



Community Needs Assessment Summary February 2023

West Central Minnesota Communities Action, Inc. (WCMCA) is located in Elbow Lake, MN and has been in existence since 1965, serving low-income households primarily in Douglas, Grant, Pope, Stevens and Traverse counties in West Central Minnesota.

WCMCA Mission: *Empowering people while providing services and resources that impact individuals and communities.*

WCMCA Vision: *Partnering to build resiliency in Greater Minnesota*

WCMCA Values: *Embracing our culture WCMCA values:*



PASSION - we strive for empathy & compassion



INTERGRITY- we expect honesty & accountability



INCLUSION - we accept all, while striving to eliminate injustice



RESPECT - we trust, honor & care for all

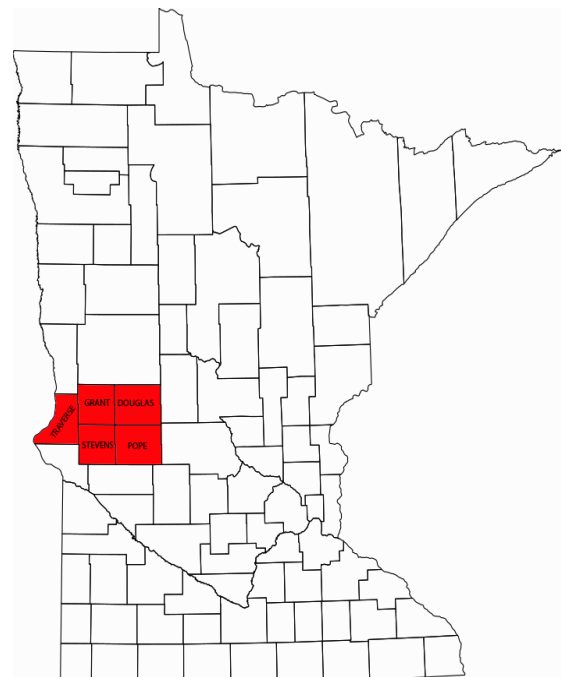


TEAMWORK - we are stronger when we work together

Community Action Promise: *Community Action changes people's lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better place to live. We care about the entire community, and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.*

WCMCA currently operates programming in the areas of energy assistance, affordable housing development, housing rehabilitation, weatherization, Head Start, homeless services including Families homeless prevention and assistance (FHPAP), long term homeless, transitional housing and rapid rehousing programs, older adult programs, supervised visitation, free tax preparation, asset development, financial education, benefits assistance including MNsure navigation services, and transportation services. The needs assessment evaluates the cause and consequences of poverty within WCMCA's legislatively designated Community Action area of Douglas, Pope, Stevens, Grant, and Traverse Counties.

The service area is located (as our namesake states) in the West Central part of Minnesota, with Traverse County neighboring the South Dakota border. The total population is approximately 69,000 people across 2,992 square miles. The economy of central Minnesota, like that of the United States as a whole, has largely shifted from agriculture and mining to industry and service in recent years. Agriculture is still important in the region, especially in the southern and western part of the region,



where the land and soil are conducive to growing crops such as corn and soybeans. Dairy farms also dot the region in areas where crops cannot easily be grown, but their numbers have been drastically dwindling in recent years. The ethnic makeup of central Minnesota is largely representative of the first settlers who came to the region. People of German and Scandinavian heritage by far make up the majority of the region's residents.

Community-level data, key indicators of the causes and conditions of poverty.

1. **Safe, Affordable Housing (all markets)**- West Central Minnesota contains the highest percentage of severely cost burdened renters; Douglas County 42.3%, Grant County 32.8%, Pope County 34.4%, Stevens County 58.8%, and Traverse County 37.4%. The rental vacancy rate is less than 2%, compared to a healthy vacancy rate of 5%. There are little to no quality homes for sale at an affordable price for WCMCA's customers and other community members.
2. **Rural Transportation**- The cost to run public transportation in rural areas is expensive and the availability to find drivers is extremely difficult, which is why availability is limited however there is a high need for seniors and adults. The typical commute for a working person in WCMCA's service area is between 10 and 19 minutes by car. A person living this far from work does not have the option to walk or take a bike to work, medical appointments or to the grocery store.
3. **Aging Population**- The expected change in population of seniors over the next 10-30 years will have an enormous impact on West Central Minnesota. Two decades from now, more than one out of every five Minnesotans will be an older adult. About the same time, Minnesota is expected to hit the peak "retirement- to working-age ratio," with nearly two retirement-age adults for every five working-age Minnesotans. This huge demographic shift will have widespread impact on Minnesota's economy, workforce, housing, health care system, social services, and civic institutions.
4. **Workforce Shortage**- In the coming decade, employers in a variety of industries may have difficulty filling open positions. Service-providing industries will experience the majority of employment growth between 2016 and 2026. Job opportunities are expected to emerge in sectors providing services by and for Minnesota's future populations, including our growing older adult population and our increasingly diverse youth populations. Facing a workforce shortage of 239,000 workers in the next few years, there are investments we can make to reduce that gap by almost one-third.

Focus group and Survey Responses

1. **Transportation**- Reliable transportation is a barrier throughout WCMCA's entire service area but especially for those who do not live in "town". Many community members own their own vehicles but the cost of owning them is very high with repairs as the number one cost burden, then insurance, and gas.
2. **Safe, Affordable Housing** – There is little to no *safe and affordable* housing throughout the service area. Often if a unit is affordable, it is not safe or sanitary. Seniors especially are in need of affordable rental options, as well as those with large families in need of three or more bedrooms.
3. **Resolution of the "Cliff Effect"**- Many respondents expressed frustration with making just enough to not qualify for some services that are still needed and the dilemma it causes when asked to choose between working more hours or getting a raise, and continuing to receive assistance such as SNAP, Energy Assistance, or Medical Assistance. This in turn affects local businesses and their ability to hire and keep full-time employees.
4. **Employment**- Jobs that pay well and are flexible to work around the childcare options/needs. Many of the jobs that are held by those that WCMCA serves do not pay a livable wage, which requires them to remain on public programs and assistance. Flexible schedules are necessary for people in our

community, especially those that are single parents. The lack of, and high cost of childcare for families causes extra burden.

5. **Handyman and Chore Services for Seniors/Aging Population** – Many seniors who wish to remain in their homes are having difficulty doing so due to the high costs of maintaining the home, especially when it comes to small repairs, snow removal and lawn care. It is unaffordable for them to move to a rental unit in town. In addition, areas of this region are faced with large older adult populations in or approaching retirement. For example, Alexandria ranks 6th (5th, as of 2020) among major Minnesota cities for the share of residents age 65+, and both have among the highest retirement- to working-age ratios in the state. A growing economy and a declining working-age population are among the factors contributing to potential workforce shortages in this region in coming years. Availability and affordability of childcare, housing, and transportation also play key roles in attracting and retaining workers.

Together, the survey data (client and community partners), focus groups and demographic data provides a broad perspective of issues and information relevant to our Agency for assessing the needs and analyzing the conditions of poverty within our communities.