

Executive Summary Marion-Polk Early Learning Hub Community Needs & Resources Survey Results

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Executive Summary

MPELH, Inc. Community Needs & Resources Survey

Purpose of the Survey

In Spring 2016, the Marion & Polk Early Learning Hub, Inc. (MPELH, Inc.) contracted with Portland State University to conduct a community needs and resources assessment to help inform community decision making about how to best expand and/or improve services for families with young children in order to support school readiness, family stability, and coordinated and aligned services. The survey was designed to collect information from a wide range of community organizations that support families with children ages 0-8 in Marion and Polk counties. Specifically, the goal was to learn more about what service expansions, enhancements, or improvements are most needed to help children be more ready for school, to improve family stability, and to better align and coordinate early childhood and family support systems. Subsequent data collection through interviews and focus groups is being planned to provide additional information for the decision making process.

Summary of Methods

The survey was designed with input from the MPELH, Inc. Advisory Board and Regional Implementation Team members. Questions were structured in such a way that respondents selected what they perceived to be the **most urgent** areas for service improvement or enhancement to support the well-being of young children ages 0-8 and their families. Questions were also included to identify key target populations in the community, services with long waitlists, and the availability of culturally specific and responsive services. Electronic (web-based) surveys were distributed to all organizations affiliated with the MPELH, Inc.; these organizations were asked, in turn, to provide the survey link to their constituencies. The survey was open for responses for 4 weeks; multiple reminders were sent to encourage participation.

Data Highlights & Key Findings

Who Completed the Survey?

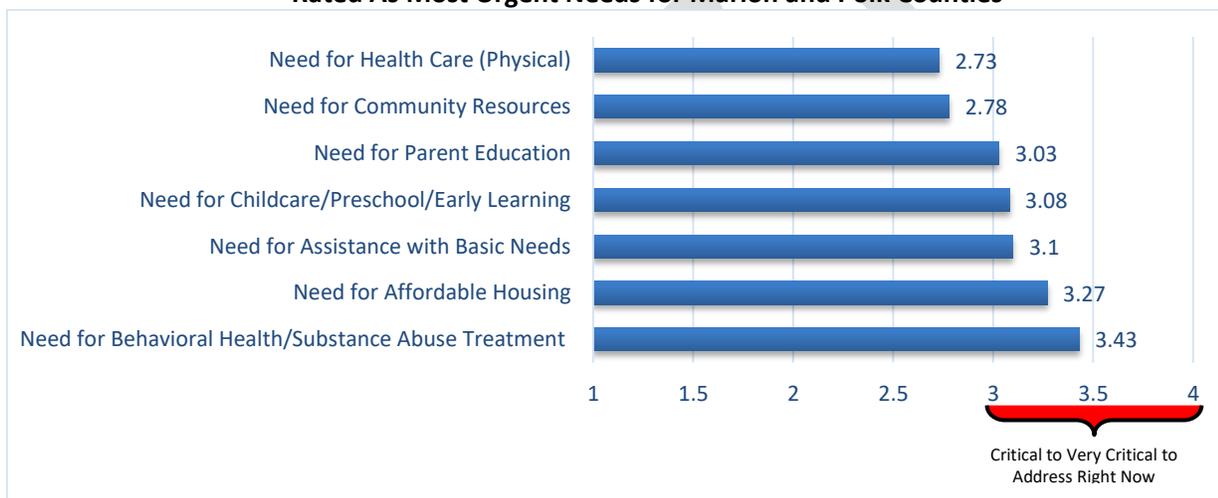
One hundred and ninety-one (191) surveys were completed, representing 211 individuals (some surveys were completed as a group). About a third (32%) represented early childhood, preschool, child care and/or parenting education organizations. Twenty-three percent (23%) represented self-sufficiency and/or other supports for families' basic needs; 14% represented housing or other community resources; and 11% were from the K-12 or Special Education systems. The smallest groups of respondents were from child welfare (8%); behavioral health/substance abuse (6%); and physical health care (6%) systems.

What Were the Most Urgent Service Needs Reported?

As shown in the figure below, when asked to **rate** the overall level of urgency for service changes across multiple systems, **behavioral health and substance abuse services**, followed by **affordable housing**, were rated as the most urgent priorities to address. **Early learning, basic needs**, and **parent education** also received ratings in the “critical” range. When asked to **choose** their “top three priorities” for improving services for families:

- **61%** included behavioral health/substance abuse;
- **57%** included early learning/child care/preschool; and
- **46%** included affordable housing.

**Behavioral Health/Substance Abuse and Affordable Housing
Rated As Most Urgent Needs for Marion and Polk Counties**



Changes most needed within the Behavioral Health/Substance Abuse System

- More mental health services for parents/caregivers
- More substance abuse services for parents/caregivers
- More mental health services for children under age 8
- More trauma informed services
- Improved access to services

Changes most needed within the Early Learning/Preschool/Child Care System

- Preschool programs (ages 3-5)
- Center-based Infant/Toddler Early Learning Programs (ages 0-2)
- After School Care for Children Ages 6-8
- More affordable early learning programs
- Higher quality early learning programs
- Better locations/accessible early learning services

Changes most needed within the Housing System:

- More low-income housing development
- More permanent supportive housing for families
- More rent payment/vouchers/security deposit assistance
- Expanded availability of affordable housing
- Better access to housing support resources

Which families should be prioritized for services and supports?

When asked to identify which specific subpopulations of parents and children are most urgently in need of more services and supports, answers reflected the reported need for services for behavioral health, substance abuse, and other trauma, specifically:

- Children & parents with mental health challenges
- Parents with substance abuse challenges
- Children involved with the child welfare system
- Families affected by domestic violence

In addition, children and parents with learning, physical, or emotional disabilities were identified as a high priority service population.

Did Respondents from Different Service Sectors Report Different Needs & Priorities?

Generally speaking, there were few significant or substantial differences in how respondents from the various service systems prioritized service needs. There were no significant differences in how respondents from different service sectors rated the urgency of need in 4 out of the 7 service areas. The areas in which respondents from different sectors rated needs differently were:

- Respondents from the **Child Welfare** service system rated behavioral health and affordable housing service needs as even more urgent than did respondents from other sectors, and rated childcare/preschool/early learning as less urgent.
- Respondents from **Childcare/Preschool/Early Learning/Parent Education** rated childcare needs as more urgent than did respondents from other sectors.

In terms of identifying high priority populations, for 14 of 16 subpopulations listed in the survey, there were no significant differences in how respondents from different service systems rated the urgency of that population's service needs. Two differences that did emerge were

- Respondents from **K12/Early Intervention/Special Education** rated the service needs of children ages 3-5 higher than did respondents from other sectors;
- Respondents from **Child Welfare** rated the service needs of migrant/seasonal worker families higher than did other respondents.

Other Key Findings

- More than a third of respondents reported that their program serves a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group, or another specific service population;
- Most programs represented by respondents are reportedly available to both Marion and Polk County residents;
- More than half of respondents reported that their programs **always or almost always** have more families than they can serve;

- While most respondents reported that children/families can generally be seen within four weeks, possible service shortages and longer wait times were reported by respondents from the **Community Resources/Housing** and **Childcare/Preschool/Early Learning** service systems.

Implications & Next Steps

The results of this survey suggest that there is considerable consensus across multiple sectors of the child and family service system in terms of where services and supports are most needed to promote school readiness, family stability and coordinated and aligned services. These stakeholders clearly felt that families affected by mental health and substance abuse (in particular) were in critical need of more available and affordable services to help them overcome challenges that may undermine family functioning and child development. In addition, the urgent need for affordable housing was also rated as critical to family and child well-being needed to support school readiness. Affordability, accessibility, and quality were further called out across service sectors as areas for improvement.

Within services that fall within the direct accountability of the MPELH, Inc., findings suggest that expansion of high quality, affordable preschool, as well as center-based care for infants and toddlers are particularly high priorities. Parenting support in the form of home visitation and ways to help families support children's learning at home were also seen as areas for service expansion. Finding ways to tailor these early childhood and parenting services to specifically address the needs of parents and children with mental health and/or substance abuse disorders warrant careful consideration. MPELH, Inc., may want to strategically seek out or enhance partnerships between early learning and behavioral health services, as well as prioritizing models for supporting school readiness that are demonstrated as being effective with these higher-risk populations. Involving these organizations as partners will be important to addressing these identified priorities.

Another issue that warrants further exploration is the availability of culturally-specific services, and services that are able to engage those target populations identified as most critically in need. While some service sectors, notably Early Learning/ Child Care/Parenting and K-12/Special Education/Early Intervention, appeared to be both more likely to provide culturally-specific services and to be aware of other culturally-specific resources in the communities, other sectors provided fewer culturally specific services and/or were generally unaware of culturally specific resources. However, sectors reporting fewer of these services and less awareness also tended to have fewer respondents overall (e.g., Behavioral Health/Substance Abuse), thus more information around these areas may be warranted.

While the information collected through this survey provides some important data to guide future work for the MPELH, Inc and its community partners, it is important to note that these responses are not a representative sample of organizations and stakeholders within Marion and Polk Counties. Clearly, some service sectors were not well-represented in the survey and further outreach and data collection from these agencies could provide additional information. Importantly, families themselves were not included in the sample, which was meant to focus primarily on the perceptions of professionals working in the community. Additional data collection from families, especially as specific interventions are being determined, will be important to ensure that these services will be successful in engaging and supporting those families most likely to benefit. Focus groups being conducted with parents this spring as a part of this needs assessment process may provide some insights, especially in regards to how to best support parents to support children's learning and development at home.