



St. David's
FOUNDATION



TEXAS
HEALTH
INSTITUTE

Community Voices on Health and Well-Being:

Amplifying Perspectives for Action in Central Texas



"A World in Motion." Created by Craig McNary and Jarrod Williams.

2024

OUR SHARED APPROACH

St. David's Foundation (SDF) partnered with Texas Health Institute (THI) to conduct a community-centered approach to qualitative data collection that builds on the findings from the 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment and more deeply explores the systems and conditions impacting health and well-being in Central Texas. In partnership with the community, the Community Voices project seeks to respectfully lift community voices, expertise, and experiences to inform decision-making that drives systems change for a healthier tomorrow. Our shared approach also served as a guiding principle for the equitable compensation of project participants, use of culturally appropriate methodology, and engagement strategies to ensure participation from individuals who represent the broad interests of the community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Community Advisory Committee

Armando Perales, St. Vincent De Paul – Luling
Ashton Cumberbatch, Equidad ATX
Doug Mudd, Community Action, Inc. of Central Texas
Enrique Castro, Greater Austin Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
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Black Parents & Families Collective, Tiffanie Harrison, Meenal McNary, Craig McNary, and Jarrid Williams

Community Action, Inc. of Central Texas, Doug Mudd, April DeLeon-Huggard, Jessica Bailey

Community Health Centers of South Central Texas, Rafael De La Paz and Gabe Gallardo

Foundation Communities, Julie Candoli and Danette Lopez Garza

Community Voices

We would like to thank the 135 community members and 15 key informants for sharing their experiences, joys, and challenges. Thank you for trusting us to respectfully lift your voices to improve the systems and conditions that impact the well-being of Central Texans.

"We thrive when we have a community around us that we can look to."

- Story Circle Participant, Williamson County

LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY

When we began the Community Voices project, which will be used to inform our next Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA), we wanted to break old habits as a Foundation, evolve the process to center on community strengths, and truly let communities design and lead the engagement practices that they know will be most appropriate and welcoming for the communities they serve or are a part of.

The Community Advisory Committee and the Community Research Partners' thoughtful advice and commitment to equitable and inclusive practices resulted in a process that provided the flexibility that communities need to provide authentic feedback. This project would not have been successful without their engagement. The result of this equity centered process, as shared by participants, was that this research felt different and was more joyful than many of their other engagements. Participants shared their stories openly and honestly and we hope that you find the experiences and stories that are shared in this report as impactful and meaningful as we do.

What we learned is that systems are failing — not people. Community members shared that they are at the same time exhausted with the constant requirement to advocate for the services and supports they need for themselves and their families, while also excited and motivated to mobilize around the issues they care about and are eager to be a part of the important work to improve our community.

Our desire, as well as our commitment, is that the Community Voices project isn't regarded as a separate initiative from our strategy development and future funding initiatives, but that it signals a beginning of how we are working differently as a Foundation — one that includes ongoing and continuous community engagement to inform our work and co-create strategies that center communities as the experts on the solutions that impact Central Texans.

Over the next year and beyond, we pledge to build off the engagements that this project represents, return learnings and insights back to the communities who provided their important perspectives, and support the solutions created by and for community members.

With gratitude, Ed.



Edward B. Burger, Ph.D.
President and CEO
St. David's Foundation

UNA CARTA A LA COMUNIDAD

Cuando comenzamos el proyecto Voces de la comunidad (Community Voices), que informará y se incorporará en nuestra próxima Evaluación comunitaria de las necesidades de salud (Community Health Needs Assessment), queríamos romper viejos hábitos como Fundación, evolucionar el proceso para centrarnos en las fortalezas de la comunidad y realmente dejar que las comunidades diseñen y dirijan las prácticas de participación que saben que serán más apropiadas y acogedoras para las comunidades a las que sirven o de las que forman parte.

El cuidadoso asesoramiento y el compromiso del Comité Asesor Comunitario y los Socios de Investigación Comunitaria con prácticas equitativas e inclusivas dieron como resultado un proceso que brindó la flexibilidad que las comunidades necesitan para proporcionar comentarios auténticos. Este proyecto no hubiera sido exitoso sin su participación. El resultado de un proceso centrado en la equidad es que los participantes compartieron que esta investigación se sintió diferente y fue más alegre que muchos otros compromisos. Los participantes compartieron sus historias de manera abierta y honesta, y esperamos que las experiencias e historias que se comparten en este informe les resulten tan impactantes y significativas como a nosotros.

Lo que aprendimos es que los sistemas están fallando, no las personas. Los miembros de la comunidad están, al mismo tiempo, agotados por el constante requisito de abogar por los servicios y apoyos que necesitan para ellos y sus familias, mientras que también están emocionados y motivados para movilizarse en torno a los problemas que les interesan y ser parte del trabajo para mejorar nuestra comunidad.

Nuestro deseo, así como nuestro compromiso, es que el proyecto Voces de la comunidad (Community Voices) no sea visto como una iniciativa separada de nuestra estrategia de desarrollo y futuras iniciativas de financiamiento, sino que sea un comienzo para trabajar de manera diferente como Fundación, que incluya actividades comunitarias constantes y continuas, un compromiso para informar nuestro trabajo y co-crear estrategias que centren a las comunidades como expertas en las soluciones que impactan a los habitantes del Centro de Texas.

Durante el próximo año y en adelante, nos comprometemos a seguir desarrollando los compromisos que representa este proyecto, devolver aprendizajes y conocimientos a las comunidades que brindaron sus perspectivas importantes y apoyar las soluciones creadas por y para los miembros de la comunidad.

Con gratitud, Ed.



Edward B. Burger, Ph.D.
President and CEO
St. David's Foundation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

St. David's Foundation (SDF) partnered with Texas Health Institute (THI) to conduct a community-centered qualitative study that builds on the findings of the 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) and more deeply explores the systems and conditions impacting health and well-being in Central Texas. The Community Voices project serves as the qualitative component for the next CHNA and will inform St. David's Foundation strategies for continued community engagement.

OUR SHARED APPROACH

The Community Voices project was co-designed with a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) and Community Research Partner Organizations (CRPOs) to:

- Offer strategic guidance for the Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA),
- Ensure qualitative data collection efforts are comprehensive, collaborative, and inclusive in engaging the community,
- Focus on a community-engaged, equity-centered, and culturally responsive approach to collecting and synthesizing qualitative data, and
- Shed light on [vital conditions for well-being](#) such as basic needs, economic and education opportunities, safety from harm and stress, and belonging.

COMMUNITY VOICES

Qualitative data collection activities began in August 2024 after co-design with the CAC and CRPOs to explore vital conditions and systems.

- **15 Key Informant Interviews.** Texas Health Institute conducted semi-structured, virtual interviews with fifteen system and community leaders recommended by the CAC based on their perspectives, expertise, and lived experience.
- **135 Community Participants.** In collaboration with St. David's Foundation and Texas Health Institute, the Community Research Partner Organizations (CRPOs) co-designed and led culturally appropriate methodology to best lift the voices of demographically diverse participants (age, gender, race/ethnicity, language, caregiver status, geography, sexual orientation, gender identity, and special health care needs). This collaborative, co-design approach ensured projects were driven by the communities we collectively serve while creating a safe space for healing, joy,

connection, trust, and a deeper understanding of the systems and conditions impacting the well-being of Central Texans. The co-designed projects were conducted as follows:

- **Bastrop County:** Plática (Spanish) & PhotoVoice (Youth)
- **Caldwell County:** Community Conversation & Plática (Spanish)
- **Hays County:** Community Conversation (Senior Center) & Plática (Spanish)
- **Travis County:** Story Circle (Caregivers) & Individual Interviews (Spanish)
- **Williamson County:** Focus Group/Public Art (Black Families) & Story Circle

“What I liked was the ability for us to create and to use what we know was most effective with the communities that we work with — that we weren’t prescribed a way to do things.”

- Community Partner

WHAT WE HEARD IN CENTRAL TEXAS

Community participants shared heartwarming and heartbreaking stories, all underscoring the need for inclusive communities and systems in Central Texas. Across all geographies and demographics, residents of Central Texas want to be seen and heard, yet they often feel isolated and invisible — especially when they try to access and navigate complex systems for basic needs such as healthcare, education, jobs, or safety. Central Texans find strength from networks of support in their communities; however, chronic stress from rising living costs, forgone healthcare, and discrimination continues to impact the well-being of Central Texans — particularly in areas with limited access to healthcare and mental health resources. **From this Community Voices project, three major themes emerged as areas for action to improve systems and conditions impacting health and well-being across Central Texas:**

Put the ‘human’ back in human services

Complex systems deter people from accessing the support they need for health, housing, education, and employment. Participants expressed feelings of hopelessness and being dehumanized by complex eligibility requirements, negative interactions, and accessibility limitations. This theme was consistent across Central Texas with different examples by county. In Bastrop and Caldwell Counties, concerns of inadequate infrastructure, long commutes, missing work, or immigration status limited access to essential care, services, and safety. In Hays County, participants called for systems and services that treat them with dignity and respect. In Travis County, participants said the

emotional toll of navigating complex systems was impacting their well-being. In Williamson County, participants called for cultural understanding in education, mental healthcare, and community.

Hungry to be heard and have agency to solve problems

Community, neighborhood, and support groups create opportunities to thrive and combat feelings of isolation and discrimination that negatively affect health, well-being, and academic performance — particularly among people of color. The importance of trust, belonging, and safety were essential to participants so they can be seen, heard, and engaged in their community and have a voice in community-led solutions. In Travis County, participants emphasized the need for trauma-informed support. In Williamson County, participants call for representation and inclusive spaces.

More is needed to move from surviving to thriving

Local, culturally appropriate, affordable, and accessible services create a safe space for joy, healing, family, and community. Rural residents in Bastrop, Caldwell, and Hays spend considerable time driving for medical care, groceries, work, and education — leaving limited time and energy for family and well-being. Parents and caregivers expressed struggles with basic needs and assistance programs, leading to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion. Older adults in Hays County shared feelings of being overlooked by society while dealing with rising living costs on a fixed income. Black families in Williamson County seek representation in clinics, schools, and communities so they feel a sense of normalcy and belonging. Without a safe space for joy, healing, family, and community, the participants shared feelings of surviving instead of thriving. Participants and community partners refer to these experiences as burnout and compassion fatigue, highlighting the importance of trauma-informed care and simplified systems to better support individuals dealing with the pressures of costs of living, caregiving, and mental health.

BUILDING A HEALTHIER TOMORROW

Similar, yet unique, strengths and challenges impact the well-being of Central Texans. We heard community voices and stories of how systems are failing, not people. In Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, Travis, and Williamson counties, community members are excited and motivated to mobilize around the issues they care about and be a part of the work to build a healthier tomorrow.

"[You can see] how much resilience is in the community. The hopes they have and the strength to build their community better."

- Key Informant, Bastrop County

The Foundation's desire as well as its commitment, is that the Community Voices project isn't regarded as a separate initiative from our strategy development and future funding initiatives, but that it is a beginning of working differently as a Foundation that includes ongoing and continuous community engagement to inform our work and co-create strategies that center communities as the experts on the solutions that impact Central Texans. Over the next year and beyond, we pledge to build off the engagements that this project represents, return learnings and insights back to the communities that provided their important perspectives, and support the solutions created by and for community members.

"Se necesita un pueblo, estamos en una comunidad donde no existen ciertos recursos, pero necesitamos unirnos y organizarnos, nosotros como padres podemos hacer muchas cosas."

- Participante de Plática

"It takes a village, we're in a community where certain resources do not exist, but we need to get together and organize, us parents can get a lot of stuff done."

- Plática Participant

**COMMUNITY
VOICES
PROJECT
OVERVIEW**

BACKGROUND

St. David's Foundation (SDF) partnered with Texas Health Institute (THI) to conduct a community-centered approach to qualitative data collection that more deeply explores the systems and conditions impacting health and well-being in Central Texas (Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, Travis, Williamson). The approach was co-designed with community partners to shed light on [vital conditions for well-being](#) such as basic needs, economic and education opportunities, safety from harm and stress, and a sense of belonging.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

In June 2024, the Community Voices project began with the recruitment and engagement of community partners.

- A **Community Advisory Committee (CAC)** was formed to provide strategic guidance during the project. The membership included twelve community and systems leaders who each brought lived experience and expertise to deepen our collective understanding of systems and conditions across Central Texas. The CAC provided input on inclusive community engagement, qualitative data collection, selection of key informants for interviews, dissemination strategies, and sensemaking.
- Five **Community Research Partner Organizations (CRPOs)** served as research and engagement partners supported by THI with the provision of technical assistance and compensation to respectfully lift the community voices, expertise, and experiences of all participants within their respective communities.

COMMUNITY VOICES

In August 2024, qualitative data collection activities began after co-design with the CAC and CRPOs to determine the inclusive approach to methodology, recruitment, and facilitation to best explore topics such as basic needs, education and economic opportunity, and safety.

- **15 Key Informant Interviews.** Texas Health Institute conducted semi-structured interviews with system and community leaders who were recommended by the CAC based on their perspectives, expertise, and lived experience.
- **135 Community Participants.** In collaboration with St. David's Foundation and Texas Health Institute, CRPOs co-designed and led culturally appropriate

methodology to best lift the voices of demographically diverse participants (age, gender, race/ethnicity, language, caregiver status, geography, sexual orientation, gender identity, and special health care needs). This collaborative, co-design approach created a safe space for healing, joy, connection, and trust. CRPOs led the following projects:

- **Bastrop County:** Plática (Spanish) & Youth PhotoVoice
- **Caldwell County:** Community Conversation & Plática (Spanish)
- **Hays County:** Community Conversation (Senior Center) & Plática (Spanish)
- **Travis County:** Story Circle (Caregivers) & Individual Interviews (Spanish)
- **Williamson County:** Focus Group/Public Art (Black Families) & Story Circle

Project Selections with Descriptions and Community Research Partner Organizations with Quotes

Pláticas (Community Conversations). Spanish for "talks" or "conversations," the pláticas and community conversations centered group discussions on stories and experiences of residents in Bastrop, Caldwell, and Hays Counties.



"We decided to join forces because that's what you do in rural communities. You just support each other."

- Norma Mercado, Bastrop County Cares



"What I liked was the ability for us to create and to use what we know was most effective with the communities that we work — that we weren't prescribed a way to do things. We decided to do pláticas/community conversations to talk about health and well-being in their community, struggles, and what could we do."

- Norma Mercado, Bastrop County Cares



Story Circles. Community-based storytelling sessions provided a safe and respectful environment to encourage participants to express their experiences in Travis County (Children’s HOME Initiative families receiving services for housing stability) and Williamson County (Black families).



“We were honored by how empowered they felt in telling their stories to people who listen and will make a difference.”

– Julie Candoli, Foundation Communities



“We wanted to pair this experience with healing and with a familiar environment. We brought in mental health professionals to facilitate the story circles.”

– Tiffanie Harrison, Black Parents & Families Collective

Public Art. Artists translated insights from a virtual focus group with Black families into public art. The art is a visual representation of well-being, values, shared identity and purpose in Williamson County.



“That was really beautiful, because a lot of times research wants to focus just on our pain and our trauma – and that’s what makes it extractive and not on what’s possible.”

– Tiffanie Harrison, Black Parents & Families Collective

PhotoVoice. This participatory photography method lifts voices through photos and digital storytelling. This project engaged youth participants to capture aspects of their community strengths and needs in Bastrop County.



“I find that youth love photos. It was really eye opening. The things that they are noticing – not just bad, but good things too.”

– Norma Mercado, Bastrop County Cares

SENSEMAKING WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND ST. DAVID'S FOUNDATION

In preparation for a sensemaking session with community partners, Texas Health Institute conducted a preliminary analysis of qualitative data collected during Community Research Partner projects and key informant interviews. The analysis informed the creation of county-specific narratives for use during the initial sensemaking with community partners.

In October 2024, the Community Advisory Committee and Community Research Partners convened for a sensemaking session led by St. David's Foundation and Texas Health Institute. The in-person sensemaking session was an opportunity to celebrate, review, and discuss preliminary findings with facilitated activities designed to illuminate themes and root causes of conditions and systems in Central Texas. Participants were able to unearth cross-cutting, systemic themes about barriers to thriving, access to healthcare, and personal well-being. Alliances began to form and some of the small group discussions continued for up to an hour after the event concluded. All agreed this was a great beginning and that the conversations must continue for real change to occur.



Group photo from sensemaking session with community partners, in front of the public art piece, "A World in Motion," that was inspired by community voices project and created by Craig McNary and Jarrid Williams.

In November 2024, St. David's Foundation staff convened for an internal sensemaking session led by Texas Health Institute and joined virtually by community research partners. The in-person sensemaking for staff to discuss quotes from community members and build empathy and emotional connection with the findings.

The themes highlighted in this report draw from a synthesis of community voices that were contextualized by the Community Advisory Committee, Community Research Partners, and St. David's Foundation staff.

**WHAT WE
HEARD IN
CENTRAL
TEXAS**

WHAT WE HEARD IN CENTRAL TEXAS

Community participants shared heartwarming and heartbreaking stories, all underscoring the need for inclusive communities and systems in Central Texas. Across all geographies and demographics, residents of Central Texas want to be seen and heard, yet they often feel isolated and invisible — especially when they try to access and navigate complex systems for basic needs such as healthcare, education, jobs, or safety. Central Texans find strength from networks of support in their communities; however, chronic stress from rising living costs, forgone healthcare, and discrimination continues to impact the well-being of Central Texans — particularly in areas with limited access to healthcare and mental health resources. From this Community Voices project, three major themes emerged as areas for action to improve systems and conditions impacting health and well-being across Central Texas:

- **Put the ‘human’ back in human services.** Complex systems deter people from accessing the support they need for health, housing, education, and employment.
- **Hungry to be heard and have agency to solve problems.** Community, neighborhood, and support groups create opportunities to thrive and combat feelings of isolation and discrimination that negatively affect health, well-being, and academic performance.
- **More is needed to move from surviving to thriving.** Local, culturally appropriate, affordable, and accessible services create a safe space for joy, healing, family, and community.

Put the ‘human’ back in human services

The emotional and time-consuming toll of navigating complex systems deters people from accessing the support they need for their health, education, employment, and well-being.

Participants expressed feelings of hopelessness and being dehumanized by complex eligibility requirements, negative interactions, and accessibility limitations. Community partners echoed this sentiment and the importance of local navigation assistance.

"We need to put the human back in human services...whether it's mental health, or physical health, or medical resources, or benefits...people are feeling dehumanized. It's also about computer literacy and having a screen between you and a person that is diving into your private business...it's really impacting people."

- Community Partner, Travis County

Community members overwhelmingly expressed frustration with technological "solutions" that don't work consistently and make their lives more difficult.

"You're taking your time off of work just to be there to get that done because they have the app that doesn't really work, or you have the people [who] don't care. The process is hard to apply, and then you're just getting denied, denied, and denied."

- Story Circle Participant, Travis County

When they do work, they are not culturally responsive or adapted to the unique needs of communities in Central Texas, resulting in an overwhelming sentiment across the region that systems just don't care about residents and their needs.

"Especially when struggling, they don't want to hear a recording or from someone who doesn't understand their community."

- Community Partner, Bastrop County

Well-meaning programs that are overburdened and under-resourced leave community members feeling discouraged and add another burden to their already over-taxed lives.

"I got into this program and they're supposed to help you with the resources you need, like support, work, or medical. At first, my case manager was making regular appointments with me, but then just stopped calling and kept saying that they would do things, but never did. I had to keep contacting them. I kind of just gave up and think 'I just have to help myself' now."

- Story Circle Participant, Travis County

When experienced across systems, this effect compounds for community members, leading to chronic stress and a feeling that they are always just getting by.

"If you're already struggling with your own basic needs, there's no way you can afford childcare. If you already are struggling for basic needs like food, then healthcare is another big expense you cannot afford. We're not thriving, we're just surviving."

- Story Circle Participant, Travis County

Participants shared several stories indicating their distrust of systems, and how things are designed to be difficult so that services and resources can be denied.

"Applying for an apartment feels like applying for college. It's really hard. Yeah. They can reject you for any little thing."

- Story Circle Participant, Travis County

Limited access to affordable, culturally appropriate health care makes it difficult for some residents to seek help for their physical and mental health, particularly for those whose well-being may be worsened by chronic stress.

"Black parents often have to sacrifice their own mental health and wellness because they simply don't have the time or the financial means to slow down."

- Public Art Participant, Williamson County

When residents perceive systems as uncaring, stressful, and more burdensome than helpful, participants expressed that they avoid seeking care from traditional systems, turning instead to "Dr. Google" or not seeking care at all.

"No he ido al doctor y no quiero ir porque ya sé lo que me van a decir. No he ido porque si voy pierdo el trabajo porque eso significa citas, citas y citas"

- Participante de Plática, Condado de Bastrop

"I haven't gone to the doctor, and I don't want to go because I already know what they're going to tell me. I haven't gone because if I go, I lose my job because it means appointments, appointments and appointments."

- Plática Participant, Bastrop County

Overwhelmingly, participants felt that those who design and maintain systems do not understand the struggles that community members actually face when trying to navigate systems, including the healthcare system.

“And you take the time for the people that are in a place where they have to work and maybe working two or three jobs, and they're living paycheck to paycheck. They don't have the time to be on the phone with the bank for overcharge fees or mishandling of fees. They don't have the time to call and stay on hold at ARC for an appointment. They just don't have the time, and they don't have the money to be able to go to the front of the line.”

– Key Informant, Williamson County

While nonprofit organizations and community-led support groups are a source of support for some, others are hesitant to ask for help.

“Their struggles are real, and they want to be treated as humans, not one time charity cases. The community wants the help if the help is truly there to be truly provided to them from the heart.”

– Key Informant, Caldwell County

Participants consistently identified trusted resources in their community and also expressed concern for those whom services often did not reach, in particular, the undocumented community.

“[Undocumented immigrants] just got to stay under the radar to not draw attention to yourself kind of thing. They are not asking for assistance. But yet we see them in the dilapidated housing that's cropping up in the counties.”

– Key Informant, Bastrop County

Hungry to be heard and have agency to solve problems

Community, neighborhood, and support groups create opportunities to thrive and combat feelings of isolation and discrimination that negatively affect health, well-being, and academic performance — particularly for people of color.

Finding a sense of belonging and connection through community was a key theme across the region, emerging as a protective factor that promotes strength through shared support and experiences. Participants also expressed a desire to build on these connections within their community as they are a source of strength and solutions.

“It comes back to community as always. We thrive when we have a community around us that we can look to.”

– Story Circle Participant, Williamson County

Faith and the faith community came up as an important theme for participants across the region. Community members turned to their own faith to give them hope and turned to their places of worship as sites for communion with others and needed support.

"A veces siento que ya no puedo más. Pero sé que Dios me da fuerza. Y Dios me ha ayudado. Dios me ha ayudado a sacar adelante a mis hijos. Y si estoy triste o antes lloraba en el carro, o si me siento solo. Dios está conmigo. Dios está con nosotros. Dios nos ama."

- Participante de Plática, Condado de Bastrop

"I sometimes feel like it can't take it anymore. But I know God gives me strength. And God has helped me. God has helped me get my children ahead. And whether I'm sad or before I used to cry in the car, or if I feel lonely. God is with me. God is with us. God loves us."

- Plática Participant, Bastrop County

Participants also shared the importance of informal networks as sources of support in their lives, often providing resources where formal systems fall short. Whether they were discussing friend groups, family members, neighbors, or community groups, informal networks play important roles in the lives of residents we heard from across the region.

"I have my best friends from my center or from my apartment complex. If anything happens, I know I can pick up the phone and call them. Some of them will call me too many times."

- Community Conversation Participant, Hays County

"To be able to have conversations about 'Hey, I'm having this struggle at this particular place or with this particular institution, and has anyone else felt that same way? And how did they navigate that?' I think that's how we thrive as a community for sure because then we don't feel alone."

- Story Circle Participant, Williamson County

When participants were not as connected to informal networks, they expressed a lack of support or belonging. This was true across counties and communities.

“Not having support or a support system is the worst thing for somebody who's struggling. Just mentally, emotionally, physically, financially.”

– Story Circle Participant, Travis County

Senior citizens in the region, in particular, felt isolated and invisible without community resources.

“Once we get to a certain age, we become invisible. We have children, grown-up children, grown children. I understand my children have a life. They have their relationships, their jobs. But every once in a while, a phone call to a parent once a week would be really great.”

– Community Conversation Participant, Hays County

Isolation and a lack of support was expressed by many parents and caregivers, particularly those in family structures that differ from traditional two parent households, and those who are caring for both children and older parents. Overall, many caregivers felt that systems are not designed for their needs.

“As a single mom, I've noticed even rent, for a single parent, there's no possible way that you can live. When I first got here, it was fine. I could manage by myself. But the longer that I stay here, I've noticed that there's almost no way a single parent can survive by herself. And I just have one child at home. I now have my granddaughter here, but I just have one child. I can't go and apply for food stamps because I "make too much money." I can't apply for Medicaid because, again, I, "make too much money.”

– Story Circle Participant, Williamson County

A common theme expressed by Black and African American key informants and community members was the impact of systemic racism on themselves and their families, particularly as they lose community ties due to gentrification and relocate to communities with members and systems who are hostile to or know little about their culture.

“Psychological and emotional safety is actually one that we need to be talking about more specifically with mothers and families that I serve in a city that has such a long history of systemic racism and the displacement that has now come from the gentrification. There is no physical proximity to create village.”

– Key Informant, Travis County

The region's unhoused population serves as an example of the long-term and costly impact of isolation and systemic failure on the lives of community members; however, efforts to build community and support are happening even where those systems have failed community members most.

"The primary cause of homelessness is a profound catastrophic loss of family (or support systems). Healthcare, the justice system, all of our systems that are intended to kind of wrap-around folks who are needing help are failing them."

- Key Informant, Travis County

Across the region, community members saw value in engaging in community conversations and expressed the desire for more opportunities to be seen, heard, and share their stories with others. Across the region, participants and community partners expressed a collective desire to overcome boundaries, continue the conversation, and have a voice in community-led solutions.

"Se necesita un pueblo, estamos en una comunidad donde no existen ciertos recursos, pero necesitamos unirnos y organizarnos, nosotros como padres podemos hacer muchas cosas."

- Participante de Plática, Condado de Caldwell

"It takes a village, we're in a community where certain resources do not exist, but we need to get together and organize, us parents can get a lot of stuff done."

- Plática Participant, Caldwell County

Continuing the investment in community voices, community solutions, and community conversations will be key to meeting the needs of all community members in the region, particularly those from communities that are often underserved by formal systems.

"Change happens in the micro communities. We have to be hopeful and continue to support each other and continue to uplift the voices."

- Community Partner, Bastrop County

More is needed to move from surviving to thriving

Local, culturally appropriate, affordable, and accessible services create a safe space for joy, healing, family, and community.

Concerns about cost, distance, time, language barriers, missed work, lack of representation, fear, discrimination, and road safety deter people from accessing healthcare, education services, employment opportunities, and community services. These collective experiences are largely summarized as feeling trapped between merely surviving and thriving.

"There's another kind of poverty that I think is equally dangerous that we're experiencing. And that's the poverty of spirit. And part of it is the poverty of spirit, not having community."

- Key Informant, Travis County

Across the region, the intersections of race, ethnicity, urbanicity, ability, age, legal status, and LGBTQIA+ identity increased the difficulty of finding accessible and timely care.

Rural residents spend considerable time driving for medical care, groceries, work, and education — leaving limited time and energy for family well-being. Taking a family member to receive affordable, culturally appropriate care could mean missing an entire day of work.

"Todo está más lejos y no hay nada cerca. Las tiendas están a unos 40 minutos. Si compras algo en las tiendas de la esquina, el precio es doble."

- Participante de Plática, Condado de Bastrop

"Everything is farther, and there's nothing near. Stores are about 40 minutes away. If you buy something in the corner stores, the price is twice as much."

- Plática Participant, Bastrop County

Rural residents with special needs expressed even greater challenges, often facing trade-offs with no good options, leading to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion.

"It's kind of scary not having specialty care here. We may have cardiology, pulmonology care, but the appointments get booked six months to a year out because everybody here is trying to go there. For me, some days, I can't walk with my arthritis. Some days, I have neurological issues. Some days I can't think or talk right. And to have to drive to Austin, to Kyle."

- Community Conversation Participant, Caldwell County

Caregivers of those with special needs in rural areas face similar concerns. Rural school districts often are not able to meet the needs of those in need of additional supports.

"My son can't even go to school here because they don't offer programs [he needs]. He has to go all the way to Seguin to get the help that he needs. And to me, somebody who lives here, pays taxes here, owns a home here, I have to put my son on a bus to go to Seguin. I personally don't think that's fair."

- Community Conversation Participant, Caldwell County

Older adults shared feelings of frustration of rising living costs on a fixed income.

"Your monthly check is increased by, I guess, \$90. And sometimes that will put you over for Medicaid, food stamps. You lose those services-- I've known people losing those services for 5, 10 dollars, being over. And it's just awful. Then rent increases. No. We don't need to compete with all these young college students in the apartment complex next to us. And they know we're on fixed income. And then they limit us when we first go to apply for the apartment. You have to have a certain amount, and you can't make over that. And we always tell somebody about this, but nothing ever gets done about it. And I know people have tried, but after a while, they get upset about not getting any progress, so they give up."

- Community Conversation Participant, Hays County

Black families spend time seeking representation in clinics, schools, and communities so they feel a sense of normalcy and belonging.

"Do they understand my culture? Are they even interested in my culture? We do things differently. We react differently to different situations. Do you truly understand me? When you don't feel that connection, it makes it harder to understand yourself. You start to question who you are."

- Story Circle Participant, Williamson County

When they do find care that is representative of their community, long-waits or insurance challenges often make the care inaccessible.

"I hear a lot of people saying that they can't find healthcare providers that look like them. And I think there are well-documented issues of healthcare biases impacting the healthcare of black and brown people, black and brown women. And so when you look for a doctor or a therapist that looks like you, it's really difficult to find. And when you find one, they're all booked up. You can't get an appointment because everybody's found them. So that whole representation, again, just being able to find healthcare providers that look like you so you feel safe and you feel that you're being heard."

- Story Circle Participant, Williamson County

Members of the LGBTQIA+ community face similar challenges finding accessible care that is safe and culturally responsive to their needs.

"Many patients have traumatic healthcare experiences, or they've gone to other healthcare providers who are not experts in serving LGBTQIA+ people."

- Key Informant, Travis County

Participants and community partners highlighted the importance of trauma-informed care and simplified systems to better support individuals facing burnout and organizations facing compassion fatigue.

"The difficulty of putting it on the nonprofits to really prop up this population — it's a lot of pressure to make it happen. Nonprofits have stepped up, but we're going to be overwhelmed at some point. The compassion fatigue from our staff. Unfortunately, this type of work, people get fatigued very easily, and they have to leave. They get burnt out. They take on the burden of the [stories and trauma]. They're doing a great job."

- Key Informant, Travis County

**BUILDING A
HEALTHIER
TOMORROW**

BUILDING A HEALTHIER TOMORROW

Similar, yet unique, strengths and challenges impact the well-being of Central Texans. Across the region, we heard stories of hope and heartbreak. We heard how systems are failing, not people. We hear and see the community's strong desire to drive change and build a healthier tomorrow.

The Foundation's desire, as well as its commitment, is that the Community Voices project isn't regarded as a separate initiative from our strategy development and future funding initiatives, but that it is a beginning of working differently as a Foundation that includes ongoing and continuous community engagement to inform our work and co-create strategies that center communities as the experts on the solutions that impact Central Texans. Over the next year and beyond, we pledge to build off the engagements that this project represents, return learnings and insights back to the communities that provided their important perspectives, and support the solutions created by and for community members.

This shared vision for a healthier tomorrow is best visualized by "A World in Motion." This public art masterpiece was inspired by a community conversation led by Black Parents & Families Collective and created by Black artists Craig McNary and Jarrid Williams.

"As our world evolves, so too must we. Faith is the guiding light that illuminates our path, leading us toward a future filled with promise. In our ever-changing world, we must learn to navigate uncertainty with hope and resilience. Love, the timeless thread that connects us all, empowers us to embrace change and inspire others. Through acts of love, no matter how small, we can make a significant impact on the world."

- Craig McNary and Jarrid Williams, Artists



"A World in Motion." Created by Craig McNary and Jarrid Williams.

"It looks like a landscape of joy and peace. It looks like food...there was a cookout, blue skies, lack of a pollution. It looks like climate justice, gathering. It looks like resting. That was really beautiful, because a lot of times research wants to focus just on our pain and our trauma – and that's what makes it extractive and not on what's possible. We are trying to shift in our organization to imagining radical future for what is possible."

– Tiffanie Harrison, Black Parents & Families Collective

**A CLOSER
LOOK BY
COUNTY**

BASTROP COUNTY



Mural in Bastrop County by Austin-Based Artist [Aaron Darling](#). Location: Downtown Bastrop. 2022

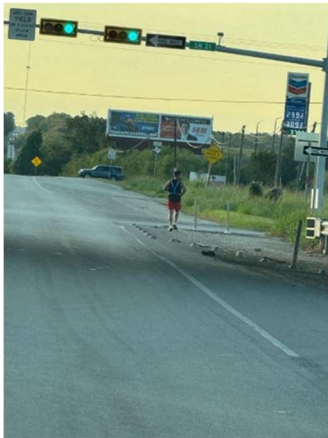
Bastrop County, located 30 miles southeast of Austin, is a rapidly growing rural county part of the Austin-Round Rock Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Bastrop County borders the northwest edge of Travis County in Central Texas and shares borders with Williamson, Lee, Fayette, and Caldwell Counties. Bastrop, the county seat, is located about 30 miles southeast of Austin. In 2022, the Community Health Needs Assessment found Bastrop to be increasingly less affordable, impacting health care access and outcomes for community members.

A rapidly growing population faces significant challenges in accessing healthcare and basic infrastructure, leaving residents struggling to meet their needs and exacerbating their health issues. Many families experience financial strain and safety concerns, often feeling isolated and fearful due to language barriers and legal status among undocumented immigrants.

The challenges faced by Bastrop residents, including limited access to essential services, financial pressures, and fear of seeking care, highlight the need to put the **'human' back in human services** where individuals have the **agency to address their needs and be heard** when advocating for their community. These barriers reflect the broader themes of

the importance of trust, belonging, and safety, as well as the importance of opportunities that allow residents to **move from surviving to thriving**.

Bastrop County has a rapidly growing population and urgent need for infrastructure development to address the systems and conditions impacting the well-being of Bastrop County residents. This need is evident in the challenges Bastrop residents face when trying to improve their neighborhoods and access essential care and services. Participants shared a story about a group of neighbors who were concerned about road safety and long response time in emergencies. The neighbors got together to install speed bumps and signs, only to be removed by the city because paperwork was completed incorrectly. Additionally, Bastrop youth said they weren't able to afford a library card because of cost, making it difficult to get the books they wanted to read.



"I live off a highway. People that live in small neighborhoods can walk and run, but for the person running in the highway, it is dangerous and limits the way they can exercise."

- Youth PhotoVoice Participant



"In the rural areas people live isolated, far away. If there is an accident [or emergency], they take a long time to get to the scene."

- Youth PhotoVoice Participant



"Books take me away from reality and put me inside the book."

- Youth PhotoVoice Participant

Participants highlighted the importance of trust, belonging, and safety so they can be seen and heard in solutions to improve the community. Some feel isolated due to financial pressure, language barriers, legal status, or fear when they seek essential services or community engagement opportunities. Financial pressures weigh heavily on participants and many families are struggling to make ends meet or even maintain their current homes amid rising living costs.

"Están aumentando nuestros impuestos cada año. Cuando llegamos eran \$500, luego \$1,000, \$1,500 y ahora son \$3,000."

- Participante de Plática

"They are increasing our taxes every year. When we arrived it was \$500, then \$1,000, \$1,500, and right now it's \$3,000."

- Plática Participant

"[In our community,] we weren't even translating our documents into Spanish [and this is the fastest-growing segment]. We didn't even put our election documents in Spanish, which is mind-blowing to me."

- Key Informant

"Spend time with friends, it's hard with school to spend time with friends. Photo reminds me of fun times."

- Youth PhotoVoice Participant

Bastrop participants desire local access to basic needs like food, healthcare, affordable housing, jobs, schools, and community services that are essential to their well-being. A mapping activity revealed participants' need to 'drive all over' for shopping, banking, and healthcare. Residents travel forty minutes or more to access the nearest medical facilities for routine or emergency care, while others fear going to the doctor because of the risk of missing work or language barriers. Long distance and fear of missing work limited access to care critical for their health and well-being. Without this care, participants shared multiple stories expressing how delayed or forgone care impacts their overall and mental health.

"No he ido al doctor y no quiero ir porque ya sé lo que me van a decir. No he ido porque si voy pierdo el trabajo porque eso significa citas, citas y citas."

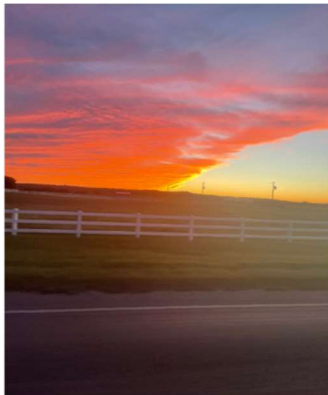
- Participante de Plática

"I haven't gone to the doctor, and I don't want to go because I already know what they're going to tell me. I haven't gone because if I go, I lose my job because it means appointments, appointments and appointments."

- Plática Participant

Building a Healthier Tomorrow in Bastrop County

Bastrop County participants expressed feelings of hope, faith, excitement, and desire for continued collaboration driven by the community. This sentiment is best summarized by a community partner who said, "Change happens in the micro communities. We have to be hopeful and continue to support each other and continue to uplift the voices because we're more similar than different."



"Beautiful skyline in the county"

- Youth PhotoVoice Participant

CALDWELL COUNTY



Mural in Caldwell County by San Antonio based artist [Matt Tumlinson](#). Downtown Lockhart. 2022

Caldwell County, known for its barbeque, is located at the southern tip of Travis County and shares borders with Hays, Bastrop, Gonzales, and Guadalupe counties. There are three county subdivisions: Lockhart (north), Martindale (west), and Luling (southeast). Lockhart is the county seat. The 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment noted Caldwell County as a primary and mental health professional shortage area.

Residents face significant challenges in accessing healthcare due to a shortage of providers — prompting many to undertake long commutes for care, which can disrupt work and school attendance. As the population grows, concerns about rising living costs, inadequate infrastructure, and safety persist, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children and older adults. While faith-based organizations and local nonprofits play a crucial role in community support, their limited capacity highlights the need for greater resources and trust-building initiatives to address systemic barriers.

The challenges faced by Caldwell County residents, such as limited access to healthcare, unsafe infrastructure, and inadequate community resources, emphasize the need to put **'human' back in human services** by fostering trust, belonging, and **local agency** to

address these issues. Residents, hungry to be heard, require opportunities to **move from surviving to thriving** that overcome systemic barriers and ensure sustainable solutions for their well-being.

Participants expressed concerns related to rapid population growth and infrastructure challenges such as limited access to healthcare and unsafe roads.

"It's kind of scary not having specialty care here. We may have cardiology, pulmonology care, but the appointments get booked six months to a year out because everybody here is trying to go there."

- Community Conversation Participant

"We're a rural area, and it's hard to get providers here. The population [to doctor ratio] is really high. Even if we have the providers-- I think it's about a 25% uninsured rate. And so being able to get the individuals in to see a doctor, there may be a wait list. If they don't quite meet the criteria for some of their programs, there's a sliding scale, but \$35 may still be too much of a copay to be able to get in to see the doctor."

- Key Informant

"We have a lot of traumatic wrecks here. A lot of times life flight will have to take them if it's really that critical and they know that it's that critical."

- Key Informant

Participants highlighted the importance of trust, belonging, and safety so they can be seen and heard in solutions to improve the community. Community relationships with faith-based organizations and nonprofits build resident trust in systems that can be a source of support. While these organizations are deeply engaged in the community and provide backbone support of Caldwell County, their capacity is limited. Local organizations need support with writing grants, capacity building, data collection, and sustainability. Other factors that negatively impact community trust are discrimination and gentrification.

"[In Northside], there's no entertainment facilities other than a park. That was where the pool used to be. But other than that, there's no medical, there's no library, there's really nothing. To get to anything, residents have to come across the tracks. And a lot of times, they do not feel comfortable doing that."

- Key Informant

Caldwell participants have limited access to care due to a shortage of healthcare professionals for primary care, mental health, and behavioral health. Instead of waiting months for needed care, residents will opt for a long commute — driving more than 30 minutes to San Marcos, Seguin, San Antonio, or even Mexico. Limited access to Spanish-speaking providers impacts access to and utilization of health care.

"Some days, I have neurological issues. Some days I can't think or talk right. And to have to drive to Austin, to Kyle."

- Community Conversation Participant

"My son can't even go to school here because they don't offer programs [he needs]. He has to go all the way to Seguin to get the help that he needs. And to me, somebody who lives here, pays taxes here, owns a home here, I have to put my son on a bus to go to Seguin. I personally don't think that's fair."

- Community Conversation Participant

Building a Healthier Tomorrow in Caldwell County

Caldwell County participants describe their community as a small town feel and are motivated to get together and support each other. Local organizations need support with writing grants, capacity building, data collection, and sustainability.

HAYS COUNTY



*One piece of “Flowing Through San Marcos” by New York-based Andrey Kravtsov (@keydetail).
110 E Martin Luther King Dr, San Marcos. 2024*

Hays County, one of the fastest growing counties in the U.S, is one part of the Austin-Round Rock Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). It borders the southern edge of Travis County in Central Texas and also shares borders with Blanco, Caldwell, Comal and Guadalupe Counties. San Marcos, the county seat, is home to a large university and is approximately equidistant from both San Antonio and Austin. The 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment highlighted the recent population growth as a cause of increasing unaffordability, particularly for underserved members of the community.

Participants shared feelings of being overlooked by healthcare systems and society, facing numerous challenges that include navigating complex benefit applications, limited transportation, and rising living costs on a fixed income. This sense of invisibility is

compounded by experiences of isolation and the frustration of delayed care, forcing many to delay or refuse healthcare because it is inaccessible or dismissive. Despite these hardships, residents found solace and support in community connections and resource centers, yet they remained anxious about competition for essential resources and services that seemed increasingly difficult to access.

The experiences of Hays County residents highlight the need to put **'human' back in human services** by ensuring that individuals are heard, respected, and supported in navigating complex systems with dignity, especially when balancing caregiving and limited resources. These challenges emphasize the importance of giving residents the **agency to address their needs**, while also recognizing the importance of opportunities to help **move residents from surviving to thriving** to overcome barriers like language, transportation, and financial strain.

Hays County participants shared where they felt invisible or disrespected when seeking healthcare, jobs, or services. Adult children of older adult parents reported having to balance their caregiving responsibilities between their own children and their parents — often navigating the complexities of benefit eligibility, estate planning, medical care, and safety with limited time and resources to do so. Older adults report having difficulty reading and understanding complex benefit applications and forms due to impaired vision. Participants observe language barriers in accessing care or services, reporting that Spanish-speaking people may 'tough it out' and use herbal medicine rather than seek treatment. According to participants, well-being for all residents is attainable if they feel heard and understood when advocating for their health. The community expressed a collective desire to be treated with dignity when accessing services.

"I was able to transfer to Section 8 and thought I had died and gone to Heaven. I got access to real meat products, canned products, rice and beans, fresh fruit and vegetables. It was a wholesome meal plan for the week. I'm diabetic and I had a nurse assigned to me to go over my food intake. She would chastise me for my diet. I told her I was on a fixed income and food was coming from the food bank. She would tell me every month that I need to buy fresh fruits and vegetables and to stop squandering my money."

- Community Conversation Participant

Participants highlighted the importance of trust, belonging, faith, and safety to serve as a safety net in times of need. Whether it was due to social isolation, language barriers, limited access to transportation, or the constant increase in living costs on a fixed income, participants described having to make difficult choices and the importance of support. Others expressed feelings of isolation when cut off from receiving resources.

"People just literally just... sit in their home all day long, that there's no interaction some days with other people."

- Community Conversation Participant

Underscoring the importance of transportation and representation, Hays County participants expressed a desire for education and economic development that will lead to opportunities for all residents. Lack of transportation and language interfered with participants' ability to pursue adult learning, seek services, and find jobs that impact their health and well-being.

"Cuando intento hablar inglés, se burlan de mí."

- Participante de Plática

"When I try to speak English, they make fun of me."

- Plática Participant

"Todos hablaban español. Pero muchos de ellos renunciaron porque quieren que siempre hablen inglés. A veces buscan gente bilingüe y es difícil. Y te hacen sentir menos por no hablar inglés."

- Participante de Plática

"All of them spoke Spanish. But many of them quit because they want them to always speak English. Sometimes they look for people who are bilingual and it's difficult. And they make you feel inferior for not speaking English."

- Plática Participant

“Our transportation system is strained. It only really serves the San Marcos area and very limited transportation to more rural areas of the county. Wimberley, Dripping Springs, Buda, and Kyle don't really have bus systems. If you don't have a car or are not in walking distance of certain things, that poses an issue, to be able to access services, get healthy food, get to medical appointments, or more.”

– Key Informant

Building a Healthier Tomorrow in Hays County

Hays County participants have a strong desire to be seen and heard, and key informants shared examples of how community members feel as though their attempts to be heard have not been addressed due to a lack of change. Creating pathways for community voices to drive solutions are desired by the community.

TRAVIS COUNTY



"Austintatious" by University of Texas students Tom Bauman, Kerry Awn, and Rick Turner. 2246 Guadalupe St, Austin. Painted 1973, revised and updated 2024

Travis County is at the heart of the Austin-Round Rock Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Home to the University of Texas, Travis County is bordered by Williamson County to the north, Caldwell County to the Southeast, Hays County to the South, and Bastrop County to the east. Austin, the county seat and state capital of Texas, serves as the cultural and economic hub of the central Texas region. The 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment found Travis County residents to be strained by certain non-medical drivers of health such as access to healthy food, housing affordability, and financial security.

Participants expressed significant struggles with accessing basic needs and navigating complex government assistance programs, leading to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion. Caregivers, particularly single mothers, face overwhelming financial responsibilities and feelings of burnout, often feeling trapped between merely surviving and thriving, while others encounter bureaucratic barriers that hinder their ability to secure necessary services and support. Despite the challenges, local nonprofits and community

resources provide some assistance, highlighting the urgent need for trauma-informed care and simplified systems to better support individuals dealing with the pressures of poverty, caregiving, and mental health.

The emotional toll of navigating complex systems and limited access to mental health care underscores the need to put **'human' back in human services** by offering trauma-informed support, clear guidelines, and resources that allow individuals to overcome barriers and thrive. Residents are **hungry to be heard and given the agency to address** their challenges but require opportunities to **move from surviving to thriving** with the right support.

The need for inclusive systems is evident in the emotional toll of navigating complex systems and a general lack of access to affordable mental health care. Several participants shared their frustration with rigid eligibility requirements for services, unhelpful representatives, and unclear guidelines, which might disqualify them from receiving aid. Participants highlighted the challenges of navigating complex systems that were even harder for individuals with cognitive or mental health challenges such as ADHD, dyslexia, or anxiety. Participants called for more trauma-informed services and support systems to address the mental health needs of individuals who have experienced significant life stressors, including poverty, housing instability, and caregiving for children with special needs.

"You're taking your time off of work just to be there to get that done because they have the app that doesn't really work, or you have the people [that] don't care. The process is hard to apply, and then you're just getting denied, denied, and denied."

- Story Circle Participant

Trust, belonging, and safety are important to participants so they can thrive instead of being stuck between "getting by" and "struggling." For some, the emotional toll of financial insecurity, challenges in accessing services, and balancing caregiving for children and other family members was a constant concern. They highlighted the need for resources to help them navigate challenges and achieve greater well-being.

"There's another kind of poverty that is equally dangerous. And that's the poverty of spirit. And part of it is the poverty of spirit, not having community."

- Key Informant

"If you're already struggling with your basic needs, there's no way you can afford childcare. If you're already struggling for basic needs like food, then healthcare is another big expense you cannot afford. We're not thriving, we're just surviving."

- Story Circle Participant

"Psychological and emotional safety is actually one that we need to be talking about more specifically with mothers and families in a city that has such a long history of systemic racism and the displacement that has now come from the gentrification. There is no physical proximity to create village."

- Key Informant

Participants discussed the barriers they face in enrolling their children in schools, accessing resources for children with special needs, and adult education programs to help individuals complete their education and improve their job prospects.

"Some organizations I apply to, they say, 'Sorry, we cannot help you.' Even if my case manager said, 'Okay, we looked up everything and we could not find anything for you,' that is still very helpful to me than not having anything at all."

- Story Circle Participant

"The strength of Central Texas, there are 1,000 nonprofits working on different things. Because there's not a centralized funding stream, we don't have the alignment to systemically look at it."

- Key Informant

Building a Healthier Tomorrow in Travis County

Travis County participants shared an interest in trauma-informed approaches and desire for human-centered systems and services. Reducing chronic stress and creating a space for joy, healing, and community are desired by participants.

WILLIAMSON COUNTY



175th Williamson County Birthday Mural by Toronto-based [Yasaman Mehrsa](#). 904 S. Main Street, Georgetown. Painted with members of the community. 2023

Williamson County, the northernmost part of the Austin-Round Rock Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), is home to several of Austin's most populated suburban communities and townships. Georgetown, the county seat known for its historic charm, is located near the county's center. Williamson shares borders with Bell, Burnet, Travis, and Milam counties. Consistently ranked in the healthiest of communities in Texas, the 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment noted this achievement while underscoring the substantial portion of Williamson designated as a high-need health equity zone.

Black parents and families emphasized the importance of representation, belonging, and community support to combat the feeling of isolation and discrimination that negatively affect health, well-being, and academic performance, particularly for people of color. They shared experiences that highlight the importance of diverse professionals who reflect the identities of the families they serve in clinics, schools, and communities. Local organizations and supportive networks play a vital role in creating safe spaces where families can thrive, share resources, and build connections to foster a sense of community and belonging for all.

The challenges faced by families in navigating systems highlight the need to put **'human' back in human services** by fostering trust, belonging, and cultural understanding in education, mental health care, and community support. These families are **hungry to be heard** and empowered to solve problems, but the emotional and physical toll of navigating

a lack of representation and inclusive spaces emphasizes the importance of opportunities for residents to **move from surviving to thriving**.

The need for inclusive communities is evident in the challenges of navigating overwhelming systems and participants' desire to thrive, not just survive. Black participants found support from their friends, family, and community groups. When connected with a supportive group, Black parents and families experience a sense of normalcy and community that is crucial for their well-being.

"Black parents often have to sacrifice their own mental health and wellness because they simply don't have the time or the financial means to slow down."

- Public Art Participant

"It's psychological safety. Right? And if you're constantly in a state of fight or flight or whatever, your brain is not able to be at its optimal level."

- Key Informant

Participants highlighted the importance of trust, belonging, and safety so they can envision an educational experience where every child receives the support they need to feel safe, learn, and grow. Participants call for schools to be a place where all students feel secure from threats, bullying, and injustice. Participants want educators to understand that behaviors rooted in conditions like ADHD or trauma should not be labeled as misbehavior, but rather as a call for supportive measures. Belonging also means acknowledging and accommodating diverse needs — like the educational needs of neurodivergent children who may struggle to conform to traditional classroom settings.

"The bright spot is providing advocacy for education. The school system is not meant to be easy on purpose. I understand how that system works because I am a part of that system on both sides. I spend extra time [with parents] making sure that they understand that system for their kids so they use that system as best as they can."

- Story Circle Participant

"We see Black, Hispanic, emerging bilingual, and special education students all having these same outcomes year after year that are not near what we're seeing for other populations. And we need to ask ourselves, 'Why is that?' And to me, it's not that they have the greatest needs in the community, but they have the greatest need of being thought of and designed for in our community."

- Key Informant

Black parents and families shared experiences emphasizing the importance of cultural understanding and representation in clinics, schools, and communities. The desire for representation extends to mental health services, where it is challenging to find therapists who can relate to and understand the stigma surrounding mental health challenges in Black communities. The lack of representation and inclusive environments can lead to emotional exhaustion and distrust in systems for Black parents and families.

"Do they understand my culture? Are they even interested in my culture? We do things differently. We react differently to different situations. Do you truly understand me? When you don't feel that connection, it makes it harder to understand yourself. You start to question who you are."

- Story Circle Participant

Building a Healthier Tomorrow in Williamson County

The desire for safe spaces where voices can be heard and emotions valued is echoed throughout the community. Participants want to be included in decisions that affect their communities, and to be trusted and supported to generate their own solutions.

ABOUT ST. DAVID'S FOUNDATION

St. David's Foundation is one of the largest health foundations in the United States, funding over \$80 million annually in a five-county area surrounding Austin, Texas. Through a unique partnership with St. David's HealthCare, we strategically reinvest proceeds from the hospital system back into the community, with a goal of advancing health equity and improving the health and wellbeing of our most underserved Central Texas neighbors. Beyond our grantmaking work, we operate the largest mobile dental program in the country providing charity care and offer the largest healthcare scholarship program in Texas.

ABOUT TEXAS HEALTH INSTITUTE

Texas Health Institute is a nonprofit, objective public health institute with the mission of advancing the health of all. Since 1964, THI has served as a trusted, leading voice on public health and healthcare issues in Texas and the nation. Our expertise, strategies, and nimble approach make THI an integral and essential partner in driving systems change. THI works across and within sectors to lead collaborative efforts and facilitate connections to foster systems that provide the opportunity for everyone to lead a healthy life.

