



Health & Human Services

# 2023 Gwinnett Human Services

## **Needs Assessment and Five-Year Strategic Plan Executive Summary**



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Overview

Through a competitive process, Gwinnett County engaged Health Management Associates (HMA) to conduct a Human Services Needs Assessment and develop a Strategic Plan. The County had not conducted a community needs assessment since 1991, and in the meantime, has experienced rapid population growth in recent years, topping out at over a million people according to 2023 Census estimates, and has become the most culturally diverse community in the Southeastern United States. County leadership was visionary and recognized that a human service needs assessment would be a critical strategy to plan for the next five years and to set the course for a more responsive and impactful human services ecosystem. Gwinnett County is specifically designing the system of the future with the people who experience the system.

Gwinnett County asked HMA to assess the status of human services in the county to better understand the current gaps in delivery and care and develop a strategic plan and road map that will equip and guide Gwinnett County toward an equitable, community-centric future. The County had the following goals for this engagement.

- Develop a shared understanding of the human services needs and assets in the county.
- Build the foundation for increased coordination and collaboration among participating entities in the human services ecosystem in the county.
- Develop a road map for the future of human services in the county.

With leadership from the County, HMA has produced the following report, comprised of three key sections, to meet those goals:

1. An Overview of the Needs Assessment
2. The Current Human Services Ecosystem Map
3. The 2024-2029 Strategic Plan

## Methods of Assessment Process

Through this process, HMA and Gwinnett County sought to work with the community to co-create a modern system that will meet the varied needs of a diverse and rapidly growing county, and the process of understanding the current ecosystem and developing the strategic plan centered on community and stakeholder input and through the steps outlined below.



### Launched

In August 2022, the HMA and Gwinnett County team, led by the Department of Community Services, kicked off the Human Services Needs Assessment & Strategic Planning project.



### Analyzed

HMA analyzed over 70 historical documents from across the human services ecosystem including plans, reports, dashboards, publicly available data, partner services, and system outcomes/outputs.



### Facilitated

HMA facilitated 42 interviews and focus groups with County staff and human service providers and led four community conversations with close to 300 participants.



### Asked

HMA sought resident and stakeholder feedback through a survey where we received over 1,300 responses.



### Developed

HMA and the County co-created the Strategic Action Plan that will guide the county's efforts through 2029.



### Measured

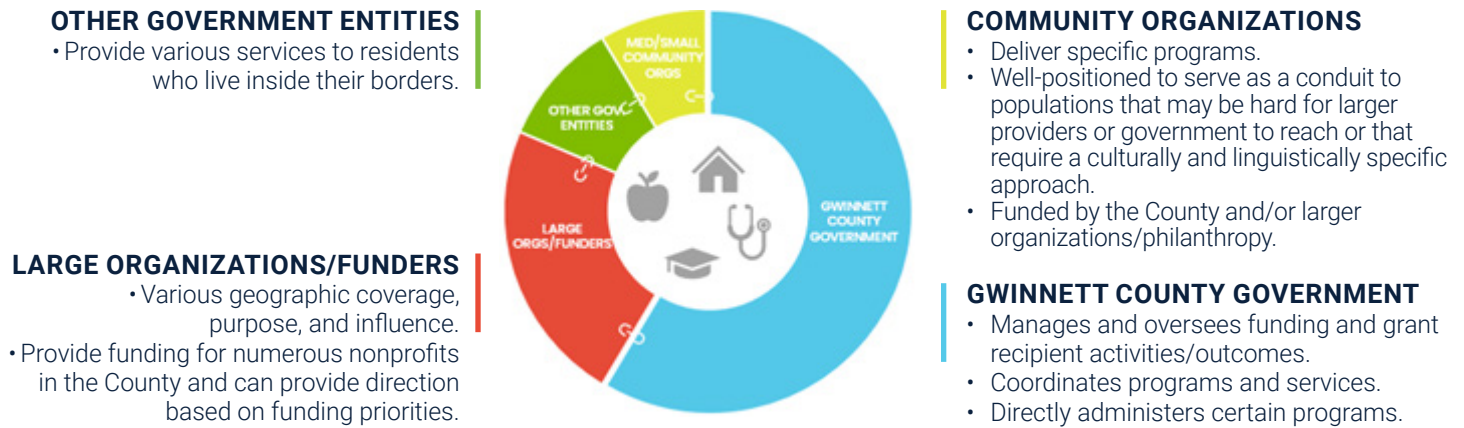
HMA made recommendations to further measure the efficacy of the system and the new model.

HMA utilized a mixed-method approach for analyses with strong input from county staff and community members to meaningfully engage the health and human services ecosystem in Gwinnett County, including service delivery providers, formal and informal community leaders, grassroots organizations, and individual members of the community, including beneficiaries of direct services and those who need services but struggle to access them, inclusively.

Quantitative data was drawn from the American Community Survey and the Policy Rules Database from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. To contextualize the data, qualitative information from interviews, focus groups, community conversations, and community/ stakeholder survey responses were used in tandem with quantitative data sets to define the environment, narrow down areas of focus, and offer explanation of trends more clearly.

## Current State Ecosystem

Gwinnett County, together with an array of public, private, and nonprofit partners, provides a dynamic portfolio of human services that is ever-evolving to meet the needs of Gwinnett County residents. The County plays a critical role in identifying health and human service needs, distributing funding, and working closely with partners to meet human service needs. Some services are delivered directly by the County, while others are delivered through subsidy or sub-recipient organizations. Because of the heightened need for basic human services precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the availability of federal relief funding to help address those needs, the County added new partners and services over the past three years.



The current human services delivery system includes both services directly provided by the County including OneStop 4 Help, Live Healthy Gwinnett, Volunteer Gwinnett, first responder services, and services for seniors and veterans. There also exists a vast, robust network of providers who are delivering parallel and/or supporting services including Housing and Community Development and Child Advocacy and Juvenile Services.

## Food Security

While Gwinnett County generally performs better than the state of Georgia and the United States as a whole on measures of food insecurity, there are communities with substantial unmet needs within this large and diverse County. Key indicators of food insecurity in Gwinnett County include:

- The Food Insecurity Index provides an indicator of relative need within the County.
- The index varies widely within the County from a low of 2.5 to a high of 96.9, and there are several neighborhoods clustered in the Southwest part of the County with high relative need, as displayed in the map below.
- Using the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Access Research Atlas, HMA identified 18 census tracts within Gwinnett County that are flagged for low-income and low-access (defined as at least 1 mile from a food store in urban areas and 10 miles in rural areas) (1). These 18 census tracts are largely clustered around the I-85 corridor in the Southwest part of the County as well as around Lawrenceville and Snellville (2).

For additional nuance that quantitative data cannot provide, HMA used our extensive qualitative research to further refine and understand how food insecurity plays out in certain neighborhoods and across the County. Specific needs identified include culturally, refrigerated and varieties of foods, transportation to pick up food, language barriers, fear among immigrant and undocumented residents, and fragmentation within the food system.

1. Food Access Research Atlas, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/>

2. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/>



## Housing

Gwinnett County is part of the Georgia Balance of State Continuum of Care (CoC) and does not have its own CoC. However, HomeFirst Gwinnett was established to design, implement, and administer the coordinated entry system for the County. In 2022, the County created a new division — the Housing and Community Development Division — within the Department of Planning and Development. The division is responsible for administering grant funds awarded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development through HOME, Community Development Block Grant, and other programs. There are four traditional municipal housing authorities within Gwinnett County: Lawrenceville, Buford, Norcross, and Sugar Hill receive state and federal funding and operate properties within Gwinnett County as well as the Housing Authority of Gwinnett County, which operates to enhance the supply of affordable housing in Gwinnett County by financing private developers who wish to build affordable, multifamily housing. In addition, to fill gaps in the emergency shelter system and to assist residents who need temporary, overnight relief when temperatures reach 35 degrees and below, Gwinnett County established county-run warming stations in 2021.

To supplement this study, HMA conducted an extensive data review that demonstrated:

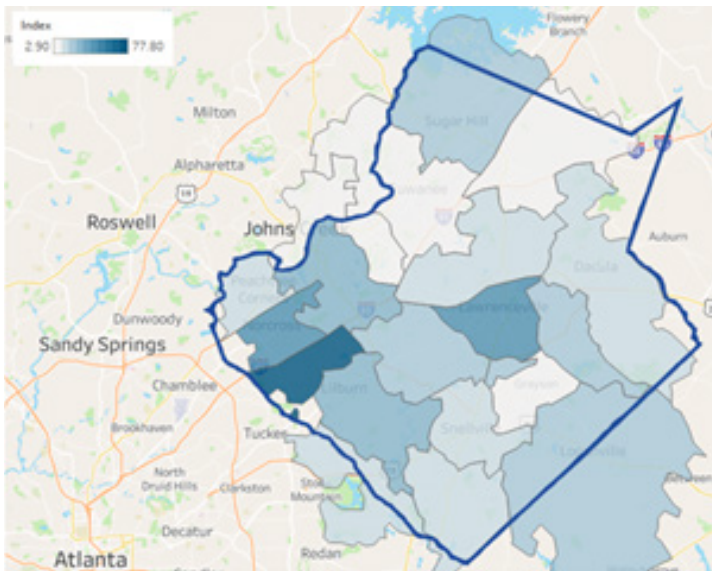
- The financial burden of housing for many Gwinnett County residents. County-wide, 55.8% of renters in Gwinnett County are spending 30% or more of household income on rent and utilities, an indicator in the worst quartile of counties in the United States and the worst quartile of counties in Georgia. In 16 of 19 zip codes in the County, at least 50% of renters are spending 30% or more of household income on rent and utilities. This figure is worsening over time, with the 5-year estimate from 2017-2021 more than five percentage points higher than the 2012-2016 5-year estimate of 50.6%.
- Overcrowded housing is also a key indicator of lack of affordable housing options and poverty. County-wide, 2.9% of households are overcrowded, which is higher than the state (2.2%) but lower than the nation (3.4%). However, there is variation across communities within the County, with zip codes in the Norcross, Lilburn, and Lawrenceville areas having higher rates of overcrowding, with the highest rate in the 30093 zip code of 5.8%. The lowest rate is in zip code 30519 (.04%).
- Total eviction filings, according to the Atlanta Regional Commission's Eviction Tracker, over the past three years for the entire County show that evictions during the CARES Act Moratorium and CDC Moratorium were substantially lower than the 2019 baseline. Evictions have been higher over the past year and higher than the 2019 baseline for most months over the past year. For example, in January 2023, there were 2,422 reported eviction filings (2,378 filings in 2019). Evictions by census tract show higher evictions around the Southwest part of the County and along the I-85 corridor, although evictions were not limited to these areas.

In addition, during focus groups and Community Conversations facilitated by HMA, nonprofit and community stakeholders described housing stability, safety, and affordability as crisis-level issues in the County, with lack of affordability as an overall trend that has impacted the entire community, the housing and human services ecosystems, and specific populations and communities that are particularly vulnerable. When asked why they can't get the services residents pointed to lack of affordable senior housing, locating affordable housing, limited resources for single mothers, wait lists/availability, inability to locate rent/support.

Gwinnett County is known for its quality of life and focus on building a healthy community, including its extensive system of parks and recreational facilities, proximity to Atlanta and world-class health care providers, and exceptional public health and behavioral health entities providing community health and safety net services. Among Georgia counties, Gwinnett ranks high (in the first quartile of the 2023 County Health Rankings for Georgia) among Georgia's 159 counties for quality of life (#8), health factors (#8), and health outcomes (#6).

There are, however, communities within Gwinnett County where numerous barriers to accessing health and behavioral health services translate to unmet need for services and limit the ability of individuals, families, and communities to obtain their optimal level of health and wellbeing. These disparities are apparent in the Health Equity Index, a measure of socioeconomic need correlated with poor health outcomes, maintained on Live Healthy Gwinnett's dashboard. Zip codes around Norcross and Lawrenceville show the highest relative need, as depicted on the map below.

HMA's interviews with community residents and stakeholders specifically identified the growing concern over mental health and substance use in Gwinnett County. Research demonstrated an acute and rising need for behavioral health services, health care access barriers, and a severe lack of linguistically and culturally appropriate health services, particularly in mental health.



### **2023 Health Equity Index**

*By zip code*

*Measurement Period: 2023*

*Data Source: Conduent Health Communities Institute*





## Youth, Literacy, and Learning

Gwinnett County and its partners, Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS), Buford City Schools, and an array of community-based organizations deliver a wide range of services to Gwinnett County youth. The County infrastructure to support youth, literacy, and learning includes Gwinnett United in Drug Education, Inc. (GUIDE), Child Advocacy and Juvenile Services Department, subsidies to support the Division of Family and Children Services, UGA Extension Gwinnett Office, which offers 4-H Youth development programs, the County Police Department, Fire and Emergency Services, and Parks and Recreation, and Building Brains Anywhere, who all offer/provide youth programming and services.

- Better and more supports for English language learners. In the County more than a third of the population aged 5+ lives in a household where a language other than English is spoken at home. The percentage ranges from a high of 63.1% in zip code 30093 to 12.3% in zip code 30052. The average across Georgia is 14.3%. There are 175 languages spoken in GCPS and approximately 25% of GCPS students are English language learners.
- While Gwinnett County has childhood poverty rates that are lower than Georgia and the nation, there are communities with extremely high child poverty rates, such as the eastern/southeastern portions of the County.
- Rising unmet need for and barriers to accessing behavioral health services among youth.
- Insufficient coordination, navigation, and communication regarding available after-school, enrichment, summer, and youth programming, mentoring, and tutoring.
- Ongoing need for quality, affordable childcare and early learning opportunities that support kindergarten readiness.
- Early drug abuse correlates with substance abuse problems later in life, and the most significant increases in destructive behavior occur among older teens and young adults.

Youth focused organizations continue to focus on youth based strategies of improvement to elevate room for improvement, stated in the 2023 United Way report on Child Well-Being specifically addressing the 505 census tracts or neighborhoods, of the total 1,260, that are considerably below metro Atlanta norms for child well-being and 79 of those trending towards lower child well-being.

GUIDE has focused significantly on reducing underage drinking since 2000, when we saw a substantial increase in teen drinking. Early on, we adopted the evidence-based program Communities Mobilizing for Change on Alcohol (CMCA) and mobilized a community task force that implemented several critical environmental strategies. These needs are exacerbated by transportation needs, a lack of coordination among service providers, and a school-by-school approach where individual school principals make decisions regarding nonprofits that can offer programming at the school leads to a large and possibly unwieldy number of organizations providing services and limits the ability to meaningfully provide navigation supports to youth and their families.



## Cross-cutting Barriers to Access

Cross-cutting barriers were also identified, particularly transportation, a need for culturally and linguistically responsive services, and addressing low-wages affecting economic development. Inadequate transportation impacts many aspects of residents' lives, including their ability to access basic services needed for themselves and their families. Central themes around transportation needs include the lack of reliable, consistent, and affordable transportation for residents to meaningfully access services; youth who, because of transportation needs, cannot fully participate in all available out-of-school time enrichment, athletic opportunities, and other activities that may positively impact their development; a public transportation system with too many gaps and not adequate alternative solutions; and service providers who are exploring individual solutions, some of which are innovative, and others which carry risk and/or use up valuable resources.

In addition, numerous cultural and linguistic barriers exist to accessing services in the community. There are several different cultures represented within Gwinnett County, and the differences between these various cultures and American culture are substantial and impact the ability of many communities to access the services they need. While there is a perception that the County is trying to put information out in different languages and work with organizations serving the diverse communities throughout Gwinnett, there remains unconscious bias, a "check the box" mentality of engaging diverse communities, and a lack of a culturally responsive and appropriate County-wide engagement strategy. More specifically, there is a need for culturally relevant food in programming targeted to food insecure residents, a lack of sufficient and appropriate translation/interpretation services, and language and cultural barriers in the health and behavioral health space.

## Future State

In addition, in the accompanying strategic plan, to get even more specific into what needs to be accomplished, this sequence of high-level goals, SMARTBE goals, objectives, and measures is supported by a new delivery model and detailed strategies, the components of which have been developed for each of the six goals, that when implemented with fidelity will ensure the County and partners accomplishes its mission on behalf of residents.

### GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The six goals below provide the necessary focus for future planning efforts; each goal frames the high-level picture of what needs to be accomplished and is supported by a narrower, SMARTBE (Strategic, Measurable, Ambitious, Realistic, Time-bound, and centered in Belonging and Equity). Each high-level goal includes actionable objectives which specify what needs to happen and what needs to be achieved to meet the goals.



#### High Level Goal 01: Address Key Service Gaps in Basic Human Needs

**SMARTBE Goal:** The county, partners, and community members should work together to address key gaps – identified through the Human Services Needs Assessment – in the county’s human services ecosystem, with a goal of closing those gaps by 2027.

##### Objectives:

- 1.1 Address food insecurity
- 1.2 Source all food security to better meet the nutritional needs of Gwinnett County’s diverse residents
- 1.3 Reduce the County’s uninsured rate and improve access to health care services
- 1.4 Address access needs to youth mental and behavioral health services
- 1.5 Improve access to adult mental and behavioral health services
- 1.6 Improve the safety and stability of housing
- 1.7 Improve wraparound services for youth and their families
- 1.8 Provide a single point of entry for specialized populations including those who need information and referrals to services
- 1.9 Improve prevention and substance strategies among key youth, adults, seniors, and veterans, including educational programs, policy changes, and community collaborative initiatives
- 1.10 Reduce poverty and low wage impact through economic development improvement on closing income gap and standardizing cost of living



#### High Level Goal 02: Create Synergy Among Programs and Partners

**SMARTBE Goal:** By the end of FY 2024, the county will have identified, trained, and nurtured a diverse set of partners who are working together to advance shared outcomes.

##### Objectives:

- 2.1 Create, strengthen, and leverage partnerships
- 2.2 Build capacity of partners and the system
- 2.3 Identify and implement Continuous Quality Improvement



#### High Level Goal 03: Develop a Sustainable Service Delivery Model

**SMARTBE Goal:** The County should develop and provide leadership for a new model that maximizes non-county revenue sources and strategically spends county dollars in direct alignment with plan goals, starting in the FY 2025 budget cycle.

##### Objectives:

- 3.1 Prioritize leveraging federal and state funding and programs to meet resident needs
- 3.2 Develop model contract(s) for provider partners that describe expectations, deliverables, outcomes, and timelines for human services delivery



### High Level Goal 04: Be a National Benchmark

**SMARTBE Goal:** By the end of the plan cycle, Gwinnett County will be a model for local governments across the nation on how to lead a community to deliver equitable, high-quality services in a growing, diverse County.

**Objectives:**

- 4.1 Increase engagement with national peers to learn from and share the County's work
- 4.2 Formalize a consistent approach to regularly obtaining and incorporating feedback from County residents into the delivery of human services
- 4.3 Nurture and model a culture of "good governance"



### High Level Goal 05: Provide Coordinated Care

**SMARTBE Goal:** By 2024, the County will launch the technology and infrastructure to support the system of providers in staying coordinated in real-time to provide timely and responsive one-stop access to a referral network.

**Objectives:**

- 5.1 Support successful development, implementation, and ongoing system usage
- 5.2 Develop regular reporting and information-sharing to reduce duplication



### High Level Goal 06: Center Service Delivery on Equity and Belonging

**SMARTBE Goal:** By 2024, the County has created and is delivering upon a service delivery model whose services, principles, data, and structures are rooted in equity and belonging.

**Objectives:**

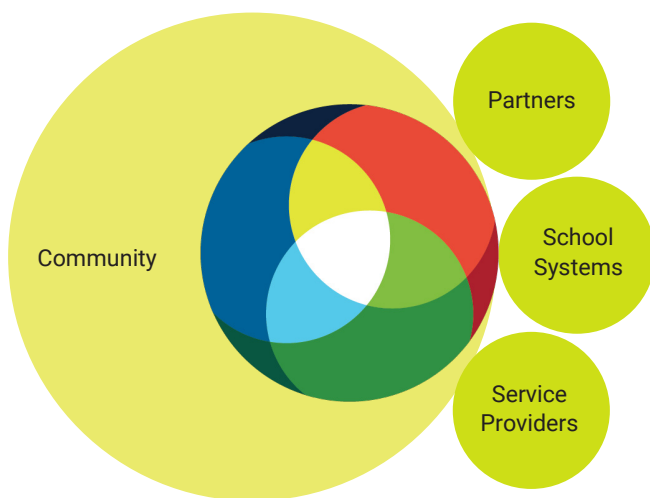
- 6.1 Model a culture of equity and belonging
- 6.2 Support and drive equity externally across the human services ecosystem

## NEW MODEL

To successfully lead and support change efforts across Gwinnett County, the County will roll out a new service delivery model for safety net services that have clear roles, structures, and goals for advancing outcomes in human services and have at its core treating people with dignity and respect, by the end of FY24. This new model is the linchpin in the County's ability to deliver on the six goals and their objectives.

This new model will drive the County's direction and work and guide how it engages with partners in the community. Given the ecosystem needs and gaps, the necessity for system-wide outcomes and accountability, and the desire to reduce duplication and strategically use County dollars across the system, the County has chosen a hybrid delivery model that will lead with the four issue areas: Food Security, Housing, Health and Wellbeing, and Youth, Literacy, and Learning.

This approach is a blend of public-private partnerships with County government, public schools, other non-county public agencies, and key private sector and community stakeholders. The County will select lead agencies around the four key priority service areas and will engage in contracts with key lead agencies who, in turn, will contract with an array of community-based organizations to build out the service array to meet the safety net needs of all residents of the County. The new model is shown below.



In addition, in the accompanying strategic plan, to get even more specific into what needs to be accomplished, the sequence of high-level goals, SMARTBE goals, objectives, and measures is supported by this new delivery model and detailed strategies, the components of which have been developed for each of the six goals, that when implemented with fidelity will ensure the County and partners accomplishes its mission on behalf of residents.