

Findings from the 2023
Lehigh Valley Health Network
Community Health Symposium
in Schuylkill County

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

On Sept. 13, 2023, Lehigh Valley Health Network (LVHN) held its second annual community health symposium.

The symposium was held in Schuylkill County, and it was designed to convene the local community to discuss opportunities for improving health. LVHN recognizes that the strengths and needs of each community it serves are unique. Having local symposia acknowledges the uniqueness of the communities served by LVHN and helps LVHN plan for how to best support each region within its service area.

Lehigh Valley Hospital (LVH)–Schuylkill joined Lehigh Valley Health Network on Sept. 16, 2016. Prior to the acquisition, the hospital was part of a two-hospital entity known as Schuylkill Health System, which included Schuylkill Medical Center East Norwegian Street and Schuylkill Medical Center South Jackson Street, both in Pottsville, and related medical facilities and practices. Upon becoming part of LVHN, Schuylkill Health fully integrated its two hospitals under a single license for two hospital campuses. The E. Norwegian Street campus is home to the more traditional hospital inpatient and outpatient services such as emergency room, medical-surgical, maternity, operating suites, cancer center, acute rehabilitation, laboratory and many others. The South Jackson Street facility is home to three inpatient behavioral health units, geriatric, adult and adolescent, as well as an advanced wound center and hospital-based school of nursing.

Since LVHN began providing services in the region, the residents of Schuylkill County have benefited from new and expanded services, new clinicians in the market and upgraded and improved facilities that offer expanded access to care. The Joseph F. McCloskey School of Nursing at Lehigh Valley Health Network in Pottsville has a long history in the area. The school is the primary educator of registered nurses for Schuylkill and surrounding counties. Since 2019, the Schuylkill region has also been home to the Walter and Irene Baran Schuylkill Family Medicine Residency program, which accepts up to four residents per year.

By convening the leaders of LVH–Schuylkill and local community-based organizations, LVHN intended to strengthen existing relationships between organizations that are working

to positively address the social determinants of health for the region as well as the health outcomes of community residents. The 2023 symposium was hosted by Penn State Schuylkill. The Schuylkill Haven campus provided a welcoming and accessible community-based setting for the gathering of local leaders and community members. The event generated excitement among participants, solidified their commitment to community health, facilitated new and renewed connections among participants and helped to define actionable next steps. This report describes the processes associated with planning and holding the symposium and presents an analysis of the thoughts and ideas collected from the event. The report also proposes several suggested next steps that will continue the momentum that was achieved through the symposium and will enable LVHN to support efforts that improve the social determinants of health in Schuylkill County.



Photo courtesy of Peter Keady/PK3 Photography
William J. Reppy, President (former), Lehigh Valley Hospital–Schuylkill, converses with a symposium attendee.



METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

Planning Committee

The planning committee for the 2023 Schuylkill Symposium included LVHN colleagues from the LVH-Schuylkill region including the regional President, the Director of Community Engagement and Communications, the Director of the Counseling Center, the Program Director for Behavioral Health, and the Director for Clinical Services. Also on the planning committee were LVHN colleagues from Community and Behavioral Health and from the Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health.

Approach

The approach to the symposium aimed to create a day that was discussion-based and focused on collaborative solutions to improving health. The goal was to create an immersive experience that provided a deep dive into community health in one specific community, Schuylkill County. Trained facilitators engaged the participants in conversations designed to elicit their thoughts and concerns about the health of Schuylkill County residents and their ideas for actionable next steps. The qualitative information collected at the symposium focused on both the participants' current experiences and on the emerging process of improving social determinants of health.

Symposium Objectives

The planning team identified four main objectives of the symposium:

1. Learn from local community partners about their insights into factors that influence health.
2. Identify ways in which local community partners are addressing the factors that affect health over time.
3. Discuss the evolving leadership role of large complex health care systems in addressing social determinants of health.
4. Summarize a collective path forward and short-term next steps that allow all partners to contribute to improving community well-being.

Invitation List

The invitation list for the symposium was compiled by the planning committee. Based on knowledge of their community, committee members from Schuylkill County compiled a list of invitees who are knowledgeable about and involved in Schuylkill County and whose work is aligned with the goals of the symposium. Using this purposive sampling, more than 130 local leaders from LVHN and partnering organizations were invited to the symposium.

Design

Each speaker who presented at the event brought much experience with and passion for the purpose and content of the symposium. Speakers' remarks were intended to inform and inspire participants and align them with the day's purpose. In addition, each participant attended three small-group discussion sessions and a wrap-up session. The discussion topics were aligned with LVH-Schuylkill's current community health needs assessment (CHNA) and included the following topics:

1. Mental health
2. Substance use disorder and recovery
3. Health behaviors

Each small-group session was co-led by at least one LVHN colleague and at least one leader from a community-based organization. Facilitators and recorders were provided training prior to the symposium. At each of the sessions, facilitators provided brief presentations on their topic areas to begin interactive discussions. The bulk of each session was dedicated to facilitators engaging in conversation with attendees. Guiding questions were provided to the group facilitators to ensure the conversations stayed focused on community health issues and collaboration. Facilitation questions included:

1. What is known or not known on your topic from the perspective of the community?
2. Where are opportunities for cross-sector collaboration?
3. What are some possible short-term next steps?

Following the afternoon small-group discussion sessions, a facilitated wrap-up session provided the day's final opportunity for attendees to bring forward their thoughts, concerns and ideas.

Evaluation Survey

Symposium attendees were provided with an anonymous survey and invited to provide their feedback. Fifteen attendees responded to the survey. In response to the question "Would you participate in a future Community Health Symposium," all 15 respondents answered "yes." The survey also asked participants "How are you feeling after today's conversations?" While one person reported feeling angry/upset, nine reported feeling hopeful, seven reported feeling motivated/positive and six reported feeling interested/curious.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DAY

Fifty-eight people attended the Symposium.

Ten sectors were represented: health care, government, mental health, addiction and recovery, K-12 education, academia, social services, business and economic development, philanthropy and faith-based organizations.

The symposium featured a welcome from Patrick M. Jones, PhD, Chancellor of Penn State Schuylkill, and three speakers. The plenary sessions were presented by:

- Gary Hess, Commissioner, Schuylkill County
- William J. Reppy, President (former), Lehigh Valley Hospital-Schuylkill, and Vice President of Operations, LVHN Northwest Region
- Lori Chaplin, Executive Director, East Central Area Health Education Center (AHEC), and Amanda Taylor, Research Project Manager at Penn State College of Medicine

Hess' remarks stressed the need for the leaders in Schuylkill County to prioritize community well-being and the quality of life for all residents. He noted that "community health is the first priority for community safety." Hess touched on a number of pressing issues including care for seniors, veterans, youth, those who lack food security and those with substance use disorder and mental health challenges. Hess recounted the ways in which the community came together to address the needs brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. He stressed the need for partnerships and collaboration and stated that we need to find ways to "build a bridge and walk over it together."

Reppy presented the highlights of LVH-Schuylkill's community-based activities and the priorities identified by Schuylkill County's Community Health Needs Assessment. Reppy noted that the county compares unfavorably to other counties in the commonwealth in regard to both health behaviors (such as smoking and alcohol use) and health outcomes (including cancer and suicide). Reppy highlighted the needs for increased health promotion and prevention activities, expanded access to healthy foods and places and increased access to health care and behavioral health care. Reppy echoed Hess' call for moving together as a community, and he provided examples of places where progress is occurring in the county.

Chaplin and Taylor presented AHEC's work in training community health workers (CHWs) and placing them in the community. AHEC provides a 100-hour CHW training program covering relationship building and basic medical and legal information. By actively recruiting underrepresented and disadvantaged students from the community into the field of health care, AHEC contributes to economic impact while diversifying the workforce. Chaplin and health educator Melissa Saunders, also with AHEC, noted that CHWs can increase access to quality health care, particularly primary and preventive care. The workers assist with disease prevention, improve access to health care and advocate for both individual and community needs. Additionally, CHWs help to reduce both barriers and costs while improving health outcomes and patient satisfaction. The speakers encouraged the audience to think about where they might be able to utilize a CHW within their organization and shared additional opportunities to join a training or information session to learn about the CHW role.



Photo courtesy of Peter Keady/PK3 Photography
Penn State-Schuylkill's campus offered a community-based setting for the symposium.



WHAT DID WE HEAR?

The following inputs were included in the analysis: all notes from the recorders who documented the day's conversations, the results from the 15 responses to the evaluation survey, and thoughts and ideas expressed by attendees at the wrap-up session. A draft version of this report was also reviewed and edited by the facilitators.

[Key themes that emerged throughout the symposium are detailed here.](#)

WHAT DID WE HEAR?

1. Community Engagement and Collaboration

From the opening welcome until the wrap-up session for the day, the theme that stood out most was that of community engagement and collaboration among people and organizations within Schuylkill County. One participant summed up the tone of the conversations, stating: “It takes an entire community to look at a problem so that it can be solved.” Encouragingly, 79% of participants who responded to the post-symposium survey reported that their organization is already working collaboratively and across sectors in addressing social determinants of health. Infrastructure funds have helped to augment collaborative efforts in recent years.

There is a sense that existing collaborations are happening despite the lack of a backbone organization. A clear backbone organization could help maximize the impact of collaborations by enhancing and expanding communication among stakeholders. Schuylkill County lacks the infrastructure to centralize and distribute information and to support effective collaborative efforts. A barrier to community awareness is the lack of broadband (high speed internet) access. Many Schuylkill County residents still lack access to broadband. These residents are at a disadvantage since a high volume of information and communication comes through the internet and social media sites.

Deepening the sense of community and effectively engaging with the community were seen as critical factors in addressing any community health priorities. Participants noted that for both mental health and substance use disorder concerns, the role of the community needs to include reducing feelings of isolation and stigma. People need to feel safe asking for help. There are also many organizations that could be engaged, or further engaged, to assist with health promotion efforts. Such organizations include the parks,

schools, nonprofits, employers, clinics and hospitals, hospices, veterans’ organizations, food banks, walk-in centers, shelters, police stations, libraries, the Chamber of Commerce and places of worship. In addition to engaging those types of organizations, participants suggested that other, potentially less likely partners also could be engaged in community health efforts. These include places such as coffee shops, tobacco shops, cannabis dispensaries, gas stations, beer distributors, restaurants, gyms, gun clubs and convenience and other retail stores. There is a strong sense that in order to effectively move forward as a community, it is important to include as many organizations and establishments as possible. The use of naturally occurring social networks among friends, family, co-workers and neighbors is another key to optimizing community health outcomes. Although everyone has a role to play in deepening community engagement, health care professionals have a particular role. Community health workers can be key to community health efforts. Through the personal relationships they establish with community members, CHWs can help empower people to be effectively engaged in their own health care and outcomes. In addition to CHWs, physicians can be uniquely instrumental in engaging community members.

The Walter and Irene Baran Schuylkill Family Medicine Residency, which has been in place since 2019, has made concerted efforts to support the family medicine residents in integrating into the community. The residency program provides those in training with opportunities to attend numerous community-based events including multiple school visits and speaking engagements. The family practice residents are also conducting home visits, which give them the opportunity to learn more details about their patients’ food, their use of medicine and their living conditions. Both family medicine

residents and CHWs help with efforts to reach out to the community, bringing care closer to their home and decreasing the distance (literally and figuratively) between community members and their health care.

Authentically engaging the community takes effort. It requires time to build trust and connection, barriers to participation must be removed, and diverse views need to be accommodated (Halthon & Hillman, 2023). To be effective, community engagement often needs to start with the most vulnerable individuals in a community. While not as drastically as in some other Pennsylvania communities, the demographics in Schuylkill County have undergone changes in recent decades, with an increase in immigrant and Hispanic community members. Given this shift, it is essential to ensure effective engagement with this population, as their growth is expected to continue in the coming decades. An example was given that when it comes to eating healthy foods, we need to ensure that we are being sensitive to the food and cultural traditions of the people we are trying to reach. Another vulnerable population highlighted was the elderly. There is a concern about isolation among seniors, especially in rural areas of the county, and a concern about the many grandparents who are raising their grandchildren in the community.



Highlights of Health Behaviors Conversations

- Enhancing playgrounds and improving accessibility to parks and recreational facilities would promote physical activity in the community.
- Transportation remains an obstacle in accessing the services and resources necessary for maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

WHAT DID WE HEAR?

2. Access to Resources

Both the lack of available resources and access to existing resources were concerns that reverberated throughout the day. The concerns spanned a number of different areas including access to health care (particularly behavioral health and dental care), medication, emergency medical services, child care, healthy foods, broadband internet and recreational opportunities. The financial aspects of health care can also create barriers to access. People lack health insurance to cover the costs of their medical care and medications. There are challenges to getting people signed up for Medicaid. Reimbursement rates, especially for behavioral health, mean that providers can lose money by treating people.

Beyond health care, housing, transportation and available workforce emerged as broader access issues for which symposium attendees saw opportunities for improvement. Per symposium attendees, homelessness is at an all-time high in the region. They suggested that a homeless shelter for the general population would be helpful in Schuylkill County, as would a street medicine program. Additionally, in order to keep young people in the area, and to attract new talent, a range of options for apartments and condominiums would be helpful. On a positive note, some communities within Schuylkill County are beginning to address blight and to create more senior housing. The shortage of safe, convenient public transportation is seen as a key barrier to accessing resources in many areas of Schuylkill County since many services and amenities are clustered around Pottsville. Symposium attendees reported that a high percentage of households are lacking cars. Where public transportation exists, bus stops may have poor lighting, poor walkability and no shelter. Transportation to medical visits is difficult, often offering limited hours and requiring 72 hours' notice.

Finally, as with many regions, Schuylkill County struggles with insufficient human resources. Numerous open positions,

which would support community health improvements, have gone unfilled for lengthy periods of time. These positions include a crisis counselor for the police force and school counselor and social worker positions. Within health care, existing staff are facing burnout, particularly after the peak of COVID-19. Symposium attendees also noted that reimbursement rates for psychiatrists have not been increased in some time, making it hard to fill those positions. Finally, the increasing age of physicians in the county indicates that staffing issues for clinicians will likely continue into the future.

In order to thrive, everyone needs access to a full array of services and amenities. These must include urgent services, which are critical for everyone in the community to have access to in times of crisis. They must also include services that promote the conditions that are vital for thriving – including education, safety, housing, natural resources and transportation (Milstein et al., 2023).

For everyone in the community to thrive, special attention must first be given to those who are most vulnerable. Within Schuylkill County, there are groups of more vulnerable people for whom access is of foremost importance, including low-income families, children, youth and elders. The needs of single parents and their children surfaced during the symposium, as did the needs of youth. One attendee noted that in a recent survey of high school students, one of the two top concerns that was identified was a lack of recreational and organized outdoor activities. There is a sense in Schuylkill County that “there is nothing to do here.” Opportunities exist to make youth aware of the parks and trails in their areas and to financially support their involvement in recreational activities, the fees for which might limit access to those living in poverty. Despite the challenges, there are also resources upon which to build in the community. LVH-Schuylkill and Schuylkill County VISION have

already partnered on multiple initiatives, including an annual youth summit, suicide prevention activities, health fairs and increasing walkability in several county neighborhoods. Symposium attendees expressed that more might be done to support engagement and collaboration with existing community-based organizations. For example, there are industrial kitchens at community centers and places of worship that might be used for cooking classes. There are sports and recreation centers, community centers and YMCAs which could be more actively partnered with to take activities to areas of the county where people can easily access them. Providing child care at community events would increase accessibility for parents and families.



Highlights of Substance Use Disorder and Recovery Conversations

- There is recognition and deep appreciation for system-level efforts, such as the Schuylkill County Drug Treatment Court and its dedication to helping individuals and families.
- More efforts could be directed toward increasing access to harm-reduction tools, such as Narcan, while combating stigma.
- There is a pressing need for new and deepened cross-sector partnerships to develop innovative solutions.
- Creating impactful and positive change requires the unified commitment of the community, where everyone has a role to play, since substance-use disorder is a cross-cutting issue that can affect anyone.

WHAT DID WE HEAR?

3. Education and Promotion

In line with the need for access is the need for education and promotion around community health priorities, services and resources. It was felt that community members could benefit from evidence-based education that might help them to make informed decisions to improve their health outcomes and those of their families. Symposium attendees noted that parents would particularly benefit from educational outreach. We could create additional opportunities for parents to be educated around general parenting skills and healthy development (especially the impact of screen time and the importance of outdoor, active play). Per the conversations at the symposium, another area of opportunity is to bring together men over age 40, as they are known to be among those most resistant to treatment, the most sensitive to shame and stigma, and most likely to die by suicide. Education for these men could address suicide prevention (including the role of firearms), the importance of social networks and how to cope with a cancer diagnosis.

As the experience of poverty is traumatic, there are opportunities to provide education on topics such as trauma-sensitive financial literacy education, college preparation and the college application process. Educational topics which might meet the needs of local youth include fitness, vaping, sleep, nutrition and cooking, navigating higher education, drug awareness, firearms, sleep, sex education and contraception. Finally, community members may not be aware of the services that are available. For example, one attendee noted that according to data from the coroner, most of the people in Schuylkill County who died from suicide recently were never seen by the crisis service. Ongoing promotion of available services could be beneficial.

Participants felt that drug use and substance use disorder are topics that should be prioritized for any educational and promotional efforts.

One reason for this is that information about related disorders changes frequently. New drugs are coming into the county through different means. New means of fighting substance-related problems are also emerging; both fentanyl test strips and Narcan are currently available in Schuylkill County. Residents of the county could benefit from updated and reliable information. Furthermore, it is not only residents who stand to gain from education. Continuing with this example, it is important to ensure that everyone employed within health care is actively working to reduce stigma, shame and other barriers to accessing care and that they are promoting available services while also working to minimize their own biases. Other groups of professionals who could especially benefit from community health education include police officers and legislators.



Photo courtesy of Peter Keady/PK3 Photography
William Rowan, Director of the LVH-Schuylkill Counseling Center, and Pearl Robertson, Case Management Supervisor for the Schuylkill County Drug & Alcohol Program, prepare to facilitate a breakout session on addiction and recovery.



Highlights of Mental Health Conversations

- Recognizing the need for awareness and prevention programs across sectors is a positive step toward fostering a healthier and supportive environment.
- There is deep appreciation for the services currently available and also recognition that they are insufficient.
- There is an increased demand for the development of partial hospitalization and outpatient programs, and expansion of the existing workforce, to meet the needs of the community.
- Gender-based disparities were identified, emphasizing the need for tailoring programs to the unique needs of individuals.



OPPORTUNITIES

As discussed in the “What Did We Hear?” section, there are several key opportunities and short-term next steps to begin addressing the key themes discussed during the symposium that focused on improving the health and well-being of Schuylkill County residents. The identified opportunities have the potential impact for the betterment of the community.

Community Engagement and Collaboration

The primary opportunity exists in strengthening and expanding existing partnerships among organizations and businesses in the community.

Deepening collaborative efforts, with Schuylkill County's VISION and others, would enable a more comprehensive and unified approach to improving health and addressing barriers in meeting community needs. By fostering stronger relationships, resources and expertise can be more effectively shared, streamlining services and reducing duplicative efforts. Additionally, the active involvement of community members themselves is vital. By working collectively with the people who directly experience the challenges and opportunities in their community, the unique needs of the community can be identified, and priorities can be established. This inclusive approach would help to ensure that interventions are culturally sensitive, community-driven and ultimately effective.

Collaborative efforts are underway with Lehigh Valley Hospital-Schuylkill and Schuylkill Community Action, which are working together to implement a pilot program to improve housing conditions for individuals with asthma and other respiratory illnesses – with the utilization of CHWs to connect residents to services. The continuation and enhancement of these initiatives are vital, as sufficient housing is necessary for both the retention and well-being of current residents. A range of new housing could also help to recruit new talent to the area. New partnerships between organizations and government officials would be paramount to the success of efforts to address housing needs. In addition to housing, other key areas of opportunity for collaborative efforts include physical activity and access to nutritional food. Partnerships between schools and recreational centers to offer after-school programs that promote physical activity and nutrition education to students could address these needs. The enhancement of playgrounds and sidewalks was a pivotal discussion point, as many are currently not functional or safe. The consumption of healthy foods and healthy cooking were discussed many times during the symposium, and opportunities exist to engage community members by providing healthy recipes and information about cooking healthy foods on a budget.

Enhancing Health Education and Promotion

Health education and promotion represent another key opportunity for the community and would rely on partnerships and cross-collaboration of sectors through initiatives such as outreach programs, educational campaigns and workshops aimed at increasing awareness of available resources and how to access them. Improving health literacy and promoting healthier lifestyles could strengthen the community.

Discussions throughout the day identified opportunities for outreach and education around mental and behavioral health awareness. In particular, the community stands to benefit from programs addressing suicide prevention, stigma reduction and harm reduction (including information about tools, such as Narcan and fentanyl test strips, and emergency services, such as the crisis phone line and walk-in center). Both schools and workplace settings have the opportunity to partner with behavioral health professionals to support community members in recognizing signs of distress and providing support and referrals.



Photo courtesy of Peter Keady/PK3 Photography
Breakout sessions, such as this one facilitated by (right) Mandy Fitzpatrick, Executive Director of Schuylkill County VISION, and (left) Mackenzie Mady, DO, Program Director of the Walter and Irene Baran Schuylkill Family Medicine Residency, gave participants the opportunity to dive deeply into the day's topics.

Advocacy and Partnership With Local and State Officials

Building upon existing relationships with government officials is essential for securing the resources necessary to bring about positive change.

Securing funding can be a particular challenge for low population-density rural areas. Ongoing efforts to educate and engage policymakers and advocating for the community's needs, while highlighting the impact of the initiatives already established, could help to garner further support and funding so that the opportunities identified at the symposium can be effectively acted upon.



NEXT STEPS

NEXT STEPS

The most immediate next step is to ensure that LVH–Schuylkill continues to engage in meaningful conversations with stakeholders across multiple sectors in the county to support and grow the momentum that resulted from the symposium.

One way that LVH–Schuylkill can play its part in achieving this is by leveraging its CHNA working groups. At least once a year LVH–Schuylkill will invite community partners to its CHNA meeting to provide an update on progress around the issues they've committed to as well as to continue to explore new opportunities for collaboration.

Leaders and key stakeholders have opportunities to both deepen existing collaborations and to seek opportunities for potential new collaborations. A commitment to looking at social and health-related issues in new and different ways begins with a willingness to say yes to meeting with new partners. LVH–Schuylkill and Schuylkill Action's recent pilot is a great example of this.

LVH–Schuylkill has made an important investment in the community by creating the Walter and Irene Baran Schuylkill Family Medicine Residency. As that program continues to grow and develop, next steps may include looking for additional ways to leverage this program to decrease barriers to access to health care services and increasing health care providers' awareness of the greatest barriers to health in the county. Since schools are such an important part of the community, strengthening partnerships with them is key to successful community engagement. Some proven strategies for working closely with schools include: providing educational opportunities around the identified community health needs; educating athletes and coaches about safety; providing screening events; creating comfort rooms for students; attending and/or sponsoring events and activities in the schools; creating age-appropriate, interactive activities to educate students about health; and pursuing school-based behavioral health and/or telehealth services.

Many recognized throughout the day that there are critical resources and sometimes local leadership within the county. Recent efforts have begun to recruit talent back to Schuylkill County and bring new and missing services closer to home. This will likely be a long-term, ongoing effort, particularly for the large sectors such as health care, higher education and county human services. Focusing on building preventive or wellness services may decrease the level of burden being experienced by the mental health system.



Photo courtesy of Peter Keady/PK3 Photography
Symposium attendees listen to opening remarks from Patrick M. Jones, PhD, Chancellor of Penn State Schuylkill.

Dissemination of This Report

All participants, facilitators, recorders and attendees will receive a copy of this report. The report will also be sent to any invitee that was unable to attend. The report will be posted on the Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health's website. We encourage all those receiving the report to share it with multiple audiences.

Reference

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<https://www.healthaffairs.org/content/forefront/organizing-around-vital-conditions-moves-social-determinants-agenda-into-wider-action>

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