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About the Agency

Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA) is a non-profit 501 3(c) corporation federally funded as a Community Action Agency serving the rural communities in Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans counties in the state of Vermont. The agency’s mission is “to empower all generations in the Northeast Kingdom to grow, prosper, and thrive.” The agency operates several food pantries, a comprehensive fuel/utility assistance program, two Parent-Child centers, a comprehensive youth program, a community & social justice program, a small business development program, and nine Head Start/ Early Head Start preschool programs. NEKCA is continuously striving to develop and grow to meet the needs of its changing communities. This needs assessment in conducted for that purpose and seeks to identify the most pressing needs of the three-county region to help focus the agency service delivery and development partnerships.

Community Profile and Data Overview

As previously mentioned NEKCA serves the rural communities in Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans counties in the state of Vermont. The three-county service region is home to approximately 63,546 residents over the span of 2,006 square miles according to the most recent 2020 US Census. This is a slight decrease in population from the previous 2010 census which reported a combined population of 64,764 between the three counties. The most notable decrease in population occurred in Essex County followed by Caledonia County. ¹

This three-county region has a higher than average combined poverty rate of 11.43% with the higher level of poverty existing in Essex County (12.7%). This is significantly higher than the state’s over all poverty rate of 9.4%. ¹ Poverty in the region affects females at a much higher rate (14.24%) than males (11.52%), and impacts 17.1% of children ages in the area compared with 13% of children statewide. Young children ages 0-4 are even more impacted with 19.2% living under the federal poverty level in NEKCA’s service region.

While the above numbers solely reflect households living under federal poverty guidelines which are quite low, there are many more households which are living with low incomes which are inadequate to meet the rising cost of living in the region. Currently 34.7% of all households in the organization’s service area are living with a household income within 200% of

the federal poverty guidelines.\(^2\)

**Income and access to resources is key to a good quality of life** and to higher health outcomes.\(^3\) Therefore, it is vital to identify the barriers which keep individuals and family in poverty and the consequences of that poverty. This needs assessment seeks to accomplish this mission and to identify the needs of the community which NEKCA serves in the context of household poverty. As an anti-poverty organization, **NEKCA is committed to working to address the roots and alleviate the consequences of poverty**. This needs assessment is therefore conducted in the spirit of this mission.

**Population Trends**

NEKCA serves the three-county region of Caledonia, Orleans, and Essex which is commonly referred to as the Northeast Kingdom. The total population of all three counties is 64,764 with Caledonia being the most populated region at 31,227, accounting for just over half of the region’s inhabitants. The next most populated is Orleans County with 27,231 residents, followed by Essex County which is home to 6,306. There has been a slight decrease in the population across the area over the ten years since the last US Census count in 2010. This decrease in population is counter to the national trend which has shown overall population growth across the county. The decrease in population may be due to lack of available housing and the overall lack of infrastructure making it difficult for new residents to relocate to and existing residents to stay in the area. Currently the overall residential vacancy rate for the service area is 1.3% which is much lower than the national vacancy rate of 2.4% (see Table 1). Furthermore, only 9.19% of housing units are at 30% or less of the area median income, meaning that 90.81% of the units are unaffordable for most individuals/families.\(^4\)

The consequences of negative population growth in the region is that there are that there is an inadequate workforce to meet the demands of the communities, leaving many without adequate healthcare, education, and childcare.

The population of the three-county region of the Northeast Kingdom is primarily congregated around the cities of St. Johnsbury in Caledonia County, Newport in Orleans County, and Barton in Orleans County. While the population density 51-500 people per square mile in the region around St. Johnsbury and 501-1000 persons per square mile around the city of Newport, the population density for the rest of the service area is under 51 people per square mile.\(^5\) Consequently, those who live outside of the two hubs face geographical isolation which greatly affects those who are most vulnerable and those without reliable transportation to access

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\(^3\) Nelson, Josh. "Peril In Poverty—The Relationship Between Quality of Life and Income."

services and resources. Furthermore, the median age variance in the region varies greatly with the average age of individuals living within 5 miles of St. Johnsbury under 35.1 while most of the other areas in the region have a median age of over 45. This age distribution may be due to the location of a popular high school, St. Johnsbury Academy, in St. Johnsbury. However, the current age distribution also indicates that often individuals living in rural regions without access to resources are typically older in age which may increase their overall vulnerability.

96.2% of the population in the Northeast Kingdom identify as white, 3.37% self-report as being born outside of the United States, and 5.2% speak a language other than English in their home.

Table 1:

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<tbody>
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Income and Poverty Trends

The average household income for the three-country region is $48,026 which is well below the median statewide income of $61,973 and the national median income of $62,843. This parallels the previously mentioned high poverty rate of 12.32%. The rate of households living under the federal poverty level is highest in Essex County (12.7%), followed by Caledonia County (11%).
and Orleans County (10.6%). Moreover, 34.70% of the household in the region live under 200% of the poverty level which is still defined as extremely low income and inadequate to afford average living expenses in the region. Household living under 200% of the poverty level are primarily located in southern Essex County where this impacts 38.1-50% of households. Another notable pocket of low-income households are located east of St. Johnsbury (38.1-50%), and directly north of Newport where over 50% of all household live with a household income under 200% of the federal poverty level.5

Transportation and Access to Services

While there is not a reliable data source which would provide data for individuals/families living without reliable transportation in the region, this is an area of interest for NEKCA and this needs assessment. The agency is interested in exploring this topic in the context of community needs and to collect data around transportation access in the assessment. Private transportation is essential in the region for individuals to access employment and resources in the region due to the long distances between these locations and many homes. The average
travel time to work in the three-county region is 26 minutes.\(^6\)

Currently the region does not have many public transportation options or resources. It is assumed that due to the high level of poverty in the region, the rural geographical nature where many of those living in poverty live, and the lack of transportation infrastructure, this would be a barrier to resources for many. Currently, the only public transportation resource in the three-county region is the Rural Community Transport (RCT) which provides limited service routes, and at limited times. While it is a vital community resource, its current capacity may not meet all the transportation needs of individuals/families living with a low-income. Furthermore, reliable transportation to resources and services is even more complicated during winter months due to the large amount of snow and freezing temperatures in the region.

**Population Identified as Vulnerable**

The data clearly identifies members of the community who are most vulnerable and most likely to experience poverty. While 11.43% of the population in the region are living under the federal poverty level, poverty disproportionately impacts certain members of the community more than others. This economic inequality is strikingly evident as 17.1% of youth ages 0-17 live in households under the poverty level and prevalence jumps to 19.2% for young children ages 0-4.\(^7\)

**Methodology**

This needs assessment utilizes data obtain through a variety of federal, state, and local data resources including but not limited to the US Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Center for Education Statistics, the US Department of Labor and many more. Data citations are footnoted and provided for reference.

The Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA) then conducted two surveys which included a 28-question staff survey distributed to all 148 NEKCA employees, and a 50 question customer satisfaction survey distributed to 925 community members who had received services from the agency in the past twelve month or who were a community partner. 91 completed staff survey were obtained and 279 customer satisfaction surveys were returned. These responses were then tabulated and analyzed for trends in an aggregate fashion. The agency also uses its own data on services provided in the region and the demographics of those utilizing agency services. This data is maintained and reported through the agency’s MyCap


\(^7\) *US Census Bureau, American Community Survey*. 2015-19. Source geography: County
The survey questions included participant demographic information and the six service domains for community action agencies including: employment, education, income, housing, health, and civic engagement/community involvement. The all questions were thematically coded into these themes and analyzed for trends. The identified need priorities outlined in this needs assessment are a result of that analysis.

**Priority 1: Health and Nutrition**

Health and nutrition was rated the top issue/need in the three-county service region of Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans. Healthy food accessibility continues to be a pressing issue for residents especially households with children. As evident of this need, 12.49% of household are reported to be food insecure. Furthermore, data shows that 54.4% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and 15.7% of households receive SNAP benefits. The state of Vermont utilizes the Universal Free School Meals model which allows all students access to school prepared lunches for free at schools where at least 40% of enrolled students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches based on their household income. Currently, all the public k-12 schools in the service region meet this eligibility requirement.

Another pressing need is accessibility to health care and to mental health support services. In the region, 4.65% of people are uninsured, and the mortality rate of “deaths of despair” (which include suicide and alcohol/drug related deaths) is 47.05 for the region compared with the national rate of 40.67.

NEKCA survey responses substantiate these findings with 28.83% of survey respondents reporting that they regularly worry about running out of food, and 31.68% report that they were not able to afford enough food for their household within the past 12 months. Despite these food challenges, 96.44% of survey respondents say that access to good food is important.

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8 Feeding America. 2017. Source geography: County
9 National Center for Education Statistics, NCES - Common Core of Data
10 US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2015-19. Source geography: County
or extremely important to them. The connection between unhealthy food and obesity has long been established and therefore it is important to note that despite the reported food scarcity in the region, 28.93% of survey respondents report that they have put on a lot of weight over the past 6 months yet. This indicates that access to food is not the only need and that it is important to ensure that food accessibility includes health food options that support physical health and a healthy weight. During the year of 2021 (from January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2021), 732 families in the Northeast Kingdom received food assistance from NEKCA’s various food programs a total of 5,534 times.

The NEKCA survey also revealed that many individuals and families rely on Medicaid (56.79%) and Medicare (10.36%) as their sole source of insurance. Therefore, it is important to have resources in the community who can help people to sign up for Medicaid and Medicare programs and to ensure that there are adequate health service providers who accept these types of insurance programs. As an organization, NEKCA has long recognized the connection between mental health and physical health and the most recent survey supports this link. The survey found that 34.88% of survey respondents report their mental health as fair or poor over the past 4 weeks, and 40.22% of survey respondents report their physical health as fair or poor over the past 4 weeks. Yet 92.53% of survey respondents report their physical health as important or very important to them, and 92.53% report their mental health as important or very important to them. Consequently 50.53% of survey respondents have had concern over their mental health and have sought help.

Based upon this data and survey results, the following needs around Health and Nutrition have been identified as follows:

- Individuals living with low incomes especially households with children need sustained and increased access to healthy food options
- Individuals and families living with low incomes need help accessing insurance coverage including Medicaid and Medicare. Medicaid/Medicare eligible and/or enrolled individuals also need increased health services which accept these insurance sources including mental health services
- Individuals and families living with low incomes need increased access to mental health services
- Individuals and families living with low incomes need increased access to resources to support their physical health

**Priority 2: Housing and Infrastructure (including broadband internet connection)**
Housing properties in the service region are aging and the growth of new housing inventory is not keeping up with the region’s population growth. Consequently, safe, and affordable housing was identified as the second top issue throughout the service region. Currently, there are 39,696 total housing units in the 3-county region for a population of 64,764 with a vacancy rate of only 1.3%. This is affecting the price of housing, making home ownership impossible for many. In 2019, only 52.49% of houses in the region were owner occupied, compared to the national rate of 56.23%. Furthermore, there has been a housing cost burden for many. In the service region, 46.89% of renters and 33.71% of homeowners spent more than 30% of their income on housing. Another issue is access to internet/broadband for households, especially those in remote areas. Only 83.93% of household in the service area have internet access, compared to 93.53% statewide and 96.26% nationally.

As previously mentioned, the housing stock in the area is aging with 37.49% of housing units are older than 1960. The aging of housing infrastructure in the region contributes to unsafe and unsanitary housing issues for many, especially those who are housing cost burdened. Consequently, 32.59% of household report living in substandard conditions.

These findings are echoed in NEKCA customer satisfaction and staff surveys which found that 39.5% of respondents have a temporary or inconsistent living situation. Furthermore, 75.80% of respondents identify housing as an extremely important priority, and over 78% of survey respondents have issues with the sanitation and/or safety of their current living conditions. The type of housing reported varied in the NEKCA surveys with 39.79% of respondents reporting that they rent, 22.78% live in a shelter/emergency shelter, and 10.33% are unhoused or non-permanently housed. Another interesting finding in the survey was that 43.77% of respondents reported living in a household of two people or less with 29.18 reporting that they live alone.

Also mentioned previously is the lack of reliable internet access for households in the region. The NEKCA customer satisfaction survey reported that 19.93% of those surveyed did not have internet and 23.49% had limited internet access through their cell phone.

In the calendar year of 2021 (January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2021) 305 individuals utilized NEKCA’s housing services, which included 66 nights of emergency shelter provided, 84 instances of utility payment assistance (including internet payment assistance), 87 instances of rental payment assistance, and 489 instances of housing application assistance. Due to the

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15 US Census Bureau, Census Population Estimates. Source geography: County
16 US Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2020-Q4. Source geography: County
18 US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2015-19
various types of support provided, 128 families where able to remain stably housing 90 days after receiving assistance.

Based upon this data and survey results, the following needs around Housing and Infrastructure have been identified as follows:

- Individuals and families living with low and moderately low incomes need increased permanent affordable and safe housing options
- Smaller households living with low and moderately low incomes need smaller and more affordable single bedroom housing options
- The Northeast Kingdom regions needs increased affordable housing inventory
- Individuals and families living with low and moderately low incomes need resources to address aging housing issues and repairs
- The Northeast Kingdom region needs increased broadband coverage in rural parts of the services area
- Individuals and families living with low incomes need more affordable broadband internet service options

**Priority 3: Employment and Economic Development**

The three-county services region of Essex, Caledonia, and Orleans have a 4.1% rate of unemployment compared to the state wide rate of 3.5%.\(^{21}\) Furthermore, the average poverty rate for the three county region is 13.67% compared to the state average of 10.2% and the national average of 10.5%.\(^{22}\) Median household income in Caledonia is $50,943; $45,796 in Essex; and $48,826 in Orleans. This is well below the state median household income of $63,293; and the national median household income of $65,712.\(^{23}\) Another notable finding is that many residents in the service region are self-employed through small businesses. This type of income/work accounts for 13.2-14.5% of working individuals in the counties of Caledonia and Essex, and 14.5%-16.5% of individuals in Orleans county. The top industries for self-employment in the region are Health Care and Social Assistance; Accommodations and Food Services; Retail Trade; Manufacturing; and Construction.\(^{24}\)

The NEKCA survey findings echo these data highlights and give additional insight to the issues.

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32.74% of survey respondents are report that they are unemployed. However, 45.91% of respondents also report that they are not seeking employment. When questioned about the barriers to seeking or wanting to seek employment, 33.10% of respondents identify lack of reliable transportation as a barrier that kept them from medical appointments, meetings, work, and from getting things needed for daily living. Another theme which came up in the surveys and was identified as a deterrence from many individuals seeking employment was the lack of decent paying jobs available. 34.64% of respondents that they lack a decent paying job.

Based upon this data and survey results, the following needs around Employment and Economic Development have been identified as follows:

- The Northeast Kingdom region needs more jobs that pay a living wage
- The Northeast Kingdom region needs increased public transportation resources

**Priority 4: Income, Infrastructure, and Asset Building**

Median and per capita income in the three-county area remains well below Vermont and national levels. Although, not surprisingly, the percentage of the population receiving public assistance is higher in the NEK, at 4.72% than the Vermont rate (4.09%) and the US rate (2.67%), the average benefit amount in the three counties ($2,835) is below the Vermont average ($3,171) and the US average ($3,335). The percentage of the population receiving Medicaid benefits is higher in the NEK at 56.95% than the Vermont rate of 46.6% and the US rate of 38.48%.

NEKCA’s surveys reveals that 70.46% of respondents report a lack of money keeps them from doing the things they wish they could do at least once a month or more. Moreover, 71.79% of respondents identify their bank balance as important factor in their quality of life.

Based upon this data and survey results, the following needs around Income, Infrastructure, and Asset Building have been identified as follows:

- Small businesses in the Northeast Kingdom need increased fiscal and technical assistance
- Low-income household need reliable transportation to access employment and economic building opportunities

**Priority 5: Education**

The Northeast Kingdom service area data reveals that the region has a lower educational attainment than the rest of the state and the national averages. 10.5% of residents in the
service area do not have a high school diploma compared to 12% nationally, and only 15% of the population has a Bachelor degree compared to the national rate of 19.8%. Furthermore, 6.96% of youth ages 16-19 are not in school or employed compared with the statewide rate of 6.61%.

There is however a high rate of families who utilize early childhood educational resources. The rate of children ages birth to 5 who are enrolled in Head Start programs per 10,000 children is 53.03 compared to the statewide rate of 25.66 and the national rate of 10.53. This reveals that many families with young children rely on the Head Start programs for essential childcare and early developmental support. Furthermore, 70% of Vermont’s children who are in need of educational support live in rural areas.25 Despite this high demand for early childcare educational support, recruitment and retention of early childhood educational providers continued to be a challenge throughout the state of Vermont. Factors contributing to this workforce shortage include low wages, and complications due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 26

These overall data insights mirror the finding in NEKCA’s customer satisfaction in which 37.01% of survey respondents have completed high school, 16.01% have completed some college, and 12.1% have completed an Associate degree or higher. However, 71.19% of survey respondents identify their education as important or very important for overall life satisfaction. Yet only 5.34% of survey respondents currently attend school or a university, and 14.59% of survey respondent are unsatisfied with their current level of educational attainment. Some of the barriers to educational attainment were lack of transportation, insufficient income needed to tuition/school expenses, and lack of access to broadband internet in rural regions.

Based upon this data and survey results, the following needs around Education have been identified as follows:

- Families and individuals living with low incomes need increased access to job training opportunities that will support their employment in fields that pay a living wage.
- Families and individuals need support with learning about and enrolling in local educational programs
- Individuals living with low incomes who are enrolled in educational programing need access to supports that help them to maintain their enrollment in such programs. Needed supports include transportation, internet access, and fiscal aid
- Families with young children who are living with low incomes need access to early

25 Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. Indicator 6.13 and variables ACE1; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10; and K11Q43R in the public use data file.
childhood education and childcare

• Early child educational programs need support to maintain qualified educational staffing levels

Priority 6: Civic Engagement and Community Involvement

Despite the social challenges related to the geographical isolation of the region, the percent of adults who rarely get emotional support is only 7% in the service region which is lower than the state rate of 8%. However, many residents in the region report negative effects of social isolation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁷

NEKCA’s survey builds upon these data findings and highlights the strong social capital that many northeast kingdom residents enjoy. 72.95% of survey respondents report that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their person relationships and 70.47% describe these relationships as healthy. This is reflective of the value that survey respondents place on their close relationships as 90.03% advise that their family and friends are extremely important to them. However, only 55.87% report that they regularly spend time with those who they are close to. Barriers to maintaining close relationships in the community may be related to transportation. 92.5% of respondents identify that they need a consistent means of transportation to fully engage and participate in their community. Furthermore, 33.10% of respondents report that lack of transportation keeps them from participating in civic engagement activities and from community involvement.

The link between social skills and social exposure has long been identified as vital for individuals to successfully maintain meaningful and fulfilling relationships. Without consistent social exposure, people often find the ability to relate to others to be increasingly difficult.²⁸ NEKCA’s survey respondents highlighted the importance for ongoing social connection opportunities and reported that the increased social isolation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic have greatly affected them. Consequently, 17.56% of respondents report that they regularly feel left out or off when around other people. Moreover, 39.86% do not have any life events approaching that they are excited about and 39.86% report they find themselves bored quiet often. This could also be connected to a lack of engagement opportunities as only 8% of survey respondents report that they regularly participate in volunteer work.

Based upon this data and survey results, the following needs around Income, Infrastructure, and Asset Building have been identified as follows:

• The community lacks transportation options for individuals who are seeking to participate in civic/community engagement activities
• NEKCA needs to increase community outreach of volunteer and civic engagement opportunities at the agency and throughout the service region