

Community Needs Assessment

2004 FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

*Perceptions among key leaders
regarding the most important
issues facing their community*



Prepared by

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Otter Tail County, Minnesota **Community Needs Assessment:** **2004 Focus Group Results**

**Analysis conducted by the North Dakota State Data Center
for the Otter Tail County Needs Assessment Committee**

Issued January 2005

Introduction

At the request of the Otter Tail County Needs Assessment Committee, the North Dakota State Data Center conducted three focus groups with “key leaders” from across the county to determine the issues that these individuals felt were most important for their communities. An informal web survey, conducted by committee members prior to the focus groups, indicated four primary themes or areas of concern: 1) family, 2) jobs and employment, 3) health and health care, and 4) alcohol and drugs. The focus groups provided an opportunity to further explore these primary themes, as well as to determine how well the preliminary web survey results resonated with the key leaders. The key leaders were asked to discuss what they saw as the main issues and concerns before exploring the primary themes. Finally, they were asked to prioritize the issues and concerns for their communities. Though not emphasized at this stage of the needs assessment process, participants were also given the opportunity to offer suggestions for how concerns could be most effectively addressed.

The focus groups were organized according to constituency groups within Otter Tail County, Minnesota. All focus groups were conducted in the evening, from 7pm to 9pm, with the intention of making them more convenient for participants. The first focus group was conducted on Monday, November 15, 2004, in Perham and targeted individuals involved in non-profits, advocacy groups, civic organizations, service clubs, faith communities, seniors, and health care. The second focus group was conducted Thursday, November 18, 2004, in Fergus Falls and targeted professionals, business leaders, government, the legal community, law enforcement, job training, and economic development. The final focus group was conducted on Monday, November 22, 2004, in Pelican Rapids and targeted individuals involved in public schools, non-public schools, child care, libraries, recreation, and arts. There were a total of 19 participants.

Detailed notes were taken during the focus groups for later analysis. During analysis, the responses were grouped in themes according to the six main questions asked during the focus group. Results are reported according to the frequency of responses and the weight themes were given in discussion. After a brief executive summary, a detailed description of results is presented, followed by a discussion of differences between focus groups and how well the four primary themes resonated with key leaders.

Executive Summary

Overview:

- Three focus groups with 19 “key leaders” in Otter Tail County, Minnesota
 - Group 1: non-profits, advocacy groups, civic organizations, service clubs, faith communities, seniors, and health care
 - Group 2: professionals, business leaders, government, legal community, law enforcement, job training, and economic development
 - Group 3: public schools, non-public schools, child care, libraries, recreation, and arts
- Held during November 2004 in Perham, Fergus Falls, and Pelican Rapids
- Organized into questions related to: main issues and concerns, and the four themes: 1) family, 2) jobs and employment, 3) health and health care, and 4) alcohol and drugs

Main issues and concerns included:

- Transportation
- Child care
- Economic disparity
- Low number of jobs available
- Cultural diversity
- Ways to address issues and concerns included: consolidation of transportation, diversity and sexuality education, collaboration, maintaining programs, activities for children, elderly as mentors, home ownership

Theme 1: Family issues and concerns included:

- Taking back family time
- Under-parented children
- Disconnection between parents and teachers
- Maintaining programs that help families and children
- Affordable housing

Theme 2: Jobs and employment issues and concerns included:

- Benefits
- Student employment
- Retaining youth
- High cost of child care
- Worker shortages
- Changing expectations of young employees
- Lack of space
- Volunteerism
- Higher education costs
- Poverty
- Fewer local banks

Theme 3: Health and health care issues and concerns included:

- High cost of health insurance
- High cost of prescription drugs
- Programs for seniors
- Seniors living in their own homes
- Mental health
- Domestic violence
- AIDS education

- Long-term care insurance
- Nursing home funding cut-backs
- Medical staffing
- Deteriorating buildings

Theme 4: Alcohol and drug issues and concerns included:

- Meth issues
- Education regarding meth production and other issues
- Alcohol as a default drug for kids and adults
- Cut-backs in resources for drug and alcohol education and treatment

Prioritizing of issues and concerns:

- Family: family time, home ownership, Early Childhood education, welcome wagon, domestic violence, seniors
- Job issues
- Health and health care
- Literacy rate
- Greater availability of “decent” jobs
- Coordinating services
- Government funding
- Diversity

Discussion of Differences Between the Three Focus Groups:

- The three focus groups were organized according to a broad relationship between constituency groups. Due to this arrangement there were slight differences in the focus of the discussions within each group. However, there were many similarities between the groups as well.
- Discussed in all three groups:
 - Transportation, family, program cut-backs, meth issues
- Discussed in two of the groups:
 - Collaboration, affordable housing, youth activities, looming shortage of workers, decrease of employment benefits and increasing costs of health insurance
- Group 1 discussions revolved around health care, mental health, altruistic concerns
 - Only group to mention cultural diversity issues, senior day care services, sexuality education
- Group 2 discussions revolved around employment issues, attracting new families
 - Only group to suggest a call plan for monitoring health and well-being of seniors
- Group 3 discussions revolved around youth and family concerns

Discussion of How Well Themes Resonated With Key Leaders:

- The four primary themes introduced by the informal web survey, i.e. family, jobs and employment, health and health care, and drugs and alcohol, loosely fit the participants’ responses to the question about “main” issues and concerns. When prioritizing the issues and concerns at the conclusion of the focus groups, each of the four themes was included.

Detailed Description of Results

Question 1. What do you see as the main issues and concerns for your communities?

- A tremendous variety of topics arose when key leaders were asked to contemplate the question of main issues in their communities. The most frequent response, as well as the response that gained the most discussion among group members, was the topic of transportation.
 - *“Transportation is a big issue, not only in the county, but around town as well.”*
- This included both senior transportation and transportation for families with children.
- Another common topic of discussion centered on child care. This included availability, affordability, and the reduced funding of programs such as ECFE, Head Start, and school programs.
- Frequently the topic of economic disparity was brought up, referring to the “haves” and “have-nots.”
 - *“Economic disparity is a concern - the haves versus have-nots - especially within the lake communities.”*
- Tied directly into this topic is the disparity between income and housing, both for seniors as well as younger couples.
 - *“Huge disparity between income and housing. It is difficult for people to stay in a community if there is no housing available within their range, they have to go somewhere else.”*
- Another aspect that ties into economic disparity is the low number of jobs available, and the high number of those jobs that are low-wage positions, which participants felt had a great impact on the high rate of outmigration. Other topics that linked to this main idea were the looming prospect of a lack of health care workers and a growing lack of teachers in health fields, especially nursing teachers.
- A topic that received a great deal of discussion in one focus group was that of cultural diversity, referring to both the acceptance of diverse populations and the encouragement of introducing new cultures to the area.
 - *“In Pelican Rapids there are 16 languages spoken, in Perham maybe only two, but there is a lot of diversity.”*
- Other common responses included: supporting school bond issues, methamphetamine concerns, encouraging attendance at the Community College, increasing inventory and assistance at the food shelves, and maintaining facilities (especially schools).
- Finally, less common responses included: concerns for homeless shelters, domestic violence, making the community feel more inclusive, community amenities to attract new residents, youth activities and information on how to access programs, health care costs, youth jobs and senior friendly employment, new jail, maintaining the lakes, mental health services for youth, grandparents raising grandchildren, and emergency day care.

How can the main concerns of the communities be most effectively addressed?

- The most common response was addressing transportation issues, perhaps through consolidation of transportation and better cooperation between communities and organizations.
- Diversity and sexuality education were given as suggestions to overcome the issues related to cultural diversity, and homosexuality and senior sexuality concerns.
 - *“We’re going to get the diversity, it’s inevitable. Are we going to gain it kicking and screaming, or are we going to embrace it and learn other cultures and accept them?”*

- An increase of collaboration of groups and programs to better serve individuals was seen as a primary resolution within one focus group.
- Maintaining programs that help others through taxes was mentioned multiple times.
- Increasing activities for children and teenagers was mentioned and current programs and planned activities were mentioned.
- Increasing the use of elderly as mentors was seen as a resolution to helping them stay active, and increasing relationships between elderly and youth.
 - *“I think using older people as mentors would be an important youth activity alternative, and an important resource that we are not using.”*
- Increasing education on home ownership, such as lending programs, and increasing the availability of starter homes were other concepts that participants thought would be useful.

Question 2. What family issues and concerns do you see in your communities?

- There were multiple issues that were discussed concerning what participants felt were family issues. Taking back family time, in any way that can be achieved, was seen as a primary goal.
- Directly tied to this concept was the idea of under-parented children, referring to the idea that parents are frequently working (sometimes more than full-time) and lack the time and energy to attend to anything beyond the basic needs of their children.
 - *“If a parent works a job 8-5, they come home, feed and bathe children, then put them to bed. There is no time for anything else, like family time or homework time. Parents feel stretched.”*
- Other possible causes of under-parenting were discussed: the rising numbers of single parents and grandparents raising grandchildren.
- Another problem that arises from the increased work load more common today was a disconnection between parents and teachers.
- Maintaining programs that help families and children, such as special education, mental health, and child development programs, was a primary concern for participants.
 - *“We have services that don’t meet all the needs. Places are filled and families/children don’t receive the services they desire.”*
- Senior day care was seen as a program that could be added to many communities. The lack of enough donated goods and the difficulty of obtaining them when needed was seen as an issue. A leadership crisis was seen to be tied to the lack of programs, especially a lack of young leaders.
 - *“There is a leadership crisis; we don’t have the number of young leaders to sustain good community development into the future.”*
- Affordable housing was seen as a family concern. Children in poverty and child obesity were seen as other concerns for families, as well as drug issues.

Question 3. What jobs and employment issues and concerns do you see in your communities?

- Some of the most commonly mentioned issues with jobs and employment were benefits, especially the practice of employers reducing employees’ hours to avoid benefits. Tying into this were (increasingly) high health care and dental costs.
 - *“Benefits are an issue with jobs. So many places are going to less than 40 hours a week so that they don’t have to pay benefits.”*

- Also, student employment was seen as a potential burden for students; however, if businesses could be encouraged to be flexible with students and understand that school should be the priority for this group, employment is an opportunity for skill development among youth.
 - *“Maybe there needs to be something that recognizes employers that recognize that jobs are not the youth’s most important things in their life.”*
- Retaining youth in the community was another concern. This was seen as being related to having jobs that are higher paying that will keep them in the area, or bring them back after schooling.
 - *“We’ve tried to work hard on retention and community building to keep people in our community and make them feel a part of it. I think it is a long process, but we’ve come a long way.”*
- Directly linked to a concern of high paying jobs was the high cost of child care for parents.
- Participants also mentioned worker shortages, an issue that ties into the aging of the population as much as it ties into outmigration of the young.
 - *“In 10 years, we’ll lose 45 percent of our skilled workforce where I work. It’s not just us in that situation; it’s the same all over. All of a sudden, there will be 40 people retiring in the span of two years.”*
- A lack of professional positions was also seen as an issue. Outsourcing was seen as a problem that wasn’t directly affecting their communities, but was seen as having some impact.
- The changing expectations of young employees were seen as a problem by some of the participants, because the expectations can be unrealistic. One participant mentioned that the reality may actually be that employers will need to change their ideas to adapt to the mindset of new employees.
- There was a lack of space in the main business district in some of the communities for new businesses moving in or just starting out.
 - *“There is a lack of spaces. All the existing businesses are in the old areas and we need to give incentives to existing businesses to move to the new spaces, so there are cheaper rents for newer businesses to move in.”*
- Volunteerism was seen to be down and it is primarily the older elderly that are volunteering, not the new retirees. One participant mentioned that companies could play a positive role in encouraging volunteerism among their employees. Another participant stressed the role of volunteerism in promoting values and a sense of community among youth.
 - *“We need education of how volunteering helps you feel, so that the young realize the benefits.”*
- Higher education costs were seen to be increasing, dramatically hindering the likelihood of secondary education.
- Poverty was seen as an increasing issue in the communities due to a large number of low-wage positions.
- The trend of fewer local banks and increasing numbers of chain banks was a concern, because chain banks were seen to be less interested and involved in the local communities.

Question 4. What health and health care issues and concerns do you see in your communities?

- The high cost of health insurance was one of the top issues, especially the lack of employer assistance with health insurance and other benefits.
 - *“The cost of health insurance is a concern, our family of seven pays \$800 a month and we don’t have good jobs to pay for this.”*

- The concept of having to choose between eating or buying pills was brought up in the focus groups, alluding to the high cost of prescription drugs that hinder elderly and others from being able to afford all the things they need in life.
- Another concern was regarding programs for seniors that have rigid income requirements that restrict their use.
 - *"We have the programs to take care of the low income seniors or disabled if they fit into that slot (\$800/month) but if you make \$850, then you can't qualify. There is no slide to it, it's a cliff."*
- Older seniors living in their own homes that are limited in their outside involvement and recreation, and lack community connections in general, were seen as vulnerable. A call plan, in which phone numbers of vulnerable elderly would be assigned to volunteers that would call them on a regular basis to check on their health and provide simple services to them, was suggested as a possible solution.
 - *"I think what would happen is that someone would develop a friendship and call even when they don't have to."*
- Mental health of adults and youth was seen as a taboo issue, yet one that needs addressing.
- Domestic violence was described as an issue that receives little attention but affects even larger numbers than most people in the community would expect.
 - *"Someplace Safe, the place for domestic violence in Perham - it has been widely used in just the last 60 days. 117 new women helped and 40 files for protection in this small area. Needing this much help in this short amount of time - that's huge and not appropriate."*
- AIDS education was seen as an issue that needs constant attention, especially with the increasing sexuality of divorced and widowed elderly.
- Long term care insurance was cited as a health concern for the community, both because of the high cost of care and the high cost of the insurance.
- Nursing home funding cut-backs were discussed during one focus group, because the large amount of cut-backs may lead to a critical lack of services in the future.
 - *"Beds that are lost, are just lost. They are not moved to another place, they're just gone."*
- Cut-backs in medical staffing because of the lack of funding for medical services, the high costs of benefits for employees, and the upcoming retiring population were seen as looming concerns.
- Deteriorating buildings were described as a final concern of health care.

Question 5. What issues and concerns do you see in your communities regarding alcohol and drugs?

- The most common issue that was brought up concerning drugs and alcohol was meth. There was an idea that alcohol problems are larger in number than meth issues, but that meth issues are growing faster and are costlier and more dangerous to address.
 - *"A lot of our violent crimes these days are driven by meth."*
- Another concern with meth was education of farmers, parents, and other community members regarding the production and other issues involving meth.
 - *"I was surprised when at the Y we did classes on meth, the number of parents and adults that showed up. We don't have enough officers to get the information out to those that desire it."*
- Some participants mentioned that alcohol has become a default drug for kids who don't want to do harder drugs. There is a need to determine the underlying reasons why kids and adults do drugs and use alcohol.

- There have been cut-backs in the resources for drug and alcohol education and treatment. This concern related to the transition from a state facility to smaller, more local facilities for drug treatment as well as the elimination of programs such as DARE to prevent kids from smoking and using other drugs.
 - *“We should have more resources for drug and alcohol prevention. I think we’ve cut back those so drastically, it’s not enough. We need to make it a priority.”*
 - *“Losing the detox center when the treatment facility closes is a concern of many. They have to move the beds into communities. Communities are ready to absorb 20 beds of mentally ill, but they aren’t welcome in many communities.”*

Question 6. How would you prioritize which issues and concerns are most important for your communities?

- It was difficult for participants to prioritize all of the issues that were discussed during their focus group. Common responses revolved around the family.
 - *“Work to build strong families - that will help to take care of a lot of the other issues.”*
 - Increasing recreation and family time was thought to be able to address other issues while increasing more traditional family values.
 - Tied in with this was the desire to increase home ownership for young families through the use of down-payment assistance.
 - Also, cut-backs on early childhood education were a concern because it was felt that teaching children is an essential component to building toward the future.
 - *“Build towards the future, anything that builds looking forward.”*
 - Another idea was to have a welcome wagon that would connect neighbors and increase ties and supports for families.
 - Domestic violence was seen as a hidden concern in all communities.
 - A final concern was to not forget seniors when discussing family issues.
 - *“How do you define family - you’re missing seniors in prioritizing with these four issues. Seniors are missing from all but health care, really.”*
- Job issues were also of primary concern. Both teaching how to be a good employee and teaching work skills were thought to be important priorities.
 - *“Somehow in the job market we must be more effective in preparing people, whether in college or with job shadowing and job training. Also, prepare them so they know what it takes to be a good employee.”*
- Health and health care issues were also mentioned by participants as primary concerns.
 - *“Health and health care has to come up fairly high, but then jobs and employment too; could flip the quarter either way.”*
- The literacy rate was also a primary concern along with having a greater availability of “decent” jobs.
- Coordinating services among organizations and communities in order to more effectively and efficiently work together was another important issue for participants.
 - *“Coordination of services, trying to get so everything works together. A lot of times we are all doing things, but there are times that we could work together more effectively and be willing to work together.”*
- Cut-backs in government funding and diversity were the final ideas mentioned by participants.
- Despite prolific responses regarding transportation during discussions, it was mentioned by few individuals while prioritizing at the end of the discussions.

Discussion of Differences Between the Three Focus Groups

The three focus groups were organized according to a broad relationship between constituency groups. Due to this arrangement there were slight differences in the focus of the discussions within each group, however, there were many similarities between the groups as well.

There were a few topics that were discussed within all three groups. The concern for transportation was varied between the groups, but was mentioned as a primary concern in all three of the groups. Transportation issues revolved around rural, senior, family, and worker transportation. Participants cited expense and availability as primary concerns. Family was also a primary concern within all three groups. The concern for under-parenting revolved around the increasing amount of time parents spend working and the lack of activities for families to do together. Program cut-backs were mentioned in all three focus groups with slightly different examples of which cuts have the most impact. Child care cut-backs were mentioned as an issue within the focus groups, as well as other programs that serve to help families. Finally, the concern for meth use was mentioned in each focus group. Preventing the use of drugs, educating farmers and those that inadvertently supply products for meth production, and serving those with addictions were mentioned within all three groups.

A number of topics were mentioned within two of the focus groups. Collaboration of programs and services to better serve the community was a common topic. Affordable housing for young families and the elderly was a concern for a number of participants as well as domestic violence and centers to address the needs of those victims. The numbers of working youth and youth activities, including cases where too few are available and other cases where youth are seen as too involved, were also described as concerns. The looming shortage of workers due to retirement and the need for increasing education for workers were also frequently mentioned. The decrease of benefits provided by employers and the increasing costs of health insurance were also cited as concerns within two of the groups.

The first focus group consisted of non-profits, advocacy groups, civic organizations, service clubs, faith communities, seniors, and health care representatives. This group focused a great deal on health care and mental health concerns as well as altruistic concerns like homeless shelters and food shelves. They were also the only group to mention cultural diversity issues, senior day care services, and sexuality education. The second focus group consisted of professionals, business leaders, government, the legal community, law enforcement, job training, and economic development. This group's discussions revolved more around employment, retention of young employees, and attracting new families. This was the only group to suggest a call plan for monitoring the health and well-being of seniors. The final focus group consisted of individuals involved in public schools, non-public schools, child care, libraries, recreation, and arts. This focus group's discussion revolved primarily around youth and family concerns, emphasizing the role of the family in preventing other issues from becoming larger concerns.

Discussion of How Well Themes Resonated With Key Leaders

Participants' concerns did fit loosely within the four main themes that the informal web survey suggested. Though key leaders were provided some information regarding the four themes when they were invited to be a part of the focus groups, the initial question of "main" issues and concerns aimed to give participants the freedom to explore any topics they felt were important.

Based on the results of the first question, many of the participants' main concerns could be placed in the broad headings of family, jobs and employment, health and health care, and drugs and alcohol concerns. There were multiple responses within the main issues question that fit within the family theme including child care, domestic violence, youth activities, and economic disparity. Health care costs and mental health were also discussed during this introductory question. Attendance at the community college as well as youth and senior employment concerns fit into the third theme of jobs and employment. Finally, meth was discussed as a concern in the initial question as well.

However, there were a number of responses to the initial question regarding main issues that do not fit as neatly into the four main themes. These include the concept of transportation, cultural diversity, food shelves, deteriorating facilities, homeless shelters, a new jail, and maintaining the lakes.

During the final question, participants primarily suggested family issues as a top priority which had the potential of resolving many other issues. When prioritizing, the issues participants discussed did generally fall within the four main themes, though prioritization took place after more than an hour of discussion regarding the four themes.