

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Needs Assessment Executive Summary

January 25, 2017

Executive Summary

The following report presents a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analysis of the City of Cambridge's most pressing needs.

The purpose of this needs assessment is to:

- Help the Cambridge City Council to make informed decisions about future funding priorities;
- Inform the development of recommendations for the investment of Community Benefit mitigation funds tied to the City Council's funding priorities;
- Model a replicable framework and approach; and
- Inform other planning efforts undertaken by the City, the Cambridge Community Foundation, Cambridge nonprofit organizations and others.

This report has been researched and written by TDC, with guidance and oversight provided by the City of Cambridge and the Needs Assessment Advisory Committee of key stakeholders.

Background

Between 2010 and 2013, mitigation funds were pledged to the City of Cambridge through zoning amendments and agreements with developers. To put these Community Benefits funds to effective use, the City Council suggested the idea that the City partner with the nonprofit community to expand services that benefit Cambridge residents and help address residents' unmet needs.

Since the idea's conception, the City worked with the Cambridge Community Foundation, a charitable organization focused on serving Cambridge residents, and representatives of the Cambridge Nonprofit Coalition to discuss collaboration on the development of a transparent and inclusive framework for understanding the community's needs. The first step in developing a plan to distribute Community Benefits funds was to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment.

To undertake the needs assessment, the City released a Request for Proposals and subsequently hired TDC. In September 2015, the City Manager created the Needs Assessment Advisory Committee to support and guide TDC. The Advisory Committee was composed of City staff from multiple departments and representatives of both the Cambridge Community Foundation and the local nonprofit community. The Advisory Committee helped TDC to refine the research plan strategy and an inclusive community engagement process.

The Cambridge Community Foundation provided substantial funding support for the needs assessment and anticipates that it will inform its future efforts.

Needs Assessment Process and Methodology

Establishing a Framework

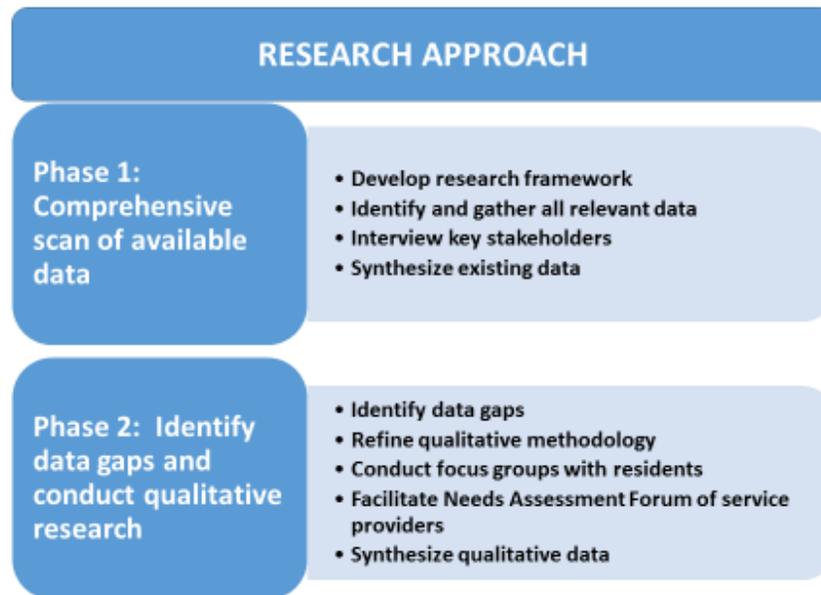
An essential starting point for the needs assessment research was the establishment of a framework for assessing needs.

Figure 1. Cambridge Community Needs Framework



TDC and the Advisory Committee were also mindful of the inter-relationship among community needs, as indicated by the overlapping circles in the graphic. This report presents data through the lens of individual categories of need, we urge readers to recognize that these needs are interconnected and that solutions that address these needs will likely be inter-related as well.

Research Approach



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It is worth noting that the information presented in this report was gathered and synthesized in advance of the November 2016 election; the results of that election may well affect needs in Cambridge in the future.

Findings

The following is a brief overview of key quantitative and qualitative findings across the needs assessment framework. We address three broad overarching categories of need, Basic Needs, Access to Opportunity and Vibrant Community and 11 discrete areas of need within this larger framework. For each of the 11 discrete areas of need, we address the following key questions:

- About how many residents are impacted by this need?
- What are the characteristics of the affected population and/or subpopulations?
- What are the trends over time?

We begin by addressing financial security because it is foundational to understanding many other needs.

Cambridge Demographic Overview

Cambridge is one of the five largest cities in the State. Cambridge's population has gradually increased since 2000, as has that of Middlesex County and Massachusetts.

Cambridge's population is younger than the county and state, with a higher proportion of working age adults. The City also has a lower proportion of children under the age of 18, as well as seniors aged 65 and older than Middlesex County and Massachusetts.

Cambridge is racially and ethnically diverse. The racial breakdown of the total population is 68% White, 15% Asian, 11% Black or African American; 8% of the population is Hispanic (of any race).

Basic Needs

Basic needs refer to the fundamental issues that must be addressed to assure physical well-being.

Financial Security

Cambridge has a sizeable number of people living in poverty within an overall environment of affluence. Poverty disproportionately affects specific subpopulations, including children, particularly those living in a single-parent female headed household. Black/African American and Hispanic/ Latino individuals experience poverty at nearly double the rate of the overall population. Individuals born outside the United States are also more likely to live below the poverty line. Further, the poverty line is an overly conservative way to define financial security. In qualitative research, TDC consistently heard that moderate- and middle-income people feel squeezed by the city's high cost of living. The number of middle income people in the city has grown smaller over time, and anecdotal evidence from this research suggests that some moderate income people are leaving the city. The family poverty rate in Cambridge has increased slightly over the past few years.

Food

Food insecurity is a challenge for some low-income residents, particularly families headed by single adults, as well as families headed by a Black or Hispanic adult. Beyond affordability challenges, low-income Cambridge residents face challenges in accessing food. Food resources, such as food pantries and grocery stores accepting SNAP benefits, are not always convenient to neighborhoods experiencing the highest levels of poverty. With the rising rate of poverty and the increased cost of living in the city, it appears that the trend of food insecurity will remain an urgent challenge for certain vulnerable subpopulations.

Housing

According to many observers, housing affordability is the most pressing issue that Cambridge currently faces, impacting a significant number of low, moderate and middle income residents who are strained to afford market rate housing. There is substantial demand for public housing and other affordable housing offered by non-profit and private housing providers. High demand coupled with limited supply has created significant barriers for many low and moderate income households to access affordable housing. Additionally, middle-income households in Cambridge are unable to pay for market rate housing without compromising their ability to cover other basic needs, and there are disincentives in place for low-income households to earn above the eligibility line and move up to the middle-income group.

While housing affordability is a challenge for many, there are vulnerable subpopulations that face particular challenges with this issue, including Black or African Americans, Hispanics or Latinos, seniors and the homeless. Further, many in the adult homeless population have a substance use disorder and/or suffer from a serious mental illness. Focus group and Forum participants commented on the increasingly visible homeless presence in Harvard and Central Squares.

Residents in the focus groups and Forum participants perceived a continuous and steep increase in rents that they believe is rising relatively more than income.

Safety

Overall crime in Cambridge is down, and Cambridge experiences less crime than average when compared to cities with similar sized populations in the state. However, some residents who participated in the focus groups were highly concerned about safety and violence.

Subpopulations that are more vulnerable to crime include women, youth, people of color, immigrants, and the homeless.

Health

Overall, Cambridge is a relatively healthy city compared to the state. However, low and middle income households as well as particular racial groups that face inequity are both most at risk to experience adverse health outcomes and most challenged to address them. The Cambridge Public Health Department identified “Mental/Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse” as the number one health priority in a recent community health assessment; this finding was echoed by residents and providers who participated in the focus groups and Forum. There is a significant need for more affordable and accessible mental health services in the city, with a particular need for preventative or early intervention services for children, adults and families. Additionally, there is increasing concern about growing substance abuse in Cambridge, specifically with opioids.

Access to Opportunity

Access to opportunity refers to the ability to pursue education and a family-sustaining wage.

Education

While Cambridge residents overall express significant concern about education, Cambridge public school students score higher in basic performance metrics than the state as a whole. However, there are significant disparities between students based on race, income and specific need-based groups such as English Language Learners (ELL) and students with disabilities. Further, differential access to educational opportunities outside of the school system, including early childhood programs, and out of school time programming, exacerbates the achievement gap. Over time, however, the city's overall dropout and graduation rates are showing improvement.

Employment

The city's rate of unemployment is lower than those of the county and the state. However, employment is not a guarantee of adequate income – Cambridge has a higher percent of underemployed workers than the state and county. Additionally, some Cambridge residents may face barriers to career readiness as their skills may not match those needed by Cambridge's employers. Race, disability, and educational attainment appear to be factors that are correlated with unemployment; immigrants and older workers also face barriers in the workplace.

Transportation

Cambridge's transportation infrastructure generally works well. However, there are challenges for certain subpopulations, including seniors, the disabled, and youth. Cambridge has seen an increase in the percentage of people using bicycles and public transit as a means of traveling and commuting; these trends seem likely to continue. Many residents are concerned about safe interactions between bicycles and cars, particularly as the number of bicycles on the road continues to increase.

Vibrant Community

Vibrant community refers to the community characteristics that contribute to a positive quality of life.

Built and Natural Environment

Cambridge's built and natural environment are valued assets in the community and do not currently represent significant needs for residents. Over time, climate change will become a more pressing concern and will have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable subpopulations, including low income residents, seniors, the disabled and those who don't speak English.

Arts, Culture, and Recreation

Cambridge has a wealth of arts organizations and offers residents a wide range of recreation opportunities. Arts, culture and recreational opportunities can be particularly beneficial for certain subpopulations, including youth, seniors, and diverse populations. More could be done to develop offerings that are accessible and tailored to the particular needs and interests of these subpopulations. Just as low- and moderate-income people are finding it hard to find affordable homes in Cambridge, artists and organizations that provide arts and recreational programming for residents are getting priced out too.

Civic Engagement and Social Capital

Social capital refers to the extent to which residents reside in livable and caring communities with social relationships and networks that give rise to systems of support and shared values. Overall, Cambridge residents believe their city is a place that is supportive of civic engagement and building social capital. However, residents report that certain changes threaten to subvert those positive qualities for all residents. The themes of displacement and gentrification were prominent in the Forum discussions and focus groups. Participants felt that longstanding community bonds were fracturing under the weight of population churn driven by the increasing cost of living. In addition, there are some populations that face barriers to civic engagement and building social capital, including immigrants, seniors, people of color and low-income residents.

Prioritizing Needs

Armed with the synthesized needs data, TDC and the Needs Assessment Advisory Committee developed and refined a framework for prioritizing among needs, and informing future funding priorities. It is our hope that this framework will provide the City Council and the future Community Benefits Advisory Committee with baseline information to support decision making in the Community Benefits funding process.

Needs Prioritization Framework

Breadth -- How many are impacted?

1. Majority of population impacted
2. At risk subpopulations and/or neighborhoods impacted
3. Fewer subpopulations and/or neighborhoods impacted

Impact on Subpopulations -- Are there subpopulations for whom this is a significant challenge?

1. Subpopulations are impacted in a significant way by this need
2. Subpopulations are impacted to a more moderate degree
3. Few or no subpopulations impacted and/or the impact is minor

Urgency -- Is this issue becoming more pressing?

1. Worsening trends

2. Steady state or mixed trends
3. Improving trends

TDC worked with the Advisory Committee to apply the needs prioritization framework, resulting in the following ranking of need from most significant to relatively less significant:

Top Tier Needs

- Affordable Housing and Homelessness
- Financial Security
- Mental Health: Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse

Middle Tier Needs

- Food
- Civic Engagement and Social Capital
- Education
- Employment

Lower Tier Needs

- Safety
- Transportation
- Arts, Culture, and Recreation
- Health
- Built and Natural Environment

Additionally, TDC and the Advisory Committee believe that it will be important for the Community Benefits Advisory Committee to look at data on service availability, knowledge and utilization to further inform funding recommendations. This knowledge about the service context can inform thinking about two additional factors, feasibility and synergy. Feasibility is the extent to which Cambridge nonprofits have the capacity to address the relevant need given additional resources from the Community Benefits fund. Synergy speaks to the extent to which directing resources to this need has the potential to address other needs as well.

Pursuing Solutions

With the needs assessment process complete, TDC and the Advisory Committee are hopeful that these compelling findings can play a role in contributing to solutions. We are mindful that the Community Benefits dollars offer a unique opportunity to direct resources to address pressing needs in a collaborative way that leverages different organizations and sectors in Cambridge.

An ordinance and governance framework for Community Benefits Funds was established in December of 2015, including the establishment of a fund for distributing funds earmarked for Community Benefits, as well as a set of guiding principles. The Needs Assessment Advisory Committee endorses these guiding principles. Just as needs are inter-connected, the Advisory Committee believes that addressing these needs will require comprehensive and holistic solutions that recognize the inter-relationship among need. The Committee recommends some additional guiding principles for funding. These principles build from and are consistent with those articulated through the ordinance. Below, the full complement of guiding principles are presented; those which are established by ordinance are marked with an asterisks.

Guiding Principles for Community Benefits Funding

Frame Needs Thoughtfully

1. *Fund programs or services that directly benefit Cambridge residents.
2. *Emphasize funding priorities established by the City Council informed by the outcomes of the needs assessment.
3. Prioritize support for vulnerable and underserved populations.
4. *Consider neighborhood(s) impacted by development projects.

Build on Existing Assets and Programs

5. *Consider other public resources allocated to a neighborhood in order to better understand unmet needs.
6. Promote awareness of and connection to existing programs and services.
7. Prioritize approaches that leverage other private and public resources.
8. Encourage an asset-based approach that recognizes and builds on the resilience of Cambridge residents and communities.

Promote Holistic Approaches, Innovation and Collaboration

9. Recognize the inter-connectedness among community needs.
10. Emphasize holistic and creative ideas that promote prevention and coordination across systems and organizations.
11. Remain open to bold and innovative approaches to challenging issues.
12. Recognize that addressing community challenges takes time and provide the latitude for longer term interventions.
13. *Prioritize funding for nonprofit applicants that promote collaboration, partnership and collective impact.
14. Encourage and incorporate program evaluation to identify which strategies work best.

Simplify the Application Process

15. *Establish a transparent, inclusive, and collaborative process
16. *Provide support and technical assistance to nonprofits in the application process to ensure equal opportunity and access.
17. *Provide opportunities for renewable grants to returning nonprofit providers that have an excellent performance evaluation record and programmatic success.

These findings shed light on both the challenges and the opportunities facing the City of Cambridge and its residents. Cambridge has many unique and valuable assets, including world class higher educational institutions, leading biotech companies, a highly valued diverse population, vibrant parks and green spaces, and a strong sense of community. Cambridge also benefits from a large number of nonprofit agencies serving the community and a significant array of human services provided by those agencies and the City. At the same time, as highlighted in these findings, the city is characterized by an increasing economic divide, and many critical

challenges facing significant portions of the population. TDC hopes that this needs assessment
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these findings, the city is characterized by an increasing economic divide, and many critical
challenges facing significant portions of the population. TDC hopes that this needs assessment
will be a living document that guides program strategies, investments and policy efforts to
address the city's challenges and leverage the city's many assets.