

**Background**

The City of Santa Rosa’s Office of Community Engagement (OCE) is the link and bridge to historically marginalized communities in Santa Rosa. The OCE strives to elevate the voices of historically marginalized youth and their families and connect them to services needed for a safe and healthy Santa Rosa.

Housed in the OCE, the Santa Rosa Violence Prevention Partnership (The Partnership) and the Community Helping Our Indispensable Children Excel (CHOICE) grant program endeavor to meet the needs of the community and fulfill the objectives of The Partnership’s Community Safety Scorecard. The needs assessment for CHOICE Cycle XI includes input from The Partnership’s Operational Team, Crisis Response Team, youth focus group discussions, parent and community surveys, data analysis from the Community Safety Scorecard, and research on effective evidence-based practices to prevent, intervene and reduce various roots of violence among youth.

All participants were asked similar questions related to sense of safety in their neighborhood, the current issues young people are facing, and their family’s wellbeing. Survey participants were asked to rate where they want the City to continue to invest. Recommendations to deter violence, programs and perceptions of safety in our community were also solicited from youth, parents, and families. All those who participated were asked questions to identify specific needs for youth, parents, families, and issues in our community related to four key action areas identified in the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan. The four key action areas (pillars)are:

**Action Areas/Pillars:**

- Life Skills/Workforce Development Programs
- School Readiness
- Student Engagement & Truancy Prevention
- Street outreach, Intervention, and Mediation

In addition to the focus groups, outcomes from the Community Empowerment Plan Listening Sessions Final Report, direct community input to Violence Prevention Partnership staff, recent crime trends in Santa Rosa (sideshows), the 2018-2021 Guiding People Successfully Final Evaluation Report and a comprehensive literature review of effective evidence-based studies on the pandemic’s impacts on youth wellbeing were all incorporated into the assessment process to analyze the needs of youth and families in our community. Findings of the focus groups and surveys are consistent with the additional analysis conducted as part of this assessment. Issues affecting the community, themes and information resulting from listening sessions, community surveys and youth focus groups are highlighted on the following pages.

**Participant Demographics**

**Participants:**

- Youth
- Parents
- Residents of Santa Rosa
- VPP Community Partners

**Age Range:** 14-70

## **Community Surveys, Listening Sessions & Youth Focus Groups Findings**

### **Issues Affecting Our Community**

Although most survey participants do not feel gangs are a major issue in their neighborhood, they still agree that they present various problems. Over 50% survey respondents stated they feel safe in their neighborhood. However, delinquency, sidschows and other crimes were mentioned as reasons for not feeling safe in their neighborhoods. Seventy-three percent of survey participants believe neighborhood programs and mentorship programs would support a healthy lifestyle for youth.

The issues highlighted below were identified in the listening sessions, youth focus groups, community surveys, and by direct service providers and community member input; they are not in order of importance.

- Graffiti and vandalism
- Sidschows
- Increase in mental health issues during COVID-19 Pandemic
- Higher re-offense rates for females
- Negative gang presence in schools and neighborhoods
- Lack of culturally relevant programming and events
- Increase in violent behavior in high schools
- Homelessness among transitional aged youth (18-24)
- Truancy
- Lack of programs and pro-social activities for youth 13-18 after school and in the community

### **Barriers to Accessing Resources**

There were a variety of responses in community surveys and during community outreach about barriers to accessing resources and services. Below are the primary responses to barriers for accessing resources:

- Lack of knowledge about available services
- Lack of knowledge about where services are located
- Not knowing what services are needed for their family (“I don’t know what services or programs my family and I need”)

### **Gap in Programs and Services for Youth**

Survey respondents and listening session participants consistently discussed the need to provide programs and services for youth ages 13-18. The Partnership’s Crisis Response and Operational teams, which conducted and incorporated Trauma Informed Care workshops, identified the lack in programming for youth ages 13-15.<sup>1</sup> Due to a massive disruption caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic there has been a significant interruption to social activities and school activities. As a result, youth are experiencing anxiety, depression, and isolation at higher rates. Below are the main themes identified from the youth focus groups:

- Need for pro-social activities in and out of schools
- Need for mentorship and positive role models

- Guidance and support during and post pandemic
- Career readiness and internships
- Need for Trauma Informed Care among school staff and community partners
- Need for culturally relevant programming

## Homelessness Among Transitional Aged Youth (18-24)

A reoccurring theme in community partner meetings is housing services for transitional aged youth. Young people experiencing homelessness have a harder time accessing services, including shelter, medical care, and employment. Some reasons include the stigma of their housing situation, lack of knowledge of available resources, and a dearth of services targeted to young people.<sup>2</sup> This theme also came up in the 2020 Community Empowerment Plan listening sessions with BIPOC community groups.

According to the *2020 Sonoma County Homeless Census Comprehensive Report* conducted by Applied Survey Research, there were 2,745 homeless persons counted in the entire County as of February 2020. Of that population, 11% were 18-24 transitional aged youth, or 304 individuals. Of these 304 people, 18% were able to find some form of shelter, while the other 82% remain unsheltered. Transitional aged youth are the least sheltered groups, compared to Veterans, families, older adults, and those who are chronically homeless. In addition, this subgroup is especially challenging to engage with, resulting in limited data surrounding their experience of homelessness.<sup>3</sup> The gap in services, lack of outreach, lack of accurate data, and youth homelessness statistically being experienced by half of our current homeless population makes transitional aged youth a priority group for The Partnership.

### Key Themes

The second part of the summary focuses on the services and program recommendations by participants of all focus groups, including parents, youth, and The Partnership's Operational and Crisis Response teams. While the focus groups with parents and youth identified issues, barriers, services and programs, the Operational and Crisis Response teams solely focused on identifying necessary services and programs for the high-need areas defined by the Scorecard. Below are the themes that emerged.

### Theme Highlights

Throughout the assessment process, a few highlights were noted as important strategies to imbed within all program service delivery models for each programmatic theme. These foundational strategies are necessary to ensure that effective service delivery directly and positively address the issues, barriers, and outcomes for our youth and families.

- Communication and collaboration with other agencies (i.e., schools, non-profits, law enforcement, etc.)
- Affordable and accessible programs for youth and families
- Case management strategies to ensure all needs are met for youth and families
- Community engagement opportunities
- School engagement on behalf of The Partnership and community partners
- Pro-social activities for youth (13-18)
- Life skills and workforce development for youth ages (16-24)

## Programmatic Themes

### School Readiness

All survey respondents ranked school readiness as their number one pillar of choice for City investment. It is important to note that there are already existing State measures to increase funding for school readiness in communities throughout California. In addition, the City is taking steps towards its own investments in school readiness by developing and funding initiatives such as the Family Childcare Shared Services Alliance, increasing access to childcare for children ages 0-5 and development of a Childcare Facility Fund, among others. Finally, programs and initiatives such as First 5 of Sonoma County and Cradle to Career invest in school readiness programs in communities throughout Sonoma County, including Santa Rosa. With current and future investments in school readiness, The Partnership recommends focusing CHOICE Cycle XI funding in the focus areas of Student Engagement and Truancy Prevention; Street Outreach, Intervention and Mediation; and Workforce Development.

### Student Engagement & Truancy Prevention

During a critical time in their development, youth 13-18 need services that are currently lacking in our community. According to the article *Reframing After-School Programs as Developing Youth Interest, Identity, and Social Capital* by Katherine D. Philp and Michele Gregoire Gill, the overt focus on academics in after-school programs and services overlooks the potential and need for spaces for kids to grow and engage in nontraditional and non-academic forms. Participants of all focus groups identified the need for pro-social activities for youth at schools, parks, and neighborhood locations. By focusing on engaging youth in pro-social activities geared towards 13-18, significantly decreases the likelihood that a youth will engage in delinquent or violent behavior.<sup>4</sup>

With the extreme and sole focus on academic services and programs, current strategies continue to fail to engage and serve youth who are disengaging or are at risk of disengaging from education entirely. Focusing on programs and services that allow for support and development of the entire person, and not just their academics, is needed. Students from all socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds “deserve access to after-school spaces that support individual interest and identity development and link them to the social resources that can promote upward mobility.”<sup>5</sup> Youth need spaces that allow them to develop as people and create a stable sense of identity. Participants identified the following engagement services and programs for youth:

- Sports (*preferably longer term and affordable*)
- Recreation programs (after school, seasonal)
- Tutors/homework assistance
- Guidance and support during/post pandemic
- Culturally relevant programs
- Need for positive adult role models
- Enrichment programs such as art and music
- Need for mentorship programs
- Summer activities

### Street Outreach, Intervention, and Mediation

Listening session participants and community partners at the Multi-Disciplinary Assessment and Referral Team (MDART) and Crisis Response Team meetings specifically discussed the importance of intervening

when youth have already begun to exhibit signs of delinquent or violent behavior. Furthermore, there were specific programs and services identified for youth reentering our community after incarceration. These services require a coordinated and comprehensive approach, working with various members of the community and The Partnership, particularly law enforcement and probation. Below are examples of programs and services for higher risk youth:

- Life skills and workforce development
- Conflict mediation services
- Social and recreational alternatives (e.g., exposure to new, positive experiences, field trips, outdoor experiences, college trips, etc.)
- Street outreach and intervention services with higher risk youth
- Mentorship programs

### Workforce Development Programs

Participants consistently discussed the need for programs and services that address youth exposure to negative influences, mental health issues, and/or lack of social skills. Studies show when the latter are not addressed, this can lead to delinquent and/or violent behavior. All survey respondents ranked workforce development as their fourth choice for City investment. By addressing the need for cognitive development of the individual, while simultaneously engaging them in a pro-social environment, the individual will be less likely to engage in delinquent or violent behavior. Furthermore, all participants reported a need for programs targeting the continuum of job and career development for youth, with a specific emphasis on developing the “soft skills” or life skills to obtain and sustain a job. Participants identified the following services and programs for youth:

- Mentoring services
- Mental health services
- Student leadership programs
- Financial and computer literacy programming
- Work readiness programs (e.g., how to do a resume or interview)
- Work experience and job placement, including volunteer or community service opportunities
- Tattoo removal programs

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<sup>1</sup> 09/22/2021 Operational Teams Meeting: Trauma Informed Care Training by Nick Dalton Meeting Recording (41:44-46:00) : [https://srcity-org.zoom.us/rec/share/l\\_DH3CkI-eyfrkNW0r5UZAIS5jjKikMgaP86aEsxPYIvLNWL3z1z3phs9p3uMwxu.kPkidu46JPBQugOt](https://srcity-org.zoom.us/rec/share/l_DH3CkI-eyfrkNW0r5UZAIS5jjKikMgaP86aEsxPYIvLNWL3z1z3phs9p3uMwxu.kPkidu46JPBQugOt)

<sup>2</sup> Census Report.” *Homeless Count | Homeless Services | Community Development Commission | County of Sonoma*, 2021, <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/CDC/Homeless-Services/Homeless-Count/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid: <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/CDC/Homeless-Services/Homeless-Count/>

<sup>4</sup> Philp, Katherine D., and Michele Gregoire Gill. “Reframing After-School Programs as Developing Youth Interest, Identity, and Social Capital.” *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 1, Mar. 2020, pp. 19–26, doi:10.1177/2372732219892647

<sup>5</sup> Philp, Katherine D., and Michele Gregoire Gill. “Reframing After-School Programs as Developing Youth Interest, Identity, and Social Capital.”