

North Country Health Consortium held its annual meeting on November 20, 2020. During the meeting participants were asked to take part in a community health needs assessment through facilitated discussions held in randomly segmented breakout group sessions.

Participants were asked the following questions:

What do you/your organization feel the most pressing health issues are in the North Country?

What resources and/or tactics are needed to address these needs in the region?

Facilitated discussions followed the Conversation Café theme of promoting dialogue as means to evoke effective, active conversations that identify the most concerning health issues and potential solutions for the North Country. Participants were engaged in collaborative dialogue intended to inspire individual reflection and collective wisdom generated by their breakout session group.

Each participant was asked the two questions then given one minute to offer their answers and suggestions. A second round with the same question immediately followed, asking the same question with participants again having one minute to offer their answers and suggestions. Next a 15-minute group discussion took place, and the Conversation Café concluded by each participant having one minute to share their take-away from the session. Information was collected by a scribe and collated to the data in this report.

The areas of greatest concern for the region carried some common themes among breakout group participants. Described as behavioral health, anxiety, isolation, depression, mental health, increased risk of suicide, and social and emotional well-being, each group shared discussion points relating to mental health/behavioral health.

Concerns were voiced about issues relating to COVID-19 such as long-term health issues, adequate healthcare workforce, missed opportunities for routine and preventive services, mental health issues, increase in substance use disorder and high-risk behaviors, and decreased connection to community. Other concerns relating to the pandemic were those around domestic violence and child abuse that may be going unnoticed because of children spending less time in school environments. Concerns about long-term effects of postponed routine healthcare resultant of the pandemic were also prominently voiced.

Many of the issues discussed were also tied to the social determinants of health (SDOH). Homelessness and affordable housing related to substance use disorder, the economy and poverty were discussed in several groups. The consensus was that the issues of homelessness and lack of affordable housing are intensely exacerbated by the pandemic.

Food insecurity and access to healthy, affordable foods was another area of concern. Suggested solutions for these issues were public health programs and education. Discussions again focused on the relational issues between food insecurity and the pandemic.

Substance use disorders and access to treatment was woven into every group conversation. Again, with social determinants of health and homelessness, SUD were thought to be exacerbated by a combination of many social/economic issues as well as access to treatment.

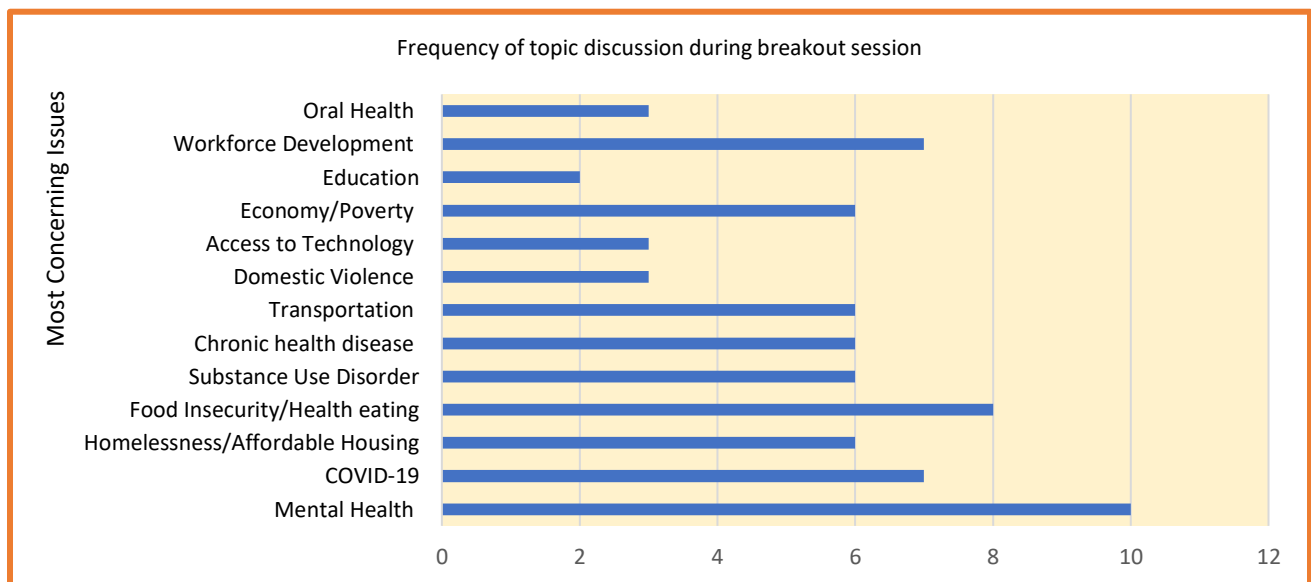
Chronic disease such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, hypertension, and SUD were other common themes for the Conversation Café. Suggested solutions were education, increasing public health programs, collaboration of resources, and better access to services.

The overarching discussions revolved around social determinants of health, access to care, transportation, poverty, education, and included with the SDOH conversations was access to technology. This was a new facet of SDOH to consider, but participants pointed to an emphasis on how having access to technology can now directly impact educational opportunities and healthcare.

Interlocking these discussions were conversations about access to healthcare and the relationship of future workforce development. Participants talked about the challenges associated with recruiting and retaining healthcare providers in the rural North Country region. Concern was expressed about immediate needs relating to the pandemic and long-term concerns about maintaining a sufficient workforce to care for the population.

The resounding suggestion for solving all these issues was collaboration. These conversations revolved around sharing resources to augment issues with workforce shortages, to improve quality healthcare outcomes, share vital resources, and improve engagement in existing programs.

Other discussions highlighted thoughts for improving access through increasing access to public health programs for oral health, substance misuse prevention programs, transportation, and more frequent use of community health workers. Deployment of the community health worker was recognized throughout each breakout session as a successful, practical, cost-saving solution to many of the health issues our region faces.



Frequency topic discussed during breakout session

