



April 2020



This update to the Schuylkill Community Action Community Assessment was completed in April 2020 in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

I. Background

This Community Assessment Update is in response to a global health pandemic that has not only affected every community in the United States but has also led to the most significant economic disruption since the Great Depression. This assessment is an initial effort to capture some of the emerging needs in the community as well as to forecast how those needs may evolve over the coming weeks and months.

In December 2019, the novel coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) was discovered to be the causative agent for acute respiratory and flu-like symptoms and began infecting increasing numbers of people in the Wuhan Province of China. The first case in the United States was confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on January 22, 2020. Despite efforts to contain the virus, by March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. By March 17, 2020, all 50 US States had confirmed cases of the virus.

Because of the highly contagious nature of COVID-19, the alarmingly high rate of fatalities associated with it and the lack of a vaccine or treatment, the only effective way to prevent mass illness is through restricted travel, physical distancing, frequent hand washing, coughing in elbows, not touching the face, and staying at home. By mid-March 2020, with the virus clearly past the stage of effective isolation and contact tracing, local, state and federal public health officials recommend extreme measures to minimize a public health catastrophe: mass quarantine, physical distancing, and a virtual lockdown of all public gatherings and economic activity.

While all types of people are getting sick from the disease, older adults and people of any age who experience serious underlying medical conditions, many which are more prevalent in African American communities, and, to some extent, Latinx and Native American communities, are at increased risk for severe symptoms from COVID-19. Persons of color, immigrants, and women are also disproportionately impacted by underlying health conditions linked to poverty, face discrimination in medical care, and are more likely to work jobs that require them to leave their homes. Also, persons with disabilities or chronic conditions are more vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their inability to thoroughly isolate themselves (need for hands-on care), physical impairments, environmental barriers, or interrupted services. The following additional populations experience differential

exposure and extensive corresponding implications as a result of the pandemic: frontline workers, persons experiencing homelessness, gig-economy workers, low-income communities under quarantine, especially in urban settings, rural communities, tribal communities, incarcerated persons and returning citizens.

Children, families, individuals, and Community Action Agency staff may experience heightened stress, anxiety, and trauma as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Loss of income, growing childcare needs, heightened food insecurity, housing and energy instability, lack of access to transportation, lack of basic supplies, and increased domestic violence are growing factors as the crisis unfolds.

Because of the urgent and widespread needs affecting all sectors of the community, this Community Assessment update is intended to provide some initial information to describe the scope of this crisis on our community and to support the many different responses that will be required to address emerging, evolving needs. It is likely that as needs evolve, some of those needs will not be captured in this update and therefore some necessary community responses may not connect to the needs identified in this document.

The *community* assessed in this document, related to the below information, is defined as the following: Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania

The needs assessed will inform services to those affected by the crisis. It is significant to note that Congressional action will permit FY20 and special supplemental CSBG funding to serve families at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (as defined by [the US Census Bureau](#)). Specific programs or strategies will target the demographic groups most affected. Given persons of color are being disproportionately affected by both the health crisis and by the resulting economic disruption, an equity lens must be used to view current and emergent needs related to this crisis.

II. Local public health response

On March 22, 2020, the first confirmed COVID-19 case for Schuylkill County was published on the Pennsylvania Department of Health’s website. Prior to that, both Pennsylvania and the County of Schuylkill had made several attempts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Below is a timeline of activities taken by both the State and County that had begun limiting activities that directly impacted our Schuylkill County service area:

- March 13, 2020- Governor Tom Wolfe announces the closing of all Pennsylvania schools effective March 16, 2020
- March 16, 2020- School closure administered. Governor Tom Wolfe announces statewide mitigation efforts to begin on March 17, 2020. Measures included but not limited to:
 - Closing of dine-in restaurants
 - No visitor policy for correctional facilities
 - All Pennsylvania licensed child-care centers were ordered closed
 - Adult daycare centers temporarily closed
- March 17, 2020- Statewide mitigation efforts put into place.
- March 18, 2020- Schuylkill County Board of Commissioners issue a Disaster Declaration for Schuylkill County.
- March 19, 2020- Governor Tom Wolfe orders the closure of all non-life sustaining businesses throughout Pennsylvania. The order is effective March 21, 2020.

- March 30, 2020- Governor Tom Wolfe declares a “Stay at Home” order for Schuylkill County. The order is scheduled to last at least until May 8, 2020.

As a result of this unprecedented public health crisis, Schuylkill Community Action is updating its Community Assessment because there is currently a significant impact on the community, and a number of short-, intermediate- and longer-term impacts are expected.

III. Immediate impacts on the community

The immediate impacts of COVID-19 have been felt across all sectors of society. In particular, some of the greatest impacts relevant to the Community Action Network have been in the areas of health, education, employment, human services provision, and community resources. According to the Engagement Network’s Vulnerability Footprint tool, the highest vulnerability in our community is in the following areas:

- Borough of McAdoo
- Borough of Shenandoah
- City of Pottsville

Nationwide, early data suggest that the following groups have experienced disproportionately higher rates of infection and/or complications/death as a result the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Males
- Individuals 60+ years old
- People of color, particularly African Americans
- People with underlying health conditions (especially, lung disease, asthma, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, liver disease, severe obesity, and individuals with immunocompromised conditions)

The following outlines the variety of impacts to the local community thus far:

- Health impacts:
 - Individuals over 60, especially those with underlying health conditions have been shown to be at particular risk for severe health implications from COVID-19. Schuylkill County in particular has an increased vulnerability due to its aging population. According to the US Census data 2014-2018 5-year estimates, an estimated 19.69 of Schuylkill County residents are aged 65 or older. This is significantly higher than Pennsylvania estimates (17.43%) and United States estimates (15.25%) of populations aged 65+.
 - Community health resources will be stretched thin as resources devoted to those sick with COVID-19 will limit resources available to others.
 - According to the US Department of Health & Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Area Health Resource File (2017), Schuylkill County has significantly lower access to primary care physicians when referenced to Pennsylvania and the United States. Schuylkill County’s rate is 55.37 per 100,000 population compared to Pennsylvania (80.9 per 100,000 pop.) and the United States (76.6 per 100,000 pop.)

- Mental health resources will need to be available in new and increased ways to deal with the many different stressors/traumas caused by the pandemic, especially its impact over an extended time period.
 - Schuylkill County has already had significant capacity issues in effectively handling mental health issues. The impact of COVID-19 will only increase demand for an already overextended County mental health system. The below table outlines the scarcity of mental health resource available to County residents:

Area	Ratio of Mental Health Providers to Population (1 provider per X persons)	Mental Health Care Provider Rate (Per 100,000 Population)
Schuylkill County, PA	1,689.2	59.2
Pennsylvania	450.6	221.9
United States	493.0	202.8

* Data Source: University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, County Health Rankings. 2019.

- Nutrition for school-aged children previously accessing free/reduced breakfast, lunch, and snacks is impacted as many are now removed from that food source due to school closures.
 - According to CountyHealthRankings.Org, 54% of school-aged children in Schuylkill County receive free/reduced breakfast, lunch, and snacks. With families now being burdened to provide additional meals independently, food insecurity will increase dramatically for many Schuylkill County Families.
- Employment impacts:
 - Individuals in the health care field are at high-risk of exposure to COVID-19 and are under tremendous stress due to additional work hours and challenging work conditions. In particular many of those workers with close, frequent contact with vulnerable individuals are lower-wage individuals.
 - Healthcare and social assistance industry represents the second highest employed industry in Schuylkill County. According to the Pennsylvania Workforce Information and Analysis April 2020 quarterly census report, 15.9 % of the workforce is employed in Healthcare and Social Assistance industry. Workers in that industry earn an annual average salary of \$40,618, which is significantly lower than the Pennsylvania average salary of \$50,744.
 - Individuals in the educational field – especially teachers and assistants in Head Start and Early Head Start as well as other early childhood care settings – are working remotely due to school shutdowns. Lower-wage workers in these fields are more vulnerable to layoffs and/or may lack the technology resources in their home to work remotely.
 - The table below represents information from the National Center for Educational Statistics on Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) employees for each of the public-school districts in Schuylkill County that have been impacted by COVID-19 related school closures:

School District	Teachers (FTE)	Other staff (FTE)	Total (FTE)
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Blue Mountain	181.37	175.47	356.84
Gillingham Charter	23.75	16.25	40
Mahanoy Area	89.2	109.3	198.5
Minersville Area	87.8	88	175.8
North Schuylkill	137	144	281
Pine Grove	120	96	216
Pottsville Area	174	316	490
St. Clair Area	41	41	82
Schuylkill Haven Area	95	103.5	198.5
Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29	43.7	144.8	188.5
Schuylkill Technology Center	31	39	70
Shenandoah Valley	83	74	157
Tamaqua Area	134	94	228
Tri-Valley	60.68	58.32	119
Total	1301.5	1499.64	2801.14

- Individuals in many sectors of the economy – but particularly the service sector, the retail sectors, gig economy, and others most affected by quarantine policies – are currently experiencing sudden and unexpected unemployment. Some are unaware of resources available to them and their families as they are experiencing unemployment for the first time.
 - Prior to COVID-19 and guidance around the closing of non-essential businesses by the Governor, Schuylkill County was already experiencing higher unemployment than other parts of the State. In February 2020, Schuylkill County’s unemployment rate was 6.1 compared to the Pennsylvania rate of 4.7. Preliminary data reflected a sharp unemployment increase in Pennsylvania once the Governor started instituting measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, which included the closing of non-essential businesses. Pennsylvania’s preliminary unemployment rate took a sharp increase to 6.0. While County unemployment data for March 2020 has yet to be released, it is anticipated that Schuylkill County like Pennsylvania’s rate will demonstrate a significant increase.
- Educational impacts:
 - On March 16, 2020, the Governor order closing of schools throughout the Commonwealth. That order was extended with schools being ordered to remain closed for the remainder of the school year. Closings of public schools in the Community Assessment area are having an immediate impact on children’s education. Children with less access to resources (broadband internet, computers/tablets, technology expertise, language barriers, etc.) are most at-risk for suffering learning loss during a potentially protracted period of school closure.
 - Caregivers of school-age children must secure day care arrangements for their children or sacrifice employment to care for their children. These same caregivers are also expected to be

primary teachers for their children during the period of the closure. Parents with limited resources face numerous challenges as a result of this situation.

- Impacts on human services provision:
 - Services to vulnerable populations are being curtailed or drastically changed. Some service providers are not operating leaving gaps in services to the community. Other service providers have had to alter their service provision in significant ways, leaving some family needs unmet. Finally, for those service providers continuing to operate, the changed circumstances have required significant, immediate adaptations that will require additional resources to support over a longer period of time:
 - Technological upgrades to current computer systems, including web cams and microphones to connect remotely with clients.
 - Tablets/Laptops having the ability for staff to access computers remotely.
 - Mobile hotspots to allow for connectivity in broadband deficient areas of Schuylkill County.
- Community resource impacts:
 - The impacts of COVID-19 on community resources are numerous and include a reduction in the availability of resources (access to group activities, commercial services), a scarcity of some resources (health care, food and emergency supplies) and/or needs for resources that have not previously been required in this community in any significant capacity.
 - Extensive food supplies for the community due to increased food insecurity as a result of COVID-19. This can also be attributed to the rising cost of goods because of increased demand.
 - Increased access to cleaning and sanitation supplies because of increased demand and cost of supplies.
 - The broad impacts of COVID-19 on this community have created an even more urgent need for coordination and collaboration of resources among the public sector, the public health sector, first responders, educators, the business community, the faith community and many others. Schuylkill Community Action plays an important role convening organizations, people and resources to support families.
 - Schuylkill Community Action works closely with partners throughout the community to help administer several agency programs. An example of a partnership with the private sector includes our utility assistance partnership with PPL. SCA works with PPL to administer three programs beneficial to income eligible customers. The programs include the OnTrack customer assistance program, Operation Help heating assistance grant program, and the Winter Relief Assistance Program, which provides baseload and/or full-cost weatherization to reduce energy burden in customer households.

Another example of community partnership includes financial education workshops provided by SCA's Financial Education Coach. The Financial Education Coach position is

funded primarily by foundation grant from local banking institutions. SCA's Financial Education Coach provides a series of Financial Education workshops aimed at increasing the financial literacy. Some of the targeted populations include homeless households, senior households, unemployed workers, low-income Veterans, and low-income early education students. SCA has worked closely with community groups including Servants to All, Providence Place, Career Link, Department of Veteran Affairs, and Child Development, Inc. to provide these workshops at no cost to these vulnerable populations.

A final example of SCA's ability to coordinate with several different sectors and community partners is the Bridge House Transitional Housing Program. Bridge House requires close coordination and cooperation with community partners from various sectors at both the administrative and program levels to operate a successful program. At the administrative level, SCA works closely with the County of Schuylkill, Pottsville Housing Authority, Schuylkill County Drug Treatment Court, and several Private Sector service providers to help fund and provide program referral sources to Bridge House. At the program level, Case Managers and the program director work closely with a multitude of community partners to assist the clients address their many barriers to housing stability and self-sufficiency. Partnerships include, but are not limited to, Service Access Management (Mental Health Case Management), Clinical Outcomes Group, Inc. and Gaudenzia (Drug and Alcohol treatment), Schuylkill County Adult Probation, and Careerlink (Employment search and job training).

IV. Anticipated near- and long-term impacts

The needs above are already established through initial data and anecdotal reports from customers, staff, board members and community stakeholders. Based on these already-observed events, it is likely that there will be near-term (1-3 months) and longer-term (greater than 3 months) impacts that that require immediate planning. A partial, but not complete, list of the anticipated impacts includes:

- *Prolonged service disruptions*
The disruptions in service delivery to customers are expected to continue for a substantial time. This is likely to lead to ancillary challenges for customers that may become long-term issues.
- *Prolonged employment issues*
Sudden layoffs and other employment disruptions are being addressed by emergency response measures; however, it is anticipated that long-term recovery efforts will be required to help customers reconnect to the workforce, particularly those for whom employment assistance has not previously been required.
- *Prolonged agency capacity issues*
Policies limiting in-person staff/customer interactions may be in place for an extended period of time and agencies will need to maintain remote work and remote customer-interaction infrastructure to be responsive to these needs in a more sustainable capacity.

- In order to address prolonged limitations on in-person staff/customer interactions, SCA will need to seek to upgrade some of its technological infrastructure. Technological upgrades may include web cams and microphones for current computer desk stations, the purchase of tablets to provide remote service delivery and off-site outreach service delivery, and the purchase of a mobile hotspot to increase connectivity in broad band deficient areas of our community.
- *Prolonged community resource/coordination issues*
 The short-term community coordination needs cited in this Assessment are presumed to continue into the long-term. Current conditions may persist for an extended period; recovery efforts will require coordination; ongoing community preparedness to guard against a future outbreak will also require ongoing convening and new community readiness strategies based on what is shown to be effective during the current crisis.
 - Throughout the crisis, SCA has connected with the Community Action Association of Pennsylvania and other Community Action Agencies in Pennsylvania to coordinate on disaster response throughout the pandemic and will continue to do so through the recovery process, as well. In addition to coordination through the Community Action network, SCA has maintained closed communication at the County level of government. SCA expects to work closely with the County of Schuylkill during the recovery response process as CARES Act stimulus is anticipated to flow through local government. Coordination of resources and collaboration throughout the process will allow for a more efficient response and effective use of potential stimulus funds.

V. Addressing Equity Implications

Though immediate data may not yet be easily obtained regarding the demographics of those most impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic, previous Community Assessments, as well as countless government and academic studies have established that structural racism, xenophobia, sexism, stigmatization and othering persist – and are often exacerbated – in times of crisis. Community Action recognizes the obligation to ensure that the barriers of structural race, gender, and other inequities are addressed during this time of crisis and beyond. Therefore, it is with this lens that communities are invited to use the equity lens and the question, “why”, to understand the specific needs of the diverse populations served.

VI. Conclusion

The needs of our local community are always evolving and changing. Schuylkill Community Action (SCA) has attempted to stay on the forefront of community needs through a variety of strategic planning activities, most notably our comprehensive Community Needs Assessment (CNA). Typically, the CNA process is conducted every three years, however, because of COVID-19 the current needs in the community have dramatically shifted and update to our current assessment is required.

COVID-19 has provided unprecedented financial and economic distress in our local community, which has taken a significant toll on many families in our local communities. Because of the impact, many families are now struggling to satisfy even their most basic needs. As we attempt to recover as a community, more resources will be required to address basic needs. Below is a list of anticipated priorities moving forward:

- **Shelter** – For most households in our community, housing and shelter represents the greatest household expense. With a significant portion of Schuylkill County experiencing a loss of income or increased financial burdens as a result of COVID-19, many Schuylkill County residents are expected to face a housing crisis. While there are moratoriums and protections on mortgage foreclosures and rental evictions at this time, the financial burden and cost of housing continues to accumulate and once protections are lifted there is expected to be an eviction and foreclosure cliff for those families that were unable to make payments during the moratorium. With the anticipated foreclosure and eviction cliff, SCA will seek to address the need through expansion of current programs and development of new programs. Below is an outline of potential programming:
 - Foreclosure Prevention
 - Home Emergency Mortgage Assistance Program- (Current)
 - Schuylkill County Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Program- (Current)
 - Housing Counseling- Homeowner focused (Current)
 - Mortgage Assistance Program (Development)
 - Homelessness Prevention
 - Emergency Solutions Grant- Homelessness Prevention Program (Development and Expansion)
 - Emergency Rental Assistance Program (Development)
 - Housing Counseling- Tenant focused (Expansion)
 - Homeless Assistance
 - Emergency Shelter (Expansion)
 - Bridge House Transitional Housing (Site Expansion if approved by HUD)
 - Emergency Solutions Grant Rapid Rehousing (Expansion)

- **Food Insecurity**- According to the most recent Feeding America Map the Meal gap study, current data suggests that 11.6% of Schuylkill County residents face food insecurity. Food insecurity refers to a USDA measure of lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members and limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods. Food insecurity impacts the following economic groups:

% Experiencing Food Insecurity	Poverty Threshold
36%	Above Nutrition Program Threshold of 185% Federal Poverty Level
6%	Between 160% and 185% of Federal Poverty Level
58%	Below SNAP Threshold 160% of Federal Poverty Level

As the table above demonstrates, food insecurity greatly impacts Schuylkill Counties most poor households and those just above assistance levels. As a result of COVID-19, food insecurity rates are expected to sharply increase. Initial agency data reflects a 12% increase in unduplicated customers accessing food resources in March 2020 when compared to March 2019. This data was collected prior to the mandated lifting of poverty guidelines and access to food commodities. As the

pandemic response continues, SCA expects to see an increase of customer accessing food pantries and/or emergency food and increase of returning customers to local pantries moving forward.

In efforts to address increase demand for food commodities, SCA is considering instituting following measures:

- Schuylkill Food Network- Increase food commodities available at the nineteen (19) distribution sites.
- Food Network Assistant- Creating a position to assist in the operation of food pantries and accessing food resources.
- Donor support
 - Monetary donations- Offset costs of food purchase and delivery fees and operation of refrigerated food truck.
 - Food donations- Increase food donations from manufacturing and warehouse distribution vendors in the community.
- **Utility Assistance-** As a result of stay at home and shelter in place orders mandated by the State of Pennsylvania, residents can be expected to see an increase in utility usage in their homes. With the increase usage and economic crisis, many Schuylkill County residents will struggle to meet their utility payment obligations. SCA anticipates the expansion of current programs and development of new programs to address utility burden. Below is a list of current and potential programs:
 - Electric
 - PPL OnTrack Customer Assistance Program (current)
 - PPL Operation Help Program (current)
 - Emergency Electric Assistance Payment- Borough of St. Clair/Schuylkill Haven (development)
 - Natural Gas
 - UGI CAP (current)
 - UGI Operation Share (current)
 - Heating Assistance
 - PPL Operation Help Program (current)
 - Heating Assistance Grant- Non-PPL customers (development)
 - Water/Sewer
 - AQUA (program referral)
 - Water/Sewer grant program (development)
- **Financial Education-** The economic fallout from COVID-19 highlighted financial management issues plaguing many Schuylkill County residents. Many families in our local community are living paycheck to paycheck and do not have emergency funds set aside in the event of a crisis. One financial crisis can have long lasting consequences on a family from which they will not be able to recover. Increasing emphasis on financial education and money management will allow households the opportunity to develop and economic recovery plan and to develop safety nets to prevent future financial crises.

- Financial Education Coaching/Counseling
 - Workshops (current)
 - Individual (Expansion)
- Budget Counseling
 - Case Management (development)

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an economic crisis that has perpetuated poverty in our local community. The aforementioned areas spotlight an enhanced focus on assisting households address their most basic needs in an effort to stabilize their lives. As the impacts of COVID-19 evolve, so will potential needs. This updated Community Needs Assessment serves as a starting point for addressing emerging trends, due to the pandemic. The updated assessment does not replace the gaps analysis and needs developed during the 2018 Schuylkill Community Action Community Needs Assessment and should be viewed as a supplement to areas identified in that assessment.