

New River Valley Community Assessment 2024



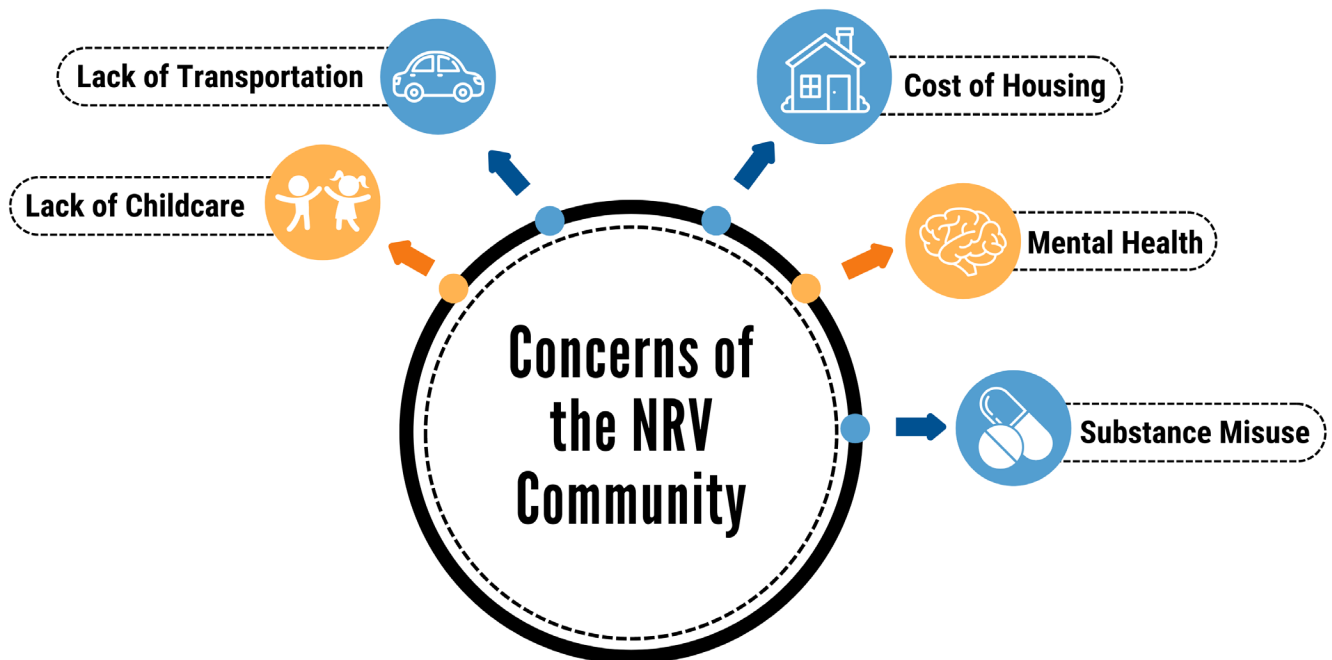
United Way of
Southwest Virginia

Executive Summary:

This assessment explores and understands the strengths and challenges identified by residents within the New River Valley (NRV) community. Through extensive secondary data collection, a community survey, and focus groups, this report aims to outline the community-identified priorities and empower the community's stakeholders to build upon existing strengths and collaboratively innovate towards solutions.

The NRV is a community located in the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountains of Southwest Virginia. Made up of five localities, Floyd, Giles, Montgomery, Pulaski, and the City of Radford, it is home to almost 185,000 residents.

Residents raised five key concerns that impact the health, education, and financial stability of the community.



Key Concerns:

1. High cost of housing and housing affordability

- The median home values range from \$148k to \$329k, compared to Virginia's median value of \$390k. Just over half of residents in the community own their home. 59% of houses are available for those making at least the median annual income for the region. Those making less are left with fewer options. Renters are more likely to experience financial strain: 45% are spending more than 1/3rd of their income on housing.

2. Mental health, especially among youth

- The community overall has fewer mental health providers (68 per 100,000 residents) for the region's population compared to state rates (84 per 100,000 residents). 15% of the overall population has reported poor mental health. However, 35% of surveyed high schoolers reported experiencing depressive symptoms and 12% reported suicide consideration.

3. Substance misuse

- The NRV has slightly lower rates of deaths by drug overdose than the state, but rates have been climbing since 2018 at both the community and state level. Deaths by drug overdose in the NRV have increased by 105% in the last 5 years.

4. High cost or lack of child care impacting resident's education and employment opportunities

- NRV residents are, on average, paying more (\$11,200) for child care than the state average (\$10,451). The community's 84 child care centers have an estimated 4,800 slots to serve more than 8,800 children under the age of 6. Families face long waitlists for care with an average of 19 infants and toddlers and 8 preschoolers wait-listed. High costs and long waitlists can impact children's academic readiness, parents' employment and/or education choices, and families' financial stability.

5. High cost or lack of transportation to get to work

- The community spreads across rural and urban landscapes and almost 40% of residents live in rural areas. Public transportation options are limited to urban areas. The comprehensive cost of owning and maintaining a single vehicle can add up to more than \$300 a month. The rurality, high costs of vehicles, and lack of more affordable, public options impacts the workforce to a detriment.

Despite these pressing challenges, residents identified holistic solutions for addressing their community's greatest concerns. The NRV has a deep network of residents, businesses, faith-based organizations, educational systems, and non-profits. By building on these networks and existing strengths, the community is well-positioned to collaborate and innovate towards community-driven solutions to tackle root causes of challenges faced.

Supporting the community's health, education, and financial stability allows the community to thrive.

United Way's commitment to the New River Valley community is long-standing. As the organization enters a renewed and realigned commitment through joining forces with United Way of Southwest Virginia, it is important that local issues are identified by the communities the organization serves. Through a comprehensive process, insights were gained by compiling publicly available data, surveying community members and partner organizations, and gaining deeper insight from more than 20 focus groups. This report shares community-identified challenges and highlights some of the key solutions identified by residents.

Special Thanks

This report was prepared by Mandi Ackerman, Director of Research + Data Analytics. Secondary data compilation was supported by Katie Bolling, Research + Data Intern. Primary data collection was in collaboration with New River Community Action.

The development of this report was helped in part by the members of the United Way of Southwest Virginia & United Way of New River Valley Transition Team. The team consists of New River Valley residents with strong ties to the community who help to identify collaborative opportunities for impact and corporate and individual resources to support our mission-critical work.

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Data Collection Methodology

Primary Data Collection

The community survey and focus groups were conducted in collaboration with New River Community Action. The community survey was open from mid-August until early October of 2023. The survey, hosted on SurveyMonkey, was distributed through the two organizations' partner networks, including via email lists and social media. Flyers with a QR code linking to the survey were distributed in the public spaces throughout the community (e.g., libraries, recreation centers). A few organizations also opted to offer paper surveys for their clients. There were 381 responses in total. Representation of responses by locality reflected the actual population distribution across localities. Respondents were largely non-Hispanic/Latino, white women between the ages of 25 and 64. The median annual household income of the sample (\$47,000) was lower than the community's median annual income.

Focus groups were conducted between September and November of 2023. They were held during various community organizations' regularly occurring meetings and lasted 30 to 45 minutes. 25 sessions were held with more than 150 participants in total, comprised of parents, direct service providers, experts on key issues in the community, and recipients of services. Focus group data was used to identify additional themes not raised in the survey, to go more in depth into strengths and challenges, and to hear, directly from residents, the lived experiences behind the numbers.

Secondary Data Collection

As part of an organizational strategic planning process conducted in the fall of 2022, leaders in the community were asked to identify challenges and trends in the New River Valley. Their responses served as an outline for secondary data compilation, which began in summer of 2023. After completion of the survey and focus group data analysis, additional secondary data was gathered to further explore the pressing concerns raised by community members. The most current data available was used.

Sources are listed at the end of each section. Data tables for primary and secondary data can be found at the end of this report.



Community Population Overview

The New River Valley (NRV) is located within the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountains of Southwest Virginia. It is comprised of five localities: Floyd, Giles, Montgomery, Pulaski, and the City of Radford.

It is home to almost 185,000 residents, $\frac{1}{5}$ of Southwest Virginia's total population. With two universities and a community college, $\frac{1}{3}$ of the community's population is made up of students. The geography of the community spans rural and urban landscapes, though most (62%) of the population lives in an urban area. The community is predominately White, with approximately 12% of the population identifying as Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native American or Multiracial. 5% of residents were born outside the U.S.

From 2010 to 2020, there was a 2% growth in the population and the population is aging. Despite a strong student presence, the overall population under the age of 65 has declined since 2015. The population of individuals 65 and older has increased 19% in that same time. Roughly one in four households have children under the age of 18. 26% of those households are headed by a single parent and 6% of children live in grandparent-headed households.

Pulaski, VA



Sources:

1. Population Estimates: Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, 2023; Virginia Tech Student Enrollment, 2022; Radford University Student Enrollment, 2022
2. Geography: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 2020
3. Demographics: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2017-2021
4. Population Change: New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Region Quarterly Workforce Report 3, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 2020
5. Decennial Census, 2020
6. Household Make Up: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2017-2021

Community Population Overview: Health

The health and well-being of the community was identified as one of the top issues for residents of the NRV (69% of respondents indicated it as an issue). Residents were particularly concerned about increasing mental health needs and the pervasive effects of substance misuse. Additionally, an aging population in the community indicates a greater need for services for senior citizens. Access to care in the community poses major barriers. There are few health providers to meet the demands of the population. There is one primary care provider in the region for every 1,200 residents.

The care ratio becomes more dire for dental (1:9,943) and mental (1:3,278) health.

“Mental health services for families... [the] waitlists are so long. My daughter has been waiting for a psych evaluation - it will be at least 1-1.5 years until she can be evaluated. So many children need help now. I can think of a couple of kids that can’t get those services. My daughter has to wait 9 months to go to a developmental clinic. Children will not get where they need to be.”
- NRV Resident

15% of people in NRV report poor mental health



There has been a 105% increase in deaths due to overdose.

15% of the NRV population reports having poor mental health. For Medicaid beneficiaries, mental health and substance use rates are closer to 40%. In 2022, there were 45 deaths due to drug overdose in the NRV, a 105% increase from 2018.

Residents were particularly concerned about the mental health of the community’s youth. 35% of high school students responding to a 2023 school climate survey reported feeling sad or hopeless within the 12 months prior to taking the survey. 12% of those youth reported seriously considering committing suicide. These rates have remained stable since 2021. 44% of students reported having an adult they could turn to when experiencing these negative emotions.

Residents in the community identified an additional barrier to health care: finding providers that accept their insurance or Medicaid to help cover the costs. Finding care is not only a challenge for families experiencing financial hardship.

“The whole population lacks providers. A lot of mental health providers are not dealing with insurance at all. You have to pay out of pocket, then submit it yourself.”

“Even if you get an appointment, you’re waiting 6 months to be seen. Then another 6 months until you can see someone for treatment.”
- NRV Residents

Community Population Overview: Health Cont.

Top Five Concerns	
Concern (N=265)	% Endorsing Concern
Mental health issues are increasing, especially among young people	50.94%
Substance misuse in the community - family disruptions	46.42%
Lack of mental health treatment centers	41.13%
Substance misuse in the community - overdoses	40.00%
Lack of early intervention mental health resources for children	36.98%

According to Community Health Rankings, the localities in the NRV generally fair well on the Food Environment Index. Still, about 35% of census tracts in the region are classified as food deserts, imposing a barrier to fresh food access to support a healthy lifestyle. While few residents (8%) reported availability of food resources as an issue, many reported difficulties accessing grocery stores and food pantries due to a lack of transportation (31%).

Community-Identified Solutions in Addressing Health Challenges:

Residents identified sliding scale clinics, such as the Community Health Clinic, to be a vital resource to address the cost of care.

With the rurality of the community, some residents raised innovative solutions to bring care into the community: “Mobile health units. We need more of these. Mobile dental clinic, mobile food pantry. Go into the community and serve them, rather than community members having to leave for services.”

Residents also identified substance use education and treatment services, such as NRVCS’s REVIVE! training, as making a big difference in the area. Food banks, community gardens, and farmers markets were identified as impactful solutions addressing hunger in the community.

More than half of the surveyed high schoolers reported not having a trusted adult to turn to when experiencing negative emotions. In addition to an expansion of mental health providers, promotion of family and community involvement can provide them with needed adult support. Some residents mentioned family-friendly community events and recreation centers as examples. Increased whole-family care and connection to the community can serve as a protective factor for youth.

Sources:

1. Primary, Mental, and Dental Care Provider Ratio: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, National Plan and Provider Enumeration System, 2023
2. Mental Health Rates: Community Health Rankings, 2022
3. Mental Health and Substance Use Rates For Medicaid Beneficiaries: Community Health Rankings, 2022
4. Drug Overdose Death Rate: Virginia Department of Health Drug Overdose Death Rate, 2022
5. Youth Mental Health: Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services School Climate Survey, 2021, 2023
6. Food Environment Index: Community Health Rankings, 2022

Community Population Overview: Education & Child Care

Half of respondents on the community survey reported that education was an issue for themselves and/or the community. Specific concerns pertained to the ability to increase educational attainment and the support for the K-12 system.

Most adults in the NRV have either a high school diploma or some college (48%). Bachelor's and Graduate/Professional degrees are more common in Montgomery and Radford City. Barriers identified by residents to increasing educational attainment included access to internet or a computer, transportation, and child care.

22% of people in the NRV don't have access to high-speed internet.



22% of NRV residents do not have access to high-speed internet. 6% of households do not have a computer in their home. Internet access doesn't only impact adults wanting to return to school, as one participant shared: "The lack of internet access spills over to keeping kids behind in school. Those kids are more at risk of dropping out". While both universities in the area are along public transit routes, the

community college does not provide transportation. For residents outside of Radford, Christiansburg, or Blacksburg, public transportation to higher education institutions is lacking.

Nationally, the impacts of COVID and school closures on the K-12 system are being seen, highlighting the importance of additional support for both students and the teachers who guide their academic success. In Giles, Montgomery, and Radford, residents frequently endorsed that teachers were lacking support in their roles. Based on a 2023 school climate survey, teachers in these districts reported that the working conditions were improving at a lower rate than those in Pulaski and Floyd, but all districts saw increases in perceived working conditions from 2021. From 2021 to 2023, every school district except for Pulaski saw a decrease in teachers reporting seeing themselves continuing to teach at their current school. Radford saw the greatest decrease, from 93% to 79%.

Kindergarten Readiness is an indicator for children's preparedness for success in school. Roughly $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{2}{3}$ of kindergartners in the NRV are deemed to be ready for kindergarten. An additional metric to forecast academic success is 3rd grade reading proficiency rates. About $\frac{1}{2}$ of 3rd grade students in the NRV are reading proficiently at grade level. These rates dropped initially after school closures in 2020 but have somewhat recovered since the onset of COVID-19.

In the NRV, on-time graduation rates are over 90% for all localities. Students who are historically disadvantaged have higher dropout rates. Dropout rates for economically disadvantaged students are highest in Giles, Pulaski, and Radford (9% to 13%). These three localities also have higher rates of disconnected youth (youth 16-19 who are not in school nor working) and students who are experiencing homelessness, highlighting the need for support and resources for those students. Students with disabilities are also in need of additional support to increase graduation rates to those of their peers.

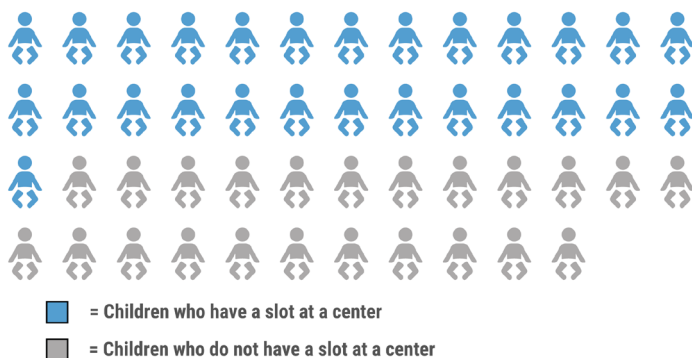
Community Population Overview: Education & Child Care Cont.

Top Five Concerns	
Concern (N=281)	% Endorsing Concern
High cost or lack of childcare for parent to attend school	37.01%
Teachers lack support, good teachers are leaving the field	29.54%
Need computer and/or internet at home for educational purposes	28.83%
Lack of school aftercare for school-aged children	27.05%
High cost or lack of transportation to attend school	21.00%

Child Care

The barriers that a lack of child care posed on families were prevalent throughout survey and focus group responses. It was a consistent theme in focus groups and was raised as the greatest challenge for increasing education and maintaining employment.

In the NRV...



More than 2,000 children under the age of 6 do not have an available child care slot.

The community's 84 child care sites are licensed to serve, at maximum estimates, 54% of the NRV's children under the age of 6. Families with infants and toddlers have fewer options for care. Just 48 of the 86 sites serve infants or toddlers. Even fewer (39) offer after-school slots for school-aged children. Waitlists for preschool slots have 8 children on average. Families with infants and toddlers and those seeking after-school care face waitlists with, on average, 19 children.

Availability of child care is not the only challenge for families. Nationwide, the high cost of child care has made headlines. Child care affordability is not just a low-income household problem.

Community Population Overview: Education & Child Care Cont.

“I’ve never been able to afford child care as a single mom. I have good friends that have been able to step in and trade child care. A lot of clients barter with child care amongst friends. Family is huge in this area. Even friends who make more money than me can’t afford child care.”
- NRV Resident

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, child care is deemed to be affordable if it is less than 7% of the household income. A recent regional child care provider survey found that the average annual cost of child care in the NRV is \$11,200 - 20% of the estimated median household income. The cost for infants and toddlers is often higher than preschool-aged children. This annual cost is just a few thousand dollars behind in-state tuition for the two universities in the community.

“Sometimes [people are] making adequate money but when you factor in the price of child care...it doesn’t add up.”, a resident noted. “Some families spend half of their wages on child care or choose not to work at all. Families making \$15/hour but with the rise in cost of everything, they may have been making it okay before but they’re not now.”

The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), Mixed Delivery, Head Start, and Child Care Subsidy programs cover the cost of childcare for income-eligible (often <100%-200% Federal Poverty Level) families at certain sites. These slots are limited. In the NRV, there are almost 3,000 children ages 0 to 4 who are eligible for the 1,200 slots available.

Community-Identified Solutions in Addressing Education Challenges:

Respondents to the community survey identified the presence of the community college and universities as positive resources in the region. The opportunity to return to school or advance one’s education is available to residents but can be made more accessible by reducing the financial and practical barriers to entry. Practical barriers not only include internet access, transportation, and child care, but preparation services and assistance in navigating the process to return to school. Community experts noted that efforts are being made to expand high-speed internet to rural areas, and residents identified valuable programming from New River Community College that supports individuals in the application and financial aid process.

With child care as a pressing concern, opportunities and solutions are critical. Great strides have been made at the state level to provide options for low-income families, and more work is needed to ensure child care is accessible to all families. While child care was consistently raised as a lacking resource in the NRV, residents noted that the programs that do exist, and the Head Starts serving low-income families, are crucial resources.

Sources:

1. Education Attainment: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2017-2021
2. Access to Broadband & Household Computer: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2017-2021
3. Teacher Working Conditions, Future Tenure: Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services School Climate Survey, 2021, 2023
4. Kindergarten Readiness: Virginia Department of Education, 2022
5. 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency: Virginia Department of Education, 2023
6. Graduation and Dropout Rates: Virginia Department of Education, 2023
7. Disconnected Youth: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2017-2021
8. Youth Experiencing Homelessness: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2017-2021
9. Child Care Sites, Licensure Capacity, & Ages Served: Virginia Department of Social Services Child Care Search, 2023
10. Child Care Waitlists & Cost of Care: United Way of Southwest Virginia Regional Provider Survey, 2023
11. University In-State Tuition Estimates: Virginia Tech In-State Fees and Costs, 2023; Radford University Tuition and Fees, 2023
12. Income-Eligible Program Slots: Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, 2023

Community Population Overview: Financial Stability

One of the greatest concerns raised by community members was financial stability (73%). One resident shared their perspective on the financial strain in the community: “Even if [someone] gets more money - maybe they work extra hours to pay rent. Then they lose food stamps. It’s a lose-lose situation. They can put a roof over their heads, but then they can’t put food in their bellies. It’s not just low income, it’s middle class too.”

The median household income for the NRV ranges from \$44,360 (Radford) to \$60,666 (Montgomery). For all localities except for Radford, the median income surpasses the 200% federal poverty threshold for a family of three, which is often the eligibility cut-off for common financial assistance programs. In Floyd, Pulaski, and Radford, median annual incomes are within the A.L.I.C.E. threshold (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed): those who make more than assistance thresholds but not enough to get by.



18% of all households in the NRV are living in **poverty.**

18% of households are living in poverty. In Radford, that rate is 30%. When considering A.L.I.C.E. families as well, almost ½ of the NRV population is struggling to make ends meet. Householders under the age of 25 and older than 65 are more likely to be financially constrained.

Looking further, economic constraints break down along racial lines. For example, only 15% of Black households in Floyd are above the A.L.I.C.E. threshold, compared to 56% of White households.

While difficulties with money management (43%) and budgeting (33%) were raised as challenges by community residents, financial stability is not solely based on one’s ability to cut costs. One resident noted: “I think too, you know, I mean wages have gone up a lot in the past couple of years, the problem is so have the expenses. I’ve seen people, I’ve talked to, their rent has gone up 2, 3, 4 hundred dollars a month in the last couple of years. So even though wages have gone up, I don’t think they’ve gone up enough to offset what has happened with expenses.”

In addition to good health and foundational education and training, financial stability is upheld by the access to safe, affordable housing, reliable means of transportation, and a job with family-sustaining wages and benefits.

Sources:

1. Median Household Income: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2017-2021
2. Poverty Rates: UnitedforALICE Virginia Household Budget, 2023
3. A.L.I.C.E. Rates & Threshold: UnitedforALICE Virginia Household Budget, 2023
4. Financial Constraints by Age and Race: UnitedforALICE Virginia Household Budget, 2023

Community Population Overview: Housing

Housing was raised as the biggest concern among respondents (79%). Challenges centered primarily around the high cost of housing. Although initiatives have been launched to expand housing, either by revitalizing older homes or building new ones, community members are currently experiencing the financial impact of the housing market. One resident commented that: “There’s not enough housing for anyone... Even people with a living wage still can’t get it. The cost of housing has skyrocketed.”

Radford, VA



The median home value in the NRV ranges from \$147k (Giles) to \$329k (Montgomery). 53% of homes are owned by the residents living there. 59% of housing units in the NRV are affordable for those making at least the annual median income. Yet, half of the population in every locality makes less than that. In Radford, only 14% of housing units are affordable for the 40% of the population making half of the median income.



Community Population Overview: Housing Cont.

Top Five Concerns	
Concern (N=262)	% Endorsing Concern
High cost of rent/house payments	74.43%
Houses in the area are not affordable	54.20%
Lack of money for down payment on a house or security deposit	46.18%
Not enough temporary emergency housing	39.69%
Can't buy or rent housing because of bad credit	37.79%

25% of households, including those owned and rented, are considered “cost-burdened”, in which housing costs more than 1/3rd of the total household income. Renters are more likely to experience housing financial burden - in every locality, more than 1/3rd of all renters are financially burdened by housing costs. According to a 2021 Housing Report, more than 5,000 income-restricted housing units are needed to provide access to adequate housing. In Montgomery and Radford (localities with high student concentration), almost half of the renting population is struggling due to housing costs. Residents of these communities felt that the universities posed an additional challenge in navigating housing: “People can’t make rent...It’s all campus housing. If you’re by campus, they jack up rent. Students need to be close to walk. Apartments where each room is 5-600 bucks. A family has to take the first thing available and pay a high cost.” There has been an overall decrease in cost-burdened renters in these two localities since 2017, while Pulaski, Giles, and Floyd have seen an overall increase. The percentage of homeowners burdened by housing costs has increased across localities in that same time

In addition to the housing affordability issue, residents also raised a lack of emergency housing as a top concern. “The homeless population has expanded. The homelessness crisis in Radford is taking on a more urban look - encampments down by the river... we have people outdoors in tents/sleeping bags.” Residents noted that not only is there a lack of emergency shelters, but also a general lack of assistance for finding stable, safe, and affordable housing.

“You get multiple families, multiple generations, living in spaces that are nowhere near the adequate size for the amount of people. You get grandmas and mamas and poor kids living in a one-bedroom apartment, or a small trailer- two whole families living in one space.”
- NRV Service Provider

Sources:

1. Median Home Value: National Association of Realtors, 2023; Virginia REALTORS, 2022
2. Home Ownership: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2018-2022
3. Housing Deemed Affordable at 50%/100% Annual Median Income: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2018-2022
4. Cost-Burdened Households: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2018-2022; Regional and Local NRV Housing Study, 2021
5. Housing Relief Estimates: Regional and Local NRV Housing Study, 2021
6. Change in Cost-Burdened Households (2017, 2018, 2019, 2021): HousingForward Virginia, 2021

Community Population Overview: Transportation

Lack of transportation impacts the ability to:



Get to work



Get Groceries



Attend School



Access Healthcare

69% of survey respondents reported transportation being an issue for them and/or their community. Residents frequently endorsed the lack of public transportation options as a concern, coupled with the high costs of owning and maintaining their vehicle. Beyond the immediate financial impacts, lack of transportation was reported as impacting ability to get to work (35% of respondents), get to grocery stores or food assistance services (31%), attending school (21%), and traveling for health care when necessary (14%).

One provider relayed how transportation impacted her clients: “For us, patients trying to find a way to get to us to be seen and get back home, to get to the hospital and back home, there’s no taxis, Ubers, or Lyfts [here], so they have to rely on friends who aren’t always reliable, so they get stuck and can’t get to where they need to go

when they need to go. There is a bus that goes to certain spots, but I had a patient recently that said “Well, it goes to this place but then I have to walk 5 miles to get to your office”.”

While, on average, NRV residents own 2 vehicles, not all families are able to own and maintain one: “The cost to own a car is a lot. Maintenance, upkeep. Oil changes are \$60... Even if it’s the best car in the world, there are costs to maintain.”

Approximately 5% of households in the NRV do not own a vehicle. A 2023 Virginia UnitedforA.L.I.C.E. report estimated that, in the NRV, transportation costs, including use, maintenance, licensing, and insurance for a single vehicle, can add up to more than \$300 a month. Nationwide, the average price of a new vehicle has increased 28% from pre-pandemic costs.



Community Population Overview: Transportation Cont.

Top Five Concerns	
Concern (N=262)	% Endorsing Concern
Don't have money to pay for car repairs	46.75%
Don't have money to buy or make the down payment on a vehicle	42.68%
Don't have adequate credit to buy a car/vehicle	41.46%
Don't have money to operate a car/vehicle - gas, inspections, insurance, etc.	39.84%
No public transportation options in my area	39.02%

Almost 40% of the population lives in rural areas. Floyd and Giles are counties classified as entirely rural. Public transportation options are limited to Radford City and the towns of Blacksburg, Christiansburg, and Pulaski. Residents shared the pervasive effects this has on families: “There’s no public transit in Floyd. A lot of families have one vehicle for the family. Dad, or the breadwinner, has the vehicle for work. Mom can’t get the children to [child care] or other things, library, dentist appointments. Children are really being left behind”.



Sources:

1. Vehicle Maintenance Cost: UnitedforALICE Household Budget, 2023
2. Nationwide Vehicle Costs: Kelley Blue Book Report, 2023
3. Vehicle Ownership: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2017-2021
4. Percent in Rural Areas: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 2020
5. Public Transportation Options: New River Community Action Agency Transportation Resources, 2023; NRV Agency on Aging Transportation Resources, 2023

Community Population Overview: Employment

61% of respondents reported employment being an issue for them and/or their community. The lack of access to child care and transportation were the two most endorsed issues impacting employment. Approximately 1 in 4 children under the age of 4 have at least one parent out of the workforce. The average commute time is 25 minutes.

The workforce participation rate in the NRV is 54%, and unemployment is 2.3%, returning to pre-pandemic levels. The top labor sectors in the NRV include manufacturing, health care and social assistance, retail trade, educational services, and accommodation and food. Despite unemployment rates on par with Virginia state rates, 50% of residents are considered financially constrained. “There’s a lack of large employers in the NRV. It contributes to the lack of high-quality, good paying jobs, which reduces employment stability”, a local workforce expert shared.

27% of respondents reported a lack of well-paying jobs with benefits as a key issue. In 2021, Accommodation and Food Services and Retail Trade had annual wages below \$38k and accounted for the largest portion of new hires (35%). These salaries cannot support a family. 1/3rd of working age adults work part-time jobs, often excluding them from receiving benefits. While there’s an estimated average of 9,800 job openings in the region that require less than an associate’s degree, these jobs offer median wages less than \$20/hr. Young workers (ages 16-24), those with less than a high school diploma, and individuals living in poverty are most likely to experience unemployment. Individuals with criminal records or substance misuse or mental health issues may also experience barriers to gainful employment, which was raised as a concern by community residents (28%).

Top Five Concerns	
Concern (N=308)	% Endorsing Concern
High cost or lack of childcare available during work hours	38.64%
High cost or lack of transportation to get to work	34.74%
Increased job stress due to short staffing	28.57%
Presence of job barriers: mental health, substance misuse or criminal background	27.60%
Lack of well-paying jobs with benefits	27.27%

Sources:

1. Job Openings by Education Level: New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Region Quarterly Workforce Report 3, 2021
2. Labor Force Participation Rate: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2018-2022; Virginia’s New River Valley Demographic Profile, 2022
3. Top Labor Sectors: American Community Survey, 2017-2021
4. Unemployment Rate: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; Trend data from Virginia Works Current Local Area Unemployment Statistics, 2023
5. Population Most Likely to Experience Unemployment: New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Region Quarterly Workforce Report 3, 2021
6. Children with Parents in the Workforce: Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, 2023
7. Commute Time: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2017-2021
8. New Hires by Sector: Virginia CareerWorks Strategic Workforce Dashboard, 2022
9. Part Time Job Rates: New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Region Quarterly Workforce Report 3, 2021

Community-Identified Solutions in Addressing Financial Challenges

Housing services and support through New River Community Action and Habitat for Humanity were indicated to be helpful resources for community members. The NRV Home Consortium Partnership has been working to move funds in order to increase housing. Beyond building more affordable housing, community members voiced wanting housing to be accessible, with sidewalks and public transportation options.

A common theme among focus group participants was how the rurality of communities creates logistical challenges for public transportation. Participants brainstormed creative ways to get people in the deepest hollows to where they need to be. Ideas like nonprofit taxi services, or models like the Medicaid Taxi (without limitations to just health visits) were shared.

Survey respondents reported a need for more job training and readiness programs. Counties in the NRV have invested in and developed career and technical education services that were noted as valuable assets. Floyd, for example, hosts a training facility that focuses on STEM, IT, and other sectors. Other existing vocational training programs, such as those offered through the community college and Virginia CareerWorks, were identified to be impactful resources.

“Childcare, transportation will always be problems. We have to work around and through, as a large rural community. We have workers, we have people who want to work. We have businesses that have open jobs. It’s just a matter of trying to figure out how do we meet needs of businesses and help job seekers gain those skills.”

- NRV Resident

Community Engagement and Capacity-Building

Although the least-endorsed challenge, 48% of residents indicated that community engagement was a concern in their community. Reasons pertained to lack of interest or time, discouragement, and not knowing how to get involved. Focus group participants who were in service-providing roles discussed an imbalance between the community need versus the capacity to serve.

“Just like the rest of us, they’re understaffed... we need two of them for every one that we have. We need two of all of us.”

- NRV Service Provider

There was also a perception from service providers that the community may not be aware of all the resources available to them. In fact, a common response in the community survey to the question “What resources are making a big difference?” for each topic was “not sure”.

Community Engagement and Capacity-Building Cont.

Although there are potential discrepancies between engagement and awareness, the NRV has existing strengths to build upon to expand capacity. In reviewing community-identified solutions to the challenges residents face, three key themes emerged:

1. **Collaboration:**

Focus group responses provided evidence that there is a deep network of partnerships and relationships in the NRV that can be leveraged to tackle challenges. Coordination across sectors is critical to building and expanding capacity. One resident in a service role stated: “We are a pretty resource rich and collaborative environment. As I’m listening to concerns and big needs, we may not be providing the all the right resources, but we have amazing organizations that work collaboratively to attempt to serve the needs of community members.”

2. **Innovation:**

Solutions that were commonly raised by survey respondents and focus group participants were those that tackled more than one challenge and could lead to generational changes. More vocational training programs help connect more people to better jobs, Head Starts give low-income families child care while they work and set children up for academic success, and mobile health units provide quality health care without the need for patient transportation. “The community garden in Giles is helping with that food insecurity piece. It’s a safe haven, it’s a place where they educate small children, because the kids from school learn how to plant and grow things so maybe as they get older, they can have their own herb and food source gardens, in their own place. Whether it’s container gardening, raised beds, or a farmer’s field.”

3. **Community-driven solutions:**

Residents raised how integral local businesses, the faith community, and the tight network of existing services and organizations are to providing support. Others discussed the value of bringing the K-12 and university student population into the fold of the volunteer community. Bringing in the whole community to develop solutions can promote long-term, sustainable change. “When things are needed, the community steps in. [The] community pulls together to make a difference. It takes the right people in place to pull it together. People here are usually willing to do what they can to help.”

Summary:

“The people are the strength. We really do try to look after each other. People within the community are very different from each other... but the culture/attitude is that as long as you do your thing and you’re not bothering me, I’m going to look out for you and protect your right to do your thing.”

Housing, mental health, substance misuse, child care and its impacts on education and employment, and transportation continue to be challenges that NRV residents face. The data and stories shared in this report highlight the entanglement of these concerns. However, the community also has key supports and resources working to address these challenges.

The NRV is home to a deep network of residents, businesses, faith-based organizations, educational systems, and non-profits seeking to make their community one of the best places to live, work, and play. By building on these networks and existing strengths, the community is well-positioned to collaborate and innovate towards community-driven solutions, tackle root-causes, and provide holistic services to support sustainable change for current and future generations of the community.

**Scan to view tables and graphs
for all data in this report:**



United Way of Southwest Virginia in the New River Valley

The United Way of Southwest Virginia (UWSWVA) stands at a critical juncture in its journey, navigating a transitional period marked by both fundraising evolution and grant-making refinement. At its core, UWSWVA aims to be more than just a fundraiser; it seeks to effectively assess local needs, bring people together, and ensure funds are used where they're most needed. This assessment has shed light on key issues and areas needing more support, helping UWSWVA plan its next steps.

With the insights from this assessment, UWSWVA is ready to enhance its funding strategies to ensure that donations make a real difference. By aligning its resources with the greatest needs, the organization aims to achieve more meaningful, measurable impact.

UWSWVA is currently in a phase of transition, making this an ideal time to strengthen its role as a leader in community change. While working through the challenges of fundraising and grant distribution, the organization remains dedicated to supporting community-led solutions. Looking ahead, UWSWVA aims to focus its efforts more strategically, guided by careful planning and the guidance of its Board of Directors.

Beyond just raising funds and allocating them, UWSWVA plays a critical role in the community as a facilitator and evaluator, building partnerships and encouraging cooperation among different groups. This helps initiate collective action and encourages discussions that lead to lasting change. In summary, the NRV Community Needs Assessment is more than just a report; it's a tool that helps guide UWSWVA's future actions. As the organization moves through this transitional period, it will continue to prioritize informed, community-focused approaches to ensure that it remains a strong force for positive change in Southwest Virginia.



United Way of Southwest Virginia