



Maine Community Foundation

Needs Assessment Report

August 2024

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Your Voices, Our Focus

Over a period of nine months, more than 1,500 community leaders, donors, nonprofits and stakeholders provided their insights and perspectives on our state's challenges, needs and opportunities through Maine Community Foundation's Statewide Needs Assessment and Issue Identification project.

What are our communities' strengths? Challenges? What emerging opportunities are there? How, specifically, can MaineCF help?

These questions and more were among those answered by people from all 16 Maine counties and from diverse backgrounds to help determine our next steps and how the foundation will engage its resources – from grantmaking to donor and community partnerships, investments and advocacy – to help all Mainers thrive.

In the summer of 2023, MaineCF began a community needs-assessment process with Suzanna Elkin of **Elkin Consulting**. After weathering a pandemic, tough (and ongoing) conversations about racial equity and climate-related challenges, it was critical to reengage with Maine's communities, ask you what you were seeing, and hear your responses.

You lent your time, knowledge and expertise to steer the course on this needs assessment. Surveys of donors, community leaders and the public gave voice to the important issues that matter to Mainers. Focus groups and community conversations engaged residents in each corner of the state. A far-ranging literature review revealed important work being done by Maine's community leaders and nonprofits – and gaps in that service, too. Your perspectives provided invaluable context to what matters most in your communities. We are grateful for your contributions.

Some of what we heard may not be a surprise to anyone who knows Maine well. Some of it, however, may be new information that intrigues, frustrates or motivates you. This feedback has inspired MaineCF anew to build a better Maine, starting with the issues identified by you. Most of them overlap with one another and all are critical to a stronger, more equitable Maine. MaineCF must remain nimble and constantly work to determine where and how it can make the biggest impact, in concert with the ongoing work by other organizations and agencies throughout the state.

The top issue areas from MaineCF's needs assessment are:

Housing – Lack of affordable housing is impacting Maine's older people, as well as the state's workforce and people's ability to live near where they work.

Health Access – The cost and accessibility of quality health care in Maine is a top concern for families and businesses – particularly in rural areas and for specific populations.

Economic Opportunity – Economic opportunity is a far-reaching, ongoing challenge in Maine, encompassing wage and income gaps, workforce skills gap, and limited child care.

Mental Health & Substance Use – Support for mental health and substance use recovery is a priority for Mainers – and the need has only increased since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Early Childhood Development – Access to quality early childhood education is a significant concern across Maine; the cost of care makes this challenge even greater.

Climate – The effects of climate change in Maine – rising temperatures, more extreme and wetter weather events, sea level rise and flooding – are having impacts on the health and economic well-being here and now.

Furthermore, we saw how **equity** and justice are threads that weave throughout each of these focus areas. Diverse Maine people and communities – including LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities and women – do not have access to equal services, opportunities or resources in the state. Similarly, rural populations lack access to sufficient services, opportunities and resources including health care, education and workforce development, broadband or transportation. The outcomes in each of these areas shows the impact of these inequities. In each section you will see important, applicable information on the impact inequities and disparities have as we seek to build a better Maine.

Thank you for your insights. We look forward to working with you on the significant issues facing Maine. Just as we've worked together for more than 40 years, we will work alongside you in the years to come.

With our gratitude,



Deborah Ellwood
President and CEO

Needs Assessment Overview

Needs Assessment Process

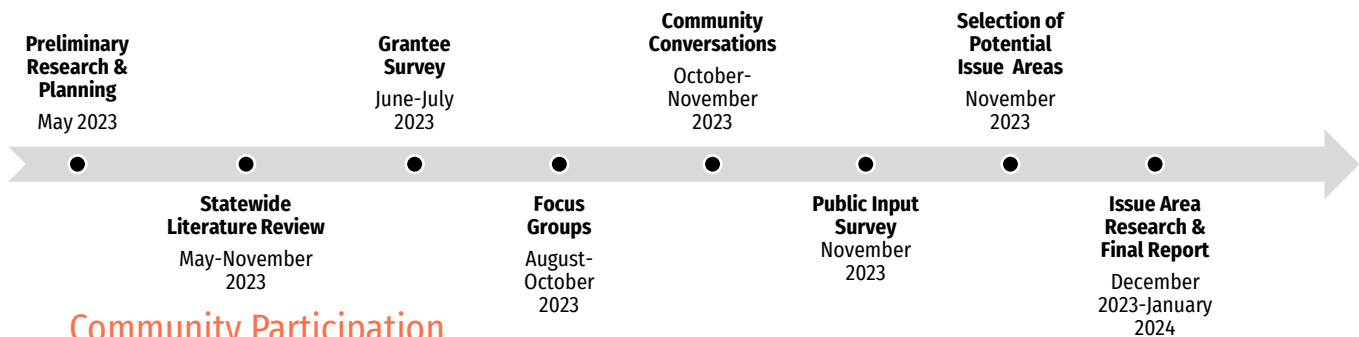
The 2023 MaineCF Statewide Needs Assessment and Issue Identification project was designed to identify six potential focus areas for the next phases of the foundation's strategic work. The needs assessment project, running from May 2023 through Jan. 2024, included extensive engagement with diverse individuals and communities from all regions in the state. Community input was gathered through a grantee survey, focus groups, community conversations and a public input survey. A literature review was also conducted to synthesize existing data from local, state, regional and national sources. Elkin Consulting, a Maine-based, woman-owned research firm, partnered with MaineCF to facilitate the design, implementation and interpretation of the needs assessment process.

Each phase of the needs assessment was designed to better understand strengths and challenges in Maine communities, trends across the state and within regions, potential solutions or opportunities and the role of MaineCF.

In Nov. 2023, MaineCF reviewed the findings from the statewide literature review, grantee survey, focus groups, community meetings, public input survey and other recent inputs including a donor survey. Six potential focus areas emerged for MaineCF's work:

- **Housing**
- **Health Access**
- **Economic Opportunity**
- **Mental Health & Substance Use**
- **Early Childhood Development**
- **Climate**

MaineCF 2023 Statewide Needs Assessment Timeline



Community Participation

Surveys, focus groups, and regional community conversations included input from stakeholders across diverse population groups and geographic areas.

Grantee Survey

Through June-July 2023, 644 surveys were completed by organizations which applied for and/or received funding through MaineCF within the past three years. Respondent organizations serve all counties in the state, with greatest participation from Cumberland County.

Key Takeaways: Respondent organizations identified lack of housing/affordable housing and poor economic conditions as outsized challenges facing the communities they serve. Housing, mental health and poverty were viewed as the most important areas of focus for MaineCF.

Focus Groups

From August-October 2023, nine virtual focus-group discussions were held with a total of 68 participants. Six groups were designed to better understand the diverse experiences and perspectives of priority population groups in the state (immigrants and refugees, LGBTQ+ individuals, rural communities, Wabanaki citizens, women and youth). Three groups were designed to gather perspectives from specific sectors (local government, business and workforce development and philanthropy).

Key Takeaways: According to participant input across all groups, the most significant issue areas facing Maine communities are a lack of affordable housing, workforce and inclusive economy, mental health and substance use, transportation, child care, health care access and climate change.

Lack of equity was a cross-cutting challenge affecting all issue areas. Participants spoke about unequal access to services, opportunities, and resources for diverse Mainers (including LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, women, and BIPOC communities). Participants also highlighted the lack of services and resources available for rural communities in the state.

Community Conversations

Through Oct.-Nov. 2023, five virtual community meetings were held for each region in the state: southern, northern, western, central, and coastal Maine. In total, 116 community members participated in the public conversations.

Key Takeaways: Participants explored how issue areas from the preliminary needs assessment research were impacting their communities. Each regional group highlighted different issue areas and provided a look at specific challenges shaped by geography, demographics, natural resources and population density. Overall, participants across all groups felt the preliminary findings resonated with their experiences of key challenges facing their communities. However, participants from some regions raised additional critical issues that were not on the list of preliminary findings, including child care access.

Public Input Survey

In Nov. 2023, the public was invited to complete a brief online survey to prioritize and better understand local contexts connected to the issue areas arising in the needs assessment process. In total 741 surveys were completed, with representation from all regions in the state.

Key Takeaways: Respondents prioritized the top three most significant challenges in their communities from among the issues that had emerged in the needs assessment research. Housing, mental health and substance use and climate change were selected as the most critical challenges facing respondent communities.

Cross-Cutting Issue: Equity

Findings from the community engagement process highlighted a lack of equity across all issue areas. Participants discussed inequities across population groups in the state as well as geographic areas, specifically the divide between rural and urban areas.

Population Group Disparities

Diverse Maine people and communities – including LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, BIPOC communities, and women – do not have equal access to certain services, opportunities or resources.

“We know about intersectionality. Anytime you're layering more levels of oppression, then the outcomes are worse. So for women of color, for low-wage women, for rural women, for single women, for women with disabilities, for LGBTQ women, the data is clear that when you add more layers the outcomes are inevitably worse and the resources are either harder to access, less effective, or less available.” [Women's Focus Group]

“I think people don't understand the disparities that the queer community has in terms of income and access to resources and the prevalence of challenges faced by marginalized groups.” [LGBTQ+ Focus Group]

“When it comes to wealth generation, whether that is home ownership, small businesses and business creation, financial support...the mainstream systems, laws, and policies are not necessarily compatible with other belief systems or cultures, so that is a challenge for many.” [Immigrant & Refugee Focus Group]

Geographic Disparities

Rural populations do not have access to sufficient services, opportunities and resources including health care, education and workforce development, broadband, transportation, and supportive communities for diverse individuals.

“Maine is split. There's a lot of organizing and education and programming happening mostly in Southern Maine. But in western Maine, rural Maine, northern Maine, there's really not as much going on. In Portland there's this idea that Maine is a hyper progressive state and that there's so much going on in Lewiston or further west. That's not the mindset that people have [in other areas] because there are not those resources there.” [Youth Focus Group]

“I'm going to talk about the health workforce issues that rural populations face and the lack of broadband, lack of digital and health literacy, ability to use technology in

an effective way. I know there's this mantra and it gets a little old, but we talk about rural populations that they're older, sicker and poorer.” [Rural Focus Group]

“Access to resources is so inequitable among communities across the state. There is a significant swath of the state of Maine that has absolutely nothing available for regional government, and that really puts them behind the eight ball even more than they are because they can't take advantage of state and federal grant and funding opportunities. We really need to address those inequities if we want to move forward as a whole system, as a whole state.” [Local Government Focus Group]

1 Housing

Housing was selected as the most critical challenge facing the state across all regions. Whether it is home prices escalating beyond what homebuyers can possibly afford, a loss of affordable and accessible rental properties, increasing homelessness or older adults living in homes that are no longer right for them, the issue resonated. Much of the data used in the needs assessment is several years old, leaving the possibility that the situation has continued to worsen.

Broad Themes & Community Experiences

- Access to housing is a challenge across all communities and regions in the state, both urban and rural.
- Lack of affordable housing is driving workforce shortages in many regions.
- Increased migration to the state is exacerbating housing issues.
- Older adults are living longer and staying in homes that do not meet their needs.

“We have neighborhoods here in the Bangor region where you have first generation still living in those homes. The kids have gone. Oftentimes it's just one surviving individual, aging older, living in this large home that they really can't afford and they really can't afford to maintain. How do we provide housing for older adults so they can move into lower maintenance, safe, affordable housing and free up that housing stock for families?” [Economic Development Focus Group]

- Old housing stock and barriers to new construction are challenges to housing access, safety and affordability.
- There is a growing unhoused population and persistent stigma around homelessness in many communities.
- Investment, short-term rentals and seasonal properties impact housing affordability and availability.
- Lack of housing is changing the face of local communities.

Regional Experiences

Coastal Maine

- **Seasonal properties and rentals:** Seasonal properties and short-term rentals are having a huge impact on housing affordability and availability in coastal communities.

- **Housing and workforce:** Lack of affordable housing affects workforce in coastal communities. In many communities, local nursing homes have closed because there is no housing for staff.
- **Changing communities:** There is an emptying out of coastal communities and neighborhoods are going dark in the winter. School populations are dropping because working families cannot afford to live in towns. In coastal areas, there are towns without townspeople.

Central & Western Maine

- **Housing and workforce:** Lack of housing is linked to workforce shortages. If there's nowhere for people to live, how to attract workers to the region? Housing markets are squeezed by people moving to the area, and it's difficult to fill vacant positions in the local workforce because candidates can't find housing near work.
- **Stigma:** Community denial and stigma make it hard to talk about or address lack of housing, homelessness, and mental health.
- **Changing communities:** Housing is changing the face of communities as people can no longer afford to live where they work and where they grew up.

Southern Maine

- **Housing and workforce:** Housing is a major challenge for many people in the region, including unhoused people, young professionals, older people and nonprofit employees. People can't always find housing where job opportunities are.
- **Investment properties:** Housing is seen as an investment and wealthier people buying in the region are raising prices.

Rural Disparities

- Rural focus group participants described housing as an acute issue for older adults, who may be living in houses that they cannot afford to repair or modify.
- Participants discussed a lack of resources for the unhoused outside of urban areas.

“There are not a lot of homeless resources available for minors in the state to begin with. And then if you're not in Portland or Lewiston or maybe Bangor, there's nothing. And so that's a real challenge for our young people.” [LGBTQ+ Focus Group]

- Participants in the local government focus group discussed how the old building stock in the state impacts housing shortages in rural areas.

“[Housing] is a huge issue in rural Maine in particular, and Maine has the oldest building stock in the entire country. Although we have buildings that could provide housing, we need different tools, we need different mechanisms to be able to renovate those second, third, and fourth stories.” [Local Government Focus Group]

Population Group Disparities

Immigrants & Refugees: Participants in the focus group for immigrant and refugee communities spoke about 1) the lack of housing as a critical barrier to family stability and 2) structural barriers to homeownership.

“Housing is a really big need in the community. You cannot build stability unless you have a place to live. If your kids are homeless, they cannot succeed in school.” [Immigrant and Refugee Focus Group]

Youth: Participants in the youth focus group expressed their concerns around being “priced out of the state” due to unaffordable rental prices.

Wabanaki Nations: Funding for housing is complicated in Indigenous communities because the Wabanaki nations are not municipalities. The lack of housing may prevent Nation members from returning to live and work in their communities.

“My tribe would like to have me locally. The chief has said that. But what ended up happening, I moved away, went to college, came back. There are no homes at home. I can't get housing. At Indian Township, we have a housing shortage.” [Wabanaki Focus Group]

Supporting Data

Maine data reveal significant population group disparities across indicators connected to housing including housing instability in high school, the unhoused population and homeownership.

- Maine’s unhoused population was 26-50 people per 10,000 in 2023 (Annual Homelessness Assessment Report), nearly double that of New Hampshire’s. Maine’s Point-in-Time (PIT) count on Jan. 24, 2023, recorded 4,258 people experiencing homelessness, a sharp increase of more than 800 people in 2022. In 2022, 18 out of every 10,000 people were experiencing homelessness throughout the U.S.
- The median rent for an apartment in Maine has increased 11% since 2011, up to \$870/month in 2020, and wages have not kept up (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022)
- In 2020 there were 31,400 low-income Maine households that paid more than half their income for rent, impacting their ability to afford other necessities like food or health care (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022)
- Of the 54,700 people that use federal rental assistance to afford housing, 77% are over the age of 65, households with children or people with disabilities (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022)

Spotlights on Equity

Homeownership rates among Black/African American Mainers are expected to decrease in the coming decades from 22% in 2020 to 13% in 2040. During the same period, rates for white Mainers are expected to increase from 74% to 77% (Urban Institute, 2023).

National homeownership rates for Black/African Americans are expected to remain stable at around 40% from 2020-2040 (Urban Institute, 2023). Black/African American Mainers were 47% of the homeless population in 2023 vs. 40% in 2022 (Maine Point In Time Count).

Older Maine women (60+) are more likely to rent vs. own their home across all age groups. (Economic Security of Older Women in Maine).

② Health Access

Across much of Maine, access to quality health care is a significant challenge. The shortage of providers compounds the issue, particularly for immigrant groups and LGBTQ+ populations, which have little to no local access to health care. Maine's population-level health is on the line – and the current status is not sustainable.

Broad Themes & Community Experiences

- Rural areas face critical lack of health care providers, services and infrastructure.
- There is a shortage of behavioral health providers to meet the high rates of mental health and substance use issues across the state.
- Particular population groups, including immigrants and LGBTQ+ individuals, face access issues and a lack of culturally competent care.
- Long travel distances are required for necessary medical care in some regions.

Regional Experiences

Coastal Maine

- **Health Insurance:** There are two separate systems for the insured and uninsured, and many people are excluded.
- **Lack of services:** The lack of urgent care services was highlighted in this region as was the shortage of mental health providers.
- **Seasonal workers:** Seasonal workers in coastal regions may have higher rates of occupational injury and no access to care.

Northern, Western, & Central Maine

- **Mental health services:** Little to no access to mental health services (due to distance, lack of internet and staff shortages). There aren't enough people paid to support mental health issues; and the people who do it aren't paid enough, which disincentivizes entering the field.

Rural Disparities

- Participants described a critical lack of essential health care services in rural areas, including maternity care, ambulance access, dental care, urgent care and nursing homes.

“Our health care system, to be totally frank, is just crumbling, especially in rural areas, and people are wanting to move to these rural areas. They feel safe and they like the sense of community, but if they can't access health care, that's going to be a real disincentive for a lot of folks.” [Philanthropy Focus Group]

“I think of our state and the rural parts of it and lack of access to health care and emergency services and birthing centers...all of those pieces come into jeopardy with the current situation.” [Women's Focus Group]

Population Group Disparities

Immigrants & Refugees: Participants in the focus group for immigrant and refugee communities discussed the significant language and cultural barriers to receiving needed care in the state.

“A lot of the community members, when it comes to getting resources or getting help when they're sick, a lot of services are not geared toward them, and things like medical bills are a big challenge.” [Immigrant & Refugee Focus Group]

LGBTQ+ Individuals: Participants in the LGBTQ+ focus group highlighted the lack of culturally competent primary care across the state, particularly in rural areas.

“My experience has been that where we really suffer as a rural population, and particularly as LGBTQ folks, is health care that's really culturally appropriate for us. Just like for many other rural communities that don't have maternity care or are seeing their services shrink, I don't expect that we're going to have these fantastic providers everywhere across the state. But if I could travel to them in Portland, Bangor and Lewiston, I would greatly appreciate that.” [LGBTQ+ Focus Group]

Supporting Data

Maine data reveal significant population group disparities across indicators connected to health access including insurance coverage, access to routine care, and missed necessary care.

- Maine's rate of uninsured children (aged 0-18) in 2022 was 5%, higher than New Hampshire and Vermont (each at 3%)
- Similarly, Maine's rate of uninsured people aged 0-64 in 2022 was 9%, higher than New Hampshire (8%) and Vermont (5%)
- All of Maine's 16 counties are designated by the Health Resources & Services Administration as having partial health professional shortage areas in primary care, mental health and dental health. (Rural Health Information Hub, 2023)

Spotlights on Equity

- Nineteen percent of Black Mainers lack a primary care provider, compared with 6% of white Mainers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2023)
- Mainers living in urban areas are more likely to have health insurance. While 11% of urban residents ages 18-49 were uninsured in the state in 2015-2019, 17% of rural residents lacked insurance. (Access to Care Among Rural Adults in Maine, 2022)
- A higher percentage of rural Maine adults ages 50-64 went without a checkup in the previous year (22% of rural residents) as compared with urban Mainers (19% of urban residents) (Access to Care Among Rural Adults in Maine, 2022)
- Fifty-eight percent of American Indian or Alaskan Native students and 55% of Black and Asian students reported having a checkup in the past year, as opposed to 70% of white students (MIYHS, 2023).
- Sixty-six percent of gay/lesbian and 63% of transgender high schoolers reported having a regular checkup in the past year, compared with 71% of students who did not identify as part of these two groups (MIYHS, 2023)

③ Economic Opportunity

A topic as broad as economic opportunity has a vast, interconnected set of challenges that touch many issue areas. Education and training. Child care. Poverty and financial wellbeing. Under employment. Chronic financial stress. Too many Mainers have been left behind by a changing economy and world, leading to jobs that may pay – but not enough to keep up. And the impacts are long lasting and felt in every community in Maine.

Broad Themes & Community Experiences

- Maine is experiencing a general workforce shortage, with an acute lack of health care workers in rural areas. Low wages for essential workers (health care, education, and the nonprofit sector) lead to workforce shortages.
- Lack of accessible child care is a critical barrier to employment, especially for women.
- Diverse Mainers lack opportunities needed to participate and be leaders in the workforce.
- Language and immigration barriers may prevent immigrants and refugees from working.
- Many regions experience extensive poverty.

Regional Experiences

Coastal Maine

- **Loss of industry:** Businesses are gone and living wages are harder to come by. There has been a loss of industries that communities were so proud of and in which families worked for generations.
- **Changing communities:** Community identities are changing with development and increasing wealth gaps. Development has changed, and there has been a loss of historical buildings and character in the communities.

Central & Western Maine

- **Low wages and poverty:** Generational poverty is a major issue in the region. People are working but don't have a living wage – they make too much to receive benefits but not enough to live comfortably.
- **Workforce shortages:** Nonprofits and other organizations are struggling to fill open positions. Obstacles to workforce participation in the region are low pay (especially in nonprofit work), transportation, an aging population and people wanting to work remotely. Lack of available and affordable housing also affects workforce participation.

Northern Maine

- **Lack of child care:** Child care is a major issue that impacts whether people move to the region. A significant driver is low pay for caregivers and child care providers.
- **Low wages and poverty:** Low pay and poverty are a major problem in the region. The low pay for service providers leads to a scarcity in necessary health care services.
- **Educational opportunities:** There is a lack of educational opportunities for students and adults. Piscataquis County is a “post-secondary education desert.”

Southern Maine

- **Barriers for Immigrants:** Language and credentialing barriers keep people (especially immigrants) from finding employment.
- **Lack of child care:** Child care that’s affordable and accessible is hard to find and prevents an inclusive economy. Child care workers are underpaid. This impacts workforce, equity and mental health in both rural and urban areas.

Rural Disparities

- Participants highlighted the lack of opportunity and low wages in rural areas.

Population Group Disparities

Women: Lack of available, affordable and culturally appropriate child care impacts women’s workforce participation and economic opportunity.

“We have built an entire economy around the expectation of the unpaid caregiving labor of women. We just expect that in order to have workplaces that function, an economy that functions, and to also do the required and necessary caregiving in our economy, that women will take part-time work, step away from the workplace, do double duty, retire in poverty. All of these things are predicated on unpaid care labor of women. And so the fact that we’re in a child care crisis or a paid leave crisis is because of policy choices we’ve made in the past and it is women who are paying the price for that.” [Women’s Focus Group]

“When you come to Maine or any new country, you lose that social support from your own family, where they used to take care of your kids while you are cooking, while you are working, and now you are on your own. So definitely affordable child care is an issue.” [Immigrant & Refugee Focus Group]

“We’ve heard a lot about not only access to any child care and access to affordable child care, but access to culturally sensitive child care as a big challenge for women who want to get their children into a child care program that matches their culture and their identities.” [Women’s Focus Group]

BIPOC and Immigrant Mainers: Diverse Mainers, including immigrants and refugees, lack opportunities needed to participate and be leaders in the workforce.

“First generation Maine kids and students of color are the future of Maine’s workforce. And we’re failing them educationally and in getting their first jobs.”
[Economic Development Focus Group]

“We’ve got this missed opportunity of all these first generation and kids of color who need to be connected to employers. They don’t know how to do it. They don’t have people in their community who are pioneers in getting internships. First generation college kids and students of color don’t know how to navigate the last mile. They don’t know that they’re supposed to write resumes or get internships and get job ready.” [Economic Development Focus Group]

Wabanaki Nations: Lack of economic opportunity in rural areas impacts Wabanaki language and culture.

“We don’t have a lot of economic opportunity, at least in Washington County, you have to move away. So I think about loss of culture, loss of language, loss of community connection.” [Wabanaki Focus Group]

Supporting Data

Maine data reveal significant population group disparities across indicators connected to economic opportunity including poverty, wage and income, unemployment, education attainment and the care economy.

- Maine’s median income (\$64,800) is the lowest in New England (New Hampshire is \$88,300; Vermont is \$72,400) and significantly lower than the national average (\$69,700 (Maine Kids Count Data Book, 2023; Maine Shared Community Health Needs Assessment, 2022; Measures of Growth, 2022)
- Maine’s current minimum wage is \$14.15, far below the estimated living wage of \$44.99 for an individual supporting a household with two children (Living Wage Calculator, 2024).
- In 2022, Maine post-secondary credential attainment level is 55%, still below the state goal of 60%. County attainment levels range from 33% to 62%. (Lumina Foundation A Stronger Nation report 2023)
- Forty-two percent of Maine’s households were below the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) threshold in 2021, meaning they earn just above the federal poverty level but less than what is necessary to afford basic necessities, above New Hampshire (33%), Vermont (40%), and the national average (41%) (ALICE in Maine, 2023)

Spotlights on Equity

- Degree attainment for Indigenous Mainers is 29% as opposed to 48% for Maine as a whole.
- In Maine, 75% of single-female-headed households are below the ALICE threshold (ALICE in Maine, 2023)
- Forty-one percent of white households in Maine are below the ALICE threshold, 59% of Black households and 13% of Hispanic households are unable to afford basic necessities in their community (ALICE in Maine, 2023)
- Rural Mainers are also more likely to be ALICE households than urban residents. In 2021, 45% of households in rural counties were below the ALICE threshold, compared with 39% in urban counties (ALICE in Maine, 2023)
- Child poverty rates are much higher for BIPOC children in the state, with 32% of Black/African American children and 17% of Hispanic or Latino children living in poverty compared to 14% of children overall (Kids Count Data Center, 2023)
- Forty-one percent of adult Mainers of color in households with children experience difficulty affording usual household expenses, compared with 26% of all adults in the state (Making Maine Work, 2022)
- Furthermore, the Wabanaki Nations in Maine experience child poverty rates much higher than the state average of 14%. From 2016-2020 the child poverty rate was 46% for the Penobscot Nation, 58% for the Passamaquoddy Pleasant Point, 61% for the Maliseet and 77% for the Mi'kmaq (Economic and Social Impacts, 2022)
- For every \$3 earned by white households in the state between 2016-2020, all other racial and ethnic groups made \$2 (Measures of Growth, 2022).

4 Mental Health & Substance Use

Mental health and substance use are areas that have consistently presented challenges in Maine. As with health care access, a limited number of substance use disorder providers has exacerbated the crisis – particularly for BIPOC communities, LGBTQ+ youth and others. The choice between waiting months for services or going without often fails Mainers in a time of need.

Broad Themes & Community Experiences

- Critical lack of behavioral health treatment and prevention services across the state.
- Mental health issues among youth connected to rural isolation, anxiety about climate change and national policies that affect youth from diverse backgrounds.
- People without private insurance have difficulty accessing services.
- Stigma exists in some communities towards people with mental health and substance use challenges and is a barrier to seeking help.
- Low pay for providers is a root cause of access issues.

Regional Experiences

Coastal Maine

- **Social isolation:** Participants highlighted increasing social isolation in rural areas. Communities are losing their identities and people are more isolated. There is a need for community meeting spaces, especially for youth.
- **Substance use:** Drug use is a key issue, and the opioid crisis is affecting coastal communities.

Central & Northern Maine

- **Overwhelming need:** Participants described a “drug avalanche” in the regions coupled with a lack of social service providers. Residents in the regions experience generational substance use issues.
- **Lack of services:** Little to no access to mental health services, including a lack of infrastructure and support system for recovery. Transportation issues are linked to all other issues in rural areas where needed services are often far away.

Rural Disparities

- High level of concern about youth in rural areas and the lack of resources to meet that need.

“I have great worry and concern for our youth in rural communities in particular, specifically a sense of hopelessness that we're seeing a fair amount and the behavioral health challenges and isolation. And the resources for our youth, especially in rural communities, are really lacking.” [Rural Focus Group]

Population Group Disparities

Youth: Youth participants discussed the rise in youth mental health issues and intersections with the climate crisis.

“I feel super worried looking at the results from the 2021 Maine Integrated Youth Health survey, which showed an alarming rise in suicidality, specifically in girls and trans kids in Maine. Thinking about mental health, I think it directly intersects with the climate crisis. I can't speak to why everyone struggles, but I think about those feelings of existential dread and the lack of mental health services that we have here for young people who can't get emergency care for mental health crises.” [Youth Focus Group]

LGBTQ+: Participants discussed the impacts of state and national politics on the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth.

“I'm worried about politics on a national level and specifically how that's going to impact the mental health of younger kids who have been organizing and trying to fight for their rights. There's already a mental health crisis in the state, and I worry it's going to become a larger issue.” [LGBTQ+ Focus Group]

Immigrants and Refugees: Immigrants and refugees often cannot access care because of language and health insurance barriers. Stigma within the immigrant community around mental health and substance use is a further barrier to seeking services.

“A lot of people who are struggling with substance use or mental health are unable to get resources like counseling or detox because they don't have MaineCare or places don't even take MaineCare. They only take insurance that does copay. And if you're already struggling financially, you'd just rather keep struggling.” [Immigrant & Refugee Focus Group]

Supporting Data

- In 2022, 35% of Maine adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression (Measures of Growth, 2022)
- Thirty-six percent of Maine youth reported depression symptoms, compared with 34% in New Hampshire and 30% in Vermont (Kids Count Data Center, 2023)

- The number of days on the waiting list for children/youth to receive home and community treatment services for serious emotional disturbance range from 66 days in Lincoln County to 318 days in Hancock County. Wait times are even longer for children with intellectual or developmental disorder who require specialized support services (Maine DHHS, 2024)
- The rate of overdose deaths in Maine is much higher than the national average: 47 overdoses per 10,000 people vs. 32 per 10,000 nationally (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2023)
- Suicide deaths per 100,000 people are high in Maine (20), compared with New Hampshire (15) and nationwide (14) (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2023)

Spotlights on Equity

- Forty-six percent of female students, almost twice as many as male students (24%), report depression during the past year (MIYHS, 2023)
- LGBTQ+ youth report the highest rates of depression. 73% of transgender students and 59% of gay/lesbian students report depression during the past year, compared with 26% of heterosexual students (MIYHS, 2023)
- Indigenous youth also report rates of depression higher than the state average, with 48% of American Indian or Alaska Native students feeling sad or hopeless during the past year (MIYHS, 2023)
- Limited studies exist around the mental health of BIPOC adults in Maine. However, analysis from 2015-2017 shows that 20% of BIPOC adults reported frequent mental distress, compared with 12% of white, non-Hispanic adults during the same period (State of Health in Maine, 2021)
- Rural populations in the state experience higher rates of suicide than urban populations. In 2019, there were 21 suicide deaths per 100,000 people in rural areas, compared with 15 in metro areas (Health in Maine: Rurality, MSCHNA, 2022)
- Among all participants in the 2023 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey, 35% of high school students reported that they felt so sad or hopeless during the past year that they stopped doing usual activities.

5 Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development focuses on both access to child care (as above in economic opportunity), but also enrollment/attendance, affordability and facility quality ratings. As with other areas of focus, early childhood development varies by several factors related to equity in race/ethnicity, poverty level and geography.

Broad Themes & Community Experiences

- Participants in the needs assessment process discussed the need for additional child care access across the state. However, these discussions were focused on child care as an important work support (especially for women) rather than a support for early childhood development. For that reason, child care access is included in the Economic Opportunity section of the needs assessment report.
- Early childhood development opportunities or inequities were not explicitly raised as critical community issues during the community engagement process.
- There is a lack of disaggregated data at the state level to provide information around population group disparities connected to early childhood access.

Regional Experiences

County Disparities

Public preschool attendance: In Maine, the number of 4-year-olds enrolled in preschool programs and types of programs offered vary widely by county. The lowest rates of public preschool attendance are in Cumberland, Sagadahoc and Waldo counties (Kids Count Data Center, 2023).

Child Care Quality Rating: Quality ratings vary widely by county. While 45% of child care centers are at QRIS Level 3 or 4 in Lincoln County, only 11% of centers receive the highest quality ratings in Penobscot County (Kids Count Data Center, 2023).

Supporting Data

- Statewide, 22% of children live in a child care desert (Education Indicators, 2023)
- In 2021, 58% of child care centers reported being understaffed (Count Us In, 2023)
- The average Maine household spent 29% of its income on child care in 2021-22 (New Hampshire's average was 25%; the national average was 27%) (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2023)

- Participation in public preschool has returned to pre-pandemic levels (47% of four-year-olds in the state attend public preschool), but participation rates and types of preschools vary widely by county (Maine Kids Count Data Book, 2023)
- A majority (51%) of children ages three and four in households at or above 200% of the federal poverty level are not enrolled in early childhood education (New Hampshire is 43%; Vermont is 38%; the national rate is 46%) (Kids Count Data Center, 2015-2019)
- Overall, the percentage of Maine school districts that offer public prekindergarten programs has increased dramatically in recent decades, up to 79% in 2021 (Measures of Growth, 2022)
- Eighty-five percent of Maine school districts are scheduled to offer public preschool to 4-year-olds in 2023-2024.

Spotlight on Equity

- Sixty percent of Black 4-year-olds and 30% of Latino 4-year-olds were enrolled in public preschool in Maine (Education Trust, 2022)
- Child poverty rates for Black children in Maine have declined 41%, but still are at 31.5% as compared to 13.8% for all Maine children (Maine Kids Count data book).
- Sixty-nine percent of children under the age of six in Maine have all available parents in the workforce (Maine Kids Count data book).
- Since 2013, the number of family child care providers, which are more likely to serve rural areas than child care centers, has declined by 39% (Maine Kids Count data book).

6 Climate

Climate is an issue that has a direct impact on every Mainer – yet those impacts will not be felt equally. Communities dependent on Maine’s waterways or winters for their economy will be hard hit. Maine’s landscape – its status as “Vacationland” thanks to its mountains, woods and waters – will change. People and communities will be faced with difficult questions about Maine’s policies, infrastructure and future. As the State of Maine’s Climate Council states in its climate plan, *Maine Won’t Wait*, the time to act is now. The plan aims to decrease greenhouse gas emissions in the state by 45% by 2030 and 80% by 2050.

Broad Themes & Community Experiences

- There is an urgent need to plan for the impacts of increased climate migration to Maine on the state’s business sector, economy, wealth gap, housing and community identities. Climate change will impact the natural resources economy, and participants emphasized a need to prepare for a different economic and industry base for the future.

“Related to climate change is that there’s very likely to be a huge migration of people into Maine... That relates to jobs and thinking about what support there is for entrepreneurship, what support there is financially for startups, as different kinds of industries could be created by these additional people. And of course, there’s also a tension between preserving Maine the way it is now and what happens when you have an infusion of people.” [Philanthropy Focus Group]

- There is tension between the conventional image of Maine and the changes that will need to happen with increased population. The community engagement plank of the state’s climate plan will be critical to bringing residents together with the science, planning and resilience in the years to come.
- State and local government face challenges in preparing communities to become more climate resistant and resilient. There is a lack of municipal level capacity and funding to do the work needed to build climate resilience for communities.

“We’ve been doing a lot of vulnerability assessments with our communities along the coast, but also our inland communities and the ways in which climate hazards are impacting infrastructure. We’re trying to figure out how to build resilience into that infrastructure for future impacts, but without the right incentives, both financial and otherwise, that work is really challenging.” [Local Government Focus Group]

- Communities are overwhelmed by this issue and don't know how to address it.
- Specific regional concerns are not addressed in Maine's climate plan, including impact on crops and tourism and a lack of infrastructure for electric vehicles.
- Increased climate migration is changing communities.

“With [climate change] you're going to see people who have large assets who can flee emergencies. They're going to come to a poor state and buy everything up and make it more unaffordable for those who are at poverty and below. And you're going to see more economic pressure from people with high net worth and large assets just gobbling everything up, downtowns and other stuff, and changing the way of life in Maine. And that's something that we need to plan for.” [Economic Development Focus Group]

- There is particular concern for the fishing industry and shoreline buildings in coastal Maine.

“We've found that people, especially on the working waterfront for example, are worried about their livelihoods in the future, worried about how climate's going to impact that. There's fear. What am I going to do if I stay here exacerbated by climate?” [Youth Group]

- There is significant overlap between climate change and increased anxiety and mental health challenges for youth.

Regional Experiences

Coastal Maine

- **Industry and infrastructure:** Climate change will hit the fishing industry and shoreline buildings will become submerged. There is a need for more education related to climate resilience and mitigation.

Central Maine

- **Agriculture:** Climate change will change agriculture and may impact opportunities for immigrants skilled in farming.

Northern Maine

- **Need for regional planning:** Climate change is being felt in the region, and Maine's broader climate plan doesn't account for regional considerations:
 - Rain is impacting potato crops.
 - Climate change may lead to shorter, icier winters that will impact the recreational/tourist season.
 - Infrastructure is built for cold, not heat.
 - Electric vehicles are not a good solution for the region (no charging infrastructure), at least not for now.

Southern Maine

- **Overwhelming issue:** Climate change impacts all the issue areas. Communities are feeling daunted – they want to address climate change but are not sure how to.

Supporting Data

- Forty-six percent of Mainers surveyed are concerned about climate change's impact on human health; 43% were concerned about coastlines and wetlands; 37% about wildlife; and 34% about Maine's economy ((Maine Climate Council Public Input Survey Summary, 2020)
- Thirty-three percent of Maine towns score high on Maine's Social Vulnerability Index and are expected to be most challenged in preparing for and recovering from climate-related hazards.
- The Maine Climate Council's Climate Impacts dashboard estimates that across the state, only approximately 60% of residents live in homes with air conditioning.

Spotlight on Equity

- A majority of Maine's rural towns have limited capacity for resilience planning, with 187 minor civil divisions having no in-house planning staff and limited regional support.
- Heat vulnerability particularly impacts older adults, with survivability thresholds of hot conditions significantly lower for those over age 65.
- There are also several equity concerns and recommendations identified by the [Maine Climate Council's Equity Subcommittee](#).

Conclusion & Next Steps

The challenges we face in Maine are daunting and run deep – addressing the six critical issue areas uncovered by the needs assessment project is vital to building a more vibrant and equitable Maine. But there is reason for optimism. Following this report, MaineCF staff will continue conversations and research to determine where we can play a unique role in making the greatest difference possible. From among the broad topics of **Housing, Health Access, Economic Opportunity, Mental Health & Substance Use, Early Childhood Development and Climate Change**, we will identify specific areas where MaineCF can drive forward significant progress with partners.

The foundation will continue to collaborate as it has over the past four decades with donors, nonprofits and Maine people in all 16 counties. Only by working together can we build a better Maine. We are energized by the opportunities that lie ahead that we will tackle **together**.

DATA SOURCES

Maine Point in Time Count: https://www.mainehousing.org/docs/default-source/housing-reports/2023-point-in-time.pdf?sfvrsn=e1c28015_5

Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey: https://www.maine.gov/miyhs/sites/default/files/2023_Reports/Detailed_Reports/HS_MIYHS2023_Detailed_Reports_HS_State/Maine%20High%20School%20Detailed%20Tables.pdf

Lumina Foundation A Stronger Nation: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/state/ME>

Social Vulnerability Index: https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/ERG_MCC_Vol1_VulnMapping_11-13-2020.pdf

Climate Impact Dashboard: <https://www.maine.gov/future/climate/climate-impact-dashboard>

Maine KIDS COUNT Data Book: <https://www.mainechildrensalliance.org/data/>



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