

Mental health care a top regional health need, per community health assessment

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Nine of 10 regional counties ranked mental health care first or second among their most pressing health needs – one of numerous main findings published in the region’s recently released regional health assessment and plan.

The nonprofit Barren River Initiative to Get Healthy Together coalition, which comprises 47 organizations and spans 10 southcentral Kentucky counties, at its Wednesday meeting

released the Community Health Assessment results and Community Health Improvement Plan for 2025-2028.

The assessment, which extracted numerous findings from 1,783 survey responses and some interviews, aimed to learn community members' perspectives and experiences about BRIGHT's priorities: physical health, mental health, nutrition, diabetes, substance use disorders, tobacco use and vaping prevention, and other community health needs.

Volunteer-driven BRIGHT committees, each assigned to an area of health, distilled data ahead of the public release and identified [six sets of priority findings](#) – which BRIGHT Communications Specialist Olivia McGee said “were key in creating” the goals and objectives of the plan – and these committees developed the goals for their respective areas that they'll work to accomplish.

Mental health care getting ranked so highly as a need was one of the priority survey findings. Another, within the “nutrition” area, was that 16% reported going without food one to five times within the past 30 days “due to a lack of money or resources.”

As an example of the process concerning the latter, BRIGHT's nutrition committee identified a goal of enhancing food access and nutrition education by “bridging resource gaps, fostering partnerships and empowering communities to make healthy food choices.”

One objective for accomplishing that is expanding awareness of meal resources such as food banks to improve access to food by 10%. And a strategy for that objective is collaborating with the Warren County Public Library to enhance its “Start Here Warren County” resource by completing and distributing a comprehensive list of these resources in Warren County by November.

Mental health had a greater focus than usual in this assessment, BRIGHT Facilitator Amanda Reckard said; Kim Link, who worked with qualitative data from the assessment, added that there was a “very prevalent theme” of people experiencing mental health struggles. Lauren McClain, who helped develop the assessment as a highly experienced expert in research methods and the co-founder of the consulting agency Grantibly, added, “one thing that I think is obvious, but it's worth repeating, is the need for mental health services in the region.”

“We live in a society where there's so much going on – so, mental health isn't just about mental health disorders,” McClain said. “It's not just about substance abuse. It's about stress, it's about loneliness, it's about dealing with everyday work-life balance stuff. There's just a lot of mental health needs, and we just do not have enough providers in the area, and it's also not affordable – sometimes, people have insurance, but they still can't afford it because their co-pay for a visit is \$100 ...

“I think that health is a holistic issue. And I think sometimes, we talk about health like one thing, but you can't separate the economy from health. You can't separate the workforce from health. You can't separate transportation and food from health.”

A couple of responses that came up the most concerning the biggest barriers to health care were a belief from respondents that they wouldn't be understood or heard, or that their provider wouldn't be interested in helping someone like them, she said.

"I thought that those were two things that really showed a lot the need for better communication between providers and patients," she said. "I don't want anyone to take that and just automatically blame the providers: Is it the providers that are not supporting people and treating them the way that they should or being sensitive, or is it a perception of the medical community on the part of citizens that just feel like they're not going to be supported?"

"So, we kind of need both – we need training for providers to provide more culturally competent care, but then also maybe some education in the communities of low-income people, rural people, immigrants that – yes – our providers do want to help you."

Another barrier that was huge and ranked highly in nearly every county was an inability for people to go to the doctor, she added.

"I wish more employers would give more time off for health visits, even if it's just a few hours or a half a day," she said. "When medical facilities are only open during business hours, and people can't get off work to go to the doctor, then what are they supposed to do?"

— *The Community Health Assessment reports are available at <https://www.brightcoalition.org/community-health-assessment-reports>*