



**Acton-Boxborough  
United Way**



**Local Dollars for  
Local Impact**

# **ABUW COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**JUNE 2015**



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1. Overview and Introduction
2. Themes and Trends
3. Major Insights by Population Group

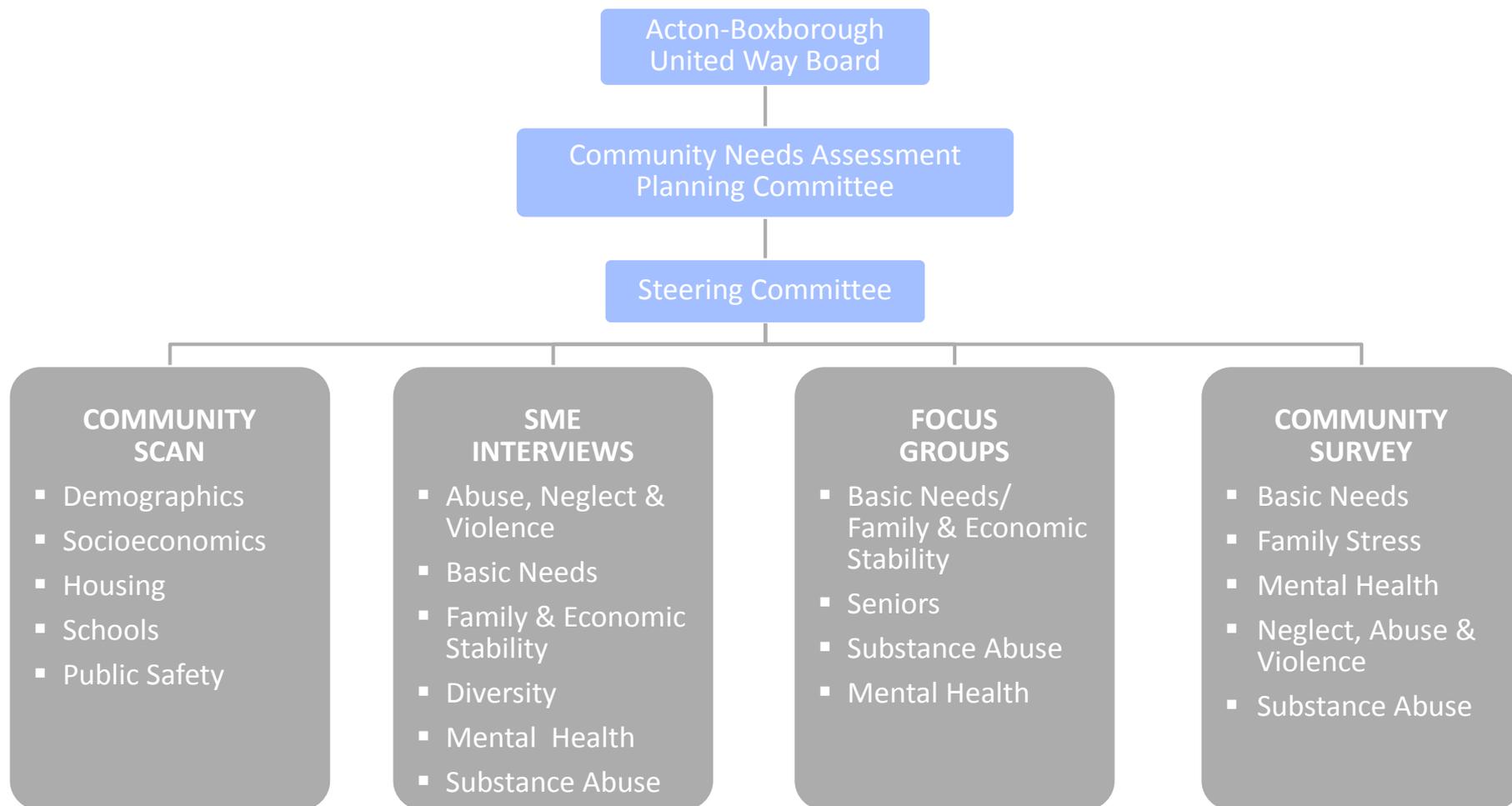
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

- The Acton-Boxborough United Way has conducted a Community Needs Assessment in order to provide insight into the most pressing human service needs in our community, including those that are ‘under the radar’ and may not be the most widely recognized
  
- ABUW encourages use of this study by our community:
  - ABUW will use this document to **inform our grant making, programmatic, and community activities**, to encourage collaboration around critical issues, and to consider appropriate strategic directions
  - Service providers and Town officials may **identify services** that need to be better publicized, new services that could be developed, and **opportunities for collaboration**
  - Residents should know that if you are struggling, **you are not alone**. Many community resources are available to you - the ABUW and many agencies are here to help
  - The broader community can **learn more about the very real challenges facing many of us**. The needs of our neighbors are often unnoticed or unrecognized. With awareness, we can build an even more compassionate and responsive community
  
- While the study is intended to highlight gaps and inadequacies, there is much to celebrate, including the **dedicated, competent and caring professionals and volunteers** who are committed to providing residents with the help they need
  
- To view the full report, please visit: <http://abuw.org/attachments/category/12/ABUW-CNA-2015.pdf>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PROJECT STRUCTURE



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## METHODOLOGY

- The Community Needs Assessment (CNA) was designed to identify the most pressing human service needs in Acton and Boxborough and the service network available to address those needs. Our comprehensive approach was designed to collect as much data and feedback as possible from multiple sources and perspectives
  
- Our Methodology:
  - **Formed Steering Committee** – 20 community leaders served as an advisory group and informational resource
  - **Focused our study** – With informed input from the steering committee, six service categories were explored: Abuse/Neglect /Violence, Basic Needs, Family and Economic Stability, Diversity, Mental Health, Substance Abuse; within four population groups: Children, Youth and Young Adults, Adults, and Seniors
  - **Community Scan** – Quantitative, replicable, mostly publicly available data in five categories: Demographics, Socioeconomics, Housing Statistics, Schools, Public Safety
  - **Interviews** – Qualitative discussions with select **Subject Matter Experts** (SMEs). ABUW conducted 19 interviews with 35 SME's
  - **Focus Groups** – Four topics were further investigated: Basic Needs/Family & Economic Stability, Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and Seniors. We gathered 24 local and state service providers to participate in these facilitated discussions
  - **Community Survey** – 658 Acton and Boxborough residents completed the on-line survey, a statistically relevant sample of the population. The survey was available in four languages and special efforts were made to include low-income residents

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PROJECT TEAM

- Community Needs Assessment Planning Committee
  - Patty Higgins - Community Needs Assessment Chair, ABUW Board
  - Alan Berko - Community Volunteer
  - Rachel Sagan - ABUW Executive Director
  - Ebit Speers - ABUW President
  
- Carlisle & Company Consultants
  - Ann Budner, Principal, Non-Profit Practice
  - Michael Lohfink, Principal
  - Stephen Murdock, Associate
  - Joy Sun, Associate

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## THANK YOU

- ABUW wishes to thank the nearly 100 professionals, human service providers and volunteers who helped in the creation of the Community Needs Assessment
  - With the exception of Steering Committee members, whose names follow this page, individuals are listed in the relevant sections of the full report
  
- Successful completion of the CNA would not have been possible without:
  - The Steering Committee's guidance, leadership, and provision of valuable data
  - The professionals and experts in the human service arena who participated in interviews and focus groups
  - Group facilitators and note takers
  - Survey translators
  - Volunteers and organization staff who helped with distribution and survey completion
  - Survey distribution assistance from the Acton-Boxborough school administrators and the towns of Acton and Boxborough
  - Use of the Acton Police Department's meeting rooms

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS (1 OF 2)

Name	Title	Organization
1. Marie Altieri	Director Personal & Admin. Services	AB Regional School District
2. Andy Armstrong	Senior Minister	Acton Congregational Church
3. Mary Ann Ashton	Co-Chair	League of Women Voters
4. Jennifer Benson	State Representative	MA House of Representatives
5. Jarod Bloom	Partner	Sechrest & Bloom LLC
6. Kelley Cronin	Executive Director	Acton Housing Authority
7. Laura Ducharme	Community Resource Coordinator	Town of Acton
8. Les Fox	Selectman	Town of Boxborough
9. Katie Green	Selectman	Town of Acton
10. Bernadette Keegan	Program Administrator	AB Community Education
11. Marge Kennedy	Social Policy Chair	League of Women Voters
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS (2 OF 2)

Name	Title	Organization
...		
12. Carrie Leggett	Social Worker	Acton Medical Associates
13. James MacRae	Veteran's Affairs Officer	Town of Acton
14. Elizabeth Markiewicz	Town Clerk	Town of Boxborough, ABUW Board of Directors
15. Cindy McCarthy	President	Danny's Place Youth Services
16. Lynne Osborn	Community Volunteer	English at Large, Acton Friends of COA
17. Carolyn Randolph	Outreach Committee	AB United Way
18. Warren Ryder	Chief of Police	Town of Boxborough
19. Michael Tobia	Chairman	Mt. Calvary Community Supper
20. Julie Towell	Pupil Services Liaison	AB Regional School District
21. Frank J. Widmayer III	Chief of Police	Town of Acton

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## THEMES – A CHANGING COMMUNITY

- A decade and a half into the 21st century, Acton and Boxborough are becoming more diverse, older, more expensive, better educated, and economically strong for many, but not all residents
  - The population has increased only modestly since 2000, but notable shifts indicate significant changes and challenges for meeting the human service needs of our towns
- 
- The Acton and Boxborough communities are diverse
  - We are getting older
  - We are more educated
  - The top income level is better paid, with fewer middle income earners
  - Housing is more expensive
  - Our towns are economically strong overall, yet with vulnerable populations
  - Vulnerable residents include:
    - Senior citizens
    - At-risk teens
    - Young adults
    - Disabled residents
    - Veterans
    - Low-income adults and families
    - Limited-English speaking families
    - Highly mobile families

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## THEMES – INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES

- Infrastructure limitations are a significant and integral aspect of the findings in this report
- Barriers make it even more difficult to access services when residents need help

### Housing

- Inadequate supply of affordable, handicapped accessible, and assisted housing
- Shelter is a struggle for vulnerable individuals and families, seniors aging in place, and the disabled

### Transportation

- Residents without access to a car or who lack the ability to drive are less able to access services

### Public Schools

- Increasing numbers of special needs children, more financially stressed families, more diversity
- Substance abuse and prevention, cyber bullying, mental health concerns complicate learning environment

### Public Safety

- Substance abuse, especially opiate addiction and overdoses, mental illness, domestic violence and financial scams are prominent and daily public safety concerns

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# THEMES – COMMON CHALLENGES ACROSS AGE GROUPS

- Multiple age groups reported similar challenges

### Stress is a Big Concern

- When residents were asked about their greatest concerns, stress on young adults, children, and adults/parents were first, third and fourth respectively
- Paying for higher education was the second greatest concern

### Isolation, Lack of Connection

- Isolation can be physical, emotional and social, and can be experienced at all age levels
- Isolation and disconnection lead to a host of other problems

### Lack of Information

- Though the existing network is deep and broad in most areas, both residents and service providers expressed the need for more timely and comprehensive information about available services, and help accessing them

### Difficulty Seeking Help

- Residents don't seek help when they need it due to stigma or shame, cultural barriers, fear of losing independence, not knowing where to turn, or/and difficulty navigating the system

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## CHILDREN – GENERAL FINDINGS

- In this study, we consider children to be from birth through elementary school age
- Birth rates nearly halved in Acton and dropped by a third in Boxborough from 2000 to 2013
- School age numbers have declined steadily since 2011, but more students now require special education services



### Primary Areas of Concern

#### Challenges at school

- Increased special needs
- Language/cultural considerations

#### Technology concerns

- Managing negative exposure
- Can be source of stress for both children and parents
- Stress from technology is the 8th highest ranked concern for residents

#### Child care challenges

- Working poor and single parents
- Special needs children

### Barriers to Accessing Help

#### Parental perplexity

- Lack of parenting support and education
- Emerging risks change quickly

#### Insufficient, poorly funded services

- Lack of affordable, high quality child care options
- Lack of pediatric medication providers, including child psychiatrists

#### Dual language learners

- Can have trouble accessing social services
- Can find it hard to get involved in school and community activities

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## CHILDREN – SPECIFIC FINDINGS

### Challenges at School

#### Increasing special needs

- More children with ADD/ADHD
- More anxiety diagnoses
- More Autism Spectrum Disorders

#### Language/cultural considerations

- More elementary age English Language Learners (ELL)
  - Over 6% in Acton, nearly 3% in Boxborough
- Asians comprise about 1/3 of the elementary students

### Technology Concerns

#### 24/7 availability

- Can lead to incessant social pressure
- Exposure to constant media influences, cyber risks, and bullying, even for young children

#### Can be invasive and isolating

- Increasingly younger children have Internet access
- Parents unsure how to stay connected with children, manage their exposure and protect from cyber risks

### Child Care Challenges

#### Child Care Voucher program

- Long waits for limited spaces
- Insufficient aid

#### Before and after school care

- Enrollment in high demand
- For disabled children, programs are expensive and underfunded

#### Affordable summer camperships

- Crucial for working families
- Scholarship requests up

#### Lack of transportation

- Greatly impacts child care access

#### Limited affordable options

- Unlicensed in-home care
- More grandparents watching young children

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## TEENS – GENERAL FINDINGS

- In this study, we consider teens to be in grades 7-12
- Student populations have declined 7.9% at the junior high and 1.7% at the high school since 2008
- High stress and unhealthy coping are common concerns in this age population

### Primary Areas of Concern

#### High stress levels

- Multiple sources of stress
- Ranked as top concern among residents
- Over half of residents don't know or are unsure where to find help

#### Mental health

- Increase in referrals
- Teen resilience declining
- Bullying is a persistent concern

#### Substance abuse

- Alcohol
- Cannabis
- Opioids/Heroin (see Adults – Findings)

### Barriers to Accessing Help

#### Limited support and education for parents

- Hard to keep up with emerging risks
- Isolated, especially when in crisis

#### Limited mental health and substance abuse services

- Lack of psychiatrists and therapists to treat adolescents; long wait lists
- Lack of affordable treatment, especially inpatient and post crisis
- Insurance cost containment measures

#### Easy availability of alcohol, substances, less aversion to “hard” drugs



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## TEENS – SPECIFIC FINDINGS

### High Stress Levels

#### Multiple sources

- Academic, peer, extra-curricular
- Parental and family expectations, bi-cultural considerations
- Material (e.g., expensive technology, tutors)
- Social media

**Teens may cope with stress in unhealthy ways**

### Substance Abuse

#### Alcohol and underage drinking

- Binge drinking called “epidemic”
- Flavored liquors appeal to underage drinkers
- A top concern for residents

#### Cannabis

- Decriminalized in MA
- Unregulated, more potent than in past
- Arriving by mail from legalized states

**Opiate addiction (see Adults – Findings)**

### Mental Health

#### Increase in referrals and diagnoses

- ABRHS psych hospitalizations doubled last year, on track to exceed that number in 2014/15
- Over half of MSPP referrals in first six months were for teens
- Anxiety, depression disorders, self-injury (e.g., cutting), eating disorders, suicidal thoughts

#### Teen resilience and parenting issues

- Teens less able to handle stress and disappointment
- Parents often unwilling to allow child’s failure/mistakes
- Parents struggle to keep pace with quickly changing risks and help children build resilience

#### Bullying

- Invasive, non-stop nature of on-line bullying
- Easy escalation into crisis

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ADULTS – GENERAL FINDINGS

- In this study, we consider adults to be ages 18-64
- Special consideration is given to young adults in this section, considered to be ages 18-25
- Although legally adults, young adults are often still supported financially by and living with their families



### Primary Areas of Concern

#### Substance abuse

- Opiates/heroin abuse top concern with professionals
- Overdoses increasing
- Treatment difficult and limited

#### Mental health

- Rise in involuntary psychiatric hospitalizations
- Anxiety and depression are among residents' top 10 concerns

#### Young adults, ages 18 to 25

- Difficult to reach and assess
- Especially vulnerable to substance abuse
- Few services or institutions that serve this population specifically

### Barriers to Accessing Help

#### Personal reasons

- Shame, stigma, fear of consequences
- Denial by abusers and family
- Distorted thinking is part of addiction

#### Lack of services

- Financially strapped facilities
- Relapses rarely covered by insurance
- Inadequate number of in-patient beds
- Inadequate non-emergency, preventive, and affordable care for ongoing issues

#### Specific to young adults

- Age group can lack strong connections, relationships
- Parents can't access their child's health records without their child's consent

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ADULTS – SPECIFIC FINDINGS

### Substance Abuse

#### Opiates an acute problem

- Quick escalation from prescription opiates (painkillers, Oxycontin, Percocet) to heroin addiction
- Heroin is cheaper and readily available
- Formerly urban problem now in suburbs
- Alarming spike in occurrence

#### Overdoses (OD's)

- Caused by illegal and prescription drugs, often opiates
- Adults over age 25 have overdosed most, some intentionally
- Since January 2012, 40 Acton OD calls resulting in 5 deaths
- Since 2012, 7 non-fatal Boxborough OD's

#### Treatment

- 30-40% of hospital inpatients are substance abusers with mental health issues
- Typically 3-7 days in the hospital to detox only
- Patients released with little community or home support

### Mental Health

- Spike in involuntary psychiatric hospitalizations
  - Frequent repeat hospitalizations
  - Patients released without sufficient follow-up help
  - Police are starting to partner with mental health experts
- Adult stress is a top concern of residents

### Young Adults, Ages 18-25

- High school graduates not in college and/or unemployed are disconnected from services
- High risk group
  - Drug dealers target this age group, not necessarily those in college
  - 10 Acton overdoses for this age group since 2012
  - Population is difficult for service providers to reach
  - HIPAA rules prevent parents from obtaining a child's medical records or from directing their care after the age of 18, except in certain situations

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## FAMILIES – GENERAL FINDINGS

- Like the towns' general populations, families are now more diverse in terms of culture, language, and make-up
- Economically vulnerable families comprise over 1/5 of our population, despite the two towns' increasing wealth

### Primary Areas of Concern

#### High stress

- Higher education costs and other financial concerns
  - Residents rank higher education costs as their second greatest concern
- Intergenerational concerns

#### Vulnerable families

- Housing, rent, food, other monthly bills are particular concerns for these residents
- Veterans
- Mobile and economically unstable families
- Domestic violence rates remain significant

### Barriers to Accessing Help

#### Red tape and bureaucracy

- Difficulty navigating state/federal regulations
- Complex laws and aid requirements

#### Limited availability

- Housing
- Transportation – most difficult for vulnerable families without a car
- Child care (see Children – Findings)

#### Cultural challenges

- Multiple languages and cultures
- Service provision more difficult

#### Financial woes

- High portion of income spent on housing
- Difficulty planning for long-term needs like higher education



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## FAMILIES – SPECIFIC FINDINGS

### Sources and Effects of Stress

#### Financial stresses

- High cost of living, higher education/debt
- Working two jobs to make ends meet

#### Intergenerational concerns

- Caring for children and aging parents, “sandwich generation,” ranked as fourth highest source of stress among residents
- “Boomerang” children, living at home into 20’s

### Vulnerable Family Issues (1)

#### Veterans

- Increasingly asking for help with basic needs

#### Mobile and economically unstable families

- Children less ready to enter school
- Schools spend more time case managing

#### Domestic violence

- Over 200 Acton cases in 2014, 30 Boxborough cases in 2013

### Vulnerable Family Issues (2)

#### Difficulty meeting basic needs

- Financial challenges
  - 20+% of households earn less than \$50k per year
- Housing challenges
  - Median house price 2-3x national average
  - Lack of affordable rental housing/greater percent of income covering rent
  - 3 year wait list for 2-bedroom Acton Housing Authority unit
  - 22.8% of Acton households qualify for state-aided housing
- Transportation challenges
  - Impede access to high quality food, medical care, social services, community and family supports, employment, school involvement
- Food and necessity challenges
  - Food insecurity
  - Trading off necessities due to finances
  - Free and reduced lunches have tripled in elementary schools since 2009

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## SENIORS – GENERAL FINDINGS

- In this study, we consider seniors to be ages 65 and older
- From 2000 to 2013, the Acton senior population rose 49% and the Boxborough senior population rose 152%. Most are “aging in place”
- Seniors are one of the population groups in both towns with the highest rate of poverty

### Primary Areas of Concern

#### Infrastructure issues

- Housing
- Transportation

#### Health issues

- Physical
- Mental/emotional

#### Safety issues

- Frauds/scams
- Hoarding

#### Financial issues

- Fixed and low income
- Services unaffordable

### Barriers to Accessing Help

#### Limited housing

- AHA has a 4 year wait list for senior units
- More supportive housing options needed

#### Financial management services

- Very limited services
- Unaffordable on fixed income

#### Services inflexible

- Meals on Wheels, home care and nursing programs often time limited
- Insurance coverage is spotty
- Medicare pays only for strict definition of medical necessity
- Seniors also reluctant to ask for reduced rates



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## SENIORS – SPECIFIC FINDINGS

### Infrastructure Issues

#### Housing options and supports very limited

- Needed for aging-in-place, independence
- Very few affordable at-home service options

#### Transportation very limited

- Not flexible, requires advance reservations
- Limited assistance for disabled
- Limited access for out-of-town appointments
- Acton recently approved fixed route van service
- Boxborough COA offers volunteer drivers

### Health Issues

#### Medical complications

- Memory loss/dementia
- Medication management

#### Depression and isolation

- Contributor to self-neglect, hoarding
- Alcoholism, overuse of pain meds a concern
- Caretaker-spouses profoundly affected

#### Reluctance to seek help

- Cannot force help if senior is mentally competent

### Safety Issues

#### Scams increasingly victimize seniors

- Lower computer literacy a factor
- Banks, outside helpers identify victims, alert police

#### Hoarding increasingly recognized as a problem

- Denial is typical; health and safety issue
- Service providers do not have a protocol to deal with it

### Financial Issues

#### Low and fixed incomes

- Housing and food a frequent struggle
- Seniors represent a large portion of food pantry and community supper attendees

#### Support services not affordable

- Help is needed with home chores, paperwork, paying bills, and adult day care



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