

The Irreducible Needs of Families in King County

Community Input 2009-2010

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 focus groups in Districts 2 and 9 in late fall 2009. Parents, grandparents, caregivers and adult family members were engaged in one of six groups held in east and southeast King County and in three Seattle neighborhoods. These groups extended the community input process into two new districts and followed the pilot groups that had been conducted in south and east King County in 2008.

The pilot groups were designed to engage members of diverse ethnic, culture, and language groups and had been held with local interpreters facilitating the discussions. The approach to partner with community agency representatives to facilitate the groups with English speaking King County residents was continued in this second round of community focus groups. The input from these recent groups is presented here.

There were three core findings in the first phase of the CFC's family focus groups that were affirmed in this extension phase in Districts 2 and 9:

- Widespread agreement exists for a holistic concept of family well being as proposed by the Commission through the Irreducible Needs project;
- Current data from a variety of sources shed light on areas where families report that are doing well, where their essential needs remain unmet, and what ideas families themselves have for help in meeting their needs;
- CFC focus groups with 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.

The District 2 and 9 focus group participants agreed that the irreducible needs described what their needs were but their range of experiences influenced what needs emerged as most significant. The focus groups were conducted during this current economic downturn when the unadjusted unemployment rate in King County was 8.4%.

The families in the two districts differed in the length of time that they had reduced family income, loss of employer-paid health care benefits, and the related struggles to meet family expenses. Families in the Central Area and in southeast Seattle had long experienced economic hardship and having insufficient income to meet all their essential needs so they repeated a process every month to decide what expenses to meet and what bills were to be left unpaid. Parents in families who lived north of the ship canal or in incorporated and unincorporated Maple Valley that had previously been middle class and upper middle class community members described their recent and rapid loss of income due to business closures that led to their new low income status and an unprecedented reliance on public assistance.

In either district whether the families were new or returning applicants to receive basic food or medical assistance the parents described their frustration at the process, their perceptions of inefficiency, and their experience of rudeness and feeling disregarded. Adults described the application process to receive benefits as dehumanizing, needlessly confusing, and requiring many redundant and time-consuming steps. There were particular frustrations expressed by recipients on medical coupons who faced delays in scheduling appointments and had to choose which family member they could schedule appointments for rather than take care of each person's needs for appointments at once. Adults were also frustrated in trying to obtain information and faced the same limitation that many immigrant families in Districts 5 and 6 had to access information that was only available online when families do not have internet access.

Whether they were responding to their continuing socioeconomic situations or reacting to their new low income living situations the families were demonstrating their underlying values depicted in these glimpses into their lives. In the Central Area the group participants mourned the closures of neighborhood schools and desired that Afro-centric values be supported in their children's education and recreation. In Rainier Beach, adult caregivers are

already enduring some personal hardships to care for their young family members demonstrating the strength and commitment to family. In Wallingford, parents have developed the capacity and tenacity to provide for their children in spite of their precarious financial situations when monthly expenses routinely exceed their income. In Maple Valley parents who had earlier been community supporters or donors have had personal experiences in becoming recipients and have gained an appreciation for the community agency safety net. In Black Diamond, older adults have a fragile existence being reliant on the social and tangible support available in their local community while maintaining their independence. In Factoria families appreciate that the education system and public recreation offers resources to residents who can access available sources.

Through their group discussions local residents shared their experiences and typically agreed on the importance of some needs over others. The graphs 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. This occurred when group members emphasized other needs as being unmet.

The graphs on the following pages reflect findings from these groups:

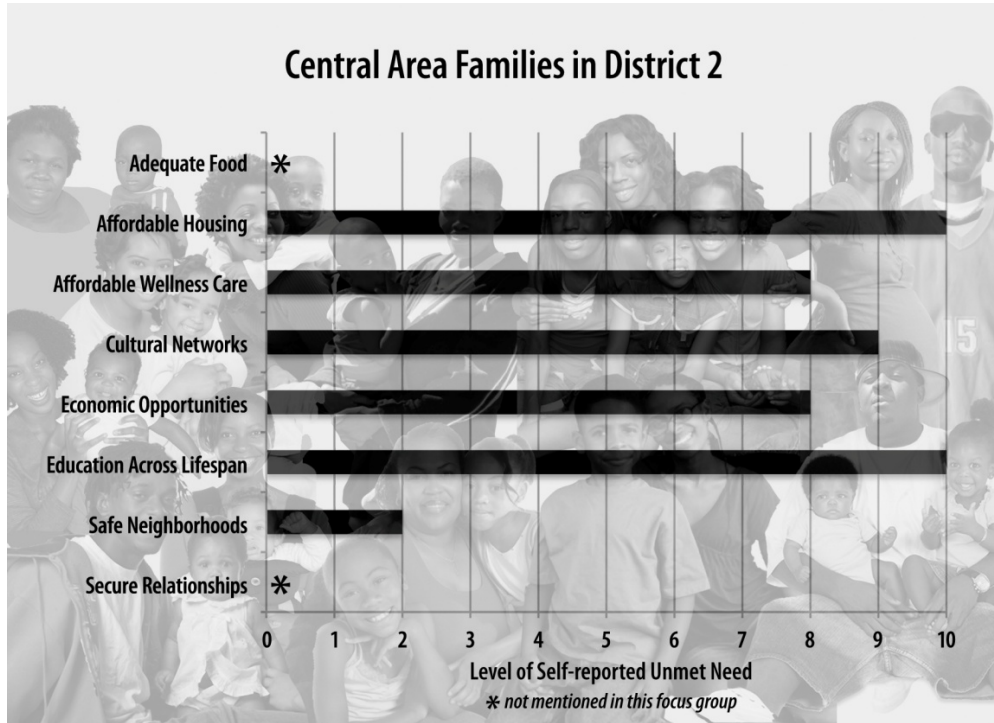
District 2 Focus Groups:

- Central Area Families
- Fremont/Wallingford/University Families
- Rainier Beach Families

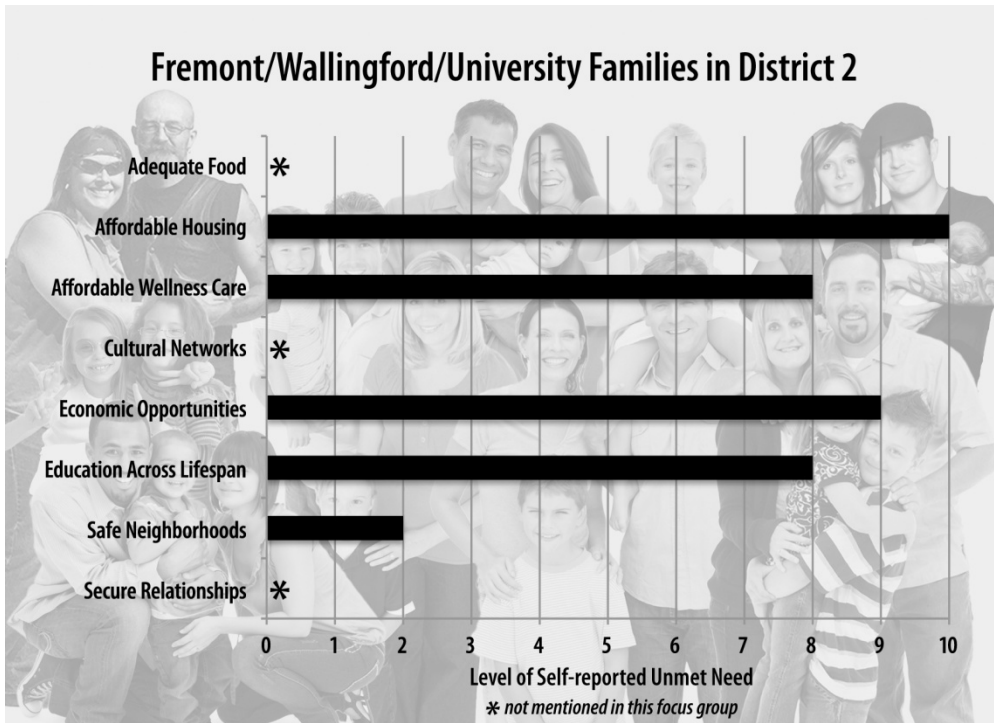
District 9 Focus Groups:

- Black Diamond
- Factoria Families
- Maple Valley Families

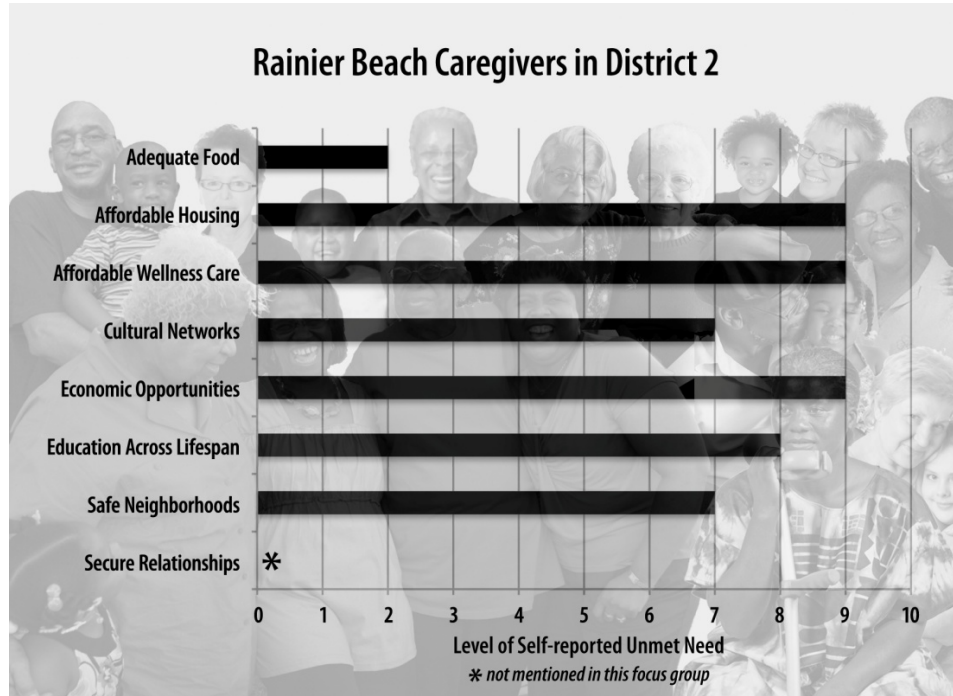
District 2 – Central Area Families



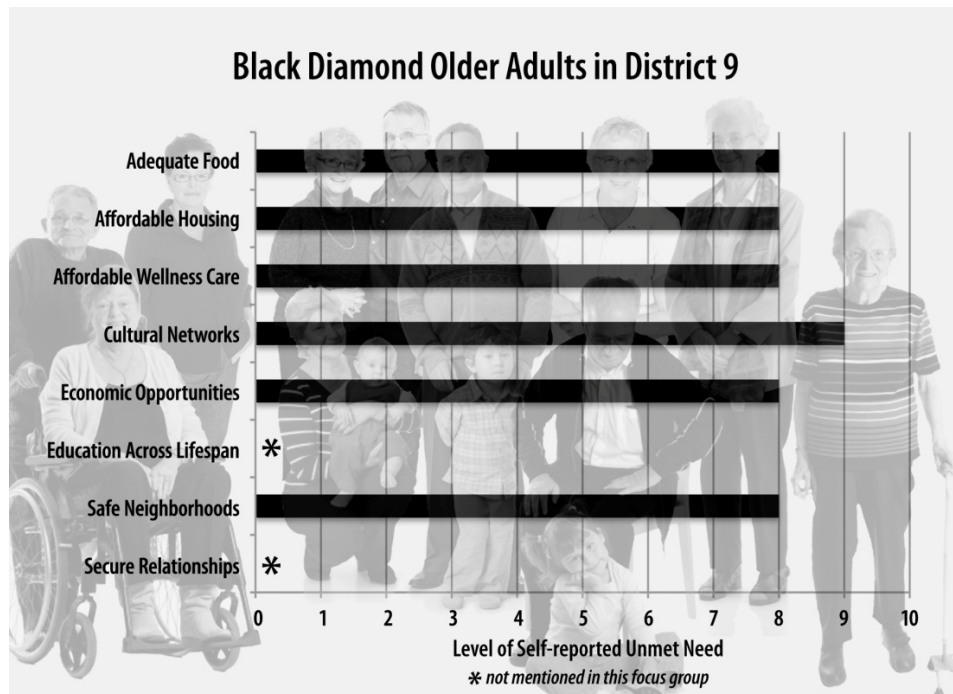
District 2 – Fremont/Wallingford/University Families



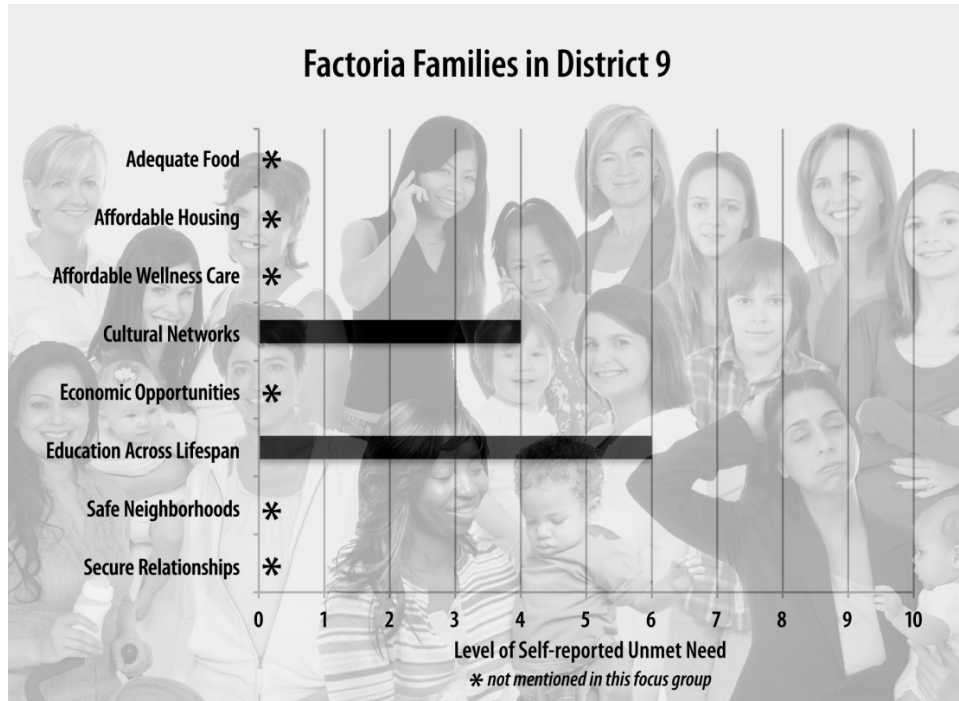
District 2 – Rainier Beach Caregivers



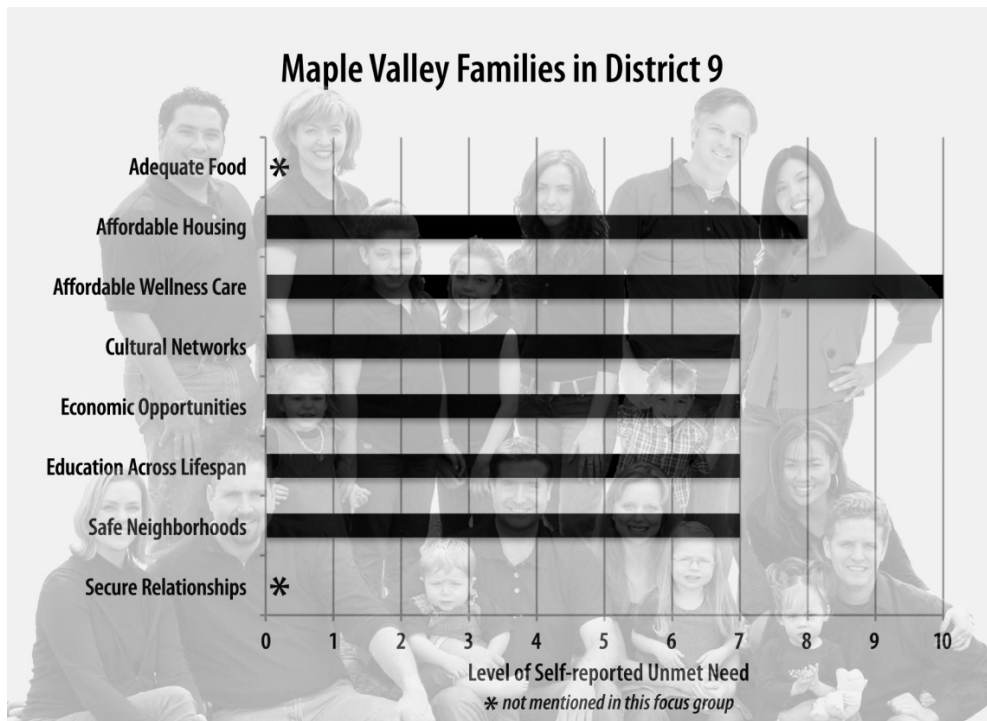
District 9 – Black Diamond Older Adults



District 9 – Factoria Families



District 9 – Maple Valley Families



Selected cross-cutting themes- Group participants in Districts 2 and 9 identified several common responses that had been expressed by focus group participants in Districts 5 and 6.

- **Affordable housing-** One and two income families found housing prices beyond their reach. Employed parents were finding affordable rental units to be very difficult to locate and to maintain if any changes in their incomes occurred.
- **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.

Family-proposed action steps- The recent group participants were similar to the participants in the pilot groups as they would like to have accessible information on what resources are available to them. Group participants would also like to be able to continue to access the local community resources and centers that they have relied on for social support, peer interaction, resource information and referral, tangible support, recreation, parenting education and family support.