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*Provide Opportunities
Empower Families
Strengthen Communities*
csocares.org

Senate Majority Policy Committee

Mental Health and Community Assistance Round Table

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Submitted by: Megan Bair, Chief Executive Officer of Central Susquehanna Opportunities, Inc. (CSO)

CSO is the Community Action Agency for Columbia, Montour and Northumberland Counties. Our mission is to work at the family and community level to address the root causes of poverty to allow families to achieve economic mobility. We work to help people achieve economic mobility by addressing all needs within each family. Our holistic approach involves providing support for mental health, housing, employment, education, and other essential services. By addressing these interconnected needs, CSO works to create a stable foundation for individuals and families, enabling them to move towards self-sufficiency and economic mobility. CSO recognizes the economic impact that mental health services or lack thereof have on local communities.

Mental health significantly affects people's ability to work towards economic mobility. Mental health challenges can lead to feelings of hopelessness and overwhelm, making it difficult for individuals to maintain employment, pursue education, or effectively parent. These struggles are often compounded by other stressors such as housing instability, lack of quality childcare, transportation needs and financial hardship. When individuals are unable to access the mental health care they need, it can create a cycle of instability that hinders their ability to achieve self-sufficiency.

CSO's 2024 Community Needs Assessment was completed with insight from local community members and service providers and using outside data on relevant economic factors. This document highlights several key areas of concern among residents, including mental health, living wage jobs, affordable housing, and transportation

The CSO Community Needs Assessment emphasizes that mental health challenges are intertwined with other stressors like housing instability, financial hardship, and lack of childcare. Residents reported feeling hopeless, overwhelmed, and unsupported, with some expressing suicidal ideation or substance use as coping mechanisms. Mental health struggles were cited as barriers to employment, education, and parenting.

Effectively addressing mental health needs requires expanding access to services and creating comprehensive programs tailored to the essential needs of families. These initiatives promote economic stability and deliver critical support, enabling families to achieve greater economic mobility.

2024 CSO Community Needs Assessment Summary: Mental Health

Community Member Insights

- Mental health was one of the top areas of concern among residents, alongside living wage jobs, affordable housing, and transportation
- Nearly one-quarter of survey respondents reported needing mental health care within the past five years
- 27.4% of respondents worry about their mental health or the safety of a close family member almost every day

Service Provider Insights

- 82.6% of service providers identified mental health services as a critical need
- Providers noted a mental health crisis, particularly among children, with concerns about depression, anxiety and long waitlists for services
- There is a shortage of counselors, and some residents are forced to rely on phone therapy due to lack of local providers
- Providers warned of an impending “avalanche” of youth mental health issues if services are not expanded

Barriers to Access

- Long waitlists and lack of providers were frequently cited
- Residents in small communities struggle to find mental health professionals who don’t know them personally, which can affect privacy and comfort
- Transportation issues further limit access to mental health care, especially for those needing to travel to larger cities like Williamsport
- Financial constraints and insurance limitations (e.g., providers not accepting certain plans) also hinder access

Impact on Daily Life

- Mental health challenges are intertwined with other stressors like housing instability, financial hardship, and lack of childcare.
- Residents reported feeling hopeless, overwhelmed, and unsupported, with some expressing suicidal ideation or substance use as coping mechanisms
- Mental health struggles were cited as barriers to employment, education, and parenting

The full CSO Community Needs Assessment can be found at www.csocares.org

