: _________ 6

9. How long have you lived at your current address?
   - Less than 3 months ______ 1
   - 3 months-1 year ______ 2
   - 1-5 years ______ 3
   - More than 5 years ______ 4

10. What is the highest level of education/training you’ve completed?
    - High school/Equivalency ______ 1
    - Some college, no degree ______ 2
    - College degree (2 or 4 yr) ______ 3
    - Post graduate degree ______ 4
    - Military ______ 5
    - Trade School/Certificate ______ 6
    - Did not finish high school ______ 7

11. Do you or does anyone in your household have any of the following disabilities? Check all that apply.
    - Mental health ______ 1
    - Mobility ______ 2
    - Sensory ______ 3
    - Physical ______ 4
    - Other: Disability ______ 5

12. Do you or does anyone in your household have a disability that limits their ability to work and/or go to school?
    - Yes ______ 1
    - No ______ 2

13. What is your primary form of transportation?
    - Bicycle ______ 1
    - Family/Friends ______ 2
    - Own Vehicle ______ 3
    - Taxi ______ 4
    - Walk ______ 5
    - Medicaid van ______ 6
    - Uber/Lyft ______ 7
    - Volunteer service van ______ 8
    - Public transportation ______ 9
    - Other: _________ 10

14. If you own a vehicle, have you experienced any of the following over the last year? Select all that apply.
    - Did not repair my car because I could not afford to ______ 1
    - Lapsed or suspended car insurance ______ 2
    - Suspended license or registration ______ 3
    - Vehicle did not pass inspection ______ 4
    - Other: _________ 5
    - None/Do not own a vehicle ______ 6

15. What are your household’s sources of income? Select all that apply.
    - Employment ______ 1
    - Unemployment insurance ______ 2
    - SSD ______ 3
    - Social security retirement ______ 4
    - Worker’s compensation ______ 5
    - Child support ______ 6
    - No income ______ 7
    - Other: _________ 8

16. How much money is currently received from these sources to support your household each month?
    - $3,000+/month ______ 1
    - $2,000-$2,999/month ______ 2
    - $1,250-$1,999/month ______ 3
    - $750-$1,249/month ______ 4
    - < $750/month ______ 5

17. Are you or is anyone in your household currently receiving (any of the following)? Select all that apply.
    - Food stamps/SNAP ______ 1
    - Food pantry/meal service ______ 2
    - Medicaid ______ 3
    - Cash benefits ______ 4
    - SSD ______ 5
    - WIC ______ 6
    - Employment ______ 7
    - Child support ______ 8
    - Other: _________ 9

18. Does anyone in your household have a pending application for any of the following? Select all that apply.
    - Food stamps/SNAP ______ 1
    - Food pantry/meal service ______ 2
    - Medicaid ______ 3
    - Cash benefits ______ 4
    - SSD ______ 5
    - WIC ______ 6
    - Other: _________ 7

19. Do any of the following financial issues apply to you? Select all that apply.
    - Consumer/credit card debt ______ 1
    - Student loan debt ______ 2
    - Underwater mortgage (owe more than your house is worth) ______ 3
    - Unbankable ______ 4
    - No bank account ______ 5
    - Medical bills ______ 6
    - Child support ______ 7
    - Other: _________ 8

20. How confident are you in your ability to deal with a $500 emergency expense, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means “not confident at all” and 5 means “very confident”? Circle one.
    - 1 = Not confident at all
    - 2 = Somewhat confident
    - 3 = Somewhat confident
    - 4 = Very confident
    - 5 = Very confident

(Survey questions continue on back side.)
## Resident Survey, cont’d. - English version

### MOBILE SAFETY-NET TEAM COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT (continued)

**23** Does anyone in your household lack health insurance?  
*Select all that apply.*
- Yes, one or more adults do not have health insurance
- Yes, one or more children do not have health insurance
- No, we all have health insurance

**24** If insured, what type of health insurance is currently used by members of your household? *Select all that apply.*
- Private insurance
- Managed care (HMO, PPO)
- Medicare
- Medicaid
- Government (VA)
- Health Savings Account
- Other
- Do not know/Unsure
- No health insurance

**25** Over the last year, was there any time when you needed any of the following but did not get it because you could not afford it? *Select all that apply.*
- Health care
- Mental health care or counseling
- Dental care (including checkups)
- Optical care (including eyeglasses)
- Prescription medicine
- Transportation to doctor appointments or health services
- Other: __________
- None

**26** Are there any urgent concerns or special needs that you or someone in your household have? *Select all that apply.*
- Utility shut-off notice
- Foreclosure/Eviction
- No money for food
- Cost/availability of child care for work
- It's too much of a hassle since the process is confusing
- Limited Internet access
- Other: __________
- No urgent concerns

**27** Has anyone in your household encountered difficulty getting necessary services (food, housing, utilities, medical care, etc.) over the last year?  
- Yes
- No

**28** If “yes”, describe what barriers were faced. *Select all that apply.*
- Traveling to get services is difficult
- I don’t speak/read English well
- I can’t get there during hours the agency is open
- I’ve been turned away because of income limits
- It can be physically difficult for me to leave my home
- It’s too much of a hassle since the process is confusing
- Other: __________
- None

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**OPTIONAL:** If you would be interested in participating in a resident focus group, please provide the following:

NAME ____________________________  Phone # ____________________________
EVALUACIÓN DE NECESIDADES COMUNITARIAS DEL EQUIPO MOBILE SAFETY-NET

Gracias por participar en esta encuesta. Sus respuestas nos ayudarán a comprender mejor las necesidades de la comunidad y nos ayudarán a construir una red de seguridad más sólida que conecte más fácilmente a los residentes con los servicios humanos que necesitan. Por favor seleccione una respuesta a menos que se indique lo contrario. Sus respuestas serán completamente confidenciales.

1 Edad __________ 2 Genero __________ 3 Raza __________ 4 Código Postal __________ 5 Lugar de encuesta __________

6 Incluyéndote, cuántas personas viven en tu hogar?
   Adultos (18 y más) __________  Niños (menor de 18) __________

7 ¿Alguien en tu hogar ha servido en las fuerzas armadas?
   O Sí __________  O No __________

8 ¿Cuál es tu situación laboral actual? Marca las que correspondan.
   O Estudia __________  O Retirado __________  O Empleado tiempo completo __________
   O Empleado a tiempo parcial __________  O Otro: __________

9 ¿Cuál es tu medio de transporte principal?
   O Bicicleta __________  O Uber/Lyft __________  O Servicio voluntario de Furgoneta __________
   O Familia/Amigos __________  O Taxi __________  O Otro: __________

10 ¿Cuánto dinero recibes actualmente de estas fuentes de ingreso al mes?
   O $2,999/mes __________  O $1,999/mes __________  O $1,250-$1,999/mes __________
   O $2,000-$2,999/mes __________  O $3,000+/mes __________

11 ¿Sufres alguno de los siguientes problemas financieros?
   O No reparé el auto porque no podía pagararlo __________  O Seguro de auto caducado o suspendido __________
   O Licencia o registro suspendido __________  O Vehículo no pasó inspección __________
   O Otro: __________  O Ninguno/No poseo un vehículo __________

12 ¿Cuáles son las fuentes de ingreso de tu hogar? Marca las que corresponden.
   O Empleo __________  O Seguro de desempleo __________  O Manutención de los hijos __________
   O SSD __________  O Sin ingresos __________  O Otro: __________

13 ¿Cuánto tiempo llevas viviendo en tu dirección actual?
   O Menos de 3 meses __________  O 6-10 años __________  O Más de 10 años __________
   O 1-5 años __________

14 ¿Cuál es el nivel más alto de educación/estudios que has completado?
   O Instituto/Equivalencia __________  O Título Universitario (2+4 años) __________
   O Algo universitario/sin título __________  O Postgrado __________  O Militar __________
   O Escuela Vocacional/Certificado __________  O No terminó el Instituto __________

15 ¿Tienes tú o alguien en tu hogar alguna de las siguientes discapacidades? Marca las que correspondan.
   O Salud Mental __________
   O Mobilidad __________
   O Física __________
   O Sin Discapacidades __________

16 Si posees un vehículo, ¿has experimentado alguno de los siguientes puntos en el último año?
   O No reparé el auto porque no podía pagararlo __________
   O Seguro de auto caducado o suspendido __________
   O Licencia o registro suspendido __________
   O Vehículo no pasó inspección __________
   O Otro: __________
   O Ninguno/No poseo un vehículo __________

17 ¿Cuáles son las fuentes de ingreso de tu hogar? Marca las que corresponden.
   O Empleo __________  O Seguro de desempleo __________  O Manutención de los hijos __________
   O SSD __________  O Sin ingresos __________  O Otro: __________

18 ¿Cuánto dinero recibes actualmente de estas fuentes de ingreso al mes?
   O $2,999/mes __________  O $1,999/mes __________  O $1,250-$1,999/mes __________
   O $2,000-$2,999/mes __________  O $3,000+ /mes __________

19 ¿Estando tú o alguien en tu hogar actualmente recibiendo alguno de los siguientes beneficios? Marca los que correspondan.
   O Food stamps/SNAP __________  O HEAP __________
   O Banco de alimentos/servicios de comidas __________
   O $2,999/mes __________  O $1,999/mes __________  O $1,250-$1,999/mes __________
   O $2,000-$2,999/mes __________  O $3,000+ /mes __________

20 ¿Alguien en tu hogar tiene una solicitud pendiente para alguno de los siguientes beneficios? Marca los que correspondan.
   O Food stamps/SNAP __________  O HEAP __________
   O Banco de alimentos/servicios de comidas __________
   O $2,999/mes __________  O $1,999/mes __________  O $1,250-$1,999/mes __________
   O $2,000-$2,999/mes __________  O $3,000+ /mes __________

21 ¿Sufres alguno de los siguientes problemas financieros?
   O Deuda de consumidor/tarjeta de crédito __________
   O Deuda de préstamos estudiantiles __________
   O Hipoteca submarina (debes más de lo que vale tu casa) __________
   O No financiable __________
   O Sin cuenta bancaria __________
   O Facturas médicas __________
   O Manutención de los hijos __________
   O Otro: __________

22 ¿Cuánta confianza tienes en poder hacer frente a un gasto de emergencia de $500, e una escala del 1 al 5, donde 1 significa “nada de confianza” y 5 significa “confianza total”? Marca uno.

   1 = Sin confianza en absoluto (el gasto sería una gran carga) 2 = Algo confiado
   3 = Moderado 4 = Más confiado 5 = Muy confiado (Podría manejar el gasto sin problemas)

(La encuesta continúa en la parte trasera)
Resident Survey, cont’d. - Spanish version

EVALUACIÓN DE NECESIDADES COMUNITARIAS DEL EQUIPO MOBILE SAFETY-NET (continuación)

¿Alguien en tu hogar carece de seguro médico? Marca las que correspondan.
- Sí, uno o más adultos no tienen seguro médico
- Sí, uno o más niños no tienen seguro médico
- No, todos tenemos seguro médico

¿Tienes seguro, ¿qué tipo de seguro médico utilizan los miembros de tu familia actualmente? Marca las que corresponden.
- Seguro Privado
- Atención administrada (HMO, PPO)
- Medicare
- Medicaid
- Sin seguro médico

Durante el último año, ¿has necesitado alguno de los siguientes pero no has podido pagarlos? Marca las que corresponden.
- Atención médica
- Atención de salud mental o asesoramiento
- Atención dental (incluidos chequeos)
- Atención óptica (incluidas gafas)
- Medicamento con receta
- Transporte a citas médicas o servicios de salud
- Otro: __________________________
- Ninguno

¿Hay alguna preocupación o necesidad urgente que tengas tú o alguien de tu hogar? Marca las que correspondan.
- Notificación de corte de servicios (agua, gas, etc)
- Ejecución hipotecaria/Desalojo
- Sin dinero para comida
- Coste/disponibilidad de cuidado infantil para trabajar
- Problemas legales
- Deudas pendientes
- Herido o amenazado en casa
- Otro: __________________________
- Sin preocupaciones urgentes

¿Alguien en tu hogar ha tenido dificultades para obtener servicios necesarios (comida, vivienda, servicios públicos, atención médica, etc) durante el último año?
- Sí
- No

Si la respuesta es “Sí”, describe a que barreras se enfrentaron. Marca las que corresponden.
- Viajar para obtener servicios es difícil
- No hablo/leo inglés bien
- No puedo llegar durante las horas en que la agencia está abierta
- Me han rechazado por mis ingresos limitados
- Puede ser físicamente complicado salir de mi hogar
- Es demasiado complicado porque el proceso es confuso
- Acceso a internet limitado
- Otro: __________________________
- Sin preocupaciones

OPCIONAL: Si estás interesado en participar en un grupo focal de residentes, proporcione los siguientes datos:

NOMBRE_________________________ Teléfono# ___________________________
INSIGHTS FROM RESIDENTS
City of Niagara Falls
OCTOBER 2019

Numbers in Need
IN BUFFALO NIAGARA

A Mobile Safety Net Team initiative established by The John R. Oishei Foundation

Visit us online to learn more about this and other communities in need across Buffalo Niagara.
NumbersInNeed.org