



The Irreducible Needs of Families in King County



Community input 2010

To continue the community input process and to enhance community learning that has informed the Irreducible Needs Project, the King County Children and Family Commission (CFC) conducted five focus groups in District 8 in August-October 2010. Parents, grandparents, unemployed adults, and local business owners were engaged in groups held in this District that includes West Seattle, White Center, Burien, and Vashon. These groups extended the community input process into a fifth district, deepening findings from focus groups conducted since 2008 in south, east, southeast King County and Seattle. The approach that was established with pilot groups of engaging members of diverse ethnic, culture, and language groups in discussions facilitated by local community leaders was followed for this most recent series of focus groups. Community agency representatives partnered with the CFC to facilitate focus group discussions in District 8 with Samoan and Khmer groups, low-income families living on Vashon Island, White Center business owners, and English speaking families living in White Center. The input from these most recent focus groups is presented here.

The local residents participating in this community input process in District 8 affirmed the three core findings from the initial CFC's family focus groups:

- **Widespread agreement exists that family well being is multi-dimensional** as proposed by the Commission to include affordable housing, affordable wellness care, economic opportunities for a sufficient wage, adequate and nutritious food, access to educational opportunities through the lifespan, safe neighborhoods, stable and secure relationships, and a culturally responsive support network;
- **Families report that while they are generally doing well, some of their essential needs remain unmet**, and families have ideas for help in meeting their needs;

- **The linguistically and culturally diverse families showed that their experiences differ from those families who responded to surveys** and that the unmet needs of diverse families were different from county-wide measures of family well-being.

Participants in District 8 focus groups identified several common responses that had been expressed by focus group participants in other districts. Among the most frequently expressed themes are:

- **Affordable housing-** Finding safe rental housing took more than a third of families' monthly income and was difficult to maintain if any changes occurred in their incomes.
- **Affordable wellness care-** The working poor and formerly employed adults could not afford health insurance and did not seek preventive health care.
- **Economic opportunities that provide livable wages-** Adults who are employed and receiving a livable wage feel they are susceptible to any unexpected health care, transportation, or child care costs that could push them off the narrow economic ledge that they try to balance.

There were also differences among the five groups in terms of which irreducible needs were unmet for them and the relative significance of various unmet needs. Low-income families living on Vashon Island and the older refugee participants were most concerned about health care coverage for preventive care, chronic illness care, and emergent health care issues. The families who had lived longer in West Seattle and White Center faced high housing costs while trying to earn a sufficient wage to meet their expenses. Local White Center business owners were trying to improve safety issues that affected their livelihood, also expressed concerns about safety in the residential neighborhoods, and struggled to make a sufficient wage in this economic downturn.

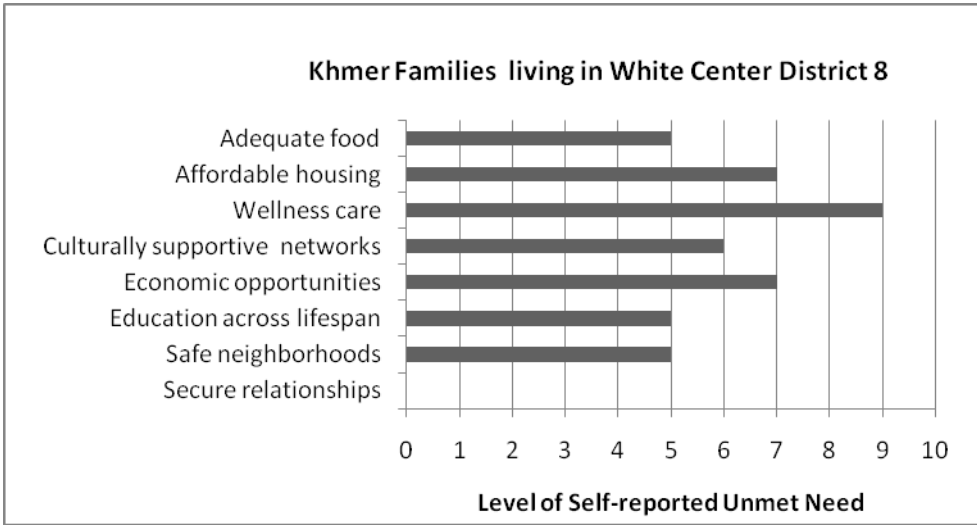
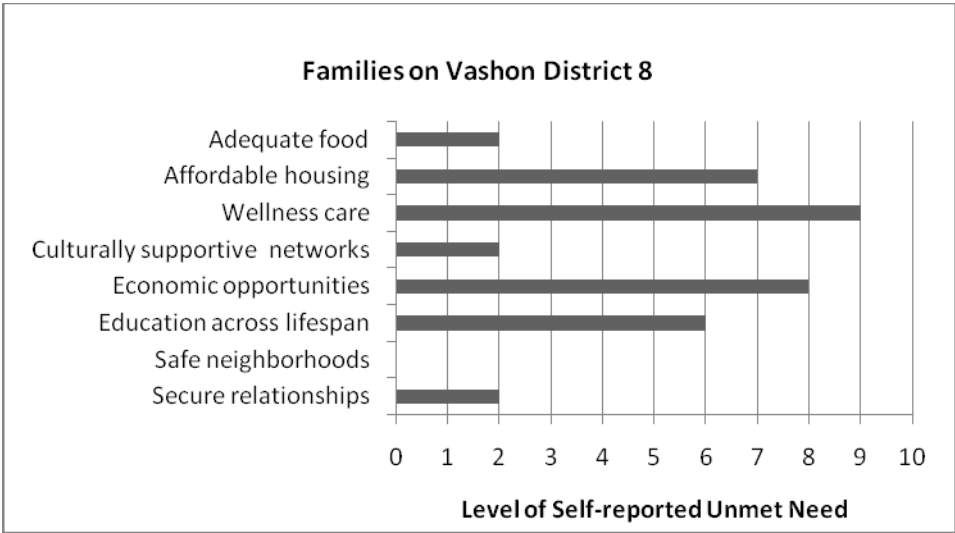
Educational opportunity throughout the lifespan was a theme for several groups. Business owners talked about the need for schools to prepare graduates with skills to be attractive as employees. Families, and in particular the Samoan and Khmer families, emphasized how much concern they have about keeping their kids in school. Programs that help families understand their role in their children's success at school were seen as a critical need.

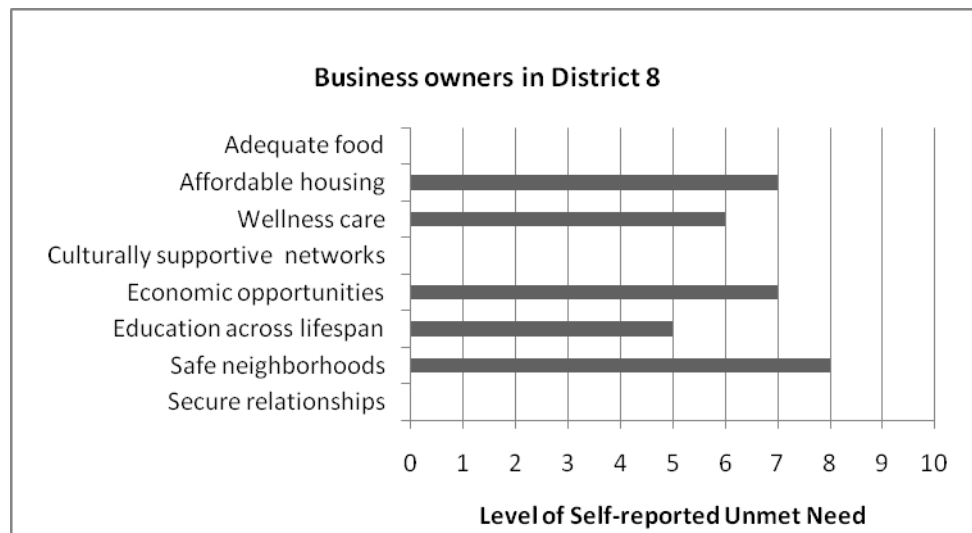
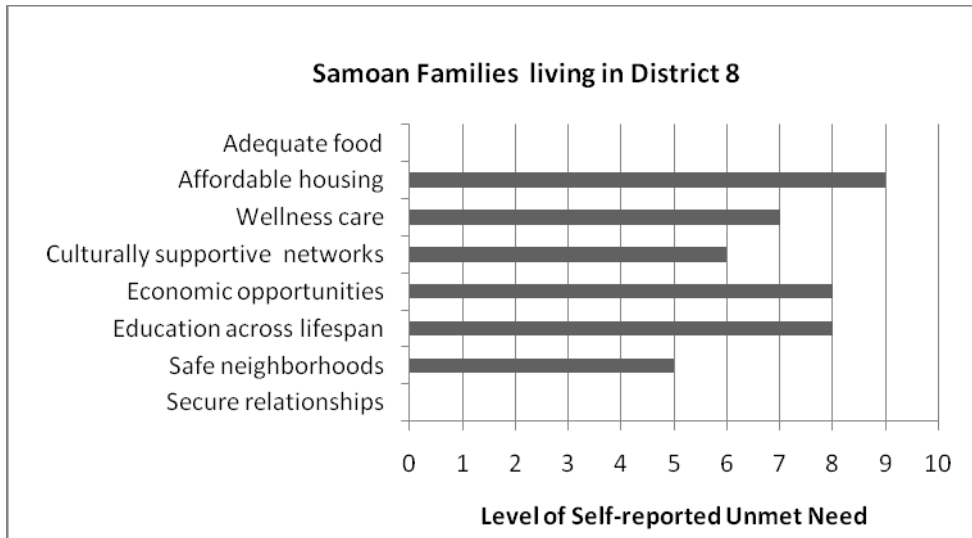
The two most culturally diverse groups of White Center residents had the longest experiences with being low-income and had struggled for years to find and keep affordable housing while also meeting other essential expenses. The working low-income families on Vashon who had formerly just met their expenses have been recently challenged to afford their rental housing and are going without any health care coverage. The small business owners in White Center are not able to afford employer-paid health care benefits for their employees and would lack health care coverage for themselves if they could not maintain it through keeping other employment. Parents living in White Center described the balance they try to keep when their earned income diminishes due to working reduced hours and any reductions occur in food stamps or health care coverage for their children.

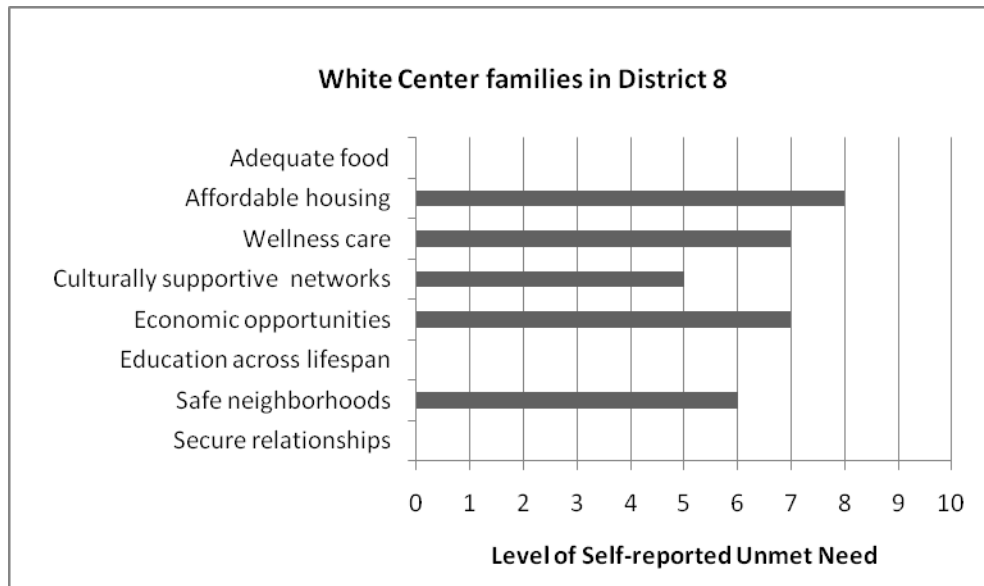
Whether the families were new or returning applicants to receive basic food or medical assistance the focus group participants described their frustration at the process, their perceptions of inefficiency, and their experience of rudeness and feeling disregarded. Adults described that the application process to receive benefits was dehumanizing. Group participants were also frustrated in trying to obtain or access information about social, health, educational, or legal resources and they faced the same limitations that many families in other districts encountered when trying to access information that was only available online and families do not have internet access.

Through their group discussions local residents shared their experiences, learned that other families had common situations, and rather readily agreed on the importance of selected needs over others. Group participants in White Center and on Vashon did not typically express that they had a need for nutritious food and they were familiar with accessing relatively low-cost sources through local growers or sellers or they were food bank clients.

The graphs below display that the participants agreed a need was unmet for their families. The larger the bar the more the group agreed that families' needs were not being met in this area. If the need was not mentioned it does not necessarily mean that the families' needs are all satisfied in this area; it simply means that this group did not discuss it as an unmet need for them or families like them.







Family-proposed action steps- The District 8 group participants were similar to the participants in the previous groups in that the most frequently expressed way for them to get their families' needs met is to have access to helpful and complete information on the availability of local resources and services for which they could be eligible. Group participants would also like continuity of access to the local community resources, family resource centers, food banks, and community centers that they have relied on for social support, peer interaction, resource information and referral, tangible support, recreation, parenting education and family support. These White Center and Vashon residents seek and appreciate the human connection and face-to-face contact they have when they need to access resources to provide for their family's well-being. Earning a livable wage was the commonly held long-term goal of families in this series of focus groups. This was seen by all groups as the key to being able to afford housing, health care and other essential needs for their families to thrive.