

Executive Summary

Assessment Overview

Every five years, Marion and Polk Counties partner with local health systems and community organizations to conduct a Community Health Assessment (CHA). This assessment gathers data from various sources to identify local health challenges and create a Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP).

Notable Improvements

Since the 2019 assessment, the community has seen improvements in several areas:

- Decrease in cancer cases and cancer mortality
- Less cigarette smoking, though it remains the leading cause of preventable death
- Lower rates of suicide mortality
- Increased vaccination uptake
- Increase in health care providers relative to population size
- Improving economic conditions

Key Challenges

Despite progress, significant challenges persist:

- Increase in overall mortality due to heart disease, stroke, accidents, and COVID-19
- Increase in chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity
- Increase in housing unaffordability and homelessness
- Increase in violent crime offenses
- Worsening mental health and high burden of depression
- Increase in alcohol related deaths
- Increase in opioid-related deaths and hospital visits, largely due to fentanyl
- Barriers to health care access including lack of timely appointments/providers, high costs, insurance issues, and need for culturally responsive services
- Differences in health outcomes by demographics, geographics, and socioeconomic status

Social Determinants of Health

The community faces challenges with social determinants including lower educational achievement, higher poverty rates, food insecurity, and unaffordable housing. These factors significantly influence local health outcomes.

Community Priorities

Based on comprehensive community input involving over 2,286 participants, three priority areas were selected for the 2026-2030 CHIP:

- Access to Health Care
- Housing Stability
- Mental Health & Substance Use

Biggest Gaps in Service and Barriers to Care

Provider Shortages

The community has fewer primary care providers, physicians, and mental health providers relative to population size compared to Oregon. Polk County has significantly fewer providers across almost every type than Marion and Oregon. Dental providers are particularly scarce in Polk, with far fewer relative to population size.

Provider Demographics

People who identified as African American/Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or Hispanic/Latina(o) are underrepresented in the provider workforce, creating gaps in culturally responsive care.

Top Barriers Reported by Community

About two out of three community members experienced barriers when trying to access health care:

- Could not get an appointment quickly enough (45.5%)
- Could not find a doctor/provider taking new patients (30.1%)
- High out-of-pocket costs (21.1%)
- Difficulty finding a doctor/provider who takes their insurance (17.8%)
- Needed services not offered in their area (14.7%)

Insurance Coverage Gaps

About 1 in 25 adults could not see a provider in the last year due to cost. Community members without insurance, those between ages 19-44, males, and people who identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Other Race, or Hispanic/Latina(o) had lower insurance coverage rates.

Reasons People Avoid or Delay Care

About two out of three people have avoided or delayed health care, primarily due to:

- Nervousness, stress, or anxiety around health care (20.9%)
- Insurance coverage or health plan issues (15.8%)
- Age-related concerns (15.4%)
- Disability (11.7%)
- Income (11.1%)

Geographic Disparities

Rural areas and Polk County experience more difficulty accessing providers near them compared to urban areas. Travel times to care are longer for rural and frontier areas.

Lack of Culturally Responsive Care

Community members identified the need for culturally responsive, linguistically appropriate, and trauma-informed care as a significant barrier. Language barriers and lack of providers who understand and respect different cultures were commonly reported issues.

The Unique Needs of the Community

Diverse Population with Language Barriers

About 25% of households in Marion speak a language other than English at home, compared to 12% in Polk. The most common languages after English are Spanish, Asian or Pacific Islander languages, and Russian. This creates a need for linguistically appropriate services.

Growing Aging Population

The community is aging, with projections showing older adults will represent a greater proportion of the population by 2045. This creates increased demand on the health care system for age-related services.

High Poverty and Food Insecurity

About 1 in 7 people live in poverty locally, compared to 1 in 8 in Oregon. About 1 in 10 community members are food insecure, creating a greater reliance on government assistance programs like SNAP.

Housing Crisis

Housing was identified as the most needed area of improvement. Oregon ranks 3rd in the nation for homelessness and 1st for unsheltered homelessness among families with children. Over half of renters pay 30% or more of household income on rent.

Mental Health and Substance Use

Mental health was identified as the most important health topic locally. About 2 out of 5 adults experienced poor mental health. Drug overdoses, primarily due to opioids and fentanyl, have risen dramatically in recent years.

Agricultural and Farmworker Community

The community serves farmworkers and their families who have unique needs related to seasonal employment, housing instability, and access to culturally appropriate services.

Large Medicaid Population

Marion had a higher percentage of people insured by Medicaid/OHP (36.4%) than Polk (32.5%) and Oregon (32.3%), indicating greater need for services that serve low-income populations.

Rural and Frontier Access Challenges

About 34% of survey respondents lived in rural areas, facing challenges with transportation, distance to providers, and limited local services. Polk County is particularly underserved with far fewer providers relative to population size.

Indigenous and Pacific Islander Communities

The region includes Confederated Tribes and growing Micronesian, Marshallese, and Pacific Islander communities requiring culturally specific health care approaches and tribal engagement.

Emergency Preparedness Vulnerabilities

Marion ranked 4th out of 36 Oregon counties for heat vulnerability. The 2020 wildfires burned 29.4% of Marion County, destroyed 700 homes, and killed 5 people, highlighting ongoing environmental health risks.

Lower Educational Achievement

A smaller percentage of community members have high school diplomas/GEDs than Oregon, with Marion having the lowest rates. Lower educational achievement is linked to poorer health outcomes and economic instability.

High Rates of Chronic Disease

Over a third of adults are obese, and diabetes prevalence is increasing. Chronic diseases are responsible for the vast majority of deaths, hospitalizations, and health care costs in the community.

Strengths of the Community

Strong Community Partnerships

The Marion-Polk Community Health Collaborative brings together hospitals, public health, providers, civic groups, and community-based organizations. Over 47 organizations participated in community health assessment activities, demonstrating strong collaboration.

Increased Community Engagement

Over 2,286 people participated in community input sessions, focus groups, or surveys in 2024—a 209% increase compared to 2019. This reflects growing community involvement in health improvement efforts.

Natural Resources and Recreation

The community has an abundance of natural resources, local produce, and recreational areas that support health. About 6 out of 10 survey respondents agreed their community was a good place to raise children, and a majority felt satisfied with availability of parks, green spaces, and recreational areas.

Improving Health Indicators

- Cancer mortality has decreased steadily in recent years
- Cigarette smoking has decreased substantially
- Suicide mortality has decreased
- Vaccination rates for children and adolescents have increased
- More adults are receiving annual checkups and preventive screenings

Growing Economy

The population is growing and the economy shows signs of improvement, with higher household incomes and relatively low unemployment (around 5% in 2023), providing opportunities for advancement.

Health Care Infrastructure

Salem Hospital is the largest hospital in Oregon and operates the busiest emergency department between the Canadian border and Los Angeles. West Valley Hospital recently expanded with 19 additional beds and a new outpatient clinic.

High Insurance Coverage

More than 9 out of 10 people have some form of health insurance, similar to Oregon rates, which supports access to health care services.

Good Environmental Quality

- Air quality was "good" 78-87% of the time in 2023
- Drinking water violations for public water systems are relatively rare
- About 9 out of 10 households have broadband internet access

Dedicated Health Care Workforce

Recent increases in health care providers relative to population size in Marion and Oregon show workforce growth. The community has 555 people per Traditional Health Worker in Marion, demonstrating investment in community health support roles.

Strong Public Health System

Organizations working on mental health, health care access, preventive medicine, and health equity represent two-thirds or more of surveyed partners, showing robust public health infrastructure.

Meeting National Health Goals

The community has met or exceeded Healthy People 2030 goals in several areas including colorectal cancer screening, breast cancer mortality, high blood pressure rates, physical activity (Polk), and broadband internet access.

Priorities and Goals

Selected Priority Areas

Salem Health reviewed the community health needs assessment and selected two priority areas to focus on:

- Access to health care
- Community safety

These differ from the broader Marion-Polk Community Health Collaborative's three priorities (access to health care, housing stability, and mental health & substance use).

Rationale for Selection

These priority areas were selected because they align with Salem Health's strategic goals to:

- Grow the medical group
- Create seamless, integrated care
- Create a resilient workforce and culture

- Improve patient experience
- Develop innovative care models

Focus on Community Safety

Salem Health specifically chose community safety because:

- Data for this priority is available to track and measure success both internally and through partnerships with local law enforcement
- Violent assaults and shootings are on the rise in both Salem and rural Marion County
- Working collaboratively with the community to reduce violence and improve safety results in community resilience and better overall health outcomes

Implementation Timeline

Salem Health must adopt a community health implementation plan within five months and 15 days after the end of the fiscal year the CHNA was adopted. The plan will detail specific strategies and activities to address their two priority areas.

Recent Facility Improvements

- West Valley Hospital added 19 beds in June 2023, bringing total to 25
- A new outpatient clinic opened in June 2024 across from West Valley Hospital, expanding rehabilitation, wound care, infusion, and medication management services

Commitment to the Region

Salem Health operates the largest hospital in Oregon and the busiest emergency department between the Canadian border and Los Angeles, with more than 115,000 visits in 2024. West Valley Hospital serves as a top-performing critical access hospital offering emergency services, inpatient and swing beds, and specialty care for rural Polk County residents.

Partnership Approach

Salem Health sits on the executive committee of the Marion-Polk Community Health Collaborative, demonstrating commitment to being a steadfast and thoughtful partner focused on areas of highest need through multiple collaborations.