



# INTERIM REPORT FOR THE LOS ALAMOS COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH PLAN

Presented to Los Alamos County Council on March 26, 2023

# Introduction and Approach, & Status of Health in Los Alamos County

## Introduction

The Los Alamos County Health Council (LACHC) is required by House Bill 137 (2019) and Senate Memorial 44 (2018) to develop a health plan that monitors local health and health care, advises on policies that affect health care, facilitates communication, and identifies resources to improve health. The Los Alamos County Council established the Los Alamos County Health Council and mandated that the LACHC develop an annual work-plan that is approved by the current Health Council members and the County Council liaison.

*(Incorporated County of Los Alamos Resolution No. 19-28).*

*The goal of the Los Alamos County Health Council is to enable all of our citizens to live as long, healthy, productive, and meaningful of lives as possible. Furthermore, to achieve this in doable, sustainable, equitable, and cost-efficient ways, that improve the overall health of our community.*

The goal of the Los Alamos County Health Council aligns with the Los Alamos County Council's Strategic Goals and Priority<sup>1</sup> areas that include Quality of Life and the Health, Wellbeing, and Social Services; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity; and Mobility Priorities.

To achieve that goal, the LACHC created a sub-committee to develop a Comprehensive Health Plan (CHP) for Los Alamos County, and the County hired a limited-term employee housed within the Social Services Division to carry out the work required for developing the plan. The plan consists of four major components: interviewing community members to gather broad feedback about the social determinants of health that promote and hinder healthy living in Los Alamos; gathering statistical data through the provision of a community-wide health survey to identify gaps and health-related needs; holding public input sessions for community members to provide feedback on health-related needs; and compiling all of the relevant pieces into a final report, complete with action plan and recommendations. This document is the **Interim Report**, summarizing the first phase of more than 200 interviews with community members. We are presenting this interim summary to highlight the major themes that have emerged thus far, present an overview from the community interviews and focus groups, and guide the immediate short-term recommendations that can be implemented now.

Our hope is that the recommendations made and actions taken as a result of this plan will contribute to improving the health and wellbeing of everyone who is part of our Los Alamos community.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic Leadership Plan p.6, available at [https://cdnsm5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_6435726/File/Government/County Council/2023.02.08\\_BOOK\\_2023\\_Strategic\\_Leadership\\_Plan\\_VMiller\\_FINAL.pdf](https://cdnsm5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_6435726/File/Government/County Council/2023.02.08_BOOK_2023_Strategic_Leadership_Plan_VMiller_FINAL.pdf)

## Approach

During the course of compiling this interim report, previous Los Alamos County Health Reports from 2015-16, 2018, and 2020 were reviewed in detail. As is often the case, reports can be commissioned and then sit on a shelf due to lack of time, resources, and or assigning responsibility to making sure the plan's objectives are carried out. We wish to avoid the same fate with this CHP, and instead envision it as a "living document," with recommendations for increased functions to be incorporated into the Social Services Division's work, as well as the work of the Los Alamos County Health Council, and additional collaborations with other Los Alamos County departments, as well as organizations throughout the county and region.

This Comprehensive Health Plan serves as the starting point for assessing where we stand as a community across a variety of health measures in 2023-24. We have used the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) as a lens for ensuring that the many different facets one's environment that impact health are being examined in conjunction with each other, as it is nearly impossible to examine these items in isolation from each other. SDOH include the following measures: Health Care Access and Quality, Education Access and Quality, Economic Stability, Social and Community Context, and Neighborhoods and the Built Environment. These are all important contributors to the overall health and wellbeing of our community.

A healthy community is one in which all community members not only survive but are actually able to thrive. A thriving community has members that are able to be productive and maintain their stability even during times of crisis. In other words, in a thriving community, people have the skills and resources to empower them with a level of resiliency that will help them weather times of crisis and be able to recover. While the access to essential services and resources for survival (e.g., food, shelter, medical care) is needed by everyone within our community, the essential services and resources for thriving may vary by each individual's unique situation. For example, the conditions necessary for children to develop into resilient adults may be different than for adults who are experiencing new challenges as they age.

There are three main steps we are utilizing towards the development of the CHP:

1. Assess the state of health and wellbeing of the Los Alamos community through community interviews and focus groups, and identify services and resources that contribute to community health and wellbeing using the Social Determinants of Health. These interviews spanned from fall 2022 through summer 2023, and included middle and high schoolers to older adults; people who work in a wide variety of settings and representing different income levels; people with physical and/or mental health disabilities, or who are parents/caregivers of people with disabilities; and people for whom English is not their first language. We attempted to include as many diverse perspectives as possible. (Completed)
2. Identify the extent to which health-related services and resources are available and accessible to everyone in the community whose health and wellbeing could benefit from them, through a community-wide health survey (to take place in Spring 2024)
3. Compile all sources of data into a final report with recommendations for actions to improve the health and wellbeing of the community. (Fall 2024)

For this first step, we identified and assembled overall health status information of the Los Alamos County community using national, state, and local data indicators. These charts are presented throughout the report, as well as in the appendix. Compiling and analyzing community-level data are critical to assessing the overall health and wellbeing of a community. Community-level data facilitates the observation of macro-level perspectives of the state of health and wellbeing in a community as well as change in those levels of health and wellbeing. However, while aggregate data at the community-level allows for assessment of overall health of a community, it can often miss health and wellness issues that impact smaller subsets of the community. Therefore, in combination with the analysis of aggregated data sets (i.e., secondary data analysis), individual and group interviews (or focus groups) of service providers, community members that may have unique needs, and public community meetings then helped to identify health issues and factors that may impact health in the Los Alamos County Community. The collection and analysis of qualitative data

is especially important for identifying health and wellbeing needs and potential solutions at a local community level.

Next, we identified the services and resources that contribute to community health and wellbeing. We identified those services and resources based on interviews of service providers, community-groups, public input, and through public health research. Research on individual and community resiliency has shown that in the absence of services and resources designated for support of health and wellbeing, for those individuals, families, and communities that have resilience, it is because they have been able to access informal means of support. Therefore, we were intentional in our inclusion of formal and informal sources of support of health and wellbeing. Concurrent with the description of health needs and resources described by community members, we compiled health needs and essential resources that are identified in the field of Public Health research and planning.

As part of the interviews, we wanted to learn about the current state of availability and accessibility of services and resources that support community and individual health and wellbeing. During this step we learned what services and resources people used and why they used those specific services and resources. While it may appear in many cases obvious why a person sought specific health and wellbeing services (e.g., medical need) we did not rely on our assumptions. By asking those we interviewed why they, or their client or patients, used specific services or resources we learned about the barriers that some people, or groups of people, have in accessing services that are available. We also learned how those who face barriers accessing available services sometimes are able to compensate by utilizing informal or nonconventional resources that are available to them.

The next step, administering a community-wide health survey, would be to determine the extent that concerns and issues related to health and wellbeing services are present in the Los Alamos County community. The results of the community survey will identify which services and resources the community members are aware of, and whether or not they are equally accessible throughout the community. The community survey will also identify which public health concerns are being adequately met, and those that need to be improved. The results of the community survey will be instrumental in prioritizing gaps in public health efforts within Los Alamos County and regionally.

Finally, we will combine the results of individual interviews and focus group feedback with the community-wide health survey analysis, into one final report for improving and sustaining the health and wellbeing of the Los Alamos County community. The final report will include short-, medium- and long-term recommendations as part of the overall action plan.

### **Status of Health and Wellbeing in Los Alamos County**

Two popular summary measures of community health and wellbeing are the county rankings developed by U.S. News and World Report, and the County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, a program of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

The U.S. News and World Report's measure includes information on population health, equity, education, economy, housing, food and nutrition, environment, public safety, community vitality, and infrastructure. The U.S. News and World Report's 2022 composite measure of community health ranks Los Alamos as the healthiest county in the United States.

The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute compiles information from numerous sources to develop a composite measure of community health and then ranks each county nationally and within the county's state. Compared to counties within New Mexico, Los Alamos County ranks in first place overall and on each subset of indicators. Examples of the subsets include length of life, quality of life, health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic factors, and physical environment. Los Alamos County presents better on a vast majority of measures compared to the nation as a whole.

The consistent results of Los Alamos being designated as one of, if not the, healthiest counties in the country by different measures indicates that Los Alamos can be confident that compared to other locales it is doing well. However, summary measures can only tell us so much about our community. In a sense they provide a very high-level perspective, particularly because in nationally-conducted surveys that feed into these models, it is often small samples from Los Alamos County that are then “weighted” in order for summaries and conclusions to be made. This limitation of uncertainty should be taken seriously.

Another source of information on the overall health and wellness of the Los Alamos community is provided in the Community Health Profile assembled by the New Mexico Department of Health.<sup>2</sup> The report provides demographic and epidemiological data for Los Alamos County and includes state and national level data for comparison.

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<sup>2</sup> Report prepared by: Jeremy P. Espinoza, M.S., Community Health Epidemiologist, Department of Health, Health Promotion Program, Northeast Region. Retrieved Thursday, March 2nd 2023 from the New Mexico Department of Health Indicator-Based Information System.

# Health Care Access and Quality

## Key takeaways

- Los Alamos County faces many of the same healthcare challenges seen throughout New Mexico and the United States including: provider shortages, long wait times, and delays in care leading to more extensive care needed, coupled with provider burnout, especially nearly four years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Despite the size and remote nature of Los Alamos County, a range of medical and behavioral health resources are available. However, there exists challenges to getting needed care that were shared by community members and service providers including: physical, technological, language and cultural, as well as transportation and financial barriers. The majority of Los Alamos County residents have some form of health insurance and yet many still struggle with needing to utilize services where their insurance may not be taken, or where they face financial burden of out-of-pocket costs.
- An equity lens to this work means ensuring quality medical and related support services are available to all regardless of age, race, sex, sexual orientation, language proficiency, disability status, income level, or those dimensions which disadvantage some people over others. There is need for physical and behavioral health providers that are well-versed in treating these intersections among specific populations, such as LGBTQAI, BIPOC, older adults, and children and young adults.

## Introduction

As we work towards our vision that all people who live, work, play, and pray in Los Alamos County are able to live as healthy and productive lives as they can, it is important to keep in mind that by health we don't only mean the absence of disease. The World Health Organization sets forth that "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."<sup>1</sup> As such, this section documents what is currently known about access to and quality of resources supporting physical, mental, and social well-being in Los Alamos County based on available National, State, and local quantitative data and from interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions with Los Alamos County providers and community members.

First, it is important to acknowledge that New Mexico, as well as Los Alamos County, face many of the same healthcare challenges seen throughout the United States, especially nearly four years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: there are staffing shortages throughout healthcare facilities and among a wide range of providers that are increasing the patient care burden and contributing to additional staff burnout. There are challenges faced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (or questioning), Asexual (or allied), or Intersex (LGBTQAI) patients in finding culturally competent care. There continues to be challenges with long wait times, finding providers that accept specific insurances, and knowing what procedures those insurances will cover.

New Mexico as a primarily rural state, and Los Alamos County that is remote (but we do not benefit from any designation such as rural for assisting in attracting health professional work

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) Constitution <https://www.who.int/about/accountability/governance/constitution.html> Accessed January 7th 2024.

force)<sup>2</sup> face additional challenges in attracting and maintaining health care providers. Providers include physicians, nurses, and support staff, as well as mental health and social service providers. And, as one provider shared during an interview, when there is a delay in care, that often follows with more need for more extensive care. Another provider shared that when community members choose to pursue care out of town, including out of state, for a wide variety of reasons, the under-utilization of local services can harm the viability of those providers. Either way, care for severe or complex medical situations often requires transferring to a hospital located outside of Los Alamos County.

State policies have tremendous impact on the health of Los Alamos County residents. For example, costs of liability insurance or malpractice insurance can be unsustainable for small practices and can also deter newly trained physicians from wanting to practice in the state. Recent legislation (SB 523)<sup>3</sup> that amends the New Mexico Medical Malpractice Act, to make practicing in New Mexico less cost prohibitive while protecting patients, was signed into law by Governor Lujan Grisham on April 7th, 2023. It will be important to follow this as it rolls out during the next several years to understand how it affects access to care in Los Alamos County, and the potential next steps for advocacy from the Los Alamos County community.

Another example of how a state law impacts availability and access to care in Los Alamos County has to do with the lack of availability for individuals to utilize mental health services provided by clinicians who are outside of New Mexico. The state of New Mexico is one of few states that is not a member of the Psychology Interjurisdictional Compact (PSYPACT)<sup>4</sup> that enables practitioners via tele psychology or temporary in-person to work with clients across state boundaries. As consumers and providers noted in interviews, the need for mental health in Los Alamos County far exceeds availability of practitioners in Los Alamos County and in New Mexico. Being able to utilize a system like PSYPACT could be one tool in our collective toolbox for improving access to mental health care for our community. Such legislation has been introduced in the New Mexico Legislature (2023 Regular Session - House Bill 249<sup>5</sup> was the most recent) but has not yet been passed.

With the above state and national context, the remainder of this section focuses on what is working well and the challenges that exist here in Los Alamos County, as have been expressed by members of the community who participated in interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions, always with a focus on equity. An equity lens to this work means ensuring quality medical and related support services are available to all regardless of age, race, sex, sexual orientation, language proficiency, disability status, income level, or really any dimension that disadvantages some people over others. At times, accessing quality care can be difficult for everyone. However, some members of the community are at compounded disadvantages to getting the care they need. Among the individuals who participated in interviews or focus groups, needs were highlighted that, while affecting a small segment of the community, are no less important to address. Community members who are BIPOC express instances of being dismissed or not taken seriously when needing emergency assistance. An example shared was

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<sup>2</sup>Health Resources and Services Health Work Force shortage designa1on <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/workforce-shortage-areas/shortage-designa1on/reviewing-applica1ons#governor> Accessed January 3rd 2024

<sup>3</sup>Governor brokers bipar1san compromise on medical malprac1ce legisla1on arch 15, 2023 Press Release <https://www.governor.state.nm.us/2023/03/15/governor-brokers-bipar1san-compromise-on-medical-malprac1ce-legisla1on/> Accessed January 6th 2024

<sup>4</sup> Psychology Interjurisdic1onal Compact (PSYPACT) <https://psypact.org/mpage/psypactmap> Accessed January 6th 2024

<sup>5</sup> New Mexico Legislature 2023 regular Session HB 249 Psychology Interjurisdic1onal Compact <https://www.nmlegis.gov/Legisla1on/Legisla1on?chamber=H&legType=B&legNo=249&year=23> Accessed January 8th 2024

being dismissed a number of times and then needing to have emergency surgery. Some older adults are left behind as technology advances. For grandparents and kin raising children on fixed income with few additional supports, providing for the young people, and especially those who have special physical and or mental health needs that may not be covered by insurance, can be a struggle.

## **Health and Wellbeing Services Available in Los Alamos County**

As of October 2021, there is one hospital, two Assisted Living Facilities,<sup>6</sup> no Intermediate Care Facilities, and one Nursing Home<sup>7</sup> in Los Alamos County. Los Alamos County also has private practices for adult primary care and pediatricians. In 2020 (most current data available), there were 10.5 primary care physician full-time equivalents per 10,000 residents.<sup>8</sup> Los Alamos County also has emergency medical services, an emergency department, an urgent care, and services available to community members who are un- or under-insured through Las Clinicas del Norte and the New Mexico Department of Health Los Alamos County Public Health Office.

According to the New Mexico Regulations & Licensing Department (2020) there were 24.6 Core Mental Health Professionals Full-Time Equivalent per 10,000 population in Los Alamos County. There were 28.1 per 10,000 population for New Mexico.<sup>9</sup> As of 2019, there was one prescribing psychologist serving Los Alamos County.<sup>10</sup> Some of the mental health professionals work within agencies (such as Los Alamos Family Council and Serna Solutions), while others provide services directly to individuals and families. Insurance acceptance, waitlists, and types of services provided may change frequently, all of which present barriers to receiving timely care. There are three Psychiatric Providers that offer some psychiatric services in Los Alamos County, although it may not be on a full-time equivalent level, or that accept New Mexico Medicaid insurance.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> New Mexico Department of Health Division of Health Improvement (DHI) Spreadsheet, October 2021. <https://www.nmhealth.org/about/dhi/>

<sup>7</sup> New Mexico Department of Health Division of Health Improvement (DHI) ASPEN Report, October 2021 <https://www.nmhealth.org/about/dhi/hflc/>

<sup>8</sup> New Mexico Regulations & Licensing Department, Physician (Medical Doctor and Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine) Licensure Survey Results from the following specialties: Family Medicine, General Medicine, General Pediatrics, Adolescent Medicine, Occupational Medicine, Preventive Medicine. Data retrieved June 24, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> New Mexico Regulations & Licensing Department, Licensure Survey Results from the following professions: Psychologists, Licensed Clinical Social Work (LCSW), Licensed Independent Social Worker (LISW), Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW), Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor Licensure (LPCC), Family and Marriage Counselor (FMC). Data retrieved June 24, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Data obtained from University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, 2020. UNM HSC obtains licensure survey data from New Mexico Regulation & Licensing Department. Calculations of need based off HRSA Need Designation calculations for FTE



PCPs for population with unusually high need. Results are published in the New Mexico Health Care Workforce Committee 2020 Annual Report. [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=nmhc\\_workforce](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=nmhc_workforce)

<sup>11</sup> New Mexico Human Services Department, Behavioral Health Services Division based on provider enrollment in the Medicaid system. The totals do include providers who offer services in multiple counties throughout the state, however have a Medicaid provider identification for each area serviced. Providers who are serving multiple counties may not be serving the county on a full-time basis. Psychiatric Providers include Psychiatrist, Psychiatric Nurse, and Prescribing Psychologist. July 2021

Dental offices, ophthalmology, optometry, pharmacies, and specialists like Sports Medicine are also available to Los Alamos County residents and neighbors. Los Alamos Visiting Nurse Service (LAVNS) provides in-home health care services based on referrals from primary care physicians.

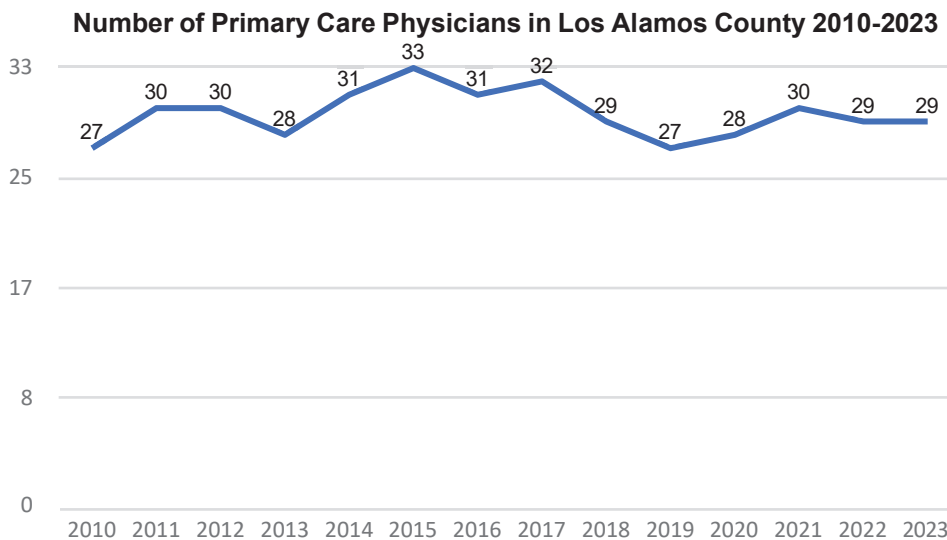
The large employers in Los Alamos County offer varying types of health and wellbeing services to their employees. For example, LANL has a Wellness Center for its employees that offers a gym and a variety of classes. LANL also provides supports and resources for its employees through Occupational Health including an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and a Behavioral Health Response Team. Los Alamos County employees also have access to EAP services, as well as other health benefits such as reduced fees at the YMCA and free entrance to the Aquatic Center and Ice Rink that are Divisions of the Los Alamos County Community Services.

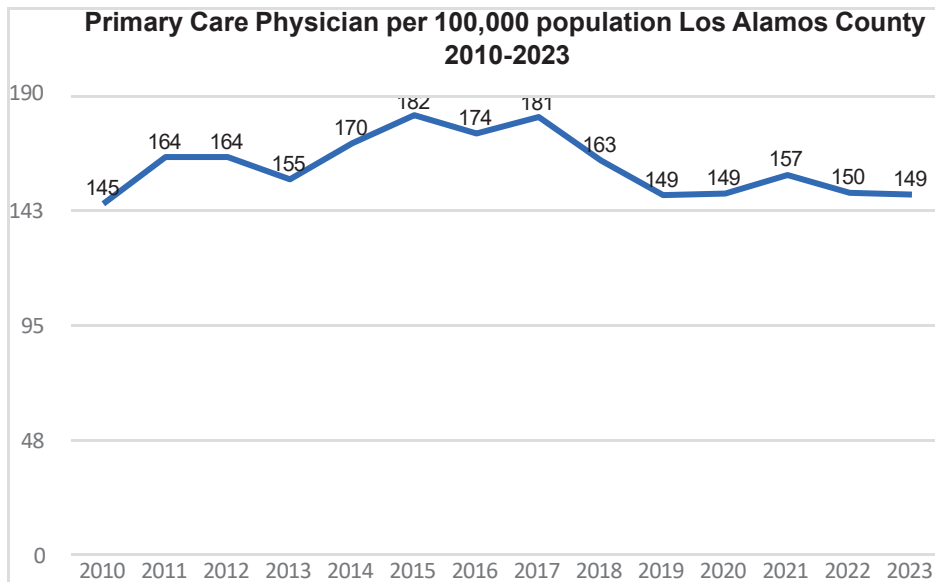
## Challenges that make it difficult for community members to have access to quality health and wellbeing services

### Availability and accessibility of care

The small and remote nature of Los Alamos County makes it particularly difficult to support the wide array of health care that community members may need throughout their lifespan.

While the number of primary care physicians (PCP), and the ratio of population to PCPs has remained fairly stable over the past 13 years, a common sentiment shared during public input opportunities is the lack of provider availability experienced in the community.





Not being able to get timely appointments can cause delays in care that in-turn, could mean that the individual’s health challenges become more serious or complex. These challenges are expressed by community members when considering a wide range of services: across primary care, women’s health, pediatrics, medical specialists, dental, vision, as well as mental and behavioral health within Los Alamos County.

Due to the challenges of getting in with a PCP, it was expressed during interviews and focus groups that, by necessity, some people utilize Urgent Care as their primary point of contact for medical assistance.

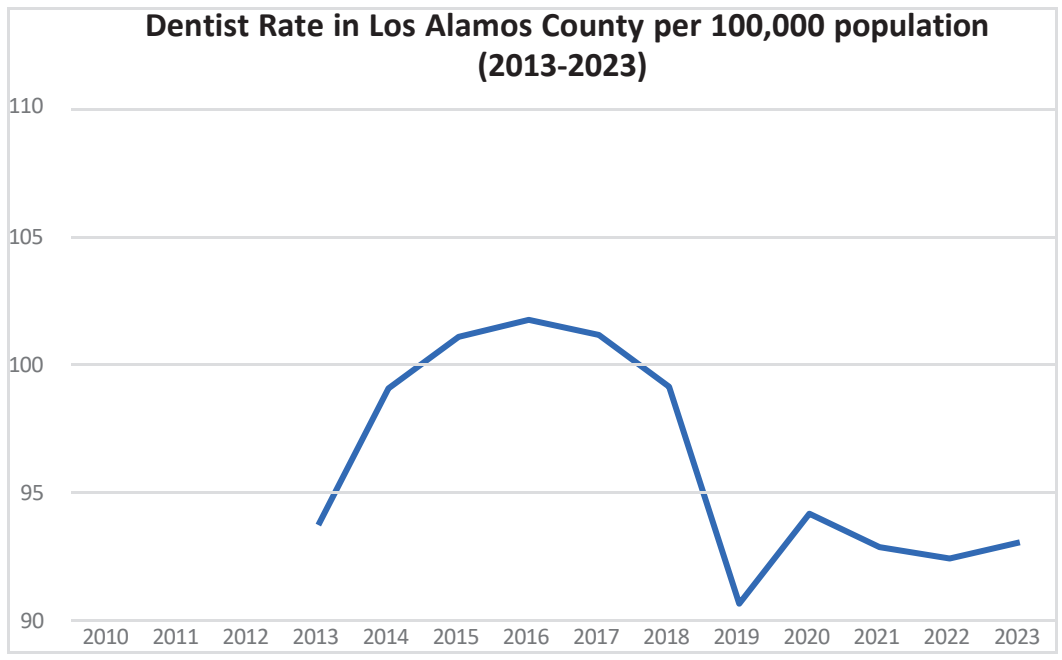
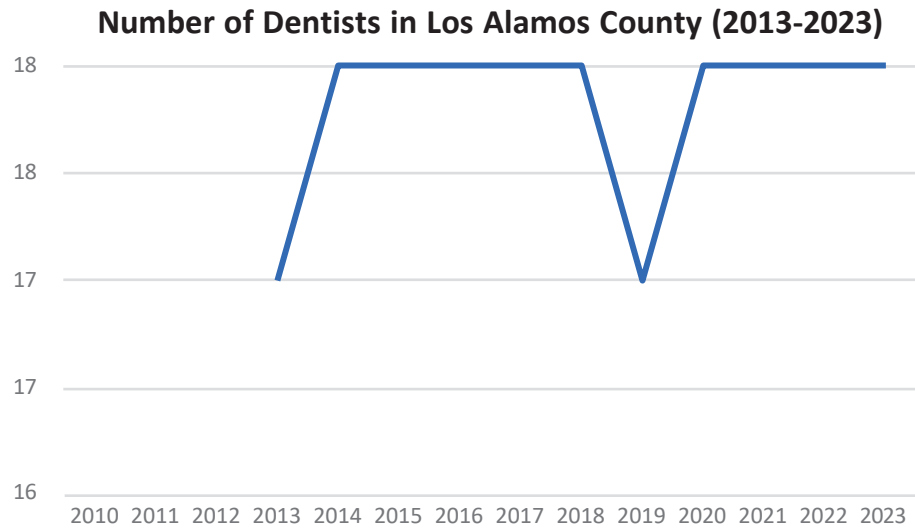
Community members who took part in interviews or focus groups shared examples of the types of services that they find particularly hard to access in Los Alamos County including:

- Stable Obstetrics and Gynecology (OB/GYN) (acknowledging that population size, economics and catchment challenges exist)
- Pediatric primary and emergency care
- Mental health and substance use services
- Rheumatology
- Orthopedic surgery
- Ear Nose and Throat (ENT)
- Rehabilitation supports
- Dialysis
- Cancer treatments including Radiation and Chemotherapy
- Treatment for autoimmune diseases

Additionally, a lack of services mentioned below present barriers for those needing health care treatments:

- Drop-in daycare specifically relevant to medical care when parents and caregivers have health care appointments but may not have connections to childcare
- Affordable and quality in-home care and geriatric care for the aging population

Despite the stability in the number of dentists in Los Alamos County, the chart of the rate of dentists in relation to the growing population of Los Alamos County shows that access to dental health care has declined since 2016.



*"Untreated dental disease can lead to serious health effects including pain, infection, and tooth loss. Although lack of sufficient providers is only one barrier to accessing oral health care, much of the country suffers from shortages."<sup>12</sup>*

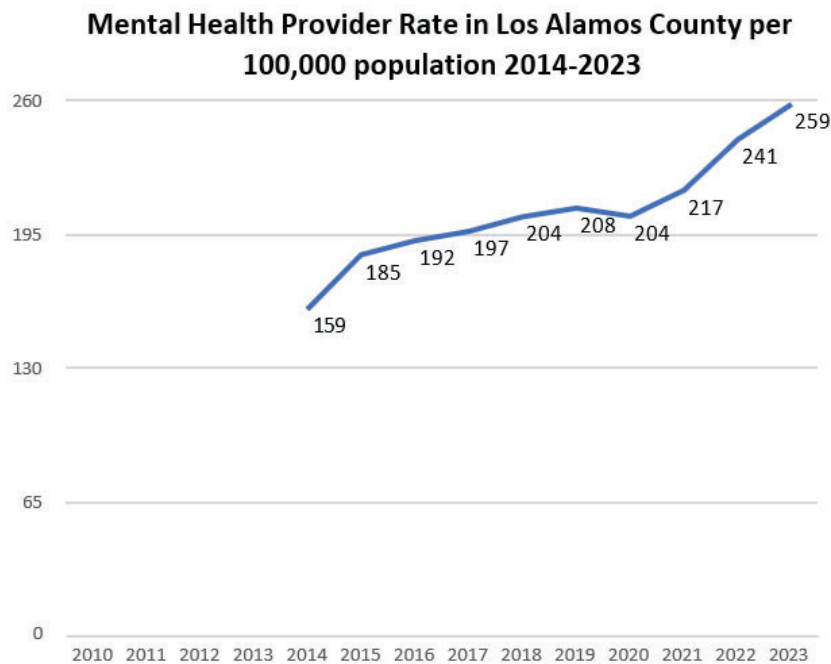
<sup>12</sup> University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps 2023. [www.countyhealthrankings.org](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org) (or 2024 County Health Rankings. All rights reserved. )

Los Alamos County has experienced a 72% increase in the number of mental health providers between 2014 and 2023. Even when controlling for population growth Los Alamos has had a 62% increase in the rate of mental health providers per 100,000.

However as of 2023, in Los Alamos County the ratio of mental health providers to population (1:390) remains lower than for New Mexico (1:230) and the U.S (1:340).

Some community support systems exist such as support groups to help individuals or family members have a place to share and learn from each other while navigating specific health challenges. Participants in interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions shared that the need exists for more supports like this with an example given of when an individual returns from being out of town for drug or alcohol treatment, or when returning from an inpatient mental health stay, there is a lack of post-treatment support options, such as Intensive Outpatient (IOP), step-down treatment, and support groups. These are needed to help those individuals stay well and healthy while integrating back into the community.

"Access to care requires not only financial coverage, but also access to providers. Nearly thirty percent of the (US) population lives in a county designated as a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area. As the mental health parity aspects of the Affordable Care Act create increased coverage for mental health services, many anticipate increased workforce shortages."<sup>13</sup>



<sup>13</sup> University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps 2023. [www.countyhealthrankings.org](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org)

Families with members who have special needs and or are neurodiverse report that they have additional challenges finding local or regional supports such as physical therapy (PT), occupational therapy (OT), speech-language therapy (SPT), and other resources for pediatric patients that have complex medical needs.

While free or low-cost access to health care is available in Los Alamos County, perspectives shared during interviews or focus groups include that for some populations like teens who may, for example, attempt to get tested for sexually transmitted infections (STI), barriers may prevent utilization of care because of needing economic qualifier information or parental permissions.

Transportation challenges are often cited as barriers to accessing care. Sentiment shared during community input opportunities include that individuals who either do not have access to a private vehicle, or who cannot drive for a variety of reasons, find that transportation options to medical appointments are limited. This is the case for appointments in Los Alamos County and those that are in surrounding communities. A community member without transportation and needing dialysis treatment found themselves paying over \$100 one way three-times per week to get the treatment out of town.

While the Atomic City Transit (ACT) can be an option for transportation to the Los Alamos Medical Center, for people who are blind or have low vision, navigating the large parking lot can be treacherous. This is an example of how our community needs to keep all members in mind as planning occurs and a reminder of the need to view all of our work through an equity lens.

For individuals who are discharged from the hospital, or leaving any other medical provider, there are limited medical transport options to help the person get home safely. This can be compounded if the person has medical equipment, is in a wheelchair, or has other significant mobility challenges.

Even for those individuals who have their own form of transportation, sentiment was shared for this report that if they face other barriers like limited flexibility in their schedules, whether that's due to working a service job, having children in the school system, or being a single parent, getting all necessary logistics to align for an appointment either in Los Alamos County or out of town, can be cumbersome and complicated. If appointments need to be as far away as Albuquerque planning for an appointment can be further complicated by the time consuming travel times. One person interviewed shared that depending on the medical condition, it's possible that the individual would not be able to hold down a full-time job -not because of the medical condition- but resulting from the long travel times for appointments.

Interviewees also shared that some older adults in the community rely on volunteers to take them to appointments. This informal process can work well however, some participants in interviews and focus groups express concern when those types of networks are not in place. Service providers in the community share that members of the Los Alamos Retired and Senior Organization (LARSO) have access to transportation to medical appointments in Los Alamos County<sup>14</sup> through their staffed programs, and to appointments off the hill through volunteers, but that these services may not be widely known.

A theme present is that there is need for reliable, roundtrip transportation for medical appointments, which should include medical transport for individuals in wheelchairs or who are bed-bound.

## **Quality of care**

When complex medical challenges are being navigated, some community members have experienced not being listened to by providers. Other community members have expressed concern with being unsure if the provider is making the best decision or recommendation for the patient's health and wellbeing at that time, or if other priorities may be in place. Common sentiment shared by individuals who participated in interviews and focus groups is the importance of being one's own health care advocate. Those individuals who are unable to advocate on their behalf (or on the behalf of family members) have found themselves in precarious situations during complex medical decision making.

Community members noted that when they were able to access health services, sometimes the care was unpredictable, staff could be dismissive, they experienced seemingly excessive delays in receiving care and or in decisions to transfer to another facility.

## **Physical barriers to care**

Individuals who have physical limitations express additional challenges accessing medical offices that do not have handicapped accessible doors, bathrooms, or accessible exam rooms. In such situations, accessibility for people who use walkers, crutches, or wheelchairs is compromised.

## **Technological barriers to care**

When establishing care with a new provider, filling out a large stack of paperwork can be daunting to many, especially for people with disabilities that may make filling out the documents "on the spot" difficult or impossible. For example, one individual who is blind stated that she "felt my autonomy was stripped away" when needing to verbally state the information for the forms.

## **Language and cultural barriers**

Among community members who participated in a focus group and whose first language is not English shared that navigating the medical system can present additional challenges whether the unknown is how to find the help needed, challenges in actually making an appointment, and also not knowing how to prepare for the appointment.

## **Financial barriers**

Some participants in interviews and focus groups express financial challenges to getting the care they need. For individuals who do not have insurance, it can be difficult to find affordable medical care. Health care decision making is particularly challenging for community members who already struggle to make ends meet. An example that was shared during community member interviews is that there is a lot to weigh when considering if you will have a procedure done in Los Alamos County or outside of town. Based on one's insurance status, a procedure could have a higher out-of-pocket cost in town, compared to looking out of town. However, for individuals who either already have compromised health and cannot travel far, or who need to rely on public transportation for an out-of-town procedure that might cost less, weighing the complexities of this decision making can be very challenging.

<sup>14</sup> Los Alamos Senior and Retired Organization <https://larso.org/transportation> Accessed January 9th 2024

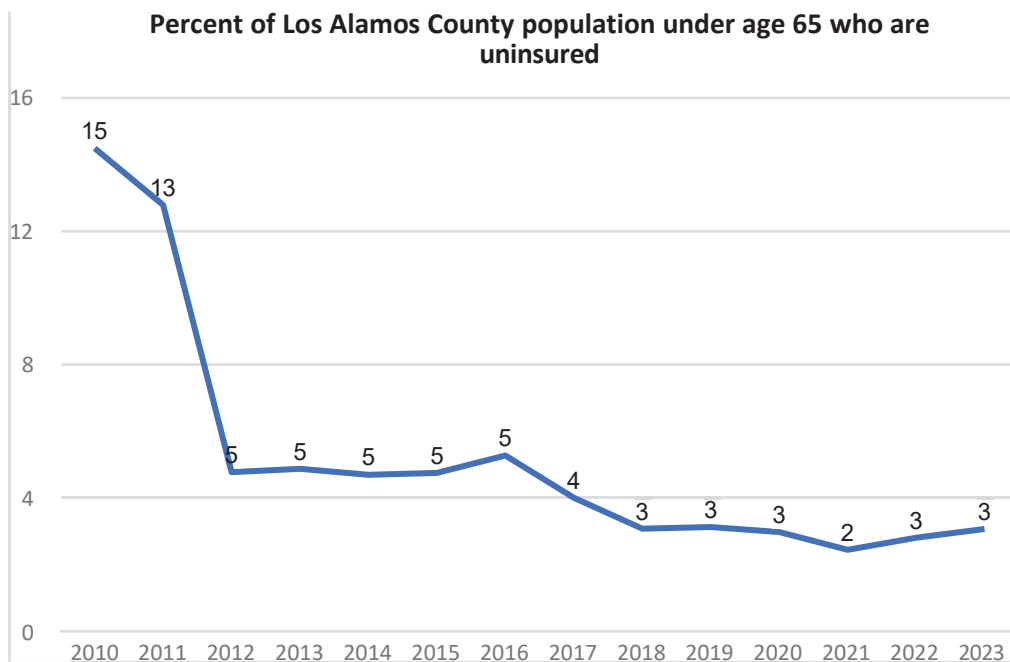


It was also shared that for individuals who live on a fixed-income, appointments that might appear to be preventative care can be stress inducing because it is unknown what the exam will reveal and they simply don't have the funds to take care of potentially costly medical procedures that might be needed. Even with insurance, the out-of-pocket expenses could be prohibitive and so some community members make the difficult decision to simply not learn if there is anything wrong with their health. A public health approach to community wellbeing would ensure that all community members have what they need to be able to utilize preventative services and to take steps needed to make the best decisions for their health without fear of financial or other repercussions.

Financial challenges exist for many who seek mental and behavioral health, according to participants who took part in interviews and focus groups. Many mental health therapists do not take insurance which makes accessing the care cost prohibitive for many community members. The few psychiatrists, including child psychiatrists, also tend to have full practices.

### Challenges with insurance

National data show that the vast majority of Los Alamos County residents have some form of health insurance.<sup>15</sup> However, these data also show that there are members of the community who do not have health insurance and their health is at greater risk because of that. Furthermore, what this chart does not address is the level of adequacy of the insurance coverage for those that do have health insurance. Las Clinics del Norte and the New Mexico Department of Health Public Health Office offer limited health and preventative care to individuals un or under insured in the Los Alamos County community. Staff at the Los Alamos County Social Services Division can assist people with navigating these systems and also in finding insurance coverage based on their eligibility, but this process can take a considerable amount of time, further delaying care.



*"Lack of health insurance coverage is a significant barrier to accessing needed health care and to maintaining financial security. One key finding from the Kaiser Family Foundation report on*

*access to healthcare is that going without coverage can have serious health consequences for the uninsured because they receive less preventative care, and delayed care often results in serious illness or other health problems. Being uninsured can also have serious financial consequences, with many unable to pay their medical bills, resulting in medical debt."<sup>16</sup>*

For community members without insurance, on fixed income, or who have medical insurance that is either not well known among providers, or is simply not taken, navigating these systems can be frustrating and demoralizing.

Community members shared many scenarios during interviews and focus groups whereby they have experienced roadblocks in utilizing their insurance or facing high out of pocket costs. Example instances include:

- LANL employees or retirees trying to get prescriptions filled or needing to see specialists that are not covered by their insurance.
- Community members who have Tri-Care (insurance for veterans and their families).
- UNM-LA students facing delays in the Medicaid prior authorization process.
- Those older members of the community who have Original Medicare and no supplement find that they have minimal or no vision or dental coverage.
- Individuals who are on a combination of Medicare and Medicaid also face challenges in utilization of their coverage.

Interviewees noted the difficulty of understanding what providers accept which insurances, and given the limited providers in Los Alamos County, this remains a large barrier to a healthy community. For example, there are few providers in Los Alamos County who take Medicaid (insurance available for low-income persons) and as reported by community members who are Veterans, there are no providers who take Tri-Care in Los Alamos County. It can also be difficult to know for example whether health-related items such as hearing aids, canes, or wheelchairs are covered by insurance, and how to access these devices if not.

A commonly shared concern by community members is challenges to accessing prescription drugs. The nationwide prescription drug shortages are compounded by the fact that two of the three pharmacy options in Los Alamos County do not currently take the health insurance provided by the town's largest employer (LANL). Additionally, these pharmacies face the same staff shortages and limited hours seen at pharmacies across the country, making it difficult when people have prescriptions that need to be filled on Sundays or after-hours.

### **Geographic barriers**

Community members raised geographic challenges they experience to care even within Los Alamos County. For example, a pediatric clinic had been available in White Rock but recently closed so all pediatric services are now based in Los Alamos. Additionally, concerns exist with situations requiring ambulances and the need to get to LAMC's ER during high traffic times. Curiosity was raised around what it would take to get a health clinic or urgent care in White Rock. One community member shared that if families are in need of emergency pediatric care, they must leave town for those services.

### **Challenges due to complexities of need**

Given the limited number of options of medical providers in the community, some families have expressed challenges in getting their families' needs met when they may appear counter to usual standard of care. An example given was due to severe responses experienced by a young person from childhood vaccinations, a request by parents to increase time between those vaccines was challenged.

Another concern raised during interviews is that there are some individuals in Los Alamos County who have chronic conditions who are unable to successfully manage their conditions, often resulting in the need for more intensive medical interventions. While many interviewees shared that emergency services in Los Alamos County are responsive and professional while providing high quality care in the community, some individuals who have repeated utilization of the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) have been told that they can no longer utilize EMS for their repeated needs. This speaks to unmet health or safety needs that community members have with perhaps limited options as to where additional resources exist.

### **Trust between providers and community members**

Perspectives provided during public input opportunities included a lack of trust between some community members and some local medical providers or institutions. Some community members wonder if the patient's welfare is the primary goal of some service providers. The mental calculations become even more complex for those community members whose health, transportation, or financial challenges make it difficult to leave Los Alamos County for care. It is unknown at this time the magnitude of how many community members feel similarly, but there is concern that if many residents lose confidence in the local health care options, or are otherwise unable to have their health needs met locally, they may begin to seek healthcare outside of Los Alamos County, which contributes to uncertain viability for the providers that are based here in town.

Input from community members interviewed included that the lack of accessible care in Los Alamos County does not appear to be due to financial challenges of the community. The idea was shared that dialogue within the community on what the underlying factors are would help to contextualize the challenges that exist and help build a knowledgeable to affect change.

### **Knowledge management and communications**

A recurring topic that was raised during interview and focus groups is the difficulty experienced in learning what services are available as well as navigating program eligibility requirements. Community members share that websites vary in the extent to which they are kept up-to-date. Similarly, basic information like primary care physicians, medical specialists or insurances taken is often not readily available online. For those individuals who do not own a computer or smart phone, and or are not internet-savvy, utilization of other forms of communication is important.

Another topic that was often raised by community members who were interviewed is the breakdown of communication among a wide array of nodes within the medical care network affecting the community. One example shared is when a patient is referred from one provider to another and then learns that the second provider did not receive the information that the patient thought they did. This necessitates that the patient backtrack to figure out where there was a breakdown in communication, an unnecessary challenge when someone is already not well.

For potentially complex medical situations, community members expressed concern not knowing the extent of complex care that can be provided in Los Alamos County. Community members request transparency in when a patient will be transferred to the next level of care versus being kept as a patient within the setting.

During fall and winter respiratory virus season, concern in the community exists with the difficulty in learning about rising disease rates, since the data is collected by different entities and not aggregated or easily shared in "layman's terms" so as to be easily understood by as many people as possible. One example shared during public input opportunities is that some data is collected through the Los Alamos Public Schools (LAPS) attendance line or through the

nurses' offices. However, community members who are not connected to the LAPS do not have access to this type of information and thus they are less aware of when spikes in disease may be occurring. For some people, this type of knowledge would make them re-introduce precautionary measures they used to take.

Community members share that word-of-mouth and Facebook groups are ways that health-related information is exchanged. While these strategies are helpful to some, other community members who are either not as connected in town, or who do not use social media, end up having fewer resources to consult for finding health information.

### **Barriers due to workplace stigma**

Among community members who participated in interviews or focus groups and have any connection to LANL or supporting LANL employees, sentiment was raised that given the classified nature of much work at LANL, fear was expressed that interfacing with behavioral health supports (including mental health and or substance use services) may impact maintaining their security clearance or other potential workplace stigma.

### **Aging in place**

Lack of supports in place for individuals as they age, and for people with disabilities including the need for formal case management, was raised during interviews and focus groups. An example shared is that among some individuals who rely on electricity for their Durable Medical Equipment (DME) (like for oxygen or for assistive breathing devices), they may not have the financial resources for their own back-up reserve for when there are power outages.

For older adults in particular who wish to remain in their homes and "age in place," there are limited services to assist with home maintenance, home safety, snow removal, and overall "well-check monitoring." Currently calls are placed through the non-emergency dispatch to have a police officer perform a well-check visit. Widely shared sentiment includes that despite the size of our community, and the many services available, individuals can easily "fall through the cracks." One example provided is the uncertainty of how needs will be met once a patient returns home from a hospital stay, particularly to prevent future hospital needs (such as whether fall risks are present in the home). Additionally, seniors who live alone and may grow more isolated over time, might need additional services but the needs may remain unknown until an emergency arises.

A topic mentioned by a number of interview participants is the lack of in-home services for various levels of need. While the Los Alamos Visiting Nurse Service (LAVNS) provides medical services in the home setting, the agency is also limited in what they can provide, and to whom.

Community members share challenges experienced with the primary long-term care facility in town. Since this Comprehensive Health Plan development process started, a change in ownership has occurred; it is currently unclear what impact this may have on older adults in Los Alamos County.

### **Mental Health and Substance Use Concerns**

A widely shared concern among adult and youth who participated in interviews and focus groups is the struggles that community members have with mental and behavioral health. Also reported during interviews and focus groups was the lack of mental health providers who are taking new patients, who take insurance, or who see subgroups of the population who require therapy with a professional who has specific training (eg. for the very youngest members of our community or those with substance use disorders). Self Help maintains a list of behavioral health providers in Los Alamos County, but this is a time-intensive endeavor that is currently

only available in English and online. (<https://losalamosmentalhealth.org/>)

An additional concern related to opioid use was shared by one interviewee, who felt their complex medical needs related to pain management were dismissed. Concerns exist that these types of needs will not be taken seriously due to the national opioid crisis, especially when pain management is integral to one's needed care plan.

For youth and young adults in our community, the New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS) data from Los Alamos High School and Los Alamos Middle School<sup>18</sup> participants show historic and current needs for youth mental and behavioral health supports. Below are only a few examples of the needs Los Alamos Public Schools students are expressing, through these statewide surveys. To view the full reports see <https://youthrisk.org/tag/los-alamos/>

Among 6th through 8th graders who participated in the 2021 YRRS:

- One-quarter (24.3%) answered 'Most of the time' or 'Always' to the question: *"During the past 30 days, how often was your mental health not good? (Poor mental health includes stress, anxiety, and depression.)"*
- 40.0% reported ever being bullied on school property and 27.4% reported ever being electronically bullied.

Among 9th through 12th graders who participated in the 2021 YRRS:

- Over one-third (34.8%) answered 'Most of the time' or 'Always' to the question: *"During the past 30 days, how often was your mental health not good? (Poor mental health includes stress, anxiety, and depression.)"* These perspectives from students on their mental health has been about steady since 2015. (p.33 of the YRRS Report)

Through the focus groups held with LAHS students, as well as from a presentation shared by the LAHS Natural Helpers school club, students are concerned with the prevalence of drugs and alcohol in their schools. Additional concerns were shared about the need for support groups specifically for this population, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, or additional supports such as certified peer specialists.

## Section in Review

In summary, this section provides an overview of the available quantitative data and perspectives from interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions that highlight health care access and quality needs and assets. While the majority of Los Alamos County residents benefit from having some form of health insurance, there are still 473 people (about 3%) under age 65 with no insurance. Minimal information is known about who those individuals are and the extent to which they may or may not be able to maintain as healthy of lives as they can without insurance. Among the community members who do have insurance, there are still struggles experienced with needing to utilize services where insurance may not be taken or through which they experience financial burden trying to pay for out-of-pocket costs. While Los Alamos County faces many of the same healthcare challenges seen throughout New Mexico and the United States, these issues are no less important to think strategically about addressing within the County and or through Regional partnerships. An equity lens to this work means ensuring quality medical and related support services are available to all regardless of age, race, sex, sexual orientation, language proficiency, disability status, income level, or any dimension that disadvantages some people over others. Keeping with our equity lens, there is need for behavioral health providers that are well-versed in treating specific populations, such as LGBTQAI, BIPOC, older adults, and children and young adults.

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<sup>18</sup> New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey: Middle School Survey Results 2021, Los Alamos County. (2021). Epidemiology and Response Division, New Mexico Department of Health; School and Family Support Bureau, New Mexico Public Education Department; and University of New Mexico Prevention Research Center. <https://youthrisk.org/publications/county-reports/>

## Education Access and Quality

### Key Takeaways

- Los Alamos County residents are highly educated and among providers and community members, including Los Alamos High School students, who took part in interviews and focus groups, sentiment is shared that Los Alamos Public Schools provide robust public education for the community.
- Parents and students who participated in interviews and focus groups report a number of challenges to students being able to remain as healthy and well as they can in order to fully participate in the high-quality education available to them. Challenges include: physical and psychological safety within school and the community, lack of mental health and other specialists available for youth, lack of acceptance of diverse youth in the community, and handicapped accessibility challenges at school and during school and community events.
- Some topics shared are likely systemic, with many interwoven factors that contribute to challenges that people may face. As such, next steps and solutions will rest on the wide network of collaborators who are already working together to improve opportunities for the health and wellbeing of all youth in the community.

### Introduction

The effects that educational attainment has on opportunity, career-readiness, and health and quality of life are profound.<sup>1</sup> As a group, Los Alamos residents are highly educated. Over 98% of Los Alamos County residents 25 years of age or older have at least a high school graduate level of education and over 70% of residents have a bachelor's degree or more of education.<sup>2</sup> The high level of education suggests that many residents of Los Alamos County have the capability of seeking and utilizing information regarding health and well-being services and resources. It also indicates the ability of many residents to understand the importance of health directives and proactively engaging in efforts to promote personal health and well-being. These are good bases for health and wellbeing but a public health approach goes further and considers the many complex factors that influence our abilities to make the best possible decisions for our health and wellbeing.

This section provides a summary of perspectives shared during interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions relevant to the intersections of education with overall health and wellbeing in Los Alamos County. Some topics shared are likely systemic, with many interwoven factors that contribute to challenges that people may face. As such, next steps and solutions will rest on the wide network of collaborators who are already working together to improve opportunities for the health and wellbeing of all youth in the community.

Los Alamos Public Schools (LAPS) at the Middle and High School levels participate in the New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS)<sup>3</sup> that occurs across the state every other year (odd-numbered years). The Los Alamos High School Natural Helpers, a group of

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<sup>1</sup> Zajacova A, Lawrence EM. The Relationship Between Education and Health: Reducing Disparities Through a Contextual Approach. *Annu Rev Public Health*. 2018 Apr 1;39:273-289. Accessed <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5880718/pdf/nihms947038.pdf> January 19th 2024

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census QuickFacts Los Alamos County, New Mexico <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/losalamoscountynewmexico/PST045223> Accessed January 19th 2024

students who seek to increase inclusion and opportunities for student connection at LAHS, as well as the LAHS Student Prevention Team, analyze these types of data about themselves and their peers and utilize it to advocate for program and service development. Along with the LAPS Prevention Specialist, students presented their findings to the LACHC during its December 2023 meeting. The LACHC will continue to seek opportunities to partner with youth leaders in addressing needs identified, particularly those that could be addressed through community-wide efforts, and that include student voices in the decision-making.

## **Positive aspects of education access and quality in Los Alamos County**

Common sentiment shared through interviews and focus groups is that the LAPS offer high quality public education to its students. Youth who took part in focus groups express their appreciation for supportive administration, teachers and staff, many options for classes, clubs, sports, and opportunities for internships. Some students expressed feeling that the school is a tight knit community, that it is safe, and that graduates are prepared for post-high school pursuits.

The University of New Mexico Los Alamos (UNMLA) is cited as a local resource both for higher education and vocational (including offering remote options for UNM-Main Campus courses and for LAHS dual credit students), as well as for continuing education like English Language Learner (ELL) classes. UNMLA is beginning to offer more support services to students, including an on-site pantry and clothing exchange. Other local community colleges that may be resources include the Northern New Mexico Collage, and the Santa Fe Community College.

Another opportunity for education shared during interviews and focus groups is through the New Mexico State University (NMSU) Cooperative Extension that has an office in Los Alamos County and provides community education open to the public.

Parents express appreciation for afterschool programs and also drop-in type childcare with Steam Lab being cited as one of few such opportunities for parents to utilize.

## **Challenges to education access and quality in Los Alamos County**

### **Physical and psychological safety within school and community**

Students who participated in focus groups shared their concern with instances of physical altercations, sexual assault, and bullying; they also expressed need for opportunities for open communication about these types of topics. Students also shared mixed feelings about strategies they are provided for reporting such behaviors, such as through the “Say Something” App. Some students share that they reported a situation multiple times and did not know if their concern was taken seriously. Others were concerned that anonymous reporting is actually not anonymous, despite what they are told.

Parents express need for greater attention paid to the social-emotional wellbeing of students, with particular concentration needed to address “othering” that occurs, whether that be because of racial/ethnic differences, learning differences, or any other socio-demographic differences. Sentiment includes a need for increased transparency in responding to -isms and lessons learned to be shared with the community at large in order to foster and build a positive and inclusive community culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS) Los Alamos High School and Los Alamos Middle School Reports 2005-2021 [https://youthrisk.org/publications/county-reports/?\\_sft\\_post\\_tag=los-alamos](https://youthrisk.org/publications/county-reports/?_sft_post_tag=los-alamos) Accessed January 19th 2024



Other participants shared the increasing need for trauma-informed training for educators and school administrators who may find themselves working with young people who have had traumatic experiences (often referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACES) in their lives.

### **Mental health supports for youth**

Youth who participated in focus groups shared dismay with the pressures that they feel to succeed academically, or in sports or other activities.

A common sentiment shared was the need for additional mental health supports for youth — both in the school and in the community settings. Continued recognition and attention paid to the effects that the pandemic had, and continues to have, on the youngest students and on those students who were at more critical life transition periods during the height of the pandemic, were also mentioned as needs. Youth and adults who participated in interviews and focus groups express deep concern for suicidal behaviors among young people in Los Alamos County.

A topic shared in focus groups and interviews and by both adult and student participants is that young people need education on drug and alcohol prevention and anti-bullying at earlier ages / grades than they are currently receiving it.

### **Student and family access to additional supports**

Parents who participated in interviews and focus groups shared challenges that exist in knowing what resources are available in the county, and this was particularly true for parents of children who are newly diagnosed with developmental or other learning disabilities.

Sentiment expressed during interviews and focus groups included that for parents who have limited English proficiency, there is need for additional accessibility measures, such as for paperwork that the student takes home to be in the language that the parent speaks and reads, or for there to be other strategies to include parents with limited English in their students' school participation and wellbeing.

For families with challenges making ends meet and who rely on school meals, the need extends to weekends and other segments of time that students are out of school.

Participants also shared that local availability of specific services such as pediatric speech, physical, or occupational therapy that takes insurance ebbs and flows. If such services are not available locally, parents experience needing to take their children out of school for half a day each week, for example, to go to Santa Fe for the service. Parents also express dismay when they know their students have any given number of challenges but perhaps not to the extent where they would receive a diagnosis. Such families struggle to both find the additional services needed while navigating their students' ability to fully participate in their education.

### **Accepting diversity of youth in the community**

A sentiment shared relevant to both the school setting as well as the broader community context is the need for improving community culture around what is celebrated: ensuring that there is a culture of acceptance of the diversity of interests and learners in the Los Alamos County community. This extends to challenges that families who observe other than the

dominant Christian holidays experience: they find that their students miss important things like exams or yearly functions unnecessarily.

Input also includes that there is a need for additional diversity of educational options, and specifically relevant to youth with neurodiversity who excel in some ways and may need flexibility in the learning environment in others. Considering those students whose learning styles do not always fit in to a public education system was also communicated as a need.

### **Barriers to fostering inclusive community opportunities**

Interviewees included the need for reducing financial barriers for volunteer-run organizations to participate in community events. Examples were given of tabling at ScienceFest or other events that cost money to participate in.

### **Coordination between LAPS and after school programs especially for neurodivergent students**

Parents expressed the need for more communication and clear expectations and guidelines of what resources are available during afterschool programs. Specifically, families shared concerns that some afterschool programs appear to be connected with the schools but that staff at those programs may not be informed about the Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) or other special needs that students have supports for during the school day. Such programs outside of the school day then become inaccessible for some students who are not provided the additional supports needed.

### **Handicapped-accessible school campuses**

Parents who participated in interviews or focus groups shared experiences navigating various aspects of school campuses with physical disabilities. Examples provided include: existence of heavy doors that do not have accessibility buttons and meeting rooms on campus that are far from handicapped accessible parking. Another example shared is that pick up and drop off lines block handicapped accessible parking spots so if a parent needs to park at such a spot, they need to arrive very early and wait until all other cars have passed through in order to navigate. Additionally, parents shared the challenges that students and parents who have physical limitations have with gaining access to use elevators. Some individuals using crutches had to take the stairs. Parents share the mental toll that these situations have on the individuals and the family.

### **Planning for accessibility into all events and processes**

Parents also shared the need to have accessibility for all considered when events are planned. Concerns were expressed with inaccessibility for people with mobility limitations, for people with vision impairment, hearing impairment, and with sensory challenges. Overall a need exists for preparations that make events universally available and accessible to the school community.

### **Section in Review**

In summary, the level of education and educational resources available within the community have a significant impact on one's overall health and wellbeing. Educated communities tend to be highly resilient communities. Members are able to be active participants in both the community's and their personal health and wellbeing. Also, communities with comprehensive educational resources are able to nurture the development of young people, and all community

members, who are physically and mentally healthy, and prepared to make positive contributions to society. Los Alamos has both a highly educated community and a school system that is actively engaged in promoting student health and well-being. However, as shared by service providers, students, and parents of students, there are areas for improved collaborations as noted above.

# Economic Stability

## Key Takeaways

- While Los Alamos County residents have the highest per capita income of all counties in New Mexico,<sup>1</sup> there are a sizable number of community members who struggle to make ends meet. Challenges for these community members are compounded by the high cost of living, limited job opportunity diversity, limited affordable housing opportunity, and the few available social service resources in Los Alamos County that are already stretched thin. The tenuous nature for some of not being able to make ends meet has profound impacts on health and wellbeing.
- The interconnected nature of challenges to maintaining economic stability in Los Alamos County were shared during interviews and focus groups including struggles faced by small business owners, lack of community vitality, mobility challenges for community members who are dependent on public transportation, and financial burden of health care costs even among people who have health insurance.
- Data that clearly shows the magnitude of economic stability challenges and their impact on one's overall physical and mental health in Los Alamos County is not readily available so an immediate step forward is to systematically compile that information. Once the magnitude and drivers of the economic stability challenges are identified, stakeholders and impacted community members should be convened in order to strategically plan for next steps.

## Introduction

Economic stability as a social determinant of health<sup>2</sup> considers the ways that employment, poverty, food security, housing and transportation stability all affect opportunities for individuals and communities to maintain health and wellbeing.

People who are low-income, live on a fixed income, or who are otherwise in a precarious or unstable financial standing have fewer buffers to respond to emergencies. Whether those emergencies are related to individual or family medical circumstances, or are community-wide such as evacuations due to forest fires, economic instability has a profound impact on our ability to remain as healthy and well as possible.

While Los Alamos County is ranked #1 by the U.S. News and World Report Healthiest Communities,<sup>3</sup> the County received a 79 out of 100 in the economy category. This category has three sub-categories: Employment, Income, and Opportunity. With LANL as the primary employer, the county scores high on the Employment and Income categories: with 95 out of 100 and 96 out of 100, respectively. However, the low overall economy score is due to the 23 out of 100 in the Opportunity category with a calculated low "Job Diversity Index Score" indicating a lack of job opportunities across varying industries.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. News December, 2023. The 15 Richest Counties in the U.S. <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/slideshows/richest-counties-in-america?slide=5> Accessed January 10th 2024

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Prepare Your Health: Economic Stability. <https://www.cdc.gov/prepyourhealth/discussionguides/economicstability.htm> Accessed January 10th 2024

<sup>3</sup> U.S. News and World Report 2022 Healthiest Communities <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/new-mexico/los-alamos-county> Accessed January 10th 2024

According to the most recent U.S. Census (2022 American Community Survey 5-year averages),<sup>4</sup> an estimated 68.5% of the residents in Los Alamos County who are 16 years of age or older are in the labor force. One implication of having nearly one-third of the adult population not participating in the labor force (the remaining 31.5%) is while they consume services locally, they are not providing services within the community. Therefore, workers from outside Los Alamos County are needed to provide many of the services being consumed locally. Or, if outside labor is not available, residents may need to seek services outside of Los Alamos County.

There is a substantial difference in the level of labor force participation between households with young children and those with older children. In households with children under six years of age, 41.5% of those families have all parents in the household participating in the labor force. In contrast, in households where children are between six and 17 years of age (i.e., school age), 77.5% of them have all parents in the household in the labor force. Those families with small children may be at an economic disadvantage due to having to rely on one income. With a lack of affordable childcare in Los Alamos County, some families are choosing to forgo a dual income household because they can't find and/or afford childcare.

It is unclear at this time what the impact of the current, and proposed growth in the LANL workforce over the next five years may have on the overall economic stability within the County.

## **Economic stability assets in Los Alamos County**

As the primary employer in the community, a large percentage of the population receives the LANL benefits package.<sup>5</sup> It is still important to note that even among LANL employees, there is distribution of salaries ranging from \$30,000 to over \$240,000 for FY22<sup>6</sup> with, according to the 2022 data, 879 employees making under \$89,999.

While some residents have the highest per capita income of all counties in New Mexico,<sup>7</sup> there are residents who struggle to make ends meet. Los Alamos County has local services that residents can turn to for assistance with basic needs. Services include: the County Social Services Division for help with navigating application processes for state and federal program assistance, and non-profit organizations that provide a range of services from help with case management to providing rent, utilities, and food assistance. Community members who participated in interviews or focus groups shared that the pandemic assistance that the County was able to offer, as well as the additional Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (through the Federal SNAP), were extremely beneficial. Those additional benefits are no longer available and have been felt by community members who participated in interviews.

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. "Employment Status." American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S2301, 2022, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2022.S2301?t=Employment&g=050XX00US35028>. Accessed on January 3, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> LANL Benefits Summary Sheet (ND). [https://www.lanl.gov/careers/employees-retirees/new-hires/\\_assets/docs/benefit-plan-summary-sheet.pdf](https://www.lanl.gov/careers/employees-retirees/new-hires/_assets/docs/benefit-plan-summary-sheet.pdf) Accessed January 10th 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Laboratory employee demographics and housing demand. Information for the construction industry. ROSY ID: #e8238398 (May 1, 2023) [https://cdn.lanl.gov/files/housing-demand-and-demographics-final\\_6d6ee.pdf](https://cdn.lanl.gov/files/housing-demand-and-demographics-final_6d6ee.pdf) Accessed January 10th 2024

<sup>7</sup> U.S. News December, 2023. The 15 Richest Counties in the U.S. <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/slideshows/richest-counties-in-america?slide=5> Accessed January 10th 2024

## Challenges that make it difficult for community members to maintain economic stability

### Housing stability

An often-heard topic from community members and providers who participated in interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions is the challenge that Los Alamos County community members experience with securing affordable housing. While these challenges are experienced throughout the Nation, a number of unique barriers including geographic and land use constraints complicate matters. These topics have been studied and reported on extensively by local journalist Stephanie Nakhleh.<sup>8</sup>

In focusing on current and near future increase in LANL hiring, Nakhleh gained perspective from many dimensions of the housing challenge including from Chris Ortega, qualifying broker for RE/MAX First (December 2022):<sup>9</sup>

“The total number of homes sold over the last few years has remained relatively consistent,” he said, at about 350 homes per year. “However, the average sales prices have increased significantly.” According to figures provided by Ortega, in 2017 the average sales price for a home in Los Alamos was \$298,892. By 2020 it had risen to \$414,401. By this year, 2022, the average sales price for a home in Los Alamos has climbed to \$501,999. That’s half a million dollars for an “average” house—a 68 percent price increase in only a few years.

The County’s Social Services Division is currently in the early stages of establishing programs to assist people in the County that are experiencing homelessness, or are at-risk of becoming homeless, through a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health. In the past three months, the staff have worked directly with more than 15 clients who are currently homeless to provide emergency food and provisions, assist them with housing and benefit applications, and get them further connected to social service resources. Social Services is also working with community partners such as the Juvenile Justice Advisory Board (JJAB) and Los Alamos Retired and Senior Organization (LARSO) on identifying and providing for additional community members who are experiencing homelessness but are not yet connected with Social Services.

For people at-risk of losing their housing, factors influencing their housing stability include rent increases beyond what they can currently afford; losing a stable housing arrangement due to divorce or leaving a domestic violence situation; being evicted; or living in an unsafe situation (such as a broken furnace that may necessitate a call to Adult Protective Services). Several teenagers and young adults have reported being kicked out or asked to leave their family home due to drug use, without having a safe alternative to spend the night.

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<sup>8</sup> Nakhleh, Stephanie. (December 8, 2023). Facing Homelessness in Los Alamos Part 2: The Nonprofit Safety Net <https://www.boomtownlosalamos.org/p/facing-homelessness-in-los-alamos>; Multi-part series on housing in Los Alamos: <https://losalamosreporter.com/2023/06/27/its-a-crisis-housing-and-the-community-development-department/>

<sup>9</sup> Nakhleh, Stephanie (December 19, 2022). ‘It’s Housing Driven’: LANL, Hiring And Local Housing. <https://losalamosreporter.com/2022/12/19/its-housing-driven-lanl-hiring-and-local-housing/>

## Health insurance coverage

Having health insurance can directly impact a person's ability and willingness to seek services and resources that can prevent illness and mitigate illness when it does occur. Being without health insurance or being underinsured, forces a person to weigh the costs of what they must forgo to direct their economic resources to their health and wellbeing. For those with limited incomes, that decision could be to shift their economic resources from food and/or housing costs to health care. That calculus becomes even more difficult when the decision is whether or not to direct their economic resources towards prevention (for example, paying for a gym membership) over the immediate costs for daily necessities (groceries and gas to get to work).

An estimated 3% of community members in Los Alamos County do not have health insurance.<sup>10</sup> Among those who are insured, the type of health insurance a person has is also an important factor. Due to the relatively low payment rates, most health care providers in Los Alamos County do not accept patients who have Medicaid insurance. Some service providers have also stated that they do not accept patients who have only Medicare insurance, again due to the low payment for services schedule used by Medicare. Approximately 7.5% of residents who have insurance have either Medicaid or Medicare without secondary private coverage.<sup>11</sup> The resulting impact is that people who are low-income, disabled, or seniors are less likely to receive the health and well-being services that help them be as healthy and well as possible.

## Food security

There is a diverse set of factors that influence the availability and quality of the food that any specific individual has access to. Nevertheless, one factor that often stands above the others is level of impact a person's, and community's, economic level and stability has on accessing food. Even if community members can afford food, are they able to afford nutritious food? Among community members who took part in interviews and focus groups, some shared their struggles in being able to access healthy, affordable, food in the community. Not being able to access healthy and affordable food can be due to a variety of reasons including: being on a low or fixed income, lack of transportation, or other complex sociodemographic situations.

Assessing personal and household income can be complex. However, qualifying for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) relies on household needs-based criteria and can serve as an indicator of income insufficient to ensure access to enough food for their household. Of the 8,029 households in Los Alamos, an estimated 254 (3.2%) of households received SNAP benefits, based on the American Community Survey 5-Year data (2017-2021).<sup>12</sup> Of note, data on those who may qualify for SNAP are more difficult to obtain given the many dimensions that are considered when assessing an individual or family for SNAP eligibility. As such, it is plausible that a greater number of households in Los Alamos County could actually benefit from receiving SNAP assistance. Knowing what barriers exist to applying for such programs is important information to be aware of moving forward. Staff within the Social

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<sup>10</sup>U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts Los Alamos County, New Mexico <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/losalamoscountynewmexico> Accessed January 21st 2024.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2022: ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Health Insurance Coverage by Type and Selected Characteristics Los Alamos County S2704. [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2022.S2704?q=health insurance Los Alamos county](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2022.S2704?q=health%20insurance%20Los%20Alamos%20county) Accessed February 6th 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). SNAP County Interactive Map using ACS 5-year data (2017-2021). Accessed <https://frac.org/maps/snap-county-map/snap-counties.html> Accessed January 19th 2024.

Services Division assist people with such applications. There are other ways for community members to access additional food if facing instability, including the monthly distributions through L.A. Cares and the Santa Fe Food Depot. If the person is at least 60 years old and becomes a member of the Los Alamos Retired and Senior Organization (LARSO), they are eligible for hot lunches at either of LARSO’s two locations and or meal delivery to their home.

In 2021, there were 220 children (or 5.2% of residents under 18) who were food insecure in Los Alamos County.<sup>13</sup> While this is a small number compared to other communities, 220 young people who do not have reliable access to food is still too many. In response to high child food insecurity throughout the state, New Mexico rolled out Universal School Meals during the 2023-2024 school year which means that any student, regardless of eligibility, can access free breakfast and lunch at school. While these school meals could help improve food security among young people who are in need, there are still weekends and holiday breaks when young people cannot rely on school meals. Moreover, among parents and students who participated in interviews and focus groups, concerns were expressed with the nutritional quality of the food provided.

### Transportation

While less than one percent of Los Alamos County households do not have a car,<sup>14</sup> some community members, by necessity, rely more heavily on public transportation to get around Los Alamos County than others. These groups include: youth and those who do not yet have their driver’s license, older adults whose abilities to drive may be diminished, and community members with disabilities who are unable to drive due to physical or cognitive constraints.<sup>15</sup>

Population groups in Los Alamos County who may have greater reliance on public transportation (ACT Short-Range Transit Plan 2022)<sup>16</sup>

Group	Total in LAC	% of LAC residents
Youth (5-17)	3,261	17.2
Adults 65+	3,347	17.6
Low income	584	3.1
Persons with disabilities	1,604	8.5
Zero vehicle households	65	0.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,861</b>	<b>47.2%</b>

<sup>13</sup> Feeding America <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2021/child/new-mexico/county/los-alamos> Accessed January 19th 2024.

<sup>14</sup> LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. (March 7, 2023) Atomic City Transit Short-Range Transit Plan 2022 Update Draft Report <https://www.losalamosnm.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/departments/public-works/documents/atomic-city-transit-srtp-report-v-3red.pdf> Accessed January 10th 2024.

<sup>15</sup> LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. (March 7, 2023) Atomic City Transit Short-Range Transit Plan 2022 Update Draft Report <https://www.losalamosnm.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/departments/public-works/documents/atomic-city-transit-srtp-report-v-3red.pdf> Accessed January 10th 2024.



Analyses and recommendations presented in the Atomic City Transit Short-Range Transit Plan - 2022 Update<sup>17</sup> highlight potential next steps for improving mobility for people who are transit-dependent in Los Alamos County.

The connections between economic stability, transportation, and health in Los Alamos County are also illustrated when considering those individuals who commute between Los Alamos and other communities on a regular basis.

Among community members who participated in focus groups or interviews, sentiment is shared about the interconnection of challenges to the high cost of living. An example provided is that if a person cannot afford to live in town but goes to school or works in the community, the time and resources that it takes to commute means that there is limited time opportunity for self care and/or attending to physical and mental healthcare needs. Another situation shared is that when a family needs to leave the community for medical care, that travel time contributes to the challenge in maintaining health and wellbeing on a day-to-day basis including holding down employment.

### **Financial hardship in the Los Alamos County context**

The population that suffers from economic instability, while small compared to other communities, still shows us that we have more work to do to provide for the conditions that enable all of our community members to live as healthy and productively as possible. Additionally, national data that reports at the County level cannot show the granularity of contextual data necessary to inform locally relevant decisions. This speaks to the need for robust and timely socioeconomic data collection to enable our community to be most nimble in making resource allocation decisions.

The qualitative information collected for this report via interviews and focus groups help contextualize challenges that might appear minimal from the national data sources. For example, even among those households with at least one LANL employee (who benefit from stable wages and insurance coverage), financial hardships are still experienced by some. Limited options for utilizing LANL insurance at pharmacies in the community is one challenge expressed. Financial hardship also can result from individuals or family members needing services from physical or mental health specialists that do not take insurance.

The lack of diversity of employment options means that if households do not have a wage earner employed by one of the primary employers (LANL, LAC, LAPS), varying degrees of socioeconomic need exists. The “missing middle” struggle to find housing, and the “working poor,” or others on fixed income suffer disproportionately to make ends meet. While the County and nonprofits provide some assistance for those community members needing help meeting basic needs, the demand is still present beyond what existing services currently offer. For families with adult members who have moderate to severe developmental disabilities, nonprofit organizations such as All Individuals First (AIF) provide adult day programs for people with developmental disabilities. However, these organizations struggle due to limited funding that primarily comes from Medicaid not being able to support the level of staffing needed.

Some community members face additional employment challenges. For example, members of the Low Vision Support Group shared that finding a way back into the workforce with a disability can be challenging. Los Alamos High School students also expressed that securing part-time employment in the community can be challenging. Financial challenges are also expressed by members of the community who rely on social security, like grandparents raising their grandchildren or kin raising young children who often have fewer supports or legal rights than parents or foster parents.

### **Community economic vitality**

Interview and focus group participants share that limited retail, dining, and entertainment options in the county impact health and overall quality of life. Specific concerns shared include that businesses appear to operate in sync with LANL's schedule which means that for those individuals and families who live in the county, there are limited evening and weekend options.

### **Attracting and maintaining health and other service providers**

People who took part in interviews or focus groups share sentiment that they have seen service providers come and go often hearing that the expense to raise a family and operate a practice here are simply unsustainable. Similar perspectives were shared within the nonprofit sector in the community. The small nonprofits who cannot compete with the LANL compensation packages experience challenges recruiting qualified staff while also experiencing frequent staff turnover.

### **Aging in place**

For those individuals who want to stay living in their own homes as long as they are able, challenges still arise with home and property maintenance. Input provided during interviews and focus groups includes for example, challenges navigating County code enforcement.

Interviewees also share that the limited options for nursing, rehabilitative care, or assisted living are particularly challenging when individuals or their loved ones want to remain in the Los Alamos County community and if possible, in their own homes, as they age. Challenges cited include: concerns over quality of care; and financial constraints and affordability of such care.

### **Section in Review**

In summary, when considering national metrics for economic stability, Los Alamos County appears to be doing very well. Still, there is growing need for taking a systematic and objective look at the magnitude of need, the sociodemographic indicators that drive economic instability in the community, and the extent to which the current resources are meeting needs identified. Knowing this information will guide next steps to bolster economic stability for all members of the community.

## Social and Community Context

### Key takeaways

- Among people who participated in interviews, focus groups and community input sessions, widely shared positive aspects of Los Alamos County that help in building and maintaining social and community connections include: that it's a small and safe community, members help each other out, and there are many opportunities to participate in free and family friendly events in the community.
- Still, quantitative data and sentiment shared during interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions speak to challenges experienced by community members in feeling a sense of social connection in Los Alamos County. Examples include: among individuals who identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) and individuals or family members with disabilities express not always feeling welcome; mental health and substance use challenges among community members and particularly youth; accessibility challenges to fully participating in the community such as physical barriers (lack of ADA compliance in some places); financial barriers for some; and social isolation among seniors.
- The need for providing additional supports that help adults and youth build and sustain a sense of community is clear. One key theme expressed throughout this phase of the project is the need for a straightforward way for individuals to access information on social and health resources in Los Alamos County.

### Introduction

Our relationships, connections to our community, and sense of belonging have profound impacts on individual and collective health and wellbeing. The 2023 U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community is a public health "call to action" highlighting the most current evidence of need, and recommended next steps for the nation to address the epidemic of loneliness and isolation since the COVID-19 pandemic worsened existing downward trends of social connection.<sup>1</sup>

*Excerpt from "Letter from the Surgeon General" May, 2023*

*Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. (p.4)*

Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day,<sup>4</sup> and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity. And the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished.

<sup>1</sup> United States Public Health Service. Office of the Surgeon General. (2023, May). Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf> Accessed January 15th 2024.

Los Alamos County is not immune to this epidemic. Over one-third of participants in the most recent Los Alamos National Community Survey (December 2020-January 2021 data collection) rated their sense of connection and engagement with their community as poor or fair.<sup>2</sup> County-wide Racial, Equity and Inclusion (REI) discussions through the REI Task Force have included recommendations for more opportunities to promote social inclusion.<sup>3</sup> Young people attending school in Los Alamos also report feelings of disconnect to others, as evidenced by focus groups at Los Alamos High School conducted for this report as well as multiple years of the New Mexico YRRS data highlighting such deficits from a young age.<sup>4</sup>

## Positive aspects of the social and community context in Los Alamos County

The health and well-being of the community is impacted by the ability of the people of the community to weather misfortune.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Resilience Analysis and Planning Tool (RAPT) shows that based on 2021 U.S. Census data Los Alamos County ranks in the 4th percentile on the Community Resilience Challenges Index (CRCI). This means that 96 percent of the counties in the United States have more challenges to their community resilience than Los Alamos County. Although Los Alamos County is well-situated to have more community resilience than most counties in the country, two conditions that are the most significant threats to the Los Alamos County community resilience are:

- 1) Lack of economic diversity (as indicated by a low number of employers)
- 2) Percentage of households with limited English proficiency

The Los Alamos County community as a whole appears to be doing well compared to elsewhere, however there is room for improvement when considering some households and individuals who are more at-risk. The U.S. Census Bureau computes resilience estimates for every county in the nation through combining ten indicators of household and individual risk to their ability to recover from an unexpected disaster.<sup>5</sup> For Los Alamos County in 2019, approximately 63% of individuals had at least one risk factor that could reduce their resilience

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<sup>2</sup> National Research Center and Polco. Los Alamos County, NM The National Community Survey Report of Results 2022. [https://cdnsm5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_6435726/File/Government/Open\\_Govt\\_Portal/The\\_NCS\\_Report\\_-\\_Los\\_Alamos\\_County,\\_NM\\_2022.web.pdf](https://cdnsm5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_6435726/File/Government/Open_Govt_Portal/The_NCS_Report_-_Los_Alamos_County,_NM_2022.web.pdf) Accessed January 15th 2024

<sup>3</sup> County of Los Alamos Racial Equity and Inclusivity Task Force Minutes (June 9, 2022). [https://losalamos.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5699285&GUID=7A0B4DB2-4A32-49A8-8F4A-6E255B4A1954&Options=&Search=Follow-Up and Possible Next Steps from the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Discussion December 2020](https://losalamos.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5699285&GUID=7A0B4DB2-4A32-49A8-8F4A-6E255B4A1954&Options=&Search=Follow-Up+and+Possible+Next+Steps+from+the+Diversity,+Equity+and+Inclusion+Discussion+December+2020) <https://losalamos.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4703681&GUID=2D447F70-1046-40DC-9FD9-C768C232928F&Options=&Search=> Accessed January 15th 2024

<sup>4</sup> New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (NM YRRS) [https://youthrisk.org/publications/?sft\\_post\\_tag=county-report](https://youthrisk.org/publications/?sft_post_tag=county-report) Accessed January 15th 2024

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Commerce. Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division. 2019 Community Resilience Estimates. Quick Guide. Updated August 10, 2021. Small Area Estimates Program. [https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/technical-documentation/community-resilience/cre\\_quickguide\\_2019.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/technical-documentation/community-resilience/cre_quickguide_2019.pdf)

and over 14% of individuals had three or more risk factors that undermine their resilience.<sup>6</sup>

Still, positive perspectives were shared during interviews and focus groups that bolster opportunities for social and community connection and are important bases upon which we can build.

Specific topics about the breadth of opportunities for building community and social connections that were shared during interviews and focus groups include:

### **Perceptions of safety of the community**

- Youth who participated in focus groups shared that Los Alamos County is a safe, small and “close knit” community where there are trustworthy adults and a feeling that people watch out for each other.
- Being a small community with free public transportation reduces barriers that some have to mobility in the community which also provides opportunity for interaction with other people.
- Neighborhoods that are conducive to walking and incidentally interacting with neighbors were also cited as factors in promoting good overall physical and mental well-being.

### **The community members**

- Interviewees reported that people are willing to help each other out. This was mentioned in the context of information sharing, or providing referrals, or resources.
- Participants also shared that the health consciousness of the community and that people tend to share values regarding healthy activities are positive.
- Elected officials and Los Alamos County employees listen to, and are responsive to individuals when concerns are communicated.

### **Community resources and events**

- Resources like the libraries, nonprofit organizations, churches, philanthropy, and outdoor spaces like trails, parks, and playgrounds, help people connect to one another.
- Adults and youth express the benefits of free and family-friendly events and activities that bring community members together. Specific examples shared include: parades, movies in the park, summer concerts, and the farmers market.
- Parents share that many opportunities are available for young kids to pursue a wide array of interests, with many being free or low-cost.
- Fitness centers were cited as health promoting and community building resources.
- The YMCA offers afterschool programs and also runs the Los Alamos Teen Center for high school students. The Family Council runs two Youth Activity Centers (one in Los Alamos and one in White Rock) for students in grades 3-8 to access activities after school and during the summers.
- The Los Alamos Retired and Senior Organization (LARSO) runs two senior centers (one in Los Alamos and one in White Rock) that provide opportunities for social interactions, physical and mental wellness, healthy meals (on-site and through home-based delivery), and other opportunities for engagement and continued learning.
- Other ways that people can connect include support groups organized around specific topics that provide space for individuals to learn and help one another navigate challenges they are facing.

**The geographic setting:** adults and youth who participated in interviews and focus groups shared that the natural surroundings in the County are conducive to being outside and

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<sup>6</sup> United States Census Bureau, Community Resilience Estimates Datasets, 2021 Estimates <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/community-resilience-estimates.html>

engaging in outdoor activities which are health promoting and have potential for community building.

## **Challenges experienced relevant to the social and community context in Los Alamos County**

Overarching sentiment shared through focus groups, interviews, and community input sessions highlights the effects that the pandemic had on supports provided and the sense of community in Los Alamos County. The pandemic worsened challenges people were already facing including social isolation, especially for older members of the community, and challenges for young people needing to operate in the academic and social settings remotely. Interviewees reported that the effects of the pandemic's isolation were still being experienced. Health and social service providers who participated in interviews and focus groups shared their concerns with stress induced declines in health and wellbeing of the community.

### **Mental health and substance misuse**

Widely expressed need during this phase of the project is for more opportunities for supports for people experiencing mental health and/or substance use issues. A specific example shared is the need for additional post-treatment support for individuals who have completed rehab for addictions, in order to maintain that sobriety.

Young people who participated in focus groups share that mental health struggles are widespread, pressure to succeed is prevalent and there is also much concern with drug use among youth. There was also concern shared that some students may not know resources that are available to them. Additional perspective commented by youth is that due to the limited availability of mental health practitioners in the community, it can be difficult to get an appointment and even for those who can get in, it is difficult to maintain anonymity because the community is so small. Students communicate that when too many roadblocks are experienced, some young people's illnesses may get worse. A concern among students is that the broader community does not have a sense of how bad it can really be for young people in this community and that it feels as though problems are "swept under the rug." Students also express concern for how privilege among some people in the community makes others who either live outside of the county and go to school here or who are of different socioeconomic status feel unwelcome.

### **Physical accessibility**

Interviewees who disclosed having various disabilities, or who have families members who do, expressed challenges with accessibility and lack of ADA compliance in some settings throughout the community. Barriers to access make it even harder for some community members to feel welcome and supported to connect within the community.

### **Financial accessibility**

Among people who took part in interviews and focus groups, financial challenges were raised pertaining to a variety of different opportunities to build and participate in community. An example shared by grandparents and kin raising children involves barriers they experience having their young people in sports or other afterschool activities that can be out of reach financially, especially for those caregivers who are on fixed incomes. Youth who participated in focus groups expressed concern that some opportunities for connecting with others can be cost prohibitive whether those events are within the school setting or are within the general

community setting. Fitness centers were cited as important health resources but membership fees can be cost-prohibitive for some.

### **Inclusion and belonging**

Members of the community who identify as Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) who were interviewed shared their experiences facing discrimination and lack of inclusion. Community members with disabilities also expressed similar feelings of not always feeling welcome. These sentiments have also been shared in the Los Alamos County National Community Survey<sup>7</sup> and through the Los Alamos County Racial Equity and Inclusivity Task Force. Feelings of exclusion can make it more difficult for community members to engage in activities and can lead to social isolation and worsening health outcomes.

Others expressed concern with the lack of meaningful interactions with people who are from neighboring communities including Pueblos and the desire for improved connections.

It was also noted that scheduling of community events and activities appear to be most often on Saturday mornings which regularly conflicts with some faith communities. One individual who was interviewed encountered an attitude of, “..why would we inconvenience the majority for the minority? That is the pervasive attitude that is the problem in town. If you’re not in the majority, why would we cater to you?”

*“People are often unaware of how to accommodate others with conditions that are out of the norm. There is need for people to be compassionate but still recognize the need for people to be independent. It can be hard to ask for help.” |*

*~Low vision support group member*

### **Family and community support**

Providers who participated in interviews and focus groups expressed concern for child neglect worsening during the pandemic, and that there was more conflict seen between youth and their parents.

Challenges were expressed by parents, grandparents, and other caregivers in knowing of, and accessing, safe opportunities for young children during out of school time, especially relevant for single parents or for families with two parents who work.

Although there are many different situations that can result in the need for grandparents to become the primary caregivers for their grandchildren, in general it is an indicator of past or

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<sup>7</sup> NCS reference from elsewhere in report

ongoing family trauma. Both children and their grandparents can experience emotional stress and barriers to accessing health care. An example provided is the challenges faced when grandparents need to be the designated legal guardian in order to utilize health insurance for the grandchild. In Los Alamos County, there are an estimated 175 households where grandparents or immediate family members have become guardians responsible for children. The duration of the situation with grandparents parenting grandchildren can be an indicator of the disruption of the parent-child relationship. Approximately 31% (55) of Los Alamos County grandparents raising grandchildren have been doing so for five or more years.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the potential presence of trauma, grandparents and kinship care may pose a financial hardship because the guardian does not qualify for additional state benefits through the Children, Youth, and Families Department (CYFD).

### **Opportunities for youth to build their own sense of community**

Youth who participated in focus groups shared that while the small and safe nature of Los Alamos County is positive and contributes to wellbeing, being a small and remote community also has its challenges. Students shared that there are not many options for activities to participate in, especially for middle schoolers and older teens. This is true for weekend activities as well as for students who are not as interested in those activities that are outdoors. Students are aware of the Teen Center, but report that changing relationships and teen dynamics may dissuade some from attending. Students who live in White Rock share that they have even fewer opportunities for things to do and that getting between White Rock and Los Alamos without their own transportation can make accessing activities more challenging.

### **Recreational and social emotional supports for youth**

While some parents who participated in interviews or focus groups shared positive perspectives about the many opportunities available for young people to pursue interests, others express concern for the emotional well-being of young people, especially those with developmental disabilities or other neuro-divergent needs. The Los Alamos NM-YRRS data introduced earlier in this chapter speak to widespread need among the middle and high school populations in the Los Alamos Public Schools. During interviews and focus groups, parents express particular concern for young people who have any characteristics that may appear “different” than the status-quo. Specifics shared include “othering” and bullying that often go unaddressed.

### **Isolation among older adults**

Living alone has been identified as having a negative correlation with good health and well-being. In Los Alamos County, nearly 15% (1,196) of residents are estimated to be living alone. Research indicates that the negative impacts of living alone is particularly strong for seniors<sup>10</sup>. An estimated 6.2% of people who reside in Los Alamos County are 65 years or older and living alone.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> American Community Survey, 2021, ACSDP5Y2021, ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles, <https://api.census.gov/data/2021/acs/acs5/profile>

<sup>10</sup> National Institute of Aging. April 23, 2019. Research Highlights Social isolation, loneliness in older people pose health risks. Accessed at <https://www.nia.nih.gov/news/social-isolation-loneliness-older-people-pose-health-risks> January 20th 2024

<sup>11</sup> American Community Survey 2021, ACSDP5Y2021, ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles, <https://api.census.gov/data/2021/acs/acs5/profile>



## Communications

“Word-of-mouth” is often cited as a primary mode of information sharing in the Los Alamos County Community. That extends to those people who utilize social media, particularly Facebook. Community members share that this can work well for people who already feel connected, but for those individuals who are either new to town or who are not on social media, a concern is expressed with how to find information about resources in the community. The sense that “newcomers” and “old timers” operate in separate spheres in the community was mentioned by providers and community members who took part in interviews and focus groups. Participants shared that this separateness contributes to feelings of social isolation.

Relevant to communication modes utilized in Los Alamos County, of the estimated 8,029 households in the County, 93% have a broadband internet subscription. This indicates that 7% of households may, by necessity, rely on other sources than the internet for their information. It is not known what percent of Los Alamos County residents have no access to internet via broadband or smart phone. Of residents who are five years of age or older, an estimated 14.7% (2,696) do not speak English at home. Of those who do not speak English at home, an estimated 25% (661) speak English less than “very well.”<sup>12</sup>

## Section in Review

In summary, the Los Alamos County community has many assets to build upon in order to bolster opportunities for all of our community members to feel welcome, included, and socially connected. An initial step forward is to involve all community members with interest and constructive ideas to strategize for improving opportunities for connecting, minimizing social isolation, and in so doing, improving physical and mental health risk factors.

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<sup>12</sup> American Community Survey 2021, ACSDP5Y2021, ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles, <https://api.census.gov/data/2021/acs/acs5/profile>

## Neighborhood and Built Environment

### Key Takeaways

- Throughout interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions the strong sense of safety, free public transportation, and places to safely walk, roll, and bicycle, especially those that are separated from vehicular traffic, were highlighted as positive aspects of Los Alamos County that are health promoting.
- Los Alamos County Community Development, Public Works, and Atomic City Transit have current planning documents highlighting similar community needs to what was learned during this phase of the Comprehensive Health Plan development including challenges with housing availability, vacant and under-utilized structures, and hindrances to active transportation.
- These cross-sector issues present ideal opportunities for partnering across County Departments.

### Introduction

The history of public health is often told through a community and urban planning lens.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Dr. John Snow (in 1854) paved the way for modern epidemiology and the linkages between public health and the “built environment” or the manmade structures and infrastructure like homes, buildings, and how our communities are designed. He did this by identifying that a cholera outbreak could be stopped by simply removing the handle of a pump that was providing access to (contaminated) water into the geographic area most affected.<sup>2</sup>

In more contemporary public health and planning intersections, substantial evidence exists of the profound impact of the built environment on the public’s health.<sup>3</sup> For example, much is known on the impacts of street design on feelings of safety and comfort in walking, biking and rolling within the community.<sup>4</sup> Increasing opportunities for “active transportation” contribute to decreased risk factors for many chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kochtitzky CS, Frumkin H, Rodriguez R, Dannenberg AL, Rayman J, Rose K, Gillig R, Kanter T; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Urban planning and public health at CDC. *MMWR Suppl.* 2006 Dec 22;55(2):34-8. PMID: 17183243. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/su5502a12.htm> Accessed January 10th 2024

<sup>2</sup>CDC Public Health Matters Blog. (March 14, 2017). John Snow: A Legacy of Disease Detectives <https://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2017/03/a-legacy-of-disease-detectives/> Accessed January 10th 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Perdue, WC, Stone, LA, and Boston, LO. The Built Environment and Its Relationship to the Public’s Health: The Legal framework. *Am J Public Health.* 2003 September; 93(9): 1390–1394. doi: [10.2105/ajph.93.9.1390](https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.93.9.1390). Accessed January 5th 2024

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation. Integrate Health and Transportation Planning. <https://www.transportation.gov/mission/health/Integrate-Health-and-Transportation-Planning> Accessed January 10th 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2009) Research Brief Active Transportation: Making the Link from Transportation to Physical Activity and Obesity [https://activelivingresearch.org/sites/activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR\\_Brief\\_ActiveTransportation\\_0.pdf](https://activelivingresearch.org/sites/activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Brief_ActiveTransportation_0.pdf) Accessed January 10th 2024.

The Los Alamos Downtown Master Plan (October 2021)<sup>6</sup> and the White Rock Town Center Master Plan (October 2021)<sup>7</sup> highlight a future Los Alamos County with improved opportunities for health and wellbeing through planning recommendations. Of note: opportunities and challenges that are documented within these Master Plans (see excerpt below) are discussing the very same “Social Determinants of Health” outlined in this Comprehensive Health Plan including challenges with housing availability, vacant and under-utilized structures, and hindrances to active transportation. These cross-sector issues present ideal opportunities for partnering across disciplines.

## VISION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Los Alamos community faces some unique opportunities and challenges that can be helped by specific interventions in Downtown. These challenges include the following:

- Lack of housing availability, especially attainable housing
- Vacant and underutilized structures and land with blighted conditions
- High commercial space rents for small, local businesses
- Scattered surface parking lots
- Large block size that hinders mobility
- Lack of pedestrian connectivity along Trinity Drive
- Lack of a comprehensive placemaking strategy
- Unclear and outdated Development Code procedures that hinder development

Downtown Los Alamos is envisioned to be a place that is walkable and provides attractions for young and old. Key assets are connected by wide sidewalks that accommodate outdoor seating and allow businesses to expand their activities into the public realm. Downtown has a cohesive identity that is inspired by the unique history of Los Alamos and the surrounding natural landscape of the Jemez Mountains and Valles Caldera. A wide range of transportation options are available that bring people in from out of town, from adjacent neighborhoods, and major employers at all times of day and week.

To help achieve this vision for Downtown Los Alamos, the Master Plan and the development framework focus on the benefits of mixed-use, transit-friendly, pedestrian-oriented development.

As called for in the County's Comprehensive Plan and community feedback from this planning effort, the development framework includes the following:

- P** A Parking District that is oriented around three parking structures dispersed across Downtown that allows for a 'Park Once and Walk' strategy
- 1** The catalytic redevelopment of C.B. FOX, Central Park Square, and the Mari Mac Village Shopping Center as mixed-use developments
- 2** Targeted mixed-use and multi-family development
- 3** Pedestrian improvements along north-south roads and Trinity Drive including buffered sidewalks, landscaping, and pedestrian furnishings
- 4** Bicycle improvements along 15th Street, 20th Street, and Trinity Drive
- 5** Comprehensive placemaking strategy that creates a unified urban form and identity
- 6** A public space adjacent to Central Park Square with enhanced pedestrian amenities
- 7** A dedicated north-south pedestrian corridor as an extension of Central Park Square south of Central Avenue that features outdoor dining and retail
- 8** Street extensions of 6th, 9th, 15th, and 20th Streets to break up large blocks and create redevelopment opportunities

The Master Plan outlines seven elements that align with the Comprehensive Plan and inform a set of recommendations intended to implement the community vision for Downtown Los Alamos. These recommendations include the following:

### URBAN FORM/IDENTITY

- Update Downtown zoning to promote pedestrian-oriented development patterns
- Increase and enhance pedestrian infrastructure
- Install signature gateway features
- Implement a branded wayfinding system
- Expand/ increase Downtown placemaking strategies
- Rebrand Downtown as a family-friendly environment

### HOUSING

- Allow increased multi-family densities/ heights
- Incentivize affordable housing
- Allow/ encourage an urban mix of housing/ development types

### TRANSPORTATION

- Implement safe pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure
- Improve vehicular access and connectivity
- Expand convenient access to transit as Downtown densifies
- Improve the parking management strategy

### ECONOMIC VITALITY

- Retail space preservation
- Retail space development
- Tenant recruitment
- Develop strategies to keep commercial rents affordable
- Promote mobile vending
- Develop policies and incentives to activate first floor frontages
- Streamline development process within Downtown
- Develop strategies that incentivize redevelopment of vacant and underutilized sites and structures
- Develop an entertainment use that attracts

- people, particularly families, to Los Alamos
- Promote tourism as a economic driver

### PUBLIC SPACE/ STREETS

- Create diverse, interconnected public spaces
- Incentivize the creation of a pedestrian corridor
- Define streets as public spaces

### INFRASTRUCTURE

- Incorporate Downtown infrastructure improvements into County's CIP
- Promote access to utilities and broadband

### SUSTAINABILITY

- Create standards for implementation of LID, solar covered parking, and electric vehicle charging stations
- Incorporate green parking lot practices
- Update outdoor lighting standards
- Revise landscape requirements to promote native plants

Implementation of the Development Framework will take a long-term, incremental approach that requires the collaboration between the County, property owners, and the development community through a combination of strategic catalytic projects as well as the facilitation of smaller scale infill opportunities. Funding and financing of Downtown improvements comes from several sources including Capital Improvement Program (CIP), Local Economic Development Act (LEDA), and private sector funds from development incentives.

Los Alamos Downtown Master Plan Executive Summary pp vi and viii.

<sup>6</sup> Los Alamos Downtown Master Plan (October 2021) <https://www.losalamosnm.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/departments/community-development/documents/los-alamos-downtown-master-plan.pdf> Accessed January 10th 2024.

<sup>7</sup> White Rock Town Center Master Plan (October 2021) <https://www.losalamosnm.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/departments/community-development/documents/white-rock-town-center-master-plan.pdf> Accessed January 10th 2024.

## Positive aspects of the built environment

The Los Alamos community prides itself on being a safe place to live, work, learn, and recreate. According to the most current (2022) Los Alamos County National Community Survey: 96% of survey respondents rate their overall feeling of safety in Los Alamos County as excellent or good.<sup>8</sup> The strong sense of safety in Los Alamos County and its connection to having a positive quality of life was shared throughout interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions.

Participants also shared that Los Alamos County has a lot to offer compared to other small towns. The free public transportation was often highlighted as a community asset. This resource enables people to have autonomy within the community, with interviewees reporting that the local bus service is safe, and bus drivers are friendly and helpful.

Among the 8,593 housing units in Los Alamos County, there are a mix of housing types ranging from detached single-family homes (64% of the housing units in Los Alamos County) to apartment buildings with multiple units. Of the occupied housing units, 74.3% are owner occupied, while the remaining 25.7% are renter occupied.<sup>9</sup> The rate of building of housing units reached a peak in between 1970 and 1979 which resulted in creation of 21.8% of the current housing stock in Los Alamos County. In contrast, only 3.1% of the housing stock in Los Alamos County has been built between 2010 and 2020. Los Alamos County has a 6.6% vacancy rate with the majority of those 564 vacancies being rental housing units.<sup>10</sup> While the need for housing in Los Alamos County surpasses the vacancy rate, questions remain as to the factors contributing to the over 500 units that are vacant.

Places to safely walk, roll, and bicycle, especially those that are separated from vehicular traffic, were also cited by participants in interviews and focus groups as health promoting aspects of the Los Alamos County community. At the time of this writing, additional Multi-Use Trail (Urban Trail Phase I and Phase II) is being constructed<sup>11</sup> and the Los Alamos County Transportation Board also supports further development of multiuse trails (see workplan for details), a Bicycle Working Group, and active transportation programs that support walking or bicycling<sup>12</sup>. Next steps from the CHP will include pursuing actionable partnership opportunities with Public Works and the Transportation Board on shared priorities.

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<sup>8</sup> Los Alamos County, NM The National Community Survey Report of Results 2022 <https://www.losalamosnm.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/government/transparency/documents/the-ncs-report-los-alamos-county-nm-2022.web.pdf> Accessed January 4th 2024

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles. Los Alamos County Dataset: ACSDP5Y2021.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles. Los Alamos County Dataset: ACSDP5Y2021.

<sup>11</sup> Los Alamos County Projects. Public Works Department. <https://www.losalamosnm.us/County-Projects/Urban-Trail> Accessed January 21st 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Los Alamos County Transportation Board <https://www.losalamosnm.us/Government/Leadership/Boards-Commissions> Accessed January 21st 2024.

## Built Environment challenges experienced in Los Alamos County

### Housing

The lack of access to affordable housing is a widely shared concern among those individuals who participated in interviews, focus groups, and community input sessions. At the time of this writing (January 2024), Los Alamos County Community Development Department is in the early stages of updating the 2010 Affordable Housing Plan.<sup>13</sup> Los Alamos County is not unique in its affordable housing challenges but the geographic and land use constraints in the County exacerbate the situation. Public health and planning professionals across the country are working together on improving “safe, stable, and affordable places to live for everyone.”<sup>14</sup> Data that the Los Alamos County Social Services Division staff collects will help shape future local and regional development of housing options for people that need temporary shelter, supportive housing, and/or housing subsidies.

Like most of the U.S., Los Alamos County has experienced a steep increase in home value in the recent past. The median home value in 2021 was \$412,700.<sup>15</sup> Approximately 17.5% of renters spend 35% or more of their household income on rent. Of particular note is that there is an estimated number of 246 homes (owner-occupied) with a value of less than \$50,000 in Los Alamos County.<sup>16</sup>

### Transportation

Roadways are inherently dangerous places.<sup>17</sup> The most recent Los Alamos County data show that there were a total of 139 crashes in 2022: 37 involved injuries, six were alcohol involved<sup>18</sup> and seven involved pedestrians or bicyclists.

Transportation safety challenges are most pronounced for those individuals who either do not own a car, or who have constraints in their abilities to drive. Community members who took part in interviews and focus groups share that relying on modes of transportation other than personal vehicles can be a challenge. Obstacles to mobility within the community impact both individual and community health and wellbeing. When individuals don't have reliable and safe transportation options, there is a greater likelihood that they will minimize leaving their homes which, in turn, contributes to social isolation, decreased health behaviors like walking or rolling,

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<sup>13</sup> Los Alamos County Affordable Housing Plan. [https://cdns5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_6435726/File/Government/Departments/Community Development/Housing/4Los Alamos County Affordable Housing Plan.pdf](https://cdns5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_6435726/File/Government/Departments/Community%20Development/Housing/4Los%20Alamos%20County%20Affordable%20Housing%20Plan.pdf) Accessed January 5th 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Health Neighborhoods. Housing. Safe, stable and affordable places to live for everyone. <https://www.changelabsolutions.org/healthy-neighborhoods/housing> Accessed January 21st 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Census Reporter Los Alamos County, NM. Census Data: ACS 2022 5-Year Estimates <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US35028-los-alamos-county-nm/>

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles. Los Alamos County Dataset: ACSDP5Y2021.

<sup>17</sup> U/S/ Department of Transportation. <https://www.transportation.gov/NRSS/SafetyProblem> Accessed January 13th 2024

<sup>18</sup> UNM and NMDOT 2022 Community Report Los Alamos County [https://gps.unm.edu/tru/reports/community-reports/2022/counties/county\\_los-alamos-2022.pdf](https://gps.unm.edu/tru/reports/community-reports/2022/counties/county_los-alamos-2022.pdf) Accessed January 13th 2024

and fewer chances for getting to know other community members through incidental opportunities of interaction.

People who rely on a safe sidewalk network as a primary mode of transportation (for example, individuals who have low-vision or are blind; people who lack car transportation), identify critical crossings in the community, as well as the need for adequate traffic control devices, with inclusion of verbal messages, as transportation equity needs. Additionally, poorly maintained sidewalks near local businesses result in less shopping locally. Safely navigating large parking lots, and getting to certain buildings like the Los Alamos Medical Center is also challenging for people who have low vision or who are blind.

Some examples of transportation challenges shared by interview and focus group participants include:

- Lack of safe routes to school for some students who live in walking distance to their schools (for example, unsafe sidewalks, unsafe intersections to cross, low visibility for oncoming traffic).
- The local bus system has limited routes, frequency, and hours on days it does run, and there is a lack of availability on the weekends.
- Bus routes are eliminated when there are staffing shortages and this is especially difficult on people who do not have any other way of getting around.
- Some transit information that is available, including wait times and schedules, can be inaccurate and this impacts the ability of riders to plan out their days.
- There are limited to no options for taxi, Uber, or rental cars in Los Alamos County.
- Transportation challenges exist for some individuals to easily and safely return home when they are discharged from medical care at LAMC.
- Transportation specific to obtaining medical care, especially between Los Alamos, Espanola, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque is very limited (if not non-existent).

It was shared during interviews and focus groups that some older adults continue driving despite limitations that may put themselves and others at risk, simply because they do not have convenient alternative modes. Some transportation options are available for Los Alamos Retired and Senior Organization (LARSO) members to help address this need.

## **Accessibility**

Accessibility challenges within Los Alamos County were raised by participants in interviews and focus groups. Examples of spaces that were shared as posing accessibility challenges include: publicly and privately owned buildings including some doctor's offices, some roadways and crossings, and some community-wide events. The Community Services Department recently completed work with a Consultant on the Los Alamos County Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Audit and Transition Plan<sup>19</sup> that will be utilized during next steps of this Comprehensive Health Plan.

*The ADA Audit and Transition Plan is a federal requirement to identify gaps in outdoor recreation amenities that create barriers to use by those with disabilities. The audit findings and public process are used to create prioritized short, mid, and long-term transition plans to bring any out of compliance items into compliance.*

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<sup>19</sup> Los Alamos County Projects ADA Audit and Transition Plan (2022) <https://www.losalamosnm.us/County-Projects/ADA-Audit-and-Transition-Plan> Accessed January 21st 2024.

Among participants who took part in interviews or focus groups, perspectives were shared that some community members who have newly arrived to town, and particularly those who have relocated from outside of the United States, experience challenges with being able to navigate local day-to-day systems.

Other accessibility challenges include lack of direct in-person access to some state and federal support agencies and services including the Children, Youth, and Families Department (CYFD) and childcare support.

### **Utilization of space in Los Alamos County**

Among community members who participated in an interview or focus group, a range of topics were identified when thinking about the impacts of land use and development on health and wellbeing.

Relevant topics raised by participants include: empty storefronts, vacant lots, few spaces for community members to gather, and a lack of vibrancy in the downtown of Los Alamos and in White Rock. All of these land use topics have direct impact on community members' sense of wellbeing and quality of life.

A common sentiment shared by participants is the lack of places to build community among adults in town. There are two Youth Activity Centers, a Teen Center, and two Senior Centers but perspectives shared include that there are few gathering places for adults beyond bars and restaurants. It should be noted that there are two libraries; a movie theatre, and other various private businesses (such as a bookstore and game stores); and since interviews and focus groups occurred, two new coffee shops have opened.

### **Maintenance of existing buildings**

When thinking about the buildings that do exist in Los Alamos County, perspectives shared include that some are under maintained, or of poor quality, and despite the conditions, many of the commercial or residential spaces that are available for lease have high rents.

### **Small business viability**

A topic shared among individuals who participated in interviews or focus groups is concern for small businesses, the people who run them, and generally what is needed to maintain their operations. Viability of small businesses in Los Alamos County has direct health and wellbeing impacts on the entrepreneurs, their families, staff, and the Los Alamos County community that seeks such opportunities to improve community vitality.

### **Options for dining and shopping**

An often-expressed topic when considering quality of life in Los Alamos County is the limited options for eating out and for shopping within the community. This was true for individuals across the lifespan. Perspectives include that business types are lacking that enable people to simply go to meet each other and enjoy being in community. Parents share how not being able to buy their children shoes or clothing in town makes life more difficult and for those who work, stores that are open late and close early are not available to them. Families who are new to town may be unable to set up their new households (eg. buy furniture) without shopping online or leaving the community. Participants mention that having Santa Fe nearby makes shopping

slightly easier although comments were also made by older adults that they become less and less comfortable driving out of town for their shopping needs.

### **Section in Review**

In summary, public health planning and city/regional planning have many similar goals for promoting health and wellbeing, as is summarized in Los Alamos County planning documents. Such topics include: a mix of housing types including affordable housing options, mixed-use development that encourages increased walking and rolling through improving safety of our streets and opportunities to use “active transportation” in areas that are separated from vehicular traffic. The first step in moving forward on any of the challenging topics that were raised is understanding the magnitude of these challenges within the community. This should be assessed through a county-wide health and wellbeing survey.



## **Next Steps**

Through this process, we have interviewed more than 200 community members, gathering first-hand experiences on the strengths and challenges of accessing health care in Los Alamos County, and what social determinants of health factors impact decision-making related to these health needs. Now that the first phase of the CHP process is complete, we will be completing the next two steps between April to October 2024, in order to complete the CHP with a full set of recommendations and action plan.

The community-wide health survey will be distributed to 8,000 households within Los Alamos County in late spring 2024. We expect the analysis to take several months, and are targeting late summer to have those results. Upon completion of this phase, we'll incorporate the broader data analysis into a complete set of recommendations, to guide the development of health-related programs and services over the next 12 – 36 months.

# LOS ALAMOS COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH PLAN (CHP) RECOMMENDATIONS (as Selected by the County Health Council)

Number	CHC Identified Need	Recommendation	Cross Reference	Lead	Status	Timeline (Once Recommendations Approved)
<b>Health Care Access and Quality (SDOH1)</b>						
1.1	Community members have challenges accessing physical and behavioral health care services	1.1.a Coordinate community-wide trainings on Social Determinants of Health (SDOH), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI), trauma-informed care and other critical issues	3.3	SSD		Short (<6 months)
		1.1.b Update existing mental health and substance use resources, as well as identify gaps/needs	1.3.a	SSD		Short (<6 months)
		1.1.c Evaluate physical health care challenges and develop next steps for improving accessibility and solving insurance needs		CHC through CHP		Medium (6-18 months)
1.2	There are gaps in services and programs specifically designed to assist older adults with healthy aging	1.2.a Fund a 1.0 FTE Case Coordination Specialist (CCS) position within Social Services Division with preferred experience working with aging systems / older adult (60+) clients, to serve as single-point-of-contact	1.2.b, 1.2.c, 1.2.d	SSD		Short (<6 months)
		1.2.b CCS to work with clients on housing and utilities, transportation, food, and other needs	1.2.a	SSD		Short (<6 months)
		1.2.c CCS to work with clients and Los Alamos Retired and Senior Organization (LARSO) other non-profits, Courts, Police Department, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), & Community Development Division (CDD) as needs arise for case coordination	1.2.a	SSD		Short (<6 months)
		1.2.d CCS to work with clients and medical and behavioral health providers	1.2.a	SSD		Short (<6 months)

Number	CHC Identified Need	Recommendation	Cross Reference	Lead	Status	Timeline (Once Recommendations Approved)
1.3	There are gaps in services and programs to support youth and young adults' mental health and substance use needs	1.3.a Expand mental health and substance use programming offered within the County (ex: Intensive Outpatient Programs (IOP), certified peer specialists, post-treatment support)	1.1.b, 2.3,	SSD		Medium (6-18 months)
		1.3.b Advocate to expand telehealth and video-health options		CHC		Medium (6-18 months)
		1.3.c Offer more trainings to providers to build capacity to serve clients' needs	3.3	SSD		Short (<6 months)
		1.3.d Include cost-of-living increases for providers to maintain staff stability		SSD		Medium (6-18 months)
<b>Education Access and Quality (SDOH2)</b>						
2	Students and parents want additional ways to address students' social and emotional needs	2.1 Continue/expand the network of partners, agencies, and collaborators working to address students' social and emotional needs	1.3.a	SSD		Short (<6 months)
		2.2 Provide encouragement and support to Los Alamos Public Schools (LAPS) to sustain ongoing student health education programs as well as vocational/career education counseling	4.4	SSD		Short (<6 months)
		2.3 Collaborate with providers and non-profits to come up with a plan for distributing Opioid Settlement Funds and implement effective best practices	1.3.a	SSD, 501c3s		Short (<6 months)
<b>Economic Stability (SDOH3)</b>						
3	Low-income individuals struggle with the high cost of living	3.1 Increase Social Services outreach in order to reach more people that may qualify for services		SSD		Short (<6 months)
		3.2 Expand collaborations with other health councils, social service divisions, providers, and local and regional non-profits to provide assistance to low-income individuals	5.2	SSD, CHC		Short (<6 months)
		3.3 Improve data collection and monitoring of key health measures across County departments in order to guide future program development	4.1, 4.2, 4.3	SSD		Medium (6-18 months)

Number	CHC Identified Need	Recommendation	Cross Reference	Lead	Status	Timeline (Once Recommendations Approved)
<b>Social and Community Context (SDOH4)</b>						
4	Many people report challenges finding timely and accurate health-related information	<p>4.1 Implement a Communications Plan to compile information from a variety of sources, and then ensure all media sources receive that information in a timely fashion</p> <p>4.2 Identify existing local support groups and meeting locations and maintain a master list that is distributed regularly</p> <p>4.3 Increase outreach at events, resource fairs, and community locations to educate the community about what resources are available, in conjunction with community partners</p> <p>4.4 Encourage youth participation in health-related groups</p>	<p>3.3</p> <p>3.3</p> <p>2.1, 2.3,</p> <p>2.1, 2.2</p>	<p>SSD/CHC</p> <p>SSD/CHC</p> <p>SSD/CHC</p> <p>SSD/CHC</p>	<p>Short (&lt;6 months)</p> <p>Medium (6-18 months)</p> <p>Short (&lt;6 months)</p> <p>Medium (6-18 months)</p>	
<b>Neighborhoods and the Built Environment (SDOH5)</b>						
5	Lack of affordable housing and lack of transportation impact many community members	<p>5.1 Collaborate with other county departments and boards and commissions to help shape affordable housing and transportation solutions (ex: CDD's 2024 Affordable Housing Plan, Public Works Pedestrian Plan)</p> <p>5.2 Participate in regional collaborations to help prioritize expansion and meet development and transportation needs</p>	3.2	SSD	Medium (6-18 months)	Long (18 months to 3 years)