



MEETING NEEDS TODAY:

A Needs Assessment of the Alexandria Human Services System - Vol. 2

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In this new report, ACHSO updates its earlier work in 2008, conducting and publishing a study of human services needs in the city for the purpose of guiding service delivery. The input of hundreds of stakeholders – from government, nonprofits and the community – were engaged around nine key issue areas: Early Childhood Development & Education; Emergency Assistance; Health - Physical, Behavioral, Oral & Food; Housing & Homelessness; Immigrant Services; Physical & Developmental Disabilities; Senior Services; and Youth & Young Adult.

Through a series of focus groups and a broadly disseminated survey, stakeholders were asked to weigh in on access to services and information, barriers to progress since the previous study, and recommendations for future activity. The appendices of the full report contain a full accounting of the information that came out of the focus groups and survey, which was undoubtedly influenced by the various master and strategic plan processes that have been conducted on a number of these issues.

Through 9 focus groups, 112 survey responses and 6 published reports, a discrete number of **KEY ISSUES EMERGED**. Over and over again, stakeholders referenced the need in Alexandria for:

- 1 Development of **more affordable housing**;
- 2 **Early intervention** for physical and behavioral health and developmental issues for youth;
- 3 **Bridging the information gap** for immigrant non-English speakers, and most specifically immigrants who also cannot read or write in their native language;
- 4 **Bridging the eligibility gap** between subsidy levels (Medicaid, child care, etc.) and income needed to afford the market cost of services; and
- 5 Enhancing **nonprofit advocacy** – particularly at the local and state levels.

The City of Alexandria has a large and engaged community of nonprofit human services providers who work tirelessly to address some of the city's most pressing needs – from affordable housing and education to hunger and health care. These providers work together as members of the Alexandria Council of Human Services Organizations (ACHSO).



ALEXANDRIA COUNCIL OF HUMAN SERVICES ORGANIZATIONS

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REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Meeting Needs Today: A Needs Assessment of the Alexandria Human Services System includes a detailed set of recommendations, but briefly, stakeholders from the focus groups as well as survey respondents recommended the following in response to the 5 Key Issues in the report:

KEY ISSUE #1

Affordable Housing

1. **Create a continuum of housing**, filling in the gaps at all income levels identified in the Housing Master Plan and creating/expanding tools like rental subsidies that will be critical for reaching extremely low-income households.
2. **Invest in more prevention and intervention services** to avoid homelessness, such as more dedicated housing locators, who are critical to the success of finding client-appropriate rental inventory.
3. **Cultivate a visible and consistent housing advocacy effort** to support real housing champions at the legislative level, combat NIMBYism and educate the Alexandria community about the importance of affordable housing investments.

KEY ISSUE #2

Early Intervention Services for Youth

1. **Implement/improve screening** for early identification of potential challenges, particularly for children in newly immigrated families who may be dealing with trauma; Add screening to the school intake process to facilitate early identification of development delays or behavioral health challenges; and improve training/education of teachers about how to spot potential issues (balanced, of course, by the realization that teachers are not social workers).
2. **Establish a full continuum of services** for young people that goes beyond just intervention.
3. **Expand socio-emotional education and conflict resolution skills** for elementary school-aged children, providing intentional instruction in this area.
4. **Provide more education to parents** specifically about children's different developmental stages, and how to discipline.
5. **Establish a mobile crisis unit** to provide mental health and substance abuse care

before a full scale intervention is needed. (This recommendation was also repeated in other age groups.)

KEY ISSUE #3

The Information Gap

1. **Train other entities** (like libraries, which get a lot of calls and requests) to make referrals.
2. **Establish a centralized location of resources** and promote more information sharing among emergency assistance providers.
3. **Establish a peer network** so that families who have been here for a while can connect new families to the service network and enhance "word of mouth" transmission of information.
4. **Bridge the information gap in immigrant communities about employment services.** Use word of mouth and social media; faith-based organizations; places people already frequent (like supermarkets and schools) as information outlets; and automated voice messages throughout the community. If a few people listen, then the information spreads.
5. **Create natural advocates** by promoting youth-driven and family-driven models.
6. **Take advantage of groups already doing door to door work** to distribute information to seniors, including churches; Meals on Wheels; Volunteer Alexandria; Fire Department; Senior Building social workers; and Division of Aging (to select areas). Use that built-in infrastructure to disseminate information in areas where we know there are information-based barriers – transportation, behavioral health.

KEY ISSUE #4

The Eligibility Gap

1. **Make access to early childhood education universal** for those who cannot afford it. This will likely require policy changes and additional funding (hence, advocacy) at both the state and local levels, as well as revisiting research and assumptions about

an appropriate or acceptable portion of household budgets that should be spent on childcare before it becomes a burden.

2. **Connect to and/or support continued efforts to secure Medicaid expansion** at the state level.

3. **Support and implement the recommendations of the city's Housing Master Plan** as well as those of the Partnership to Prevent and End Homelessness, which is specifically focused on extremely low-income households. Both plans support the development of a continuum with enough housing for people at all income levels, and note particularly that there are few, if any, options on the market for people with SSI-level incomes, and even fewer options for people who have multiple barriers to housing stability even above and beyond lack of income.

KEY ISSUE #5

Nonprofit Advocacy

1. For issues like affordable housing and immigration that affect many other issues but attract a lot of opposition, **connect to and/or establish a broad coalition of nonprofit and other stakeholders** to engage in year-round advocacy and public education efforts in order to affect local policy, program administration and funding changes.
2. The coalition should **work to cultivate and support champions at the legislative level** to push needed reforms, and to be proactive in promoting a culture of tolerance in the city.
3. **Connect to and/or establish state level advocacy efforts** to educate the state's decision-makers about specific challenges delivering human services in a high-cost jurisdiction like Alexandria, and push for needed changes in health and child care access, affordable housing and immigrant services.
4. **Engage the people and communities that are directly affected by issues** like lack of affordable housing and immigrant services in advocacy and public education campaigns.



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