

Executive Summary

What is the Community Health Needs Assessment 2008?

The Needs Assessment 2008 is a collaborative effort by Sutter Medical Center of Santa Rosa, St. Joseph Health System – Sonoma County, Kaiser Permanente Medical Center – Santa Rosa and the Sonoma County Department of Health Services to spotlight the health, well-being and future of the children of Sonoma County. These partners have joined forces in the past in their joint needs assessments to address a number of significant community health issues – prevention of dangerous falls by seniors, the lack of diversity in the health care workforce, and the need for immunization clinics. As these needs assessments have highlighted important issues in the past, Needs Assessment 2008 searches out “Windows of Opportunity” to prevent serious children’s health problems and to bring the community together to envision and realize a “Lifetime of Health” for our children.

Why focus on children’s health?

Children are the treasure and the responsibility of our entire community. Through providing health care services to children in Sonoma County and working with community efforts to address children’s health issues, the hospitals have become increasingly concerned by several problems that appear to threaten the future of our community and our children. These are the epidemics of children’s oral disease, childhood overweight and obesity, and alcohol and other drug use by teens and pregnant women. Shining a spotlight on issues that keep our children from reaching optimal health and taking steps together to improve children’s lives are common goals shared by the region’s hospitals and the Sonoma County Department of Health Services.

The Assessment’s theme - *Windows of Opportunity, a Lifetime of Health* - embraces the notion that there are multiple opportunities to intervene and make positive change to address problems that affect children. But this requires taking action during windows of opportunity – the unique times in life when children are growing and their brains and bodies are developing. By seizing these opportunities, the whole community benefits as children become healthy community members, workers and parents of the future. It is by giving children what they need now to live healthy, productive lives, we steer the future of Sonoma County onto a steady course.

What is the role of the region’s hospitals in improving children’s health?

The hospitals and health department are uniquely positioned to bring a public focus to children’s health issues as a result of their central position in the community health network and their access to the media and policy makers. When they provide leadership and engage in collaborative efforts, better and faster progress can be made on children’s health.

There is effective collaboration happening right now in our community. Everyday, groups are making inroads on difficult child health problems. It is the hope of the Needs Assessment partners that the data and suggestions in this Needs Assessment can contribute to the efforts to find solutions to these child health problems.

What are the underlying themes of the Needs Assessment?

Promoting prevention. The health problems raised in the Needs Assessment are preventable with concerted action on the part of partners and the community. To this end, the Needs Assessment employs *The Spectrum of Prevention* – “a fundamental model in public health, [which] acknowledges that a broad range of factors play a role in health. Policies, legislation and organizational practices are all powerful influences in shaping an individual’s attitudes”¹ and the environment that determines the way people live. The Needs Assessment suggests actions that can be taken on each issue at multiple levels including policies, programs, individual and organizational practices.

Reducing health disparities. Without question across the nation and in California, communities of color and low-income families and individuals suffer disproportionately from lack of access to health care and myriad health problems. Children are no strangers to the “health disparities” linked to socio-economic status and race/ethnicity. Of the issues raised in this Needs Assessment, this disparity is most evident in the areas of oral health and overweight/obesity. The Needs Assessment tries, where possible, to highlight the health disparities and propose actions that can begin to alleviate them.

Fostering understanding. There is a lack of understanding among the public about the connection between childhood dental disease, obesity, and teen and prenatal AOD use and the long-term health of children and teens. Improving the public’s understanding of these child health issues necessitates the collection of accurate data now and into the future. In developing this Assessment, dozens of people working hard on these issues contributed their data and expertise. In the “Indicators” sections, the Needs Assessment proposes a handful of data indicators, which can be used to measure the community’s progress in improving these child health issues. This Assessment aims, through continued collection of data and by educating the public, to increase the community’s understanding of the link between these particular child health issues and overall child health and well-being.

Leveraging opportunities. The Needs Assessment is a critical planning document for the hospitals, and also a call to action for the entire community on children’s health. The hospitals have a large role to play. But, every individual and organization in our community can contribute to turning the curve on these and other child health issues.

The Needs Assessment points to some of the many important efforts already underway in our community to address child health – Healthy Kids, The Pediatric Dental Initiative, the Community Activity and Nutrition-Coalition, the State Incentive Grant Program to reduce teen drinking risk in Rohnert Park, Petaluma, and Cotati, among others. These are spotlighted for a reason – to provide an opportunity for those in the community who want to support this work to do so. It will take a groundswell of commitment from individuals and organizations, adding their resources and strength to these local efforts, if we are to be successful in making critical shifts in children’s health in our community. Every individual and organization can do something – they can look to *The Spectrum of Prevention* sections throughout this Needs Assessment and find a way to join the work to improve children’s health in our community.

Major Findings of the Needs Assessment

Dental Health. Most children in Sonoma County enjoy good oral health with only infrequent need for interventive treatments. But for a significant number of children poor oral health is a painful and ongoing problem. These children are affected unnecessarily by this preventable disease, falling behind in school and social development, and suffering painful bouts of toothache and infection. Low-income children suffer the most tooth decay. Fortunately, oral disease can be avoided by using a combination of strategies. With a focus on prevention and more access to care, all Sonoma County children can experience optimum oral health.

- Tooth decay, both treated and untreated, is rampant in children.
- Low-income children and Hispanic/Latino² children experience much higher levels of treated and untreated decay than other children.
- Children do not have access to fluoridated public water, the most effective public health measure to prevent oral disease.
- Children are not getting needed preventive dental visits.
- The need for immediate dental care to treat urgent problems from Early Childhood Caries is high.
- Children are not receiving protective dental sealants in sufficient numbers.
- Many children do not have dental insurance, an important determinant of good oral health.

Overweight and Obesity. Childhood overweight is an urgent health crisis with no easy solution. Preventing childhood overweight is a collective responsibility requiring individual, family, community, health care, business, and governmental commitments to address both sedentary behavior and unhealthy diet.

- Overweight and obesity are increasing in Sonoma County.
- Low-income children in Sonoma County are at higher risk for overweight and obesity.

- Sonoma County children are not consuming the daily recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables.
- Physical activity positively contributes to preventable illnesses.
- Food insecurity, defined as limited or uncertain access to nutritious foods, is linked to overweight.
- Sonoma County schools must be part of the solution to solving overweight and obesity, through education, physical activity programs and established nutritional standards for foods offered in school.

Teen Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug (ATOD) Use. Alcohol, tobacco and other drug use among Sonoma County teens is a major public health concern. The dangers of alcohol and drug use are extensive, pervasive and lasting for teens and yet the social pressures for teens to drink and use drugs are enormous. The media makes it seem sexy, TV and magazine advertising promote alcohol and tobacco products, and other teens make it seem “cool.” Community factors such as permissive attitudes, behaviors, and easy availability from commercial and social sources play a huge role in contributing to underage drinking and drug use.

- Alcohol is the leading drug used by Sonoma County youth.
- More young people reported using marijuana than tobacco in the past 30 days.
- Tobacco use increases for the first time in six years.
- Methamphetamine is a serious problem for some Sonoma County youth.
- Sonoma County teens exceed the state average with high-risk behaviors associated with alcohol.
- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among teenagers. Alcohol use is a major contributor.
- Sonoma County needs more AOD treatment programs for youth.

Prenatal Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Use. Women want to do the best they can for their babies. But through lack of knowledge or because of dependence or abuse, many women expose the fetuses they carry to alcohol and other drugs. Pregnancy is a unique time when women, even habitual AOD users, are open to making changes in their lives for the sake of their future children. Remarkable progress is being made in Sonoma County to reach AOD using pregnant women and help them eliminate substance abuse and find treatment.

- Each year, roughly 600 children are born exposed to alcohol and other drugs in Sonoma County.
- Between 10% and 14% of pregnant women in Sonoma County use alcohol and other drugs (exclusive of tobacco).

- Drug use by pregnant women in Sonoma County is a major problem on a par with or greater than the national average.
- Alcohol is the most frequently used substance by pregnant women in Sonoma County.
- Marijuana is the illicit drug used most often by pregnant women in Sonoma County.
- Tobacco use during pregnancy is widespread – roughly one-fifth of pregnant women in Sonoma County smoke.
- AOD use is linked to child neglect and abuse, and child mortality.
- Sonoma County teens are at high risk for giving birth to a substance-exposed child.

“Water and soil themselves don’t create a beautiful garden. We’ve produced individual flowers, but not a beautiful garden... We need to move from isolated success stories to systematic, sustained successes.” Dr. Charles Homer, President and CEO, National Initiative for Children’s Healthcare Quality

With the completion of the Needs Assessment, several key learnings stand out. These will inform our work on children’s health.

- **The cost benefit of prevention.** Preventing problems before they arise is a particularly powerful tool in child health. Taking logical steps now, when children are young, can set children up for a lifetime of good health. These prevention efforts will result in a dramatic cost savings and reduction in social problems to our community.
- **The need for more and better local data.** The data gathered in this Needs Assessment is a patchwork from many different sources. The data often lack consistency over time, are difficult to compare from year to year, and frequently do not tell the complete story. If our community is to mobilize to make improvements in children’s health, one of our most powerful tools is accurate local data. There are opportunities to make significant improvements in gathering and tracking local data on all of these issues, but particularly on the issues of oral health and prenatal alcohol and drug use.
- **The critical role of environment in health.** The environment where we live, work and play, what foods are available, the quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink, opportunities for exercise, the impacts of advertising on our consumer choices – all of these have an impact on our health. While individual education and behavior change are important to improving health, the real power in making progress on health is in changing the environment and systems that structure and affect our world.
- **The tremendous power of collaboration.** Collaboration holds the promise of allowing progress on issues that any one or two parties alone could never budge. A remarkable local example of the power of collaboration is Sonoma County Healthy Kids. As a result of the determined efforts of dozens of public and private community partners, this collaboration has taken great steps toward solving the problem of uninsured children in Sonoma County. This example of collaboration should be a model on which to base future efforts in children’s health improvement.

Where do we go from here?

The future of any society depends on the ability to foster the health and well-being of the next generation. Failure to provide children with what they need puts our future at risk. To make progress we must look for the right balance between individual and shared responsibility for child health, accept our individual and institutional roles in making change and put in place systems to monitor changes over time. In this spirit, the next assessment – Community Health Needs Assessment 2011 – will track and report on progress made on these issues over the next three years.

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- ¹ *Pathways to Progress: Laying the Foundation for a Healthier Marin*, 2005 Community Needs Assessment and Plan, p. 10.
- ² Throughout this report, the terms Latino and Hispanic are used interchangeably depending upon the context and the terminology used in the source cited.