

## **Executive Summary**

### **Overview**

The 2023 Malheur County Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) identifies health needs through a social determinants of health framework. Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Ontario partnered with community leaders, nonprofits, and public organizations to assess assets and challenges in the region. Data collection occurred between July and December 2022, combining primary data from surveys, focus groups, and interviews with secondary data from public datasets.

### **Top Three Priorities**

#### **Safe, Affordable Housing and Homelessness**

Rising housing costs, low vacancy rates, and challenges building new housing create significant burdens for residents. Survey respondents ranked housing costs as their top concern. Malheur County has higher rates of crowded housing than the state average, and homelessness has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The region lacks adequate overnight shelter capacity.

#### **Access to Affordable Health Care, Including Oral and Vision Health**

Residents report difficulty accessing health care due to long appointment waits, high costs, insurance coverage gaps, and lack of linguistically and culturally appropriate services. Barriers particularly affect immigrant populations, non-native English speakers, and those relying on Medicaid or Medicare. While Malheur County has dentist rates comparable to the state, accessing providers who accept Medicaid/Medicare remains challenging.

#### **Safe, Reliable Transportation**

Residents face rising transportation costs and limited non-driving options. This particularly impacts the county's aging population, making it difficult to access health care and services. Many residents must travel outside the region for critical services unavailable locally.

#### **Community Resources**

Community resources to address these and other social care needs can be accessed at [findhelp.org](https://findhelp.org). Secondary data from this report is available through the Idaho Oregon Community Health Data Atlas at [idahooregonatlas.org](https://idahooregonatlas.org).

## **Biggest Gaps in Service and Barriers to Care**

### **Insufficient Services**

Mental health care services and substance use services are most frequently identified as insufficient in the community. General health care services (including primary and specialty care) and oral health care services also show significant gaps.

### **Access Barriers**

The most commonly reported barriers to accessing needed health or social services include:

- Cost of services
- Long waits for appointments
- Lack of insurance coverage or insufficient coverage
- Insurance problems and complications
- Language barriers and lack of culturally appropriate services
- No available providers nearby

### **Provider Shortages**

Malheur County has approximately 38 primary care physicians per 100,000 residents—only one-third of the statewide average. Mental health providers are also limited at 604 per 100,000 residents. Workforce shortages have reduced operating hours for many services.

## **Vulnerable Populations**

Immigrant populations and non-native English speakers face the greatest barriers due to language differences, fear of mistreatment related to immigration status, and lack of awareness of available resources. Populations relying on Medicaid or Medicare struggle to find providers who accept their insurance.

### **Oral Health Care**

While dentist rates match state averages, residents report barriers including lack of providers accepting Medicaid or Medicare, long wait times, and high costs for services including co-pays. Only 60% of adults reported seeing a dentist in 2020, compared to 66% statewide.

### **Preventive Care**

Malheur County falls below state averages for routine checkups and seniors receiving core preventive services, indicating gaps in preventive health care utilization.

## **The Unique Needs of the Community**

### **Rural and Border Community Characteristics**

Malheur County is Oregon's easternmost county with residents frequently traveling to Idaho for services. The region experiences challenges specific to rural areas, including limited provider availability, long distances to specialty care, and reduced service hours due to workforce shortages.

### **Diverse Hispanic and Latino Population**

Nearly 35% of Malheur County residents are Hispanic or Latino—significantly higher than the state average of 13.6%. This population experiences barriers including language access, lack of culturally appropriate services, limited representation in public fields, and fear related to immigration status. More than half of children under 18 are enrolled in Medicaid.

### **High Poverty Rates**

Malheur County has the highest poverty rate in Oregon as of 2021. More than half of all households struggle to meet basic needs according to ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) measures. Infant poverty rates are especially high, indicating families with young children face particular financial vulnerability.

### **Agricultural Economy**

The community's agricultural base creates unique employment patterns and economic challenges. Median household income is significantly lower than the state average and has not increased at the same rate as statewide wages.

### **Aging Housing Stock**

The median year homes were built has remained stable, indicating limited new construction. Many homes are older and potentially need more repairs and updates than homes statewide. Crowded housing rates exceed state averages.

### **Limited Public Transportation**

Public transportation use is very low, and the community lacks adequate accessible transportation options, particularly for activities beyond work or emergency health needs. This especially impacts older adults who have less comfort driving.

### **Marijuana Dispensary Hub**

Ontario has the largest number of marijuana dispensaries per capita in the state, creating concerns about increased visitors and impacts on crime, housing, and infrastructure.

### **Recent Population Growth After Decline**

Following years of population decrease and domestic out-migration, the county experienced growth between 2019 and 2021, likely from in-state migration. This rapid change impacts housing costs, infrastructure, and community resources.

#### **Small Community Privacy Concerns**

LGBTQIA+ residents report concerns about privacy when accessing inclusive care in a small community where anonymity is difficult.

#### **Educational Gaps**

College graduation rates are notably lower than state averages, particularly among Hispanic/Latino and Native American populations. More than 70% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch between 2014-2020, well above state averages.

### **Strengths of the Community**

#### **Health Outcomes**

Malheur County has a lower suicide mortality rate compared to the state average. The county experienced a smaller spike in unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic than the state, with 2020-2021 unemployment rates falling below state rates for the first time in several years.

#### **Commute and Transportation Patterns**

A lower percentage of workers have travel times to work over one hour compared to the statewide average. Mean travel time to work remains stable and falls far below the mean for Oregon as a whole, indicating reasonable access to employment.

#### **Housing Costs**

Median monthly housing costs and median gross rent have remained stable and lower than rising state averages over many years, though this must be considered alongside lower local incomes.

#### **Community Partnerships and Collaboration**

Strong collaboration exists among community organizations, with a 15-member Steering Committee representing diverse sectors including health systems, public health, nonprofits, educational institutions, and human services organizations working together on the CHNA.

#### **Existing Service Infrastructure**

The community has behavioral health services through Lifeways providing outpatient mental health and addiction services, child and adolescent mental health services, and inpatient/residential services. Community health workers assess social needs and connect patients to resources through findhelp.org.

#### **Educational Institutions**

Treasure Valley Community College serves the region with enrollment of 4,722 students in 2020-21. The college partners with health systems for nursing programs and workforce development.

#### **Housing Development Progress**

The Presbyterian Community Care Center was successfully converted into a 52-unit affordable housing development with units for those making 60% or less and 30% or less of area median income, including dedicated units for people with severe and persistent mental illness.

#### **Lower Food Desert Rates**

The percentage of residents living in food deserts is lower than the state percentage, indicating better geographic access to healthy food options than many Oregon communities.

#### **Crime Trends**

Property crime rates have remained relatively stable with a small decrease during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Priorities and Goals**

### **2020 CHNA Implementation Actions**

#### **Affordable, Safe Housing and Homelessness**

Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Ontario partnered with Northwest Housing Alternatives to convert the former Presbyterian Community Care Center into a 52-unit affordable housing development completed by August 2022. The development includes onsite spaces for community meetings, telehealth, and clinical rooms, with a resident services coordinator managing more than ten local service providers. The hospital provides \$10,000 annually to support the Winter Tiny Shelter Home project, offering 14 shelter homes for individuals and families experiencing homelessness between November and April.

#### **Substance Use, Including Tobacco and Vape**

Saint Alphonsus Health System employed two Tobacco Treatment Specialists providing cessation counseling to hospitalized patients and free tobacco cessation classes. In FY21-22, 438 unique patients were served with an average of 41 referrals per month. In FY23, 693 patients were seen with 204 referrals between June-December 2022. The hospital also provided financial support for tobacco tax increases and state policies to reduce tobacco/vape use in Oregon.

#### **Childcare and Education**

SAMC-Ontario provided more than \$13,000 in scholarship support through the Foundation for local students pursuing health care education. The hospital contributed \$600 in cash and \$93,954 in staff time between FY21-23 to support Treasure Valley Community College and Oregon Health Sciences University nursing programs. Between fall 2021 and fall 2022, numerous OHSU and TVCC nursing students completed clinical rotations across multiple departments. The hospital provided \$36,000 to Pacific Northwestern University of Health Sciences residency program for free housing during local residency rotations.

#### **Access to Health Care, Including Oral Health**

SAMC-Ontario employs a Community Health Worker at Fruitland Health Plaza to assess social needs and connect patients to community resources. The hospital launched the Community Health Worker Hub during the pandemic, with FY21 serving 179 patients, FY22 serving 256 patients, and FY23 (July-Dec 2022) making 2,279 encounters and 652 referrals across the health system. A CHW Hotline receives calls from patients, colleagues, and community members for social care needs assistance. As of December 2022, 31.7% of patients in Saint Alphonsus emergency departments, primary care practices, and specialty care settings are screened for social care needs.

### **2023 CHNA Priorities**

The hospital identified three top priorities for the 2023 assessment:

- Safe, affordable housing and homelessness
- Access to affordable health care, including oral and vision health
- Safe, reliable transportation