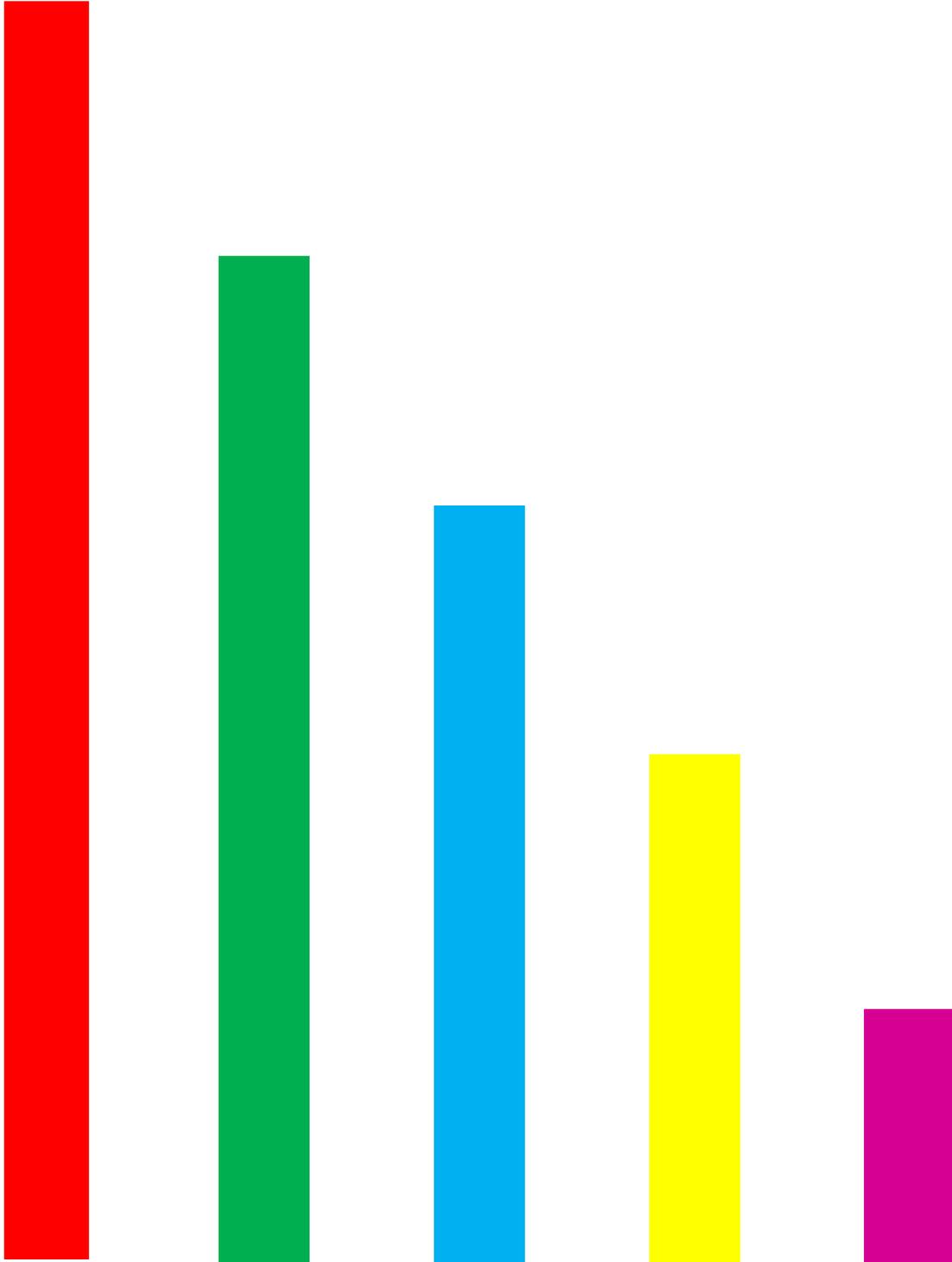


*What Makes a Healthy Okaloosa County:
An Assessment of Community
Themes and Strengths*

Okaloosa County Health Department



OKALOOSA COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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ABOUT US

Located on University of West Florida's Emerald Coast Campus in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, the Haas Center collects, analyzes, and distributes economic data for clients seeking expert economic advice. We exist to help entrepreneurs and industry leaders--from traditional manufacturing to emerging technologies--meet their information needs in the modern economy.

The Haas Center specializes in data analysis for the purposes of economic forecasting, marketing research, business expansion, tourism, and real estate development as well as industry and academic studies. The Haas Center's staff combine academic credentials with varied experience, ranging from economists to survey specialists. Each professional combines innovation with attention to detail to produce high-quality research products for Center clients.

For further information please visit our website at haas.uwf.edu or contact Rod Lewis at clewis2@uwf.edu.

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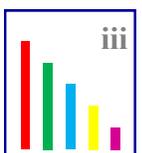
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview. The Okaloosa County Health Department commissioned a study assessing perceptions and attitudes towards quality of life and quality of health in the Okaloosa County area. To complete this study, Haas Center staff conducted surveys measuring perceptions of health and economic issues and five focus groups measuring attitudes and perceptions of quality of life and health in the area. Utilizing data from surveys and focus groups, Haas Center staff members were able to gauge the perceptions and attitudes towards quality of life and quality of health within Okaloosa County.

Survey Results. Overall results from the survey showed that 86.1% of respondents were either “satisfied” or “highly satisfied” with life in the area. In line with this positive assessment, most respondents also felt that Okaloosa County was a “good” to “excellent” place to raise a family (85.4%) and a “good” to “excellent” place to grow old (89.9%). Survey results were overwhelmingly supportive in terms of satisfaction with the area and results indicated that people viewed Okaloosa County as being a safe place to reside and a place where the environmental quality was very good. Accordingly, survey respondents found it easy to engage in community activities, such as volunteering or participating in community groups, and respondents felt that the community provided adequate support for individuals and families in times of stress and need.

Survey participants generally held a positive opinion of health care in the Okaloosa County area with most respondents rating the health care in the area as being “very good” or “excellent.” Overall, results from the survey suggested that residents in Okaloosa County considered the prevalence of health problems, such as cancer and heart disease, to be about “average.” However, diabetes and obesity were rated as trending towards “average” to “somewhat severe,” indicating that these health concerns were viewed as being higher in prevalence in Okaloosa County.

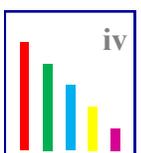
Several health factors were rated as having an effect on the community. Among them, “being obese” and “lack of exercise” were rated as having the greatest impact on the community. However, drugs, tobacco, binge drinking, and poor eating habits were also rated as having significant impact.

Overall, results from the survey were very encouraging and most respondents indicated being genuinely happy living in the area. However, results did suggest that people in the area were specifically worried about how some health concerns, such as obesity and diabetes, were affecting their community (additional health concerns are listed in the above paragraph).

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Focus Group Results. Five focus groups were conducted in four cities within Okaloosa County: Fort Walton Beach, Niceville/Valparaiso, Crestview, and Destin. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from eight to eleven. When asked what the most important characteristics of a healthy community are, the most common answers across focus groups included the following: 1) a strong sense of community, 2) strong economy with diversification of industry and jobs, 3) access and availability of good medical care, 4) infrastructure in terms of recreation facilities and transportation, and 5) quality education. When asked what the most important issues are that must be addressed to improve health and quality of life in Okaloosa County, themes emerged that included the following: 1) diversification of the economy and jobs, 2) education (e.g. linking education to jobs in the area), 3) infrastructure (e.g. transportation), 4) adequate Health Care, and 5) healthy entertainment choices. When juxtaposing responses to these questions, it became apparent that many of the same factors that survey participants felt were the most important characteristics of a healthy community were also areas that should be improved in Okaloosa County (e.g., diversification of the economy, education, infrastructure, health care).

When asked what factors are preventing the community from doing what needs to be done to improve quality of life and health in the area, participants most often cited the following: 1) allocation of funds, 2) the local economy, 3) buy-in and consensus among community leaders and residents, and 4) competition among cities in the county to secure resources. To provide solutions for these issues, focus group attendees generated a list of actions, policies, or funding initiatives they would support. Results indicate there would be support for the following: 1) economic development incentives for businesses, 2) managed growth and zoning priorities, and 3) a focus on additional community involvement initiatives for both citizens and local government officials.

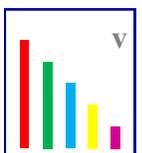
Results from the focus group also suggested that Okaloosa residents were very proud of their community for the following reasons: 1) cleanliness and beauty of the area, 2) community involvement and citizens, 3) military presence, 4) the quality of schools, 5) low crime rate, and 6) quality doctors.

Summary. Results from the survey and focus groups indicated that residents generally held positive attitudes and perceptions towards the quality of health and quality of life in Okaloosa County. However, as stated above, the data revealed a few areas of concern that Okaloosa County residents held in regards to the quality of life and quality of health in the area. These areas will be discussed more thoroughly throughout the document and suggestions for future improvements will be provided.

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INTRODUCTION

The Okaloosa County Health Department contracted the Haas Center to conduct a study on perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of health and quality of life in Okaloosa County. Data were collected through surveys and focus groups over two project phases. During phase one, surveys concerning mental and physical health (e.g., health care issues, health problems) and the living environment in Okaloosa County (e.g., community safety, cleanliness of surroundings) were administered to a random sample of the Okaloosa County population. During phase two, five focus groups were held in four cities within Okaloosa County (e.g., Fort Walton Beach, Niceville/Valparaiso, Crestview, and Destin).

We wish to express our sincere appreciation for all focus group participants. The names of those who participated are listed in Appendix A. We also wish to thank the community leaders and residents who helped us assemble the focus groups along with the Crestview Area Chamber of Commerce, the University of West Florida Emerald Coast, Northwest Florida State College and the Destin Chamber of Commerce for hosting the focus groups. In addition to their support for this project, each of these hosting entities plays a vital role in area residents' health and well-being.

In the report that follows, we presented the results from the random-sample survey of the Okaloosa County population as well as the results from the focus groups which were held around Okaloosa County. We began our discussion with the survey results and concluded with a discussion of the data collected in the focus groups. The survey results provided an overall picture of perceptions regarding community health and well-being and the focus groups were utilized to "flesh out" these perceptions. The focus groups tackled, in-depth, what a healthy community means, highlighting area strengths and weaknesses and offering potential solutions to perceived problems.

HEALTH SURVEY RESULTS

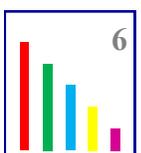
The health survey consisted of a random sample of 418 Okaloosa County residents who were polled on a series of themes via telephone. The survey consisted of a series of socioeconomic and demographic questions as well as batteries of questions related to perceptions of an overall sense of community. As with any survey, the validity of the responses were directly related to the degree to which the sample itself was reflective of the attitudes and opinions of the population (or populations) under study.

Sample Characteristics. The demographics of survey respondents closely mirrored general population demographics of Okaloosa County. This indicated that survey responses were likely in line with responses that would be

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gathered if the entire population were surveyed. Approximately 52% of respondents were female versus 50% across Okaloosa County's population. This is expected, as an oversample of females in survey research is not uncommon. Further, the survey sample closely mirrored the overall racial/ethnic composition of the general population (see table on right). Approximately 81% of respondents were Caucasian, 9% were African American, 2.5% were Asian/Pacific Islander and the remaining respondents identified with another race.

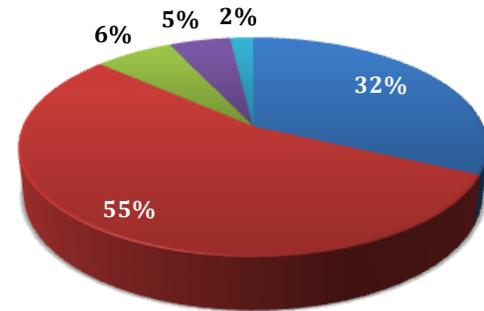
Respondents were generally more educated on average than the Okaloosa County population. Approximately 20% of respondents had only a high school education versus 27% in the population. A slightly smaller percentage of the respondents held a college degree than the average for the population, but significantly more respondents had an advanced degree.

Sample Demographics

	Okaloosa County	
	Sample	Population
Size	418	185,721
Male	47.6%	50.2%
Female	52.4%	49.8%
Caucasian	81.3%	81.1%
African American	9.1%	9.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.4%	2.9%
Other Race	5.5%	6.8%
High School Diploma	20.1%	27.2%
Some College	28.5%	27.5%
College Degree	28.9%	32.8%
Advanced Degree	12.9%	9.2%

Overall Quality of Life. In the 2011 County Health Rankings report, Okaloosa County ranked ninth overall among the 67 Florida counties in health outcomes (e.g., morbidity rates), and third in health factors (e.g., health behaviors, social and economic factors). Based on the results from the current health survey, residents' perception of their quality of life was consistent with these findings. Results showed that 87% of residents reported that they were "satisfied" or "highly satisfied" with the quality of life in Okaloosa County. Smaller percentages of respondents were either "dissatisfied", "highly dissatisfied", "neutral", or "did not know."

Satisfaction with Quality of Life in Okaloosa County



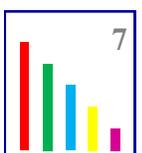
Living Conditions. Most survey respondents felt that Okaloosa County is a "good" to "excellent" place to raise a family (85.4%) and to grow old (89.9%). Data suggested that the perceived safety of the region and the environmental quality were two of the most common reasons for why this was true. Respondents tended to rate Okaloosa County as a very safe place to live, which coincided with data collected by the 2011 County Health Rankings report. The report placed Okaloosa County in the 97th percentile—the second highest ranked county for social and economic factors, which included safety. The ranking for physical environment—which included environmental quality—was in the 66th percentile. These results were different from the results in the current survey, in which, respondents generally felt that the environmental quality (e.g., air, trash, or water) in Okaloosa County was "very good."

On average, people generally found it easy to engage in community activities that affect the quality of life, which contributed to the high level of satisfaction

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with quality of life in the area that was found on the survey. Specific examples of such activities included volunteering and participating in community

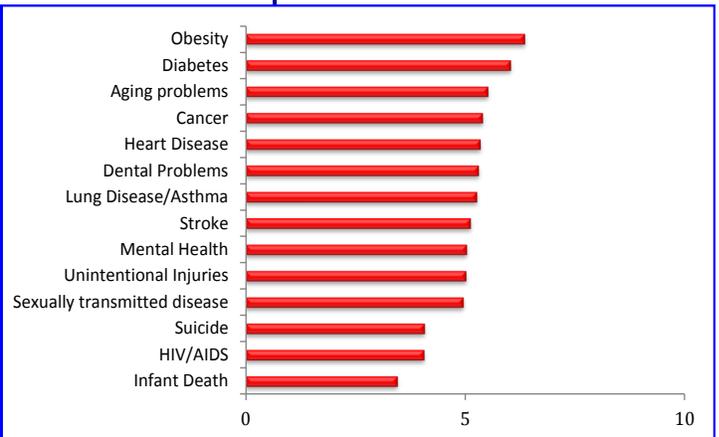
Living Conditions

	Ratings					
	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Don't Know
Desirability as place to raise family	2.2%	6.5%	20.1%	31.3%	38.5%	1.4%
Quality of health care	9.3%	15.1%	32.3%	27.8%	11.5%	4.1%
Desirability as place to grow old	5.3%	8.6%	28.7%	31.1%	25.6%	0.7%
Community support	7.9%	13.4%	29.7%	26.6%	14.4%	8.1%
Safety	1.7%	9.3%	29.7%	35.6%	23.7%	0.0%
Environmental quality	2.2%	7.2%	29.2%	38.3%	23.2%	0.0%
Economic opportunity	17.7%	25.4%	32.5%	17.7%	3.3%	3.3%
Opportunity for community participation	3.6%	11.7%	34.4%	31.8%	16.0%	2.4%

groups. Results also suggested that the community provided adequate support to individuals and families in times of stress and need, which contributed to perceptions of the quality of life in the area. Additionally, the quality of health care in the area received average ratings of “very good” or “excellent,” which meant that most residents were more than satisfied with the availability and access to health care in the area.

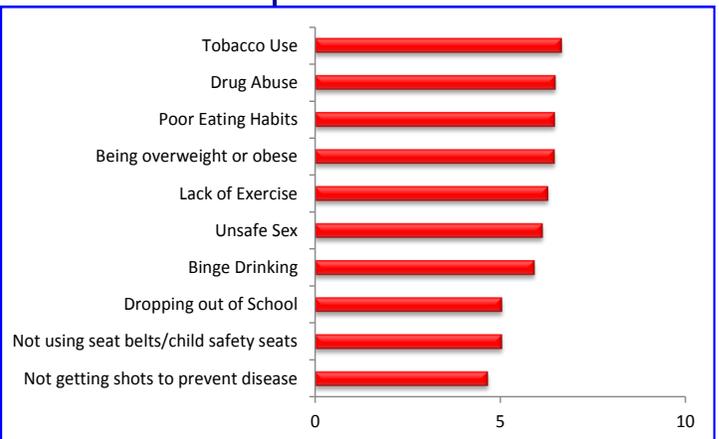
Health Problems

As shown in the “Health Problems” graph on the right, the majority of survey respondents did not view the impact of surveyed health problems as particularly strong or weak for the county. However, the impact of diabetes and obesity in the county were rated as comparatively worse than other health problems and trended towards “average” to “somewhat severe” in terms of their impact. Suicide, HIV/AIDS, and infant deaths were seen as the least impactful relative to other health problems in the community.



Of the few health problems that respondents viewed as trending towards “severe”, obesity, in particular, was found to be connected to a number of negative health behaviors, which are listed in the “Health Behaviors” graph on the right. Respondents rated lack of exercise and being obese or overweight as having the highest impact on the community. Not far behind, drugs, tobacco, binge drinking, and poor eating habits were other health behaviors that respondents felt are impacting their communities at rates slightly higher than average. Efforts to increase awareness of these health behaviors and reduce their prevalence should be considered.

Health Behaviors



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Overall, respondents held positive views towards the environment, community support, and the health care system in Okaloosa County. Additionally, results suggested that residents did not view the county as being severely impacted by the health problems and health behaviors that were examined in the survey.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

During phase two, five focus groups were conducted to gather data on the opinions, attitudes, and perceptions that residents of Okaloosa County held toward the quality of health and quality of life in both Okaloosa County and Northwest Florida. During analysis of focus group data, several themes emerged across the focus groups that were considered critical to Okaloosa County residents.

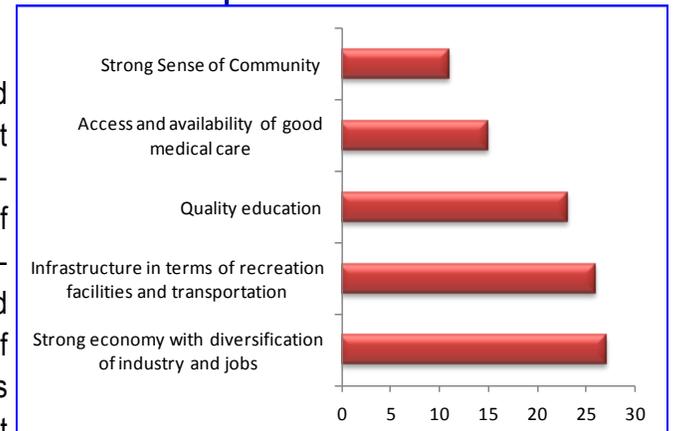
Sample Characteristics. Prior to a discussion of focus group results and findings, it is important to consider the selection of people who chose to attend and how they may differ from population averages in Okaloosa County. The majority of participants were white, married, college educated, and had household incomes greater than \$75,000. All of the focus group participants were full-time residents of Okaloosa County, thus, data may not accurately capture the perceptions and attitudes that part-time residents of Okaloosa County hold towards the quality of health and life in the area. A demographic comparison of the focus group sample to the population of Okaloosa County is included to the right.

Results. Aggregate results from the focus groups revealed what Okaloosa County residents considered to be the most important characteristics of a healthy community and included the following: 1) strong economy with diversification of industry and jobs, 2) infrastructure in terms of recreation facilities and transportation, 3) quality education, 4) access and availability of good medical care, and 5) a strong sense of community. Results showed that Okaloosa County residents considered the following to be the most important issues that must be addressed to improve health and quality of life in the area: 1) diversification of the economy and jobs, 2) infrastructure (e.g., transportation), 3) education (e.g., linking education to jobs in the area), 4) adequate health care, and 5) healthy entertainment choices. The considerable overlap be-

Sample Demographics

	Okaloosa County	
	Sample	Population
Size	44	185,721
Male	46.5%	50.2%
Female	53.5%	49.8%
Caucasian	84.1%	81.1%
African American	9.1%	9.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.0%	2.9%
Other Race	0.0%	6.8%
High School Diploma	2.3%	27.2%
Some College	14.0%	27.5%
College Degree	81.4%	42.0%

Characteristics of a Healthy Community



FOCUS GROUPS

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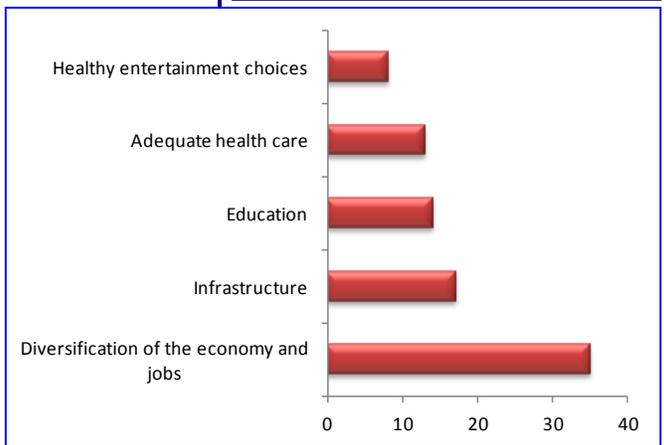
tween responses to the first two prompts, indicated that some of the factors that Okaloosa County residents considered most important for a healthy community are also areas that Okaloosa County residents felt could be improved in their community. Results suggested that Okaloosa County should focus on diversifying the economy in the area, improving educational opportunities, providing a more adequate transportation infrastructure, ensuring access to top-notch medical facilities, and providing healthy entertainment and recreation opportunities.

To assess perceived hurdles to improving the quality of life and quality of health in the area, focus group participants were asked to generate a list describing the factors that they believe are preventing the community from doing what needs to be done to improve the quality of life and health in the area. The most common responses across focus groups included the following: 1) allocation of funds, 2) buy-in and consensus among community leaders and residents, 3) competition among cities in the county to secure resources, and 4) the local economy. Participants then generated a list of actions, policies, or funding initiatives that they would support to remedy these issues. The most commonly suggested items on this list included the following: 1) managed growth and zoning priorities, 2) economic development incentives for businesses, and 3) a focus on additional community involvement initiatives for both residents and local government officials.

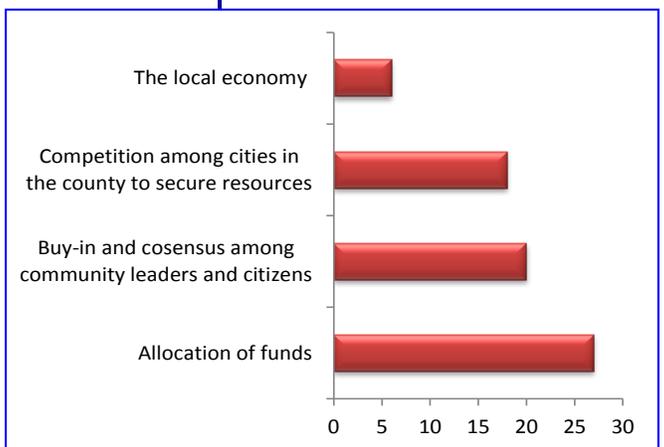
To assess what residents view as the strengths of the community, participants were asked to generate a list describing what makes them most proud to live in Okaloosa County. The most common responses to this prompt included the following: 1) community involvement and residents, 2) military presence, 3) cleanliness and beauty of the area, and 4) the quality of schools.

Participants were also asked to generate a list of people or groups working to improve the community. A list of just over fifty was generated, indicating that residents of Okaloosa were quite aware of people and groups currently working to improve the community. The most commonly noted organizations across focus groups included the following: 1) area chambers of commerce, 2) Economic Development Council, 3) Tourist Development Council, 4) non-profit organizations (e.g.,

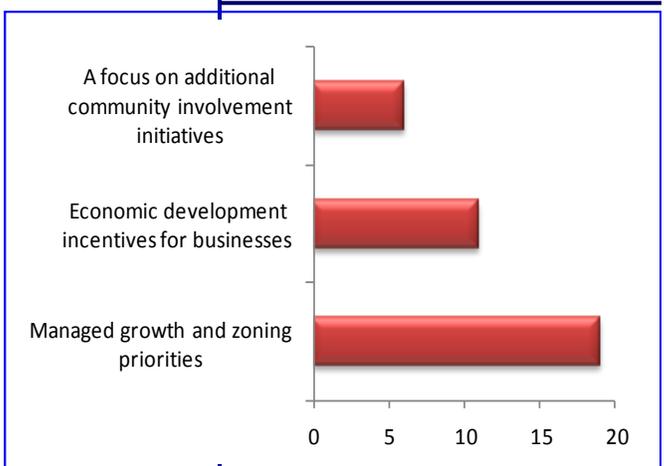
Needed Improvements



Obstacles to Improvements



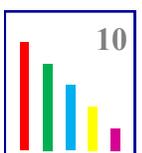
Endorsed Initiatives



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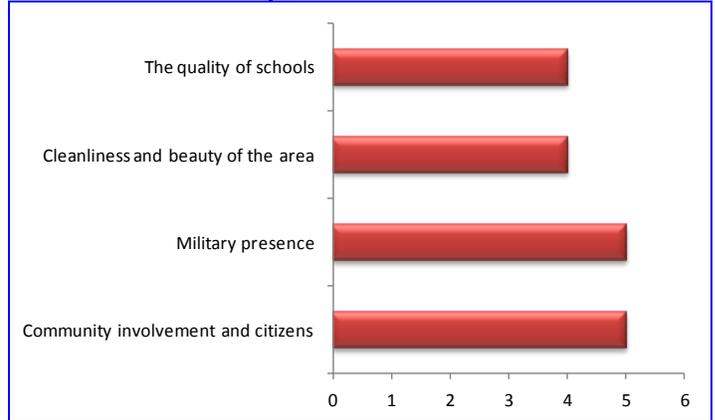
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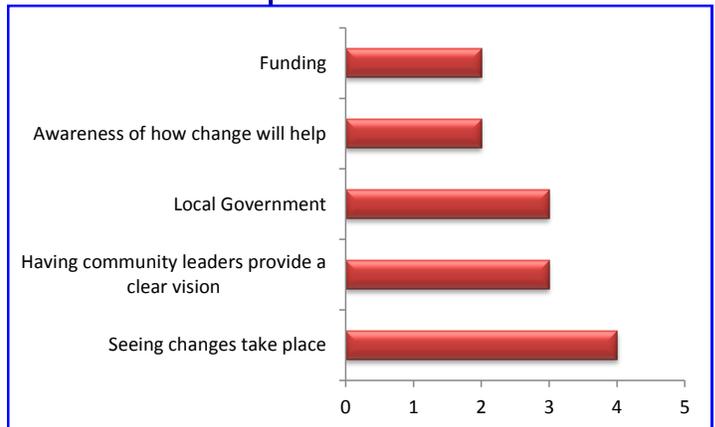
American Heart Association, March of Dimes, United Way, Fisher House), 5) educational institutions and school leaders, and 6) local government officials.

To gauge what would motivate participants to become more involved with improving the community, they were asked to generate a list of the things that would excite them to take action. The most common responses included the following: 1) seeing changes take place (i.e., executing action plans rather than simply developing them), 2) having community leaders provide a clear vision of the changes that need to take place, 3) local government, 4) an awareness of how change will affect the individual and how it will help others, and 5) funding for community projects.

Points of Pride



Motivation for Involvement



INDIVIDUAL FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Focus groups were conducted at four locations in Okaloosa County. Haas Center Staff gathered subjective data from Okaloosa County residents regarding their attitudes and perceptions towards the quality of life and quality of health in Okaloosa County. These were then grouped into the following three domains: 1) community health, 2) community improvements, and 3) community involvement. Brief descriptions and findings from each of the focus groups are included below.

Fort Walton Beach. The first focus group was conducted at the University of West Florida/Northwest Florida State College campus in Fort Walton Beach. In total, nine Okaloosa County residents served as participants.

Fort Walton Beach Community Health. When asked to describe the most important characteristics of a healthy community, several responses were generated. The top two ranked responses included diverse and high-paying jobs and a high quality educational system (K-20). All nine focus group participants endorsed jobs as very important to the health of a community and seven endorsed quality education.

The group commented that availability of high paying and diversified jobs for residents of all education and training levels was critical to improving the quality of life and health in a community. Participants emphasized a desire to attract new businesses to Okaloosa County for this purpose. In reference to quality schools (K-20), participants commented that county officials should work to instill and improve K-20 education (i.e., education that continues be-

FOCUS GROUPS

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yond high school) in the area. The need for advanced educational opportunities within the county was strongly emphasized as a means to fill jobs and stimulate growth. In terms of improvements by way of diversifying jobs, 88% of participants felt that Okaloosa County should strive to increase the availability of vocational and technical training in the area to fill the current needs of employers. Along with increasing person-job fit (i.e., linking local education to local jobs), participants also commented that an effort to bridge the current gap between average pay and the cost of living is necessary. For non-military residents, high-paying jobs are scarce and the cost of living is disproportionate for a substantial amount of residents earning non-military salaries. Additionally, participants felt that the county should improve the availability of “full-balanced employment opportunities” for young adults and college graduates outside of the military, so that people without military training or established work experience could find employment in Okaloosa County. The top three characteristics of a healthy community and the most important issues that participants felt must be addressed in order to improve the health and quality of life in Okaloosa County are noted in the table below.

Important Aspects of a Healthy Community		
Rank	Characteristics of a Healthy Community	Areas of Improvement in Okaloosa County
1	Diverse and high-paying jobs	Job diversification
2	Quality Schools (K-20)	Linking local education to local jobs
3	Infrastructure	Availability of health care

Infrastructure, the third characteristic of a healthy community listed, referred to effective transportation and communication systems, as well as properly maintained public facilities, such as parks. Sixty-seven percent of participants felt that infrastructure is vital to a healthy community. Under areas to improve in Okaloosa County, 44% of participants endorsed availability of health care, placing it third from the top on the list of improvements. It was noted that Fort Walton Beach has a large population of retired residents and many people come to the county for the affordability of health care. Increasing the availability of this care, may facilitate healthy living and quality of life.

Fort Walton Beach Community Improvements. After participants discussed ideal characteristics of a healthy community and the specific needs of Okaloosa County, they addressed obstacles preventing improvements from taking place and which actions, policies, or funding priorities they would support that would lead to a healthier community. All focus group participants felt that funding was the biggest hurdle to ensuring quality of life and quality of health in Okaloosa County. Eighty-eight percent of attendees felt that the level of buy-in and consensus among residents and county officials present-

ed another hurdle preventing improvements to the quality of life and health in the county. Participants also suggested that attempts be made to bring officials into agreement on key issues through the following efforts: 1) strategic planning, 2) setting short and long-term goals, 3) getting everyone on the same page, and 4) increasing residents' desire and motivation for change. In terms of what actions, policies, or funding priorities they would support, focus group participants indicated that "protecting the resources that we already have" in the county is most crucial. More specifically, 77% of participants endorsed protecting the water supply to ensure healthy environment and quality drinking water. The second most endorsed item put forth by focus group members was "providing economic development incentives" for businesses. This suggestion was endorsed by 55% of participants and included sustaining our current economic base and stream-

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Hurdles
1	Funding
2	Buy-in and consensus

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Actions, Policies, or Funding Priorities
1	Protecting natural resources
2	Economic development initiatives

lining regulatory processes to make it easier for businesses to open and operate in the area. Forty-four percent of attendees endorsed "countywide efforts geared towards managing growth and putting greater emphasis on zoning." This would involve the local government controlling business growth initiatives and managing population in key areas. Participants noted that these efforts should be made with care, so that they would not negatively impact the strong military presence in the area.

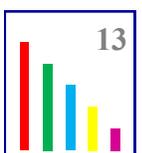
Fort Walton Beach Community Involvement. The final group of questions addressed issues surrounding community involvement. Participants first listed individuals or organizations that currently assist in efforts to improve health and the quality of life in the county. The list that they created included the following: 1) the Economic Development Council, 2) the Workforce Development Board, 3) city and county governments, 4) chambers of commerce, 5) Local non-profit organizations (e.g., Shelter House, Boys and Girls Club, Waterfront Rescue Mission, United Way), and 6) higher educational institutions.

Next, participants were asked what makes them most proud of their community. The suggestions that were generated included the following: 1) cleanliness and beauty, 2) community involvement and residents, 3) local government, and 4) military presence. Of the nine participants, 67% endorsed military presence, 56% endorsed cleanliness and beauty, another 56% endorsed

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community involvement and residents, and 33% endorsed local government. As the percentages show, military presence garnered the most support from focus group members.

The final question sought to draw out what would excite participants to become more involved in improving their community. Focus group members made the following suggestions: 1) seeing changes take place (i.e., executing action plans), 2) establishing a clear vision for changes, 3) making sure that previous action plans are carried out and results are visible, and 4) involving residents in the change process instead of allowing only government officials to take charge. Regarding this last point, participants suggested that a quasi-governmental forum be conducted so that both residents and government officials would have a voice by working together on change initiatives.

Niceville/Valparaiso. Following the Fort Walton Beach focus group a second focus group was conducted on the Northwest Florida State College in Niceville. Eleven Okaloosa County residents participated in this focus group.

Niceville/Valparaiso Community Health. When asked what the most important characteristics of a healthy community are, several responses were generated. The top two endorsed responses were a “strong urban planning system” and “adequate education/school system.” All focus group participants considered a strong urban planning system necessary for a healthy community and 36% endorsed “adequate education/school system.” When asked what the top issues that need to be addressed in Okaloosa County to improve the quality of life and quality of health, “infrastructure” and “economic diversity” were the highest ranked responses. “Infrastructure” was endorsed by 91% of participants and 73% endorsed “economic diversity.”

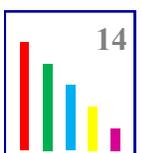
Important Aspects of a Healthy Community		
Rank	Characteristics of a Healthy Community	Areas of Improvement in Okaloosa County
1	Strong urban planning system	Infrastructure
2	Education/school systems	Economic diversity

It is important to note that one of the characteristics indicative of a healthy community, “strong urban planning system,” was highly related to “infrastructure,” which was the area that was selected as the one that needs the most improvement. Focus group participants brought up the point that several of the communities (e.g., Crestview, Destin) were unable to keep up with rapid community expansion due to a lack of infrastructure planning. It was also noted that the system of roadways in Okaloosa County is inefficient and often results in traffic jams. Specifically, it was noted that traffic congestion makes it difficult for first responders (e.g., police, fire, EMT) to react quickly. Participants suggested that a countywide public transportation sys-

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tem could cut down on traffic, as well as provide easier access to county facilities (e.g., health care facilities) for those without transportation.

Niceville/Valparaiso Community Improvements. To assess how the community may improve, focus group participants were asked to list obstacles preventing improvements from taking place and which actions, policies, or funding priorities they would support to improve the community. Eighty-two percent of participants felt that the competition amongst the cities within Okaloosa County was hindering improvements intended to increase the quality of life and health in the community. Seventy-three percent of participants felt that community leadership was preventing the county from advancing the health and quality of life. It was discussed that community leadership does not necessarily mean only the politicians, but also business and community leaders. Participants suggested that these leaders need to provide a clear vision as to where the community should be heading in both the near and distant future, and then work in unison to achieve that vision.

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Hurdles
1	Competing communities
2	Community Leadership

In terms of what actions, policies, or funding priorities could be implemented to improve the county, 82% of participants endorsed the suggestion of introducing a local sales tax. Participants noted that even a low sales tax would help generate funds to implement community improvements. The consolidation of public services (e.g., fire departments, police departments) was also suggested as a way to free up funds for improvements. Fifty-five percent of focus group participants supported a consolidation if it would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of public services.

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Actions, Policies, or Funding Priorities
1	Local sales tax
2	Consolidation of services and community involvement

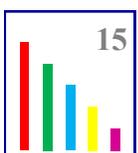
Niceville/Valparaiso Community Involvement. The final group of questions addressed issues related to community involvement. Participants first listed individuals or organizations that currently assist in efforts to improve health and the quality of life in the county. The list that they created included the following: 1) economic development organizations (e.g., Economic Development Council, Tourist Development Council, chambers of commerce), 2) educators, 3) non-profit organizations (e.g., Americorps, Institute of Senior Professionals, Children in Crisis), 4) Adopt-A-Highway, 5) politicians, 6) Okaloosa County Transit, and 7) Meals on Wheels.

Participants were then asked to list what makes them proud of their community. Participants listed the following: 1) current volunteers, 2) schools, 3)

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churches, 4) being a part of a caring and supportive community, 5) high quality of doctors in the area, 6) military and veterans in the community, 7) low crime rate, 8) conservative values, 9) beaches, and 10) the environment.

When asked what would excite them enough to become involved or more involved in improving the community, focus group members mentioned “having more time available to become involved.” They also mentioned that “having employers encourage volunteering and provide incentives” for employees to volunteer, might aid the desire and ability to become involved. Focus group participants also felt that it is important to know how their contributions are going to affect or help others in a meaningful way. Lastly, the focus group mentioned that having a strong and clear vision for what the community is moving towards would excite them enough to become more involved. They gave the example that Pensacola (Escambia County) seems to be moving towards a clear vision, such as bringing in a minor league baseball team, and that Okaloosa County needs a clear vision as well.

Crestview. Two focus groups were conducted in Crestview: Crestview A and Crestview B. Focus groups were conducted in the Crestview Chamber of Commerce and a total of seventeen participants attended (9 in Crestview A and 8 in Crestview B).

Crestview A Community Health. When asked to describe the most important characteristics of a healthy community, all of the participants in Crestview A stated that a “diversified and strong economy” is important for a healthy community and 77% indicated that “education and prevention programs” are important. When asked about Okaloosa County in particular, these same two suggestions arose in terms of how Okaloosa County could be improved. Participants explained how a diversified economy would improve the health and quality of life in Okaloosa County by noting that an environment which supports and recruits a variety of types of businesses enables a community to thrive through providing numerous and diverse employment opportunities. Additionally, the Okaloosa County economy is reliant on the military. If the military presence in the county was to decline, the health of

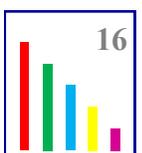
Important Aspects of a Healthy Community		
Rank	Characteristics of a Healthy Community	Areas of Improvement in Okaloosa County
1	Diversified and strong economy	Diversified economy
2	Education and prevention	Education and prevention

the local economy would be drastically affected. Participants felt that diversity in non-military reliant businesses is crucial to a strong and stable economy. Referring to how education and prevention programs could improve quality of life, participants noted that quality education is important to fill job needs and increase quality of life of its residents. Participants suggested that a greater

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countywide emphasis on prevention programs aimed at educating residents on topics such as immunizations, mental health, and healthy living practices would be beneficial.

Crestview A Community Improvements. After participants in Crestview A discussed ideal characteristics of a healthy community and the specific needs of Okaloosa County, they addressed obstacles preventing improvements from taking place and which actions, policies, or funding priorities they would support that would lead to a healthier community. Unequivocally, funding was the largest obstacle hindering improvements to health and quality of life, receiving support from 100% of focus group participants. Seventy-eight percent of participants endorsed the suggestion that competition between neighboring cities (e.g., Destin, Niceville/Valparaiso) and states for businesses and medical specialists is a hurdle for Okaloosa County.

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Hurdles
1	Funding
2	State and local competition

To build a healthier community, participants identified one key improvement. They indicated that they would support policies and initiatives aimed at reducing or restructuring state and federal regulations, while increasing business incentives (e.g., tax breaks, eliminating impact fees) to attract business to the area. It was felt that if businesses became more attracted to the community, a stronger, more stable local economy would follow. Additionally, participants felt that increasing communication within local government would facilitate this type of positive action.

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Actions, Policies, or Funding Priorities
1	Reduce or restructure regulations

Crestview A Community Involvement. When asked about specific examples of people or groups working together to improve the health and quality of life in our community, participants generated the following list: 1) chambers of commerce, 2) local municipalities, 3) non-profit organizations (e.g., American Heart Association, March of Dimes), 4) government leaders, 5) the Tourist Development Council, 6) the Economic Development Council, and 6) the school district.

When asked what makes them proud of their community, participants listed the following: 1) government officials, 2) community outreach, 3) support from members of the community, 4) community support for the military, 5) low crime rates, and 6) school system rankings.

When asked what would encourage them to become involved or more in-

involved in the community, focus group members stated that seeing results, both short term and long term, was necessary. Also, the participants noted that seeing current city and county projects being carried to completion would encourage resident involvement in the community. Lastly, focus group members listed a reduction in federal regulations as an important concept/item to address in order for them to become involved or more involved in improving the community.

Crestview B Community Health. When asked to describe the most important characteristics of a healthy community, 87.5% of the focus group participants in Crestview B endorsed access to high quality medical care. The group mentioned that medical care should include healthy activities within the community (e.g., walking paths, sports facilities). Quality education was endorsed by 62.5% of participants as an important characteristic of a healthy community. They mentioned that quality education should extend beyond primary schools, secondary schools, and colleges and include vocational and technical schools. When asked what issues need to be improved in Okaloosa County to improve quality of health and quality of life, 100% of attendees felt that access to medical care needed to be improved in Okaloosa County. This was important to point out because the highest ranked area of improvement in Okaloosa County was also the highest ranked variable considered necessary for a healthy community. Participants provided support for the health care system needing improvement by noting that there is a limited supply of specialty medical care professionals and Medicaid providers in the county. Additionally, the group felt the county is underserved in mental

Important Aspects of a Healthy Community		
Rank	Characteristics of a Healthy Community	Areas of Improvement in Okaloosa County
1	Access to high quality medical care	Access to medical care
2	Education	Employment

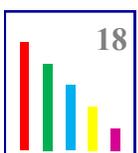
health and substance abuse services, primarily due to lack of funding. Participants felt that there was a need for more employment opportunities within Okaloosa County and the need for short term employment opportunities (i.e., for students, military spouses) was expressed as being particularly important. Members of the focus group also expressed a need for entry-level positions to provide opportunities for residents without specific training or niche skill-sets.

Crestview B Community Improvements. Possible improvements to the community of Okaloosa County were discussed using the prompts, “What do you believe is keeping our community from doing what needs to be done to improve health and quality of life?” and “What actions, policy, or funding priorities would you support to build a healthier community?” A summary of the

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participants' top rated responses from these questions can be found in the table below. "Funding" was the most endorsed item, with 62.5% of participants endorsing it. The general consensus of the these participants was that funding should be increased to train workers to fill jobs that are prevalent in the local community. According to 25% of focus group participants, the problem holding Okaloosa County back is the lack of a focused community plan of action. It was noted that action plans must be agreed upon by the county as a whole in order for it to move forward in a collaborative manner, and be linked to the most important needs of the community, so that community members will have a vested interest in its success.

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Hurdles
1	Funding
2	Focused plan of action

Although the two items holding the community back were "funding" and "lack of a community plan of action," the top variables that the focus group would support to build a healthier community were "employment", and "vocational and technical training." As discussed previously, in the community health section, the focus group participants felt that there were few entry-level and mid-level positions available in the community. All participants felt that bringing new companies and industries to the area would increase employment opportunities and bring new jobs for entry-level and mid-level employees. Along these lines, 62.5% of participants would support expanding vocational and technical training programs to build a healthier community. These programs should be open to both recent high school graduates and adults looking to return to school. It was discussed that these programs would help to fill the types of positions that are most often open within the county.

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Actions, Policies, or Funding Priorities
1	Employment
2	Vocational and technical training

Crestview B Community Involvement. The focus group participants were asked to create a list of groups working together to improve the health and quality of life of the community, as well as a list of what makes them proud of their community. They were then asked to list variables that would excite them enough to become involved or more involved within their community. The focus group participants listed several groups working together to improve the health and quality of life in the community: 1) Caring for People Forum, 2) County Emergency Management, 3) BRAC Community Council, 4) Ft. Walton Chamber of Commerce, and 5) community service network groups (e.g., Head Start, JobsPlus, non-profits).

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The focus group participants were then asked what makes them proud of their community. They were proud that volunteer and government groups, as well as other members of the community, were trying to make a difference within the community. They were also proud that this community is willing to come together to find new solutions to improve the community and that the county provides support to the military. Also mentioned were the high public education and public health rankings that the county holds relative to the rest of the state of Florida. In addition, the focus group was proud of the geographical region that their community was located in, citing it as “a beautiful place to live.”

Lastly, the focus group members were asked to consider what would make them excited enough to become involved or more involved in improving their community. Participants stated that more funding is needed in order for more people to become involved in improving the community. The participants would like to see a realistic plan for the community that prioritizes areas of improvement (i.e., emphasis and priority are placed on the more pressing factors that need improvement). In order for the plan to be efficient, it must be a collaborative effort that is agreed upon by the county as a whole, including the chamber and city planners. It was also mentioned that communities need to be pulled together. There needs to be a collective effort to build up the community as a whole and not just the businesses. The group also stated that it is important to see progress being made in order for more people to get involved in the community. Conversely, if ideas are generated and no progress is made, it will discourage community involvement.

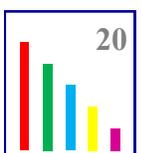
Destin. The last focus group was conducted in Destin at the Destin Area Chamber of Commerce. Eight people attended and provided responses to focus group prompts provided by Haas Center Staff.

Destin Community Health. When asked what they believed were the most important characteristics of a healthy community, the focus group participants generated several responses that included absence of environmental pollution and stable government. To determine which responses were considered most critical to the group, focus group participants were asked to endorse two responses from the list they generated. All focus group participants endorsed the item “strong sense of community” as being one of the two most critical characteristics of a healthy community and 62.5% of participants endorsed “strong economy with strong economic diversification.” To add clarification, the group felt a “strong sense of community” meant a community had: 1) numerous involvement groups (i.e., groups to help individuals connect with the greater community), 2) shared values among residents, 3) a strong core of philanthropic giving, 4) civic support, 5) a strong spiritual base, 6) diverse

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cultural amenities, 7) active youth and senior communities (e.g., youth councils and recreation facilities), and 8) a cultural infrastructure.

When asked about the issues that must be addressed to improve the health and quality of life in Okaloosa County, 75% of attendees endorsed “economic diversification” and 62.5% endorsed “infrastructure.” It is of key importance

Important Aspects of a Healthy Community		
Rank	Characteristics of a Healthy Community	Areas of Improvement in Okaloosa County
1	Strong sense of a community	Economic diversification
2	Strong economy & diversification	Infrastructure

to note that the focus group participants identified “economic diversification” as one of the most important characteristics of a healthy community and as one area that needs improvement in their community. The group noted that bringing more industry to the area, creating more jobs, diversifying jobs, and focusing resources on start-ups were areas that should be selected for improvement in the future. Attendees noted a lack of cultural venues, a lack of environmental safety-nets for water and air quality, and inadequate public transportation all contribute to existing infrastructure issues.

Destin Community Improvements. To assess how participants felt the community might improve, participants were asked about what factors they believe are keeping our community from improving in terms of health and quality of life. They were also asked what actions, policies, and funding opportunities they would support to build a healthier community.

When asked what they believe is keeping our community from doing what needs to be done to improve health and quality of life in the area, the participants suggested the following: 1) local economy and 2) political consensus. More specifically, 62.5% of participants endorsed local economic issues as being the most critical factor that is keeping the community from doing what needs to be done to improve health and quality of life in the area. The local economic issues that were considered most salient include the following: 1) home values, 2) loss of jobs in the areas, and 3) lack of funding for infrastructure, education, and community programs. The issue of “political consensus” was endorsed by 37.5% of participants as being an area of needed improvement. This issue was defined by participants as encompassing the following: 1) community investment and 2) differing interests of permanent and transient populations.

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Hurdles
1	Local economy
2	Political consensus

When asked what they would do or support to help build a healthier community, the focus group members mentioned making it easier for businesses to

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move into the area, less payroll taxes, more predictable government involvement, and economic diversity. Initiatives making it easier for businesses to move into the area received the most support, with 75% of focus group participants indicating that they would support policy initiatives related to this area over others. The following suggestions were generated by the group as forms of policy that they would support to make it easier for businesses to move to the area: 1) provide tax incentives for businesses to move to the area, 2) simplify the permit process to avoid “red tape,” and 3) stabilize local bureaucracy so that it would operate in a consistent and urgent manner.

Community Improvement Initiatives	
Rank	Actions, Policies, or Funding Priorities
1	Making it easier for business to move into the area
2	Less payroll taxes and more predictable government
3	Economic diversity

Destin Community Involvement. Three different prompts were used to generate responses for community involvement, including the following: 1) generate a list of people or groups working together to improve the health and quality of life in the community, 2) what makes you proud of your community, and 3) what would excite you enough to become involved or more involved in improving the community. Responses to these questions were not rated and, thus, appear in no particular order.

To gauge the level of awareness that focus group participants had regarding people and groups working to improve the quality of life and health in the area, attendees were asked to generate a list. As a group, the following list was generated: 1) volunteer community in Destin (i.e., charitable organizations), 2) chambers of commerce, 3) city committees (e.g., recreation committee, youth council), 4) Mattie-Kelly Arts Foundation, 5) churches of Destin, 6) American Cancer Society, 7) Fisher House, 8) the Garden Club, 9) Children’s Advocacy Center/Children in Crisis, 10) United Way, 11) Economic Development Council/ Economic Development Organizations, 12) Florida public relations organizations, 13) Tourist Development Council, 14) Center for Lifelong Learning, 15) Hard Rock Café, 16) military members, 17) Taylor Haugen Foundation, 18) Fisherman’s Fund, and 19) Harvest House.

When asked what makes them proud of their community, the focus group participants generated the following responses: 1) My mayor, 2) the people of the community (citizens and tourists), 3) the environment, 4) fishing heritage, 5) the quality of life, 6) community pride and spirit, 7) businesses (great shopping locations and restaurants), 8) Vacation community, 9) natural resources (beaches and recreational), 10) largest fishing fleet in the state, 11) harbor,

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12) military presence, 13) cultural amenities, 14) quality of schools, and 15) volunteers (educational and charitable).

When asked what would excite them enough to become involved or more involved in improving the community, the focus group participants generated the following list: 1) being retired (having more time), 2) seeing tangible results from efforts, 3) youth recreation (having coaching opportunities), 4) non-hostile government environment (positive team), 5) having a passion to want the community to be a better place to live, 6) adequate financing for projects.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the focus group participants in Destin were very aware of people or groups working to improve the quality of life and/or quality of health in the area. They also took great pride in their community and felt that it had a lot to offer both full-time and part-time residents of the area. Most expressed a desire to become more involved with improving the community and if factors such as funding and a clear plan were laid out, they would feel more encouraged to increase their efforts to improve the health and quality of life in Okaloosa County.

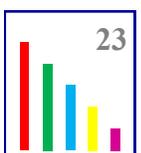
Taken as a whole, we may draw several conclusions from these findings that generalize to the population of Okaloosa County residents. First, residents have a positive perception of the quality of life in Okaloosa County. Survey respondents and focus group participants felt that Okaloosa County was a wonderful place to raise a family and grow old. They also felt that diversification of jobs would increase well-being within the county. By establishing new types of employment opportunities, economic stability would increase, which would aid in preventing and recovering from future economic downturns. Heavy reliance on a few industries places the county in a vulnerable position and participants acknowledged this fact. They also stated that without cooperation and a consistent vision between cities within the county, diversifying employment opportunities will not succeed. Operating in a disjointed fashion will only hinder the ability to recruit new businesses and limit the quality of life and economic potential in the county. For example, industries that require a diverse labor force will have difficulty filling their needs in a county that does not cooperate between cities.

The importance of well-rounded educational opportunities was discussed by all five of the focus groups as an important characteristic of a healthy community. It is necessary to educate both a vocational and technical labor force, as well as educating for positions that require higher education levels, in order to meet current and future business needs. The Crestview A focus group also felt that quality education and prevention programs could lead to

CONCLUSION

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the prevention of diseases. Due to the fact that survey respondents listed obesity and diabetes as the health concerns that they felt were the most severe in Okaloosa County, it is important to have programs to educate residents on the prevention and effects of these conditions. These educational programs could be conducted through the primary and secondary schooling system or through community events.

City planning in terms of infrastructure was another major theme mentioned consistently. This was often discussed in the context of roadways and traffic difficulties. Although the current system of roadways cannot be easily changed due to certain pre-existing structures, such as Eglin Air Force Base, it is possible to set a plan for future infrastructure to avoid increasing such difficulties. Implementing a system of public transportation that runs county-wide would decrease the current traffic congestion. Public transportation would also provide residents with the capability of accessing health care facilities in other areas of the county and may possibly draw some of the specialized medical care back into the community.

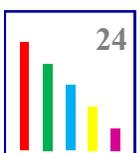
Lastly, although survey participants felt that it is generally easy to engage in community activities, such as volunteering, the opinions of the focus groups were mixed. Some groups felt it was difficult to find opportunities, while other groups did not mention finding opportunities for community involvement as being a problem. Participants discussed a possible remedy: create a centralized location (e.g., website, newsletter) for information about local volunteer opportunities or community groups. This centralization would make it easier for residents to find volunteer opportunities.

Although the findings from the survey and focus groups indicated that residents generally find Okaloosa County a pleasant place to live and raise a family, they also showed that there is some work that can be done to make the county an even more desirable place to live. Looking towards the future, it is important to take these suggestions into consideration.

CONCLUSION

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Mayor Mike Anderson	Tom Hermanson
Therese Baker	Marcia Hull
Craig Barker	Lewis Jennings
Angela Blackburn	Debbie Lewis
Lee Bobo	Keith Lewis
Patti Bonezzi	Amy Linores
Maggie Boyd	Derek Lott
Jim Breitenfield	Brian Mitchel
Mayor David Cadle	Beth Norton
Trisha Chason	Brittany Oxley
Daniel Cobbs	Jodie Parker
Mikel Currie	Kay Rasmussen
Phyllis Davis	Mayor Sam Seevers
Reate Davis Jr.	Susan Shaw
Michelle Dent	Brian Shonk
Roxie Emunson	Rita Smith
Jeff Fanto	George Stakley Jr.
Nancy Gontarek	Alex Wagner
Lockie Gregory	Marty Walker
Ty Handy	Tara Wesley
Brian Haugen	Fletcher Williams Jr.
Kim Henderson	Carrie Ziegler

APPENDIX A

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