

**Center for Rural Social Work Research and Development
School of Social Work
Stephen F. Austin State University**

**Hogg Foundation – Collaborative Approaches to Well-Being in Rural Communities
Letter of Interest**

Community Need and Demographics

People who live in rural and frontier America tend to have the same types of mental health challenges and need for services as individuals who live in urban and suburban areas. However, comparable mental health care services are unavailable in many rural areas. Mental health services in rural areas are often characterized by a small number of providers serving a large but sparsely populated geographical area. Rural areas have a number of unique characteristics, many of which affect access to and utilization of mental health services. For Nacogdoches County, these factors, combined with systematic funding cuts for community-based mental health services, narrowing of eligibility criteria for state funded mental health services, limited access to psychiatric inpatient services, reductions in third party payment programs, and the lack of mental health parity, have made it increasingly difficult for residents who have a mental illness to maintain their recovery and wellness in the community, especially those residents who have a chronic mental illness. These factors also hamper the efforts of local health and human services providers to deliver services that are imperative to maintaining recovery and wellness. For example, the lack of comprehensive community-based services increases the likelihood of a psychiatric crisis, which will most likely result in an inpatient hospitalization. And, the community-based services do not allow for adequate support of individuals returning to the community from an inpatient hospitalization. The end result being a “revolving door” between the community and inpatient services, which is counter to both recovery and wellness.

The Collaborative Approaches to Well-Being in Rural Communities Project presents a tremendous opportunity for Nacogdoches County to address the aforementioned issues. One of the primary benefits of a truly inclusive assessment process is that it places ownership of the issues and solutions with the community, which is the key to sustaining efforts to accomplish the identified outcomes. Furthermore, the process allows for the development of relationships that will facilitate the coordination of existing resources, which could result in greater effectiveness and efficiency. It also creates the relationships and structures necessary for collective advocacy for changes in policies and legislation, as well as funding. Simply, involving the entire community in the process of identifying the challenges and solutions is the approach most likely to yield the overall desired outcome – a community environment that is conducive to mental health recovery, wellness, and well-being. Along these lines, we plan to employ appreciative inquiry as a means of engaging Nacogdoches County residents and organizations in the process of becoming a trauma-informed community. Before discussing the proposed approach further, we would like to present a community overview for Nacogdoches County.

Community Overview

Geographical and political boundaries. Nacogdoches County is located in a rural region of East Texas that is commonly referred to Deep East Texas. Nacogdoches County is not adjacent to an urban county or area. In fact, the closest urban areas are Dallas/Fort Worth (approximately 165 miles northeast of Nacogdoches) and Houston (approximately 120 miles south of Nacogdoches). Nacogdoches County is comprised of 981.2 square miles (34.7 square miles of which is water) with a population density of 68.17 people per square mile (Texas Association of Counties [TAC], 2018). Nacogdoches County is bordered by the following: Rusk County (northern border); Shelby County, San Augustine County and the Attoyac River (eastern border); Angelina County, Angelina River, and Sam

Rayburn Reservoir (southern border); and Cherokee County and the Angelina River (western border). Nacogdoches County is divided into 4 precincts, each of which is served by a County Commissioner, Justice of the Peace, and Constable. Residents of Nacogdoches County are represented by the following state and federal elected officials: Congressman Louie Gohmert (U. S. Congressional District 1), Senator Robert Nichols (Texas Senate District 3), Representative Travis Clardy (Texas House District 11), and Keven Ellis (Texas State Board of Education District 9). Finally, the county is served by nine independent school districts: Central Heights, Chireno, Cushing, Douglass, Etoile, Garrison, Martinsville, Nacogdoches, and Woden. Whereas there are many small communities in Nacogdoches County, only five of them are incorporated: Nacogdoches (County Seat), Appleby, Chireno, Cushing, and Garrison. The City of Nacogdoches is centrally located, covers 27.05 square miles, and is the most populated community in the county. The other four incorporated towns are much smaller, ranging from 1.2 to 2.1 square miles.

Demographics. Based on the 2016 population estimates, Nacogdoches County has an overall population of 65,806 with 33,789 of those individuals residing within the City of Nacogdoches (U.S. Census Bureau [USCB], 2018a, 2018e). The 2016 population estimates for the other four communities are: 473 (Appleby), 387 (Chireno), 613 (Cushing), and 987 (Garrison). Descriptions of the demographic characteristics of Nacogdoches County and the City of Nacogdoches are provided in the following subsections (all of which, unless otherwise noted, are based on 2016 estimates).

Race/ethnicity, sex, and age. In terms of race/ethnicity, the predominate group in the county is Caucasians (77.3%), followed by African Americans (18.3%), Hispanics (19.3%) Asians (1.7%), Native Americans and Alaska Natives (0.9%), and Asians (0/3%) (USCB, 2018e). For the City of Nacogdoches, 63.8% of the population is Caucasian, 29.2% is African American, 3.3% is Asian, and 0.1% is Native American and Alaska Native (USCB, 2018a). Seventeen percent (17.6) of the city's population is Hispanic or Latino (USCB, 2018a).

Nacogdoches County's population consists of 48% males and 52% females (USCB, 2018e). The number of males and females in the City of Nacogdoches is similar, 46% and 54%, respectively (USCB, 2018a). As for age, the majority of the county's population is between the ages of 18 and 65 (62.6%). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010e), 13.8% of the population is 65 years of age or older and 23.6% of the population is 17 years of age or younger. The City of Nacogdoches' population is similar in that 11.2% of the population is 60 years or older and 20.9% of the population is 17 years of age or younger (USCB, 2018a).

Households and housing. There are 23,942 households in the county and 12,138 in the City of Nacogdoches (USCB, 2018d, 2018e). The average number of persons residing in each household in the county and city is 2.51 and 2.35, respectively (USCB, 2018d, 2018e). The County of Nacogdoches has a total of 27,965 housing units with 85.6% of those being occupied (USCB, 2010b). The homeowner vacancy rate is 1.3 and the rental vacancy rate is 7.9 (USCB, 2018b). The median monthly expenses associated with home ownership (including the mortgage) is \$1,154 and the median value of owner occupied homes is \$114,300 (USCB, 2018e). As for rent, the median for the county is \$745 per month (USCB, 2018e). Within the City of Nacogdoches, there are 13,795 housing units, 88% of which are occupied (USCB, 2018a). The city's homeowner and rental vacancy rates are 1.6 and 8.6, respectively (USCB, 2018a). The median monthly expenses associated with homeownership is \$1,186 and the median value of owner occupied homes is \$130,400 (USCB, 2018d). The median rent for the City of Nacogdoches is \$756 per month (USCB 2018d). Nacogdoches County has two housing authorities, which are located in Nacogdoches and Garrison. Both public and Section 8 housing are available. The typical wait for housing is 18-24 months. As for emergency housing, the county has one privately operated homeless shelter and one domestic violence shelter.

Employment and education. In Nacogdoches County, 59.6% of the residents aged 16 years and older are employed (USCB, 2018e). Of those employed, 31.1% are in management, business, science, and arts related occupations; 23.8% are in sales and office occupations; 15.3% are in production,

transportation, and material moving occupations; 18.3% are in service occupations; and 11.45% are in natural resources, construction, and maintenance (USCB, 2010b). The county unemployment rate for December 2017 is 3.5%, which is down from the December 2016 rate of 4.4% (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2018). As for county residents who are 25 years of age or older, 81.2% have a high school degree or higher and 25.2% have a bachelor degree or higher (USCB, 2018d).

Income and poverty. In the County of Nacogdoches, the median household income is \$38,915 and the most common range for household income is \$50,000 to 74,999 (USCB, 2018b). For the City of Nacogdoches, the median household income and most common range for household income are \$31,979 and \$50,000 to 74,999, respectively (USCB, 2018a). In terms of poverty, 25.4% of the county residents live in poverty and 30.0% of county residents under 18 years of age live in poverty (USCB, 2018b, 2018e). Poverty rates in the City of Nacogdoches are slightly higher with 30.0% of all residents living in poverty and 32.6% of residents under the age of 18 living in poverty (USCB, 2018a). These rates are noticeably higher than the national and state rates for all residents, 12.7% and 16.7%, respectively (USCB, 2018b, 2018e). Another indicator of poverty is the percentage of K-12 students who are identified as economically disadvantaged. These students qualify for free meals under the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, meaning that their household income falls at or below 130% of the federal poverty line. The percentage of qualifying students within the county ranges from 37.2% to 81.2%, with five of the nine districts above 50% (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2017).

Economy. According to the USCB (2010h), the major areas of employment are sales and office occupations; production; education; management; and education. In fact, 23.8% of the county's workforce is employed in sales and office occupations (USCB, 2018b). Although the county's economy is fairly diversified, it is tied to agriculture and natural resources (e.g., timber/timber products, poultry and petroleum), as well as the local state university. The local economy has been impacted by a variety of factors, such as changes in the regional, state and national economies, as well as the agricultural industry. Whereas the county's economy is able to meet the needs of some of the community members, there are many who are unable to meet their basic needs. Evidence of such includes, but is not limited to, the above average rates for poverty and residents without access to health insurance.

Education. The county has nine independent school districts that serve children in K-12 and one charter school that serves children in K-5. For the nine school districts, the annual dropout rate for 2014-2015 ranges from 0% to 2.3% and the five-year longitudinal graduation rate for the class of 2014 ranges from 88.2% to 100% (TEA, 2017). Of the nine districts, eight met TEA accountability standards for 2016. The largest district in the county was rated as "improvement required." In terms of higher education, Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) is located in the community. SFASU is a regional comprehensive state university that offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Angelina College (AC), a two-year community college, is located in Lufkin (approximately 25 miles south of Nacogdoches). AC offers general education and vocational/technical courses on its main campus in Lufkin and vocational/technical courses at its satellite campus in Nacogdoches.

Transportation. Although public transportation is available in Nacogdoches County, for the most part, routes are limited to the City of Nacogdoches. Service to other counties is limited. These factors create barriers for county residents who need to travel to "town" for goods and services, as well as those who need to travel to larger communities for services, such as specialized health care. For example, many specialized healthcare services are only available in Dallas, Houston, and/or Tyler.

Physical health and services. For 2013, the overall mortality rate for the county is higher than the state rate (Texas Department of State Health Services [TDSHS], n.d.). As for specific causes, the county rates for cancer, stroke, chronic lower respiratory distress, and accidents are higher than the state rates (TDSHS, n.d.). The rates for communicable diseases are below the state rates, with the exceptions of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and tuberculosis, all of which are above the state rates (TDSHS, n.d.). For 2013, 55.1% of expecting mothers received prenatal care during the first trimester, which is

below the state average of 62.5% (TDSHS, n.d.). The rate of adolescent mothers in the county (4.9%) was higher than the state rate of 3.2% (TDSHS, n.d.).

The Health Services and Resources Administration (HRSA) has designated Nacogdoches County as a Medically Underserved Area (MUA) and a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) for primary care (low income), dental (low income), and mental health care. The City of Nacogdoches has two hospitals, one is operated by the County and one by a for-profit corporation. Healthcare services for low-income individuals and families are available through Brown Family Health and East Texas Community Health Services (ETCHS). In fact, ETCHS is designated as an FQHC (Federally Qualified Health Center) and it operates two clinics in the county, both of which are located in the city. Although medical care is available, often times residents must travel outside of the region in order to access specialized medical and dental care. Common destinations are Houston, Dallas, and Tyler. Another barrier to accessing health care is the limited number of providers who accept Medicaid and Medicare. Along these lines, 20.1% of the county residents are without health insurance coverage (USCB, 2018e). The number is slightly higher among city residents, 22.1% (USCB, 2018d). And, both of these rates are noticeably higher than the state and national rates, 18.6% and 10.1%, respectively (USCB, 2018e).

Mental health. Overall, mental health services in Nacogdoches County are limited. Nacogdoches County is served by Burke, the LMHA (Local Mental Health Authority) for the Deep East Texas region. Specifically, Burke provides services for mental health, intellectual and developmental disabilities, substance abuse, and early childhood intervention. Burke also operates the MHEC (Mental Health Emergency Center), a regional in-patient psychiatric stabilization facility. In addition to Burke, there are several independent and group private practices, but only two of them offer a sliding fee scale. And, many of them have moved away from taking insurance, especially Medicaid and Medicare. There are three psychiatrists in private practice and their services tend to be difficult to access due to high demand.

Substance abuse. Substance abuse is an on-going social problem nationally, as well as the state and local levels. Methamphetamine continues to present a significant challenge at the state and local level. However, there are also other local concerns, including crack cocaine and prescription drug abuse (especially opiates). Locally, mental illness and substance abuse commonly co-occur, making it more difficult to effectively treat mental illness. This is especially true given the lack of substance abuse treatment options, both locally and regionally. Specifically, residents must travel to Dallas, Houston or Shreveport (LA) for inpatient services (detoxification and treatment). The closest state-funded detox facilities are in Houston and Waco. And, the options for local outpatient treatment are limited.

Needs, Challenges, and Opportunities

Despite notable strides in improving mental health care in Nacogdoches County over the last 10+ years, there is still much more to be done, especially in terms of moving toward becoming a community that is conducive to achieving and maintaining recovery and wellness. Simply, mental health services are available to those who have insurance coverage and/or the resources to pay out of pocket. They are also available to those whose income and diagnosis qualify them for services through the LMHA. However, space is limited. So, many of those who are eligible, must wait for an opening in services. In the meantime, they are not receiving services, placing them at greater risk of a psychiatric crisis. And, it is important to note that there is a population of people who have mental health issues, but do not meet the criteria for state funded services via the LMHA and do not have the financial resources to access private mental health care. These individuals are in a position to go without services until their condition has deteriorated enough to meet the state eligibility criteria and/or they end up in another system where services are available (i.e., criminal justice system). Furthermore, prevention services are all but non-existent. Simply, many residents find themselves in a situation where they have to “get worse before they can get better.”

As a community, we need to do better. And, we have the capacity to do better. A logical place to start is with an inclusive community-driven needs assessment that focuses on identifying the challenges to becoming a community that encourages and supports recovery, wellness, inclusion, and equality for all community members. The process should also identify existing resources and strategies to leverage such resources to overcome the challenges. It is reasonable to assume that the identified challenges will include unequal access to mental health and health care services, as well as other social and economic resources. Another likely factor is the tendency of individuals, families, groups, organizations, neighborhoods, and communities to “stay in their silos” instead of seeking out opportunities to work together and share resources. Despite that tendency, there are a number of exceptional things happening in our community that can serve as a way to bring people together and build the necessary foundation for sustainable partnerships. Examples include, but are not limited to, art-based initiatives to support mental health recovery and wellness; community gardens; education on gardening and healthy eating; a mental health court through the Nacogdoches County Court at Law; and local faith-based initiatives focused on creating an inclusive and caring community. All of these examples create opportunities for us to step outside of our silos. To bring us together. To learn about one another. To learn about the importance of wellness, recovery, inclusion, and equality. To learn to care about one another. And, in that, lies the key to making a collective commitment to ensure that all of our neighbors are well, included, and safe in our community.

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