Healthy Communities Initiative Assessment: Barriers to Employment
Background and introduction

“While significant health improvements have been achieved through medicine and public health, individuals’ health and wellbeing are also influenced by where and how they live, and the unfortunate reality is that tremendous differences in health outcomes still remain for many underserved groups and communities. Health disparities adversely affect groups of people who have systematically experienced greater obstacles to health based on their racial or ethnic group; language spoken; immigration/documentation status; religion; socioeconomic status; age; mental health; cognitive, sensory, or physical disability; sexual orientation or gender identity; geographic location; or other characteristics historically linked to discrimination or exclusion.”

Kansas Health Foundation

This project, funded as part of the Healthy Community Initiative of the Kansas Health Foundation, has engaged Douglas County residents in conversations around barriers to health and well-being among vulnerable populations in Douglas County. With support from a multi-sectoral leadership team and guidance from local residents, conversations have specifically centered around barriers to employment among individuals living with low socio-economic status in Douglas County. According to the 2018 Health Equity Report created by the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department, “Residents earning less than $35,000 are 6.6 times more likely to be uninsured and to be diagnosed with asthma. They are more likely to not go to the doctor due to cost and to have poor mental and physical well-being.” The Douglas County Community Health Plan is taking steps to address health equity through Healthier Together: Creating the Conditions for Health for All.

Problem: Income is a social determinant of health, and there are individuals of low socioeconomic status in Douglas County who face barriers to obtaining or maintaining employment that moves beyond minimum wage. The goal of the HCI project is to identify solutions from within the community, removing barriers to employment and thus improving health equity and quality of life.
Multisectoral support & leadership team

This project was led by the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department in partnership with an interdisciplinary group including community members and representatives from the following organizations:

- Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department
- LiveWell Douglas County
- Lawrence-Douglas County Housing Authority
- United Way of Douglas County
- University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development

In the Fall of 2018, the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department hired Christina Gentry to serve as a community liaison to support this project.

Approach and methods

Focus groups and interviews were conducted with community members living in public housing and receiving housing vouchers between fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. Recruitment was done utilizing fliers, social media posts, letters and in-person invitations. In order to reduce barriers to participation, the facilitators offered on-site focus groups with dinner and childcare provided. Additionally, participants received a $10 gift card to thank them. The facilitators focused on empowering and hearing from people who felt marginalized due to economic class, race, education, gender and other social circumstances relevant to income. Towards January 2019, further outreach beyond the Housing Authority incorporated all marginalized underrepresented residents experiencing barriers to employment in Douglas County. In all, more than 100 people were engaged.

Interviews reached individuals near their place of residence including the Huppee Community Facility in Edgewood Homes, Family Promise, the Lawrence Public Library and Sunrise Project. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Analysis of themes emerging from the data was conducted using inductive coding. Figure 1 shows the most commonly reported barriers to employment, including prejudice, lack of educational opportunities, lack of transportation and child care. Figure 2 displays a word cloud containing the main themes and barriers to employment.
Figure 1: Top barriers to employment according to focused population, N=100

Figure 2: Word cloud displaying barriers to employment, N=100
Barriers to employment: Community member voices

Racial and gender bias
“Implicit bias is so powerful. You walk up, and people already make assumptions about you, or are thinking of a person they had an experience with that looks like you. I think that needs to change. Having diversity, equity and inclusion can be a check box, but organizations need to live and breathe that, and make it a part of their culture.”

“Racism and hate exist.”

“We felt tokenized.”

“I’m not seen as professional or as a good look compared to the others, I’m not sent to places to be a spokesperson. I don’t get these opportunities even though I’m well known in the area, went to school in Lawrence, have a lot of friends and am well-connected. My trustworthiness and dependability are not relied in a way I’m used to. I’m kind of treated like an extra agent, which is fine, but I’m used to being invested in where I work. I feel like they don’t want to cultivate that with me, that I’m somehow temporary.”

“I feel like since I’m a minority in a lot of ways, I’m not able to truly be my authentic self. I’m who I am, but I can’t be completely who I am because of who I work with. Would they be comfortable being around black or African American me? Or do I have to be in a way where they’re comfortable around me at the board meeting or task force meetings?”

“I don’t know if it’s my last name because back home, you don’t get hired if you have a certain Native name, it was an anti-Native place. I’m not sure if it’s that or my social media account is the reason.”

"My sister and I once worked at the same place; I was a certified dispatcher for both the state and reservation. My sister went to KU and got an education. We both applied for a job, but they offered me the job, even though she was more qualified. My sister looks Native and that kept her from advancing."

“Being a woman of color, there’s a glass ceiling in organizations because no one looks like you in leadership. It doesn’t make me happy, but it gives me hope that there are conversations on diversity and inclusion.”
“A lot of these cultural competency trainings still center the oppressor; everything is carefully done to accommodate the comfort of people who are limiting us. Usually it’s a smiling Caucasian person who is leading the conversation, and they feel good at the end of the day because they did their piece. I’m like, “really? You get to relieve your guilt with this?”

“Training your workforce is one thing but we should have a higher expectation of clients or customers/patients treating those who work there better.”

“As women, sometimes we’re grateful to have the job so we don’t ask for more.”

“We need more cultural competence and sexual harassment training. I feel that I’m taught how to deal with difficult customers, and that’s it. I don’t think there’s enough training to address the other things that happen at the workplace frequently, such as harassment.”

“The hiring and employment bias of not paying people of color or women more [is an issue]. Women and women-appearing people, we can get sexualized more often instead of valued in the workplace. This impacts our earning potential because we’re seen as something to look at and not something to invest in. We’re seen as not as intelligent or able to advocate for ourselves that we want to be paid more. We’re told the wrong things to have better wages, related to looking better, instead of learning about the business or doing things that the men are being told.”

Lack of educational support and job match

“There’s tons of help for teenagers and kids, but adults need help with education, like tutoring assistance. An example is I have a friend who doesn’t know English; they’re willing to pay the [cost of the] test for her, but no one was able to provide help with learning the difference between noun and verb.”

“We need to teach financial literacy. Everyone left school and immediately we get credit card offers. If kids knew on the way to adulthood what impact credit can have, what an asset and liability is, it would help. Fixing credit is hard.”

“People want to fit you in a job as opposed to put you in a position where you can build a career. I feel that is a problem.”
Transportation
"I’ve once missed a week of classes because I couldn’t afford gas to go to school. This affects my education and employment."

Child care
“It would be nice if the daycare opened later hours. That would be really helpful for people who live in public housing.”

“A barrier is that it’s a wealthy town; daycare is not affordable. We need affordable daycare. We waste gas to go to work. If daycare is $2,000 and I’m only making $1,800 a month, it’s not affordable. Sometimes it’s not even a certified daycare.”

"Child care [is a barrier] because most nursing jobs start in the morning, and there’s no daycare for before school. So, if I don’t work day shift, I must hire someone to help take care of my child night shift. There's not a lot of after-school daycare here."

“Child care. If you don’t have access to childcare, health care, or food, your physical and mental health will be a problem. If you don’t have those things, what is a job going to do?”

“Child care. I have a special needs child, so they’ll charge me 3 times a normal child. I have to decide between going to work and being in debt or staying at home and not facing an issue.”

Lack of education and experience
"Not having enough experience, not having a degree is a barrier. Everywhere you go, they want you to have between 2-10 years’ experience. I've considered becoming an audiologist, but I don't have enough time to go to school."

“Most of the jobs around here don’t have entry-level positions. We need more entry-level jobs; something to get your foot in the door.”

“Strengths in Lawrence are for the young ones; employers either want you in school or fresh out of school. A lot of people don’t have the opportunity to go to school. If you’re older, it’s harder to get hired.”
“A lot of jobs around town require a high school diploma or equivalent, even some of the jobs require a degree. It’s hard for some of us who can’t quite get there.”

“Because Lawrence is a college town, even having a bachelor’s often isn’t enough to get a well-paying job. You almost must have a Ph.D. to get a good job.”

“I feel like some of the jobs that require a bachelor’s degree exclude people who don’t have all that education. They should open up options a little more for those who don’t have the education but are interested and want to learn more.”

**Low wages**

"I haven't experienced problems getting a job, but I've experienced problems getting a well-paying job."

“Affordable housing: it’s absolutely ridiculous that you can’t find it. I make a professional salary and it’s still hard.”

“The wages. Many people aren’t paid what they’re worth. The cost of living in this town is high, and the wages are not there.”

“Finding something flexible enough for my school schedule that pays more than $9 an hour is a barrier. I applied to 47 jobs in a 2-month time span and the only ones that called me back that worked for my schedule paid only $8.50.”

**Inflexible work schedule**

“It’s difficult when they need you at work no matter what. That is difficult when you have kids.”

"Single moms and dads, especially with kids with disabilities, [need] a schedule that can work with them."

**Criminal background**

“We need interview coaching on how to address a felony in an interview. How to address it quickly without making it a bigger deal. More help with expungement.”
"Background checks are horrible. Once a background check comes back, even though you've done your job, it still lingers and follows you. No matter how much you change your life, it's still there. You can't get employment; you go back to criminal behavior because what else are you supposed to do?"

“Criminal history doesn't define who they are. A lot of people just don't want to re-offend. I'm speaking for myself. Your community is putting you in a position of what else can you do? Even though you have the qualifications to work there (even above qualified), you’re not allowed to have a position (or even start at the bottom) because of something you've done years ago. You shouldn’t have to carry that baggage. I think they gotta do away with those background checks. It’s ridiculous. Housing is the same way, especially for low-income [individuals].”

**Mental health**

One participant shared with the facilitator that she was not comfortable speaking up in the focus group, but that she didn’t typically leave her apartment due to mental illness, and thus was unable to work. She had received services in the past (from Bert Nash) but was not currently receiving services. She was homeschooling her son because he had been bullied at school.

“I don’t think it’s being lazy; some people are depressed. Start with people with mental health barriers. I personally know a lot of people who don’t go to work because of depression.”

"A barrier is that I have anxiety. I have anxiety and was working in the back of the store helping stock. I had to quit because the manager wanted me to be cashier even though they knew I had anxiety."

**Health care**

"I’m without my medication without insurance right now. If I was in another country, I’d get my medication with no problem. I can’t afford to pay insurance because I don’t have a job. You need meds to be healthy to work. My meds cost $3,000 a month."

"We got a major problem with affordable medical care."

"A healthy community will include safety and health issues addressed no matter [people's] insurance status. A free clinic or one that caters to people with a very low income. I hear more talk than action."
What’s next

Next steps for the project include dissemination of findings and engaging community members and partners in solutions generation and implementation. This phase of the project will include growing the team so that at least 50% of leadership team members represent the focused population and expanding capacity to change community conditions.

If you are interested in learning more or becoming involved, please contact: Christina Gentry, Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department Community Liaison, at cgentry@ldchealth.org or 785.856.5349.

About this report

This report was commissioned by the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department, with support from the Kansas Health Foundation Healthy Communities Initiative.

The report was created by Ruaa Hassaballa and Christina Holt at the University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development.
Appendix A: Focus group questions

1. What do you view as strengths when it comes to employment opportunities in Lawrence?
2. What are the strengths you bring to a job?
   a. What do you most value in your work?
   b. What would you like to see more of in Lawrence concerning opportunities?
3. If employed, what are the strengths that you possess you are not currently able to use in your job?
4. What are the barriers to employment (or hardships that prevent you from obtaining employment) that you have experienced?
5. What has been the most helpful for you in finding a job? Have any organizations been particularly helpful?
   (If the answer is no /none refer to question #6)
6. If you have used these resources available why haven’t they worked for you?
   (If the answer to? 5 was yes ask # 7)
7. What resources would you recommend to someone looking for a job?
8. What do you believe are the 2-3 most important issues that must be addressed to improve employment opportunities that make more than min. wage?
9. Are there other issues in the community that relate to opportunities that we should be looking to address?
10. What brought you here to live in Lawrence? What keeps you here?
Appendix B: Interview questions

1. What do you view as strengths when it comes to employment opportunities in Lawrence?

2. What are the strengths you bring to a job?
   a. What do you most value in your work?
   b. What would you like to see more of in Lawrence concerning opportunities?

3. If employed, what are the strengths that you possess you are not currently able to use in your job?

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7. What resources would you recommend to someone looking for a job?

8. What do you believe are the 2-3 most important issues that must be addressed to improve employment opportunities that make more than min. wage?

9. Are there other issues in the community that relate to opportunities that we should be looking to address?

11. What brought you here to live in Lawrence? What keeps you here?