

Community Conversations

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HEALTH

About Local Health Issues

Supplemental Report to the 2025 State Health Assessment

November 2023



Overview

The Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) held five community listening sessions in September and October 2023. The purpose of the Community Conversations was to engage community members in the process of tackling complex health issues Alabamians face in their communities. The State Health Assessment (SHA) Workgroup selected, developed, and edited the format of the sessions so all community members were invited and able to attend.

The Community Conversations were held in Huntsville, Mobile, Birmingham, Guin, and Montgomery, Alabama. There was also an Auburn location; however, no one attended this event. Locations were selected based on proximity and familiarity of locations to the community members. Two sites were at the health departments (Huntsville and Birmingham); however, some of the SHA Workgroup members identified there may be some stigma around attending events at a health department. The other three locations were community centers such as the library (Mobile), senior community center (Guin), and the Montgomery local Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Sessions were held after work hours to accommodate family schedules. Sixty three Alabama residents signed up for the events, and 67 attended. Many attendees were community representatives due to their job titles such as clinicians, non-profit workers, and health educators. While some questions reflected on an individual's experience, most of the verbal discussion was about health impacts made at the community-level or based on what they see in their clinics.

The Community Conversations consisted of a facilitated discussion between community members focused on specific and locally relevant issues. All listening sessions were between 75 to 90 minutes and were led by the SHA Coordinator. Participants were asked to comment on the topics within the six stated below statements. The sixth statement prompts an extended 10 minute open floor for any comments not addressed under the previous statements. The questions were developed prior to the event to facilitate discussion and maintain consistency across these listening sessions. The six statements were:

- "I feel that there are enough resources around me to improve or maintain my health."
- "In the past 2 years, I participated in health events that made me feel connected to my community."
- "I am able to see and receive an appointment with health personnel in a timely manner. This could be a physical therapist, eye doctor, dentist, nurse practitioner, physician's assistant, or doctor."
- "Please list the top 5 health concerns for you and your community."
- "Please list the largest barriers to being healthy for you and your community."
- "I feel like this session was beneficial to improving my community's health."

Data was collected through audio recordings of sessions and detailed notes from all members of the audience. A mixed methods approach was chosen to collect primary data from participants. There was a 2-page, 6-question, multiple-choice survey taken with the Community Health Issues Survey. Additionally, the audio recordings were used so individuals could detail an encompassing reason to their health behaviors and choices. For every open-ended question, at least two individuals were asked to further elaborate in their responses. The thematic analysis will not be in this report, but the results will be included within the 2025 SHA.

Responses by Location

With each of the cities, a priority health topic was selected based on epidemiological data in the area. The first 10-15 minutes of each section were dedicated to gaining insight on the lived experiences of community members. The “big three” health issues for each city reflect the main topics that the participants focused on throughout the session.

Huntsville

Big three: Knowledge about Resources, Aging Community, and Chronic Disease

Huntsville, which is located in north Alabama in Madison County, has a population of 221,933 individuals, and is one of the fastest growing cities in the state (Census Quickstats, 2023). Since 2010, the population has increased by about 20 percent and is predicted to continue (Huntsville Facts & Figures, [n.d.]). In 2023, the city’s leading employers were in the defense, automotive, and research industries (Huntsville/Madison County Chamber, 2021).

The event was held at the Madison County Health Department on September 21, 2023, and the pre-selected topic for Huntsville was chronic disease. In the United States, about 6 in 10 adults have a chronic disease, and 4 in 10 adults have more than two chronic conditions (Centers for Disease and Prevention Control [CDC] Chronic Disease, 2023). In 2021, seven of the top ten causes of death in the state of Alabama were chronic conditions (Alabama Center for Health Statistics, 2021). The leading cause of death in the state, heart disease, killed Alabamians at a rate of 147.5 per 100,000 in the same year (Alabama Center for Health Statistics, 2021).

During the Community Conversation session, participants voiced their concern about the aging community and the increased burden of chronic diseases, primarily diabetes and hypertension. The aging population, measured by residents over 65, was estimated in the 2020 Census to be about 16.2 percent. Resources available in the Huntsville area for the elderly include STUDIO 60 Senior Center and the Top of Alabama Regional Council of Governments. Participants further commented that the aging population was having difficulty successfully connecting to these resources due to transportation gaps.

Mobile/Mobile County

Big three: Rural Access to Care, Mental Health and Substance Use, and Social Determinants of Health

Mobile County is in the southwest corner of the state. It is the second most populated county in Alabama with an estimated 411,410 individuals (Census Quickstats, 2023). The city of Mobile is situated along Mobile Bay and has a population of 183,289 people (Census Quickstats, 2023). The local economy is based around healthcare, maritime, and manufacturing industries (Mobile Chamber, 2014).

The event was held at the Ben May Library on September 25, 2023, and the pre-selected topics for Mobile County were homelessness and substance use. According to the 2020 Census, approximately 18.2 percent of the Mobile County population, and 20.0 percent of the population in the city of Mobile are in poverty. The continuum of care that services the areas in Mobile and Baldwin counties is managed by Housing First Inc. Between 2019 and 2022, the homeless population in the city of Mobile, Mobile County, and Baldwin County increased from 219 individuals

to 670 individuals, which rose significantly during the height of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID 19) surges (Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2022). In 2022, these areas were allocated money through the Emergency Solutions Grant with the Department of HUD to deliver strategies and interventions for this increase (Sharp, 2023).

During the Community Conversation session, participants voiced their concern about healthcare access in non-metropolitan areas of the county and nearby towns, particularly about the inadequate number of substance use rehabilitation services. The death rate due to drug overdose was estimated to be 30.1 per 100,000 in the state of Alabama, and 18.0 per 100,000 for Mobile County (County Health Rankings, 2020). Participants further commented that exacerbating risk factors such as homelessness, income, unemployment, and systemic racism, have created additional barriers for individuals who have the highest risk for health access.

Birmingham

Big three: Perinatal Care, Knowledge about Resources, and Addressing Local Violence

Birmingham is home to over 196,000 residents (Census Quickstats, 2023). It is the largest metropolitan area in the state by population and is the center for healthcare with seven hospitals in the region (City and Metropolitan Statistical Area [MSA] Population Estimates, 2022). Birmingham is in the north central area of the state in Jefferson County and has a population of 665,409 (Census Quickstats, 2023).

The event was held at the Jefferson County Department of Health on October 4, 2023, and the pre-selected topic was perinatal health. In 2022, Alabama had a high infant mortality rate (7.2 per 1,000 live births), high African American mother mortality rate (100.1 deaths per 100,000 births), and a high low birth weight rate (1 in 10 babies) (Alabama Center for Health Statistics, 2022). Additionally, most of the state is considered a maternal health desert (March of Dimes, 2022). In 2020, approximately 38.8 percent of Alabama counties did not have obstetric care. Prior to this event, it was announced that birthing centers at Brookwood Baptist Health in Alabaster and Princeton Baptist Medical Center Hospital in Birmingham's West End District would be closing within the next 60 days (Yurkanin, 2023).

During the Community Conversation session, participants voiced their concern about the connection from perinatal health resources to other supportive resources. Present for this event were midwives, doulas, and non-profit milk and diaper donation centers.

Guin/Marion County

Big three: Access to Specialized Care, Substance Use, and Knowledge about Resources

Through the Equitable Neighborhood Initiative in Central Alabama, the SHA Workgroup was able to connect with smaller towns during the Community Conversation development. Guin is in Marion County (Northern Public Health District) along the Mississippi/Alabama state line. It is a small town with a population of approximately 2,000 people (Census Quickstats, 2023).

The event was held at the Collins Life Center, used primarily as a Senior Center in the mornings, on October 17, 2023. The pre-selected topic for the greater Marion County area was rural access to care. Although participants from the

meeting reported the primary care doctors were timely and close, specialty care, pediatric care, and emergency hospitals are located within a 30–35-minute radius. This included nearby metropolitan areas such as Tupelo, Mississippi; Jasper, Alabama; Birmingham, Alabama; or Tuscaloosa, Alabama (self-reported by attendees). In 2022, the estimated ratio between patients to primary physicians was approximately 3,710:1 for Marion County (County Health Rankings, 2022). Participants reported that it is an aging community, with about 285 residents eligible for Medicare. Approximately, 13.2 percent of the county population is without health insurance (County Health Rankings, 2022).

During the Community Conversation session, participants primarily voiced their concern about the gaps in specialized care, particularly advanced care and pediatrics. Other topics included transportation and the shortage of industries in the area that has led to socioeconomic gaps in residents.

Montgomery/Montgomery County

Big three: Knowledge about Resources, Women’s Health, and Chronic Disease

Montgomery is the capital city of Alabama with 196,986 residents (Census Quickstats, 2022). It contains local and state government, Air Force and Army military bases, and automotive manufacturing (Montgomery Chamber of Commerce, 2023). The county has a population of 226,361 residents. Approximately 49 percent of the people living in Montgomery County are estimated to be obese, 15 percent are living with diabetes, and 31 percent reported having no leisure physical activity. Approximately 12.2 percent of people in the county and 12.6 percent of people in the city are without health insurance (County Health Rankings).

The event was held at the Montgomery Bell Road YMCA on October 19, 2023, and the pre selected topic for this area was nutrition and physical activity. Montgomery is in the middle of the Black Belt, a stretch of fertile land across the state with a large population of African American people due to slavery. The Black Belt includes Bullock, Dallas, Green, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Montgomery, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, and Wilcox counties. This region is known for an increased rate of many chronic diseases and food deserts (Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System [BRFSS], 2021). In 2021, it was estimated that about 32,260 people in Montgomery County were food insecure (Map the Gap, 2021).

During the Community Conversation session, participants voiced their concern about chronic diseases and physician bias. Since the majority of participants were women, most of the discussion was centered around obstetrics and gynecology and women’s health. Other comments were about food, physical activity, and health resources to support a healthy lifestyle.

Conclusion

The primary topics that every group highlighted were substance use disorder, mental health, and the ability to find health resources in their communities. All participants were concerned about their connectiveness, especially post-COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, participants noted that there was more community building and discussions that connected individuals to resources. Now, most services have been health fairs and events directly from the health centers. Overall, the local community wants more centralized locations to create healthy opportunities and a general resource list for their area.

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