

Stakeholder Perspectives of MetroWest

Views of Assets, Needs and Opportunities

November 2019

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The Foundation for MetroWest

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Acknowledgements

CGR thanks the Foundation for MetroWest for the opportunity to work on this study. We also are grateful to the dozens of stakeholders who participated in focus groups and interviews to share their insights about life in their region. We are thankful for the entire Foundation staff, and especially to Chief Operating Officer Jay Kim and Director of Programs Caroline Murphy, for their assistance and insights throughout the project.

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Introduction

The Foundation for MetroWest engaged the Center for Governmental Research (CGR) in December 2018 to develop a community indicators website and conduct a stakeholder engagement process for the MetroWest region of Massachusetts. Both efforts were intended to inform community efforts and grantmaking, while also building a strong resource for donors, nonprofits and community members to better understand the region's strengths and challenges, and to create solutions.

The website compiles 50 indicators and analysis to help community leaders and the public use quantitative data to better understand their region. The engagement process is an important qualitative complement to the website, providing nuance, context and themes that are difficult to capture with numbers and statistics alone.

The website, ImpactMetroWest.org, will launch publicly in January 2020. Indicator categories for the website include Children & Families, Community Life, Demographics & Diversity, Economy & Workforce, Education and Financial Security.

Our Methodology

Focus Groups and Interviews

In September 2019, CGR's project team led a series of eight focus groups with 60 participants and conducted three one-on-one interviews. Foundation staff provided valuable assistance by recruiting participants and scheduling all meetings.

Focus groups represented:

- MetroWest nonprofit leaders and key staff from organizations ranging from service providers to cultural institutions to advocacy groups;
- State and municipal officials and staff;
- Foundation for MetroWest donors and fund holders;
- Representatives from the MetroWest and Boston-area philanthropic sector; and
- Business and corporate leaders in the region, including individual business owners and executives and representatives for chambers of commerce.

The project team also interviewed Framingham Mayor Yvonne M. Spicer, Framingham State University President F. Javier Cevallos, and Diane Gould, president and CEO of the nonprofit human services provider Advocates.

Online Survey

CGR also designed and conducted an online survey, which collected 1,359 responses between May and August 2019. In addition to the English-language version of the survey, Spanish and Portuguese versions were available.

Report Structure

Reflecting the nature of questions our project team used across all elements of the engagement process, we have organized themes that emerged from this process into assets, needs, and potential strategies for the region to address challenges. We summarize the survey results separately, following the focus group and interview results.

Leading Regional Assets

Participants and interviewees described MetroWest as a diverse, civically engaged, well-educated and relatively affluent region, located in an ideal spot within the state. Many residents are proud of their communities and have the interest, willingness and resources to help address the region's challenges. They are supported by a strong economy, a plethora of higher education institutions, a hard-working and cooperative nonprofit sector, competent municipal leaders, and a delegation of state legislators who are well-positioned to make change.

Compassionate, Civically Engaged Residents

Almost uniformly, focus group participants described MetroWest's residents as the region's strongest asset. They described many local residents as well-educated and relatively affluent, which the data support – a larger share of MetroWest adults hold college degrees than the state and nation, and the region's median household income is higher than Massachusetts as a whole.¹

MetroWest residents often want to help others who are less fortunate, although not all are aware of or fully understand the needs that exist in their own region. Many residents who recognize the issues are compassionate, civically engaged and invested in their communities, willing to discuss and confront challenges, and have a strong sense of volunteerism, participants said. One nonprofit leader described generous partners and donors who are more than willing to meet a need within 24 hours if

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates, 2013-17. In MetroWest, 49% of adults over 25 had at least a bachelor's degree. The national share was 31%. Massachusetts' share was 42%. The median household income in MetroWest was \$85,400, compared to \$74,200 at the state level and \$57,700 for the U.S.

asked. The overall impression was that, with direction, many of the region's residents are willing to play a bigger role in solving local problems and have resources to do so.

A Strong Sense of Community

Residents are dedicated to their communities and take great pride in them, many participants said. This sense of belonging often applies to towns and cities more than the larger region. People more often associate themselves with specific communities, or in some cases, individual neighborhoods or sections of towns. Some participants, however, said they saw increasing recognition and acceptance of a regional identity.

The "Economic Engine" of Massachusetts

Several participants said the region is increasingly and correctly recognized as the "economic engine" of Massachusetts. MetroWest boasts several multinational corporate headquarters, a strong high-tech sector, and many higher education institutions that produce highly skilled workers. Again, the data support this perception: MetroWest has a higher share of high-tech jobs than the rest of the state, its unemployment rate in 2018 was comparatively low, and its average salary outpaces Massachusetts as a whole.² This strong regional economy brings resources and jobs into MetroWest.

Many participants believed there is untapped potential for corporations with local headquarters to play a larger role in local philanthropy. These companies already contribute to charitable causes, but participants felt they often do so at a national or international scale, with local efforts more limited to events like a day of community service. Some participants in the corporate sector said younger workers increasingly expect their employers to contribute to their communities and play a role in combating social inequity. This generational shift may present a fresh opportunity to engage corporations in local philanthropic efforts.

Small business also were seen as assets that give back to their communities.

An Educational Powerhouse

As noted briefly above, MetroWest is home to several respected institutions of higher education, including Framingham State University, Massachusetts Bay Community College, and private colleges like Bentley, Babson, Brandeis, Regis and Wellesley. Participants viewed these colleges and universities as invested in their communities and willing to contribute to work solving local problems. Framingham State and Mass Bay in particular were seen as working to strengthen their roots in MetroWest and

² Bureau of Labor Statistics. High-tech jobs represented 19% of all jobs in MetroWest in 2018, compared to 14% for Massachusetts. The region's unemployment rate in 2018 was 3.0%; the state rate was 3.3%. The region's average salary in 2018 was \$74,880, compared to \$72,650 for the state.

strongly committed to social equity. Participants described students as untapped assets who could be better engaged in working on the region's challenges.

A Region with an Ideal Location

Many participants saw the region's location as a core strength. While transportation can be a challenge, the region is centrally located between Boston and Worcester. This gives MetroWest residents access to jobs, colleges, universities, hospitals, and cultural institutions in both cities. The region's access to Massachusetts Bay Commuter Rail, the Massachusetts Turnpike, I-495 and Route 128 all were seen as strengths that contribute to economic development.

Participants also viewed the region as diverse in land uses, offering residents an appealing mix of denser cities, suburbs and open space. The region's natural resources, including the Sudbury, Assabet and Concord rivers, also were described as assets that foster conservation and environmentalism as values among residents.

Strength in Diversity

Numerous participants described the racial, cultural and socioeconomic diversity of the region's population as one of its strengths. Several noted MetroWest's immigrant communities and the diversity of languages spoken here as positive attributes. People of different backgrounds bring a range of perspectives and skills to solving the region's problems. That said, participants also said the region has more work to do to be genuinely inclusive and equitable, which we discuss later in this report.

Competent Leaders with Political Capital

Participants generally spoke positively of the region's municipal and state elected leaders, saying they cooperate and strategize well at both the local and state levels. Several people noted MetroWest has a strong delegation at the Massachusetts State House, headed by Sen. Karen Spilka of Ashland, who has served as president of the state Senate since 2018. Participants believed that MetroWest's needs and concerns have a willing audience on Beacon Hill, and that many of the region's legislative leaders and policymakers are in positions of leadership or longevity that allow them address issues effectively. In a handful of cases, municipal leaders are taking progressive positions on issues like affordable housing, participants said.

A "Strong Nucleus" of Nonprofits and Service Providers

MetroWest has a plethora of nonprofit agencies, large and small, focusing on the region's needs. Participants described MetroWest as having a "strong nucleus" of nonprofit agencies with an inter-agency model, with a core group that includes some of the largest providers meeting monthly to learn from one another.

While there are many nonprofits, participants generally felt that most were necessary to meet the region's considerable needs. Agencies were described as cooperative, open to partnerships, and working to ensure they do not unnecessarily duplicate efforts. We heard, however, that nonprofits have limited time to collaborate.

Cooperative Philanthropies

Local institutional philanthropies are closely connected and work well together to meet needs, per focus group participants. For example, a number of philanthropies in MetroWest recently joined a statewide initiative in philanthropy in addressing Census 2020 to ensure that the region's vulnerable residents are counted.

Additional Strengths

Other assets that were mentioned more briefly included:

- The region's strong K-12 school systems, as well as parochial and charter schools.
- MetroWest's position in a state with progressive policies for workers, including paid family leave and pay equity.
- The RIDE, a door-to-door paratransit service for people with disabilities, serving the easternmost towns and cities of the region within the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority catchment area.
- The region's health care institutions, including MetroWest Medical Center, UMass Memorial Marlborough Hospital and Beth Israel Deaconess HealthCare. Participants also noted the region's access to Boston-area hospitals with national or international reputations, such as Dana Farber Cancer Institute.
- A strong arts, culture and dining scene, including local museums, performing arts venues, and restaurants.
- A rich history in a state whose roots predate the American Revolution.

Pressing Needs and Challenges

Participants said the region's affluence often masks its needs and challenges, which include pockets of deep poverty, socioeconomic disparities among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and socially isolated immigrant groups. While there are many nonprofit organizations in the region, there was a clear sense that they are unable to meet the level of need. And while some businesses contribute to their communities, many participants felt that not all are as engaged as they could be.

Some of these challenges are exacerbated by larger multi-region or state-level issues, such as the cost of living, housing affordability, traffic congestion, and limited public transportation options outside of cities. There is no clear consensus on what defines

MetroWest, and this may contribute to difficulties getting leaders and organizations to work across town lines to develop regional solutions to regional problems. It also may make it harder to convince donors and funders to invest in addressing problems here when needs may be more apparent in the Boston area.

For clarity, we have divided challenges below into several categories: multi-region or state-level issues, region-specific issues, community or sector-specific needs, and those specific to the Foundation for MetroWest.

Multi-Region or Statewide Challenges

We recognize that as a community foundation, the Foundation for MetroWest has limited capacity to impact complex problems that have roots beyond this region and / or in state-level policy. But focus group participants and interviewees shared these issues early, often and consistently in every session, and they provide an important backdrop for many of the more local issues raised later in this report. The scale of these problems also provides context for the discussion below about opportunities to partner with larger foundations to address larger issues affecting the region.

For Many, Housing Choices are Limited and Unaffordable

Participants consistently raised the cost of living in MetroWest, and housing in particular, as one of its most pressing challenges. The data backs up this concern. The median home value in MetroWest is about \$380,000, about 8% higher than the state median and nearly double the national median.³ Housing affordability in the region has declined since 2000.⁴ The problem is not limited to this region; Gov. Charlie Baker has said Massachusetts is in the midst of a “housing crisis.”⁵ Stakeholders described how this problem has rippled across various segments of the community:

- Low- and middle-income people who work in the region can’t afford to live here, which raises their commuting costs and limits their productivity and family lives. Employers described challenges recruiting employees to the region.
- Young people who grew up here often can’t afford to stay or return to their hometowns after graduating from high school or college.
- Vulnerable populations, including recent immigrants and people in poverty, struggle to find stable, high-quality housing that they can afford.
- People in homeless shelters or residential substance abuse treatment programs often cannot find an affordable home when they are ready to leave.

³ ACS 2013-17.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census, and ACS 2013-17.

⁵ Schoenberg, Shira. 2018. “Lawmakers grapple with Gov. Charlie Baker’s proposal to address housing ‘crisis.’” MassLive.com. <https://www.masslive.com/news/2019/05/lawmakers-grapple-with-gov-charlie-bakers-proposal-to-address-housing-crisis.html>

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- Seniors, some of whom have lived in the region for decades, cannot afford to “age in place.”

The latter issue sometimes causes tension among seniors who wish to remain in their communities and younger families who are more willing to support higher taxes for their children’s schools. Participants also described limited housing options in a region where single-family homes remain the norm.

Participants also discussed a lack of income-restricted affordable housing in the region. Framingham is one of few communities in Massachusetts where at least 10 percent of its housing stock is considered affordable under the state’s Chapter 40B affordable housing law. Even so, some participants felt this was insufficient to meet demand and said affordable housing too often has been clustered in dense areas of low-income housing instead of being distributed throughout communities. There also are long waiting lists for subsidized housing.

Local homelessness also was described as a growing problem; one person described a tent encampment that cropped up recently in Milford.

Stakeholders also shared other cost of living concerns beyond housing. This included the costs of child care for working parents and transportation, whether for purchasing and maintaining a vehicle or paying fares for the commuter rail.

Difficulties Getting In, Out and Around the Region

Transportation issues received about as much attention in focus groups as the cost of living in MetroWest. Participants described challenges getting around *within* the region, as well as *in and out* of the region to Worcester and Boston.

Traffic congestion can be severe, causing long commutes and lost time at work. While commuter rail was described as an asset to the region, many participants also felt it was too infrequent and / or too costly to use regularly, particularly for lower-income workers traveling to and from the Boston area. Regional transit authorities provide public bus service within the region, but by many accounts, routes and frequency are limited by inadequate state and federal funding. The region also falls into different transit authority service areas, each of which has different routes and levels of service. Participants felt public transportation overall fails to consistently connect workers to jobs; some employers felt the burden falls on them to help workers navigate the first or last mile of their trips to and from work. Others said people receiving public assistance have difficulties traveling via transit to state Department of Transitional Assistance offices in Framingham and Worcester.

Some of the region’s more rural communities lack regular transit service, and areas that are particularly car dependent can be dangerous for pedestrians to navigate.

People who cannot drive, including seniors, face particular challenges with social isolation and access to services and everyday necessities. While some towns provide senior transportation services, it is inconsistent across communities. Medicaid-funded transportation services generally are available only for trips to medical appointments.

Region-Specific Challenges

What is MetroWest's Identity?

While there appears to be growing recognition of MetroWest as a distinct region of Massachusetts, many stakeholders said the region lacks a clear and cohesive identity. Individual communities don't always agree on whether they are part of MetroWest, and some regional organizations define the boundaries differently than others. Does it extend east of Route 128? What about areas west of Interstate 495 or north of Route 2? Stakeholders who live in MetroWest referenced its economic strength and suburban character as defining traits, but these qualities sometimes obscure the region's needs.

These ambiguities may contribute to difficulties getting local leaders and organizations to coalesce around regional approaches to some of MetroWest's problems. They also present a challenge in articulating the region's needs to potential funders or partners outside the region.

Affluence Obscures the Region's Problems

Both nonprofit and philanthropic stakeholders said one of their biggest challenges is making donors aware of needs that exist within MetroWest. The relative wealth of many MetroWest communities can obscure local needs. Anecdotally, donors often are inclined to donate to causes in the Boston area, where needs may be more obvious, and where larger charitable organizations sometimes have more name recognition. Similarly, a donor interested in funding the arts might sooner look to a well-known and prestigious institution like the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston than a local arts organization. Even a number of large family foundations whose family members live in MetroWest focus their efforts on Boston, according to focus group participants. Some stakeholders also saw a potential role for the Foundation in making the case for local donations, as well as in connecting nonprofits directly with potential donors.

Beneath the Surface, Poverty and Economic Inequality

Amid wealthy areas, focus group participants described pockets of deep, multi-generational poverty in the region. Data show this is most apparent in Framingham and Waltham, with poverty rates of 12% and 10%, respectively. This represents an estimated 13,300 people with incomes below the federal poverty line in these two cities alone.⁶ Participants also described low-income residents who struggle to make

⁶ ACS 2013-17.

ends meet – especially seniors – in the region’s more affluent communities as well. Local food banks were described as overburdened. Some participants also described limited assistance for low-income residents in some of the region’s wealthier towns, and poor health outcomes in high-poverty areas.

While poverty impacts people of many racial and ethnic backgrounds, some participants noted that people of color are disproportionately likely to live in poverty here (as well as at the state and national levels). Census data show that in MetroWest, the share of Hispanic residents who live in poverty is about three times higher than the share of white residents in poverty; for Black or African American residents, the share is twice as high as among white residents.⁷

Poverty in immigrant communities was a particular point of concern for many stakeholders. Several indicated that recent immigrants who may need assistance or services are afraid to engage with nonprofit service providers or local government, fearing deportation. This includes both undocumented *and* documented immigrants who are concerned they may be targeted under the Trump administration’s “public charge” rule, effective in October 2019, which can make it more difficult for immigrants to gain entry to the country or secure permanent legal status if they use public benefits. Nonprofit leaders said they were aware of immigrants who have stopped accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (or food stamps), health benefits and other types of basic assistance due to fears surrounding the “public charge” rule.

Immigrants Living in Isolation

We also heard broader concerns about immigrant communities isolated from their larger communities. Some immigrants are hesitant to engage in civic life or their children’s schools, fearing deportation or other types of immigration enforcement, participants said. Language and cultural barriers also prevent immigrants from fully participating in their communities. Local governments sometimes struggle to communicate with immigrant communities and businesses. While there are language classes and bilingual services available in the region, stakeholders said there are too few, and waiting lists are long. Undocumented immigrants are further removed from the mainstream of their communities, often working multiple jobs under the table.

Combined, stakeholders said these issues contribute to mental health issues and stress among both adult immigrants and their children, which often goes unaddressed.

⁷ ACS 2013-17. 23% of Hispanic residents, 17% of African American residents, 11% of Asian residents and 7% of white residents had incomes below the federal poverty line.

Diverse Region-wide, but Not in Our Neighborhoods

Participants said that while eastern Massachusetts and the region may have diverse overall populations, communities and neighborhoods do not reflect this diversity. Both the region and state are often segregated racially, ethnically and socioeconomically. Even within individual communities, some stakeholders said there can be stark lines between races and social classes. Some participants saw particular shortcomings in local government and school systems, where they said diverse leadership is relatively rare. One stakeholder said that because the region's population is relatively diverse by the numbers, people often think there is no work to do to make this a more inclusive and equitable place to live; some saw a need for more deliberate efforts to ensure that diverse people are represented in decision and policymaking. Stakeholders also described a need for greater cultural competence skills across sectors – government, nonprofit and businesses – in communicating, serving and developing relationships with minority communities in the region.

Growing Need, Limited Access to Mental Health Services

Stakeholders with direct knowledge of local health care systems described inadequate services for the region's mental health and substance abuse treatment needs, especially given the impact of the opioid crisis in the region.

MassHealth (the state's Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program) provides coverage for mental health services, but some stakeholders said some providers will not accept it or offer limited services due to low reimbursement rates. In addition to a limited number of practitioners and waiting lists for appointments, some stakeholders described stigma as a barrier to accessing mental health services, particularly among immigrants, youths and older adults in general.

Limited Cross-Sector Collaboration

Participants often described positive working relationships and good communication *within* sectors, but limited opportunities to work *across* sectors to address the region's challenges. For example, there appears to be limited conversation between municipal governments and local philanthropic organizations. Organizations come together sometimes to address a specific need or complete a concrete project, and they collaborate effectively toward a shared goal. But the collaboration or coalition isn't sustained so that groups can continue working together to tackle big problems.

Concerns about Development Impacts

Several stakeholders shared general concerns about the impacts of land development. Concerns centered on traffic congestion, strain on municipal services or infrastructure, the potential for development to increase property values and displace existing residents, and overcrowding in schools.

Sector-Specific Challenges

Nonprofits

Many Nonprofits, but Limited Coordination of Efforts

MetroWest has an abundance of nonprofit organizations working hard to address the region's needs, from substance abuse treatment to youth programming to homeless shelters. While we heard that some of the larger nonprofits in the region coordinate well with one another, others said they lack time to collaborate effectively. On the whole, nonprofits were not consistently aware of services that each other provide, and said they knew they were often competing for the same limited grant funds. Some also said the public has difficulty understanding the nonprofit landscape, navigating nonprofit systems and finding points of entry.

While there was some interest in a collective impact model, some nonprofit stakeholders noted this typically requires a backbone staff or umbrella organization to coordinate efforts – something the nonprofit sector currently lacks in MetroWest. Nonprofits also saw a potential role for a larger organization to help facilitate, coordinate or fund advocacy work.

Little Support for Operating Expenses

Participants in nonprofit focus groups said while they understand funders' desire to support programs instead of overhead, they often struggle to secure funding to cover basic operating and administration expenses. Recruiting and retaining skilled employees is difficult, given limited pay. There was a desire for funders to provide less restricted funding to well-vetted nonprofits that can demonstrate strong track records. Some participants said the staff time required to write and secure smaller program grants sometimes exceeds the value of the grants themselves.

Difficulties Filling Key Skills and Developing Staff

Nonprofits described a number of skill sets that could improve their work, but are often unavailable due to tight staffing budgets. These included data collection and analysis, program evaluation, and marketing and communications. Some organizations said they also had difficulty finding enough bilingual staff and saw the need for more staff education on cultural competency and diversifying staff. Some stakeholders had interest in exploring ways to share these types of across organizations.

In addition, nonprofit stakeholders described needs for more leadership and professional development.

Philanthropy

Needs for Capacity Building and Regional Thinking

Stakeholders in the philanthropic sector described unmet needs for capacity building in the local nonprofit sector. Participants said the region's smaller nonprofits often have difficulties with managing finances, operating efficiently, diversifying their staff, building staff's language skills, and scaling up their work. Funders said they recognize that nonprofits would like more philanthropic support for basic operating needs, but at the same time, funders see a need for nonprofits to build their capacity to manage their finances effectively and operate more efficiently.

Stakeholders also described an abundance of small nonprofits that spring up as passion projects, but may duplicate existing organizations. There may be opportunities to encourage more regional awareness and coordination on common problems.

Barriers with Local Corporations and Businesses

There was agreement among funders, nonprofit stakeholders and business / executive participants that there is room to improve corporate giving at the local level. Companies with local headquarters often have very specific and strategic priorities for charitable giving, especially at a national scale. Some larger companies participate in local giving, but often in a limited way, such as an annual day of service. Stakeholders were interested in finding ways to better connect with these corporations and communicate local needs that align with their existing funding priorities.

There also are cultural barriers that may limit giving from small businesses owned by immigrants. According to a stakeholder who works closely with immigrant groups, some can be distrustful of government or larger institutions, fearing corruption. Some already do give back to their communities, but often this happens in parallel to organizations like the Foundation.

Municipal Government

Local Government is Fragmented

One municipal stakeholder described local government as "balkanized," or fragmented into small units. For example, he noted that each municipality has its own Board of Health, and that Massachusetts has more than 200 public safety dispatch centers. This fragmentation can make local government inefficient and costly, and some stakeholders felt that the state's strong tradition of home rule can be a barrier to regional cooperation, resource-sharing and problem-solving. It also means that promising initiatives and services in local government often have limited reach beyond municipal borders. Several stakeholders mentioned CrossTown Connect, a public-private initiative to provide transportation services in Acton, Boxborough,

Concord, Littleton, Maynard, Sudbury and Westford as an important example of collaboration across municipal lines to meet a public need. At the same time, they noted that the initiative's reach is limited to the seven participating towns. Many other municipalities offer some type of transportation service for seniors, but the level of service varies from town to town, with little consistency across the region.

Limited Revenues Constrain Municipal Budgets

Local governments in Massachusetts face reduced levels of state aid and limited aid to maintain infrastructure. Property taxes are constrained by Proposition 2 ½, which caps taxes as a percentage of total assessed value and limits annual increases. There also is pressure to control taxes so seniors can continue to afford to live in their communities after retirement.

Limited Research or Analysis on Municipal or Regional Innovation

One stakeholder said there are limited resources offering analysis to municipalities on how to deal with some of the challenges discussed above. There are organizations examining the impacts of legislation and policies at a statewide level, but few that break down issues at the municipal level or provide research, best practices and strategies for local governments in Massachusetts. Participants identified potential policy issues that may be of interest to municipal leaders – such as a local option gas tax or regional coordination of recycling and trash hauling – but require some study and analysis to determine if they are worth pursuing.

Difficulty Finding Qualified Staff and Skilled Communicators

Some local government representatives described challenges hiring qualified people for open positions. It can be difficult for municipalities to compete for workers with specific skills, given limited salaries, and the cost of living in the region makes recruitment more difficult. At the same time, some government stakeholders described difficulties getting important information out to the public as traditional news outlets cover their municipalities less regularly. Local governments generally lack staff with specific marketing or communications expertise, and often find social media to be rife with misinformation.

Potential Strategies to Explore

Recognizing that the challenges discussed were significant, focus group participants focused on collaboration in brainstorming new strategies for the region to potentially pursue.

Convene Collective Work on Regional Problems

Stakeholders saw few organizations in MetroWest that currently act as conveners that pull actors across sectors together to strategize collective efforts to work on region-wide problems. Existing efforts that bring together some of the key players in certain sectors, such as the MetroWest Nonprofit Network and chambers of commerce, could serve as assets the foundation can build on to create a more comprehensive, cross-sector effort.

Increase Coordinated Advocacy Efforts

Some of the challenges that MetroWest faces are much bigger than this region. The high cost of living and troubled transportation systems are problems that affect all of eastern Massachusetts, and most large metropolitan areas. Tackling these issues requires coordinated policy and advocacy efforts. This could take many forms, including increased cooperation among large funders focused on systems change (such as the Barr Foundation) with more local funders like MetroWest. While large funders bring significant resources and systems expertise to issues, local funders and other actors have valuable grassroots, place-specific knowledge. The efforts and knowledge of each can inform the other. Increased study and analysis of policy solutions to issues at the regional level could also help to establish a regional agenda for tackling the region's challenges.

Increase Focus on the Region's Challenges

The Impact MetroWest community indicators project is a strong first step in what many stakeholders saw as a need for the region to better understand and focus on its unique needs. Its impact can be amplified through additional in-depth research projects, convening efforts, targeted initiatives to address specific needs and topics⁸, and other approaches. Stakeholders see promise that this work will help make the case to large potential donors, including local corporations, to focus at least a portion of their giving locally instead of sending most or all of it out of town.

Survey Summary

As part of its community engagement effort, CGR conducted an online survey that was open for roughly five months, from late April to early August 2019. In addition to the English-language survey, Portuguese- and Spanish-language versions also were available. The survey had 14 questions about strengths, assets, services and challenges in the region, as well as demographic characteristics of respondents.

⁸ Impact Essex County is an example of a community foundation indicators project that picked a focus area, income inequality, and targeted investments to address it. See <http://eccf.org/eeo>.

The results are summarized here; a more detailed discussion of the results appears in the Appendix to this report.

Profile of Respondents

There were 1,359 responses to the English-language version of the survey. There were limited responses to the Spanish and Portuguese version – 9 and 2, respectively.

About 62% of respondents live in MetroWest, while a quarter both live and work in it. Just under half of those who responded had a household income over \$100,000, and 26% had incomes under \$100,000. A majority (85%) of respondents were white, with other racial and ethnic groups each representing less than 5% of respondents. Another 5.7% of respondents preferred not to share their race and / or ethnicity.

Survey Findings

The Region's Assets

Survey participants were asked to select up to five factors that make it great to live in MetroWest. More than half of respondents selected the proximity to Boston or Worcester, schools/education, and nature/open space. About 40% said that people, safety, and sense of community are part of what makes it great to live in MetroWest. Responses differed by race and ethnicity. The survey's Asian respondents most often selected schools/education (70%) over proximity to Boston or Worcester; a larger share of the survey's Hispanic respondents selected diversity (42%) than their white counterparts (23%). The survey's African American respondents most often chose the natural environment/parks/open space (41%) as a great factor.

The Region's Challenges and Needs

As for the region's challenges, affordability or cost of living was by far the most frequent response (76%), followed by transportation (57%), housing (42%) and diversity (36%). Other themes that emerged in open responses included variations on problems with housing affordability and growth, traffic congestion and inadequate public transportation, and concerns about services for seniors, mental health and substance abuse. Respondents of all racial and ethnic groups were fairly consistent.

Participants were asked about services they feel their community needs, or needs more of. Public transportation and affordable housing were the two most frequent responses, followed by affordable child care. Asked why people are unable to access available services, 68% of respondents felt that people don't know what services are available. A lack of culturally or linguistically appropriate services also was cited more often as a barrier among African American, (38%), Asian (37%) and Hispanic respondents (33%).

Community Leaders and Important Institutions

Participants were asked if there are specific leaders, community members, institutions or organizations of importance to the community. Municipal leaders, public safety workers, volunteers, faith leaders, teachers and school district leaders were among the most frequent responses. Specific leaders included Senate President Karen Spilka of Ashland and the mayors of both Framingham and Waltham. Respondents indicated they view schools, libraries, houses of worship and college / universities as some of the region's most important institutions.

Appendix

Survey Methodology

The Impact MetroWest survey was distributed online. The survey was open for roughly 5 months, from late April to early August 2019. In addition to the English-language survey, Portuguese- and Spanish-language versions also were available. The survey had 14 questions about strengths, assets, services and challenges in the region, as well as demographic characteristics of respondents.

Profile of Respondents

There were 1,359 responses to the English-language version of the survey. There were limited responses to the Spanish and Portuguese version – 9 and 2, respectively.

About 62% of respondents live in the community, while a quarter both live and work in the community. A small percentage stated they are visitors and consumers and do not live or work in the community.

Do you live or work in this community?

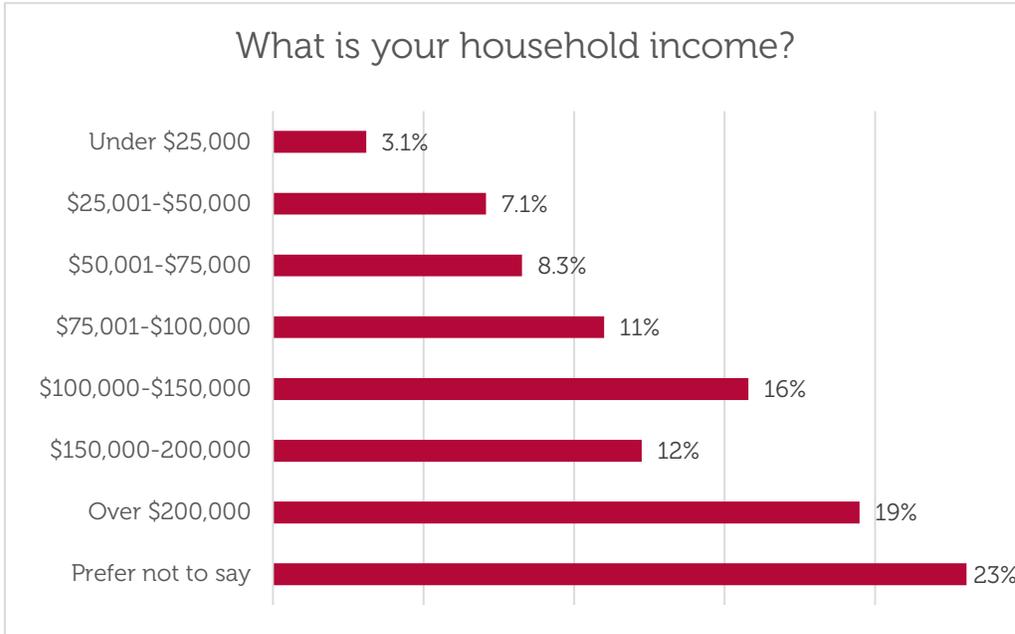
Live	62%
Work	11%
Both live and work	25%
Neither live nor work	3%

Framingham residents were the largest single subgroup of respondents (11%). The dozen communities with the largest numbers of survey participants, representing more than half of all respondents, appear below.

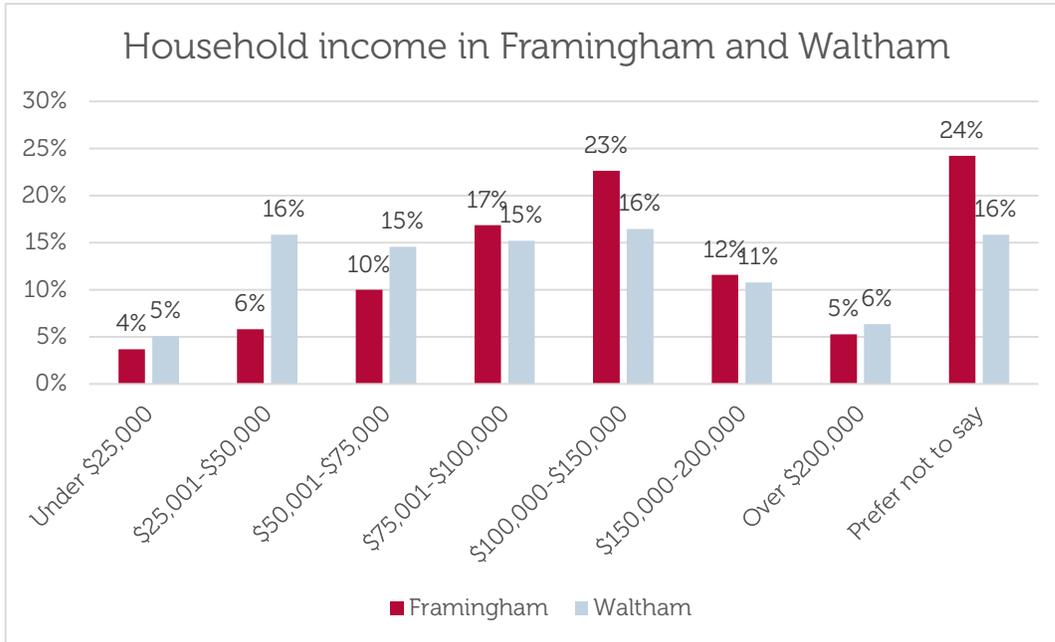
Community	Both live and work	Live	Total residents	% of total respondents
Framingham	61	85	146	11%
Waltham	47	80	127	9%
Lexington	14	50	64	5%
Wellesley	16	43	59	4%
Natick	14	40	54	4%
Sudbury	9	44	53	4%
Ashland	8	44	52	4%
Hopkinton	13	38	51	4%
Holliston	15	35	50	4%
Wayland	12	37	49	4%

Marlborough	15	25	40	3%
Milford	18	21	39	3%

Just under half of those who responded had a household income over \$100,000, and 26% had incomes under \$100,000.



Incomes of respondents were a bit lower in Framingham and Waltham, where the survey received the most responses.



Almost 50% of respondents were between the ages of 45 and 65.

Women (76%) responded to the survey in greater numbers than men (22%). A majority (85%) of respondents were white, with other racial and ethnic groups each representing less than 5% of respondents. Another 5.7% of respondents preferred not to share their race and / or ethnicity.

What is your age?

25-34	8.6%
35-44	19%
45-54	23%
55-65	24%
Over 65	17%
Prefer not to say	2.7%
Under 24	5.6%

Respondents across most racial and ethnic groups most often lived in Framingham and Waltham, but to varying degrees. More than two-thirds of African American respondents (70%) lived in Waltham and Framingham, compared to 48% of Hispanic respondents and 26% of white respondents. Lexington and Framingham were the most common communities of residence for Asian respondents (or 36%).

What is your race and/or ethnicity?

Asian	3.4%
Black/African American	2.4%
Latinx/Hispanic	3.2%
Multiracial	1.5%
Native American	0.4%
Prefer not to say	5.7%
White/Caucasian	85%

When asked to review a list of roles in the community and check all that best described them, the vast majority of respondents identified themselves as residents (79%), followed by community leaders (15%) and people who work in the business sector (8%). Of 207 respondents who filled in their own description, 33% specified that they were volunteers.

Survey Results

Almost all (92%) respondents felt that MetroWest is a great place to live, while 8% felt that it needs improvement or is not a great place to live.

Which community do you know best?

Framingham	14.0%
Waltham	11.6%
Lexington	4.9%
Wellesley	4.9%
Natick	4.6%
Ashland	4.3%
Hopkinton	4.1%
Sudbury	4.1%
Milford	3.8%
Holliston	3.8%
Marlborough	3.8%
Wayland	3.8%

Respondents identified Framingham and Waltham as the two MetroWest communities they know best, followed by Lexington, Wellesley, and Natick. Of the 33 communities to choose from, 68% of respondents said they know 12 best (listed on the left). Stow, Boxborough, Lincoln and Harvard were the least known (all less than 0.5%).

What is great about living here?

Proximity to Boston or Worcester	63%
Schools/education	58%
Natural environment/parks/open space	57%
People	40%
Safety	39%
Sense of community/civic engagement	37%
Accessibility of arts & cultural activities	25%
Diversity	24%
Economy/employment opportunities	21%
Affordability/cost of living	12%
Housing	11%

Survey participants were asked to select up to five factors that make it great to live in MetroWest. More than half of respondents selected the proximity to Boston or

Worcester, schools/education, and nature/open space. About 40% said that people, safety, and sense of community are part of what makes it great to live in MetroWest. About 3% of respondents provided their own responses, several of which echoed choices above (for example, the location and schools). A few people cited public services and restaurants or retail shopping. Responses differed somewhat by race and ethnicity. The survey's 46 Asian respondents most often selected schools/education (70%) over proximity to Boston or Worcester (52%) as a factor that makes it great to live in this region. A larger share of the survey's 43 Hispanic respondents selected diversity (42%) than their white counterparts (23%). The survey's 32 African American respondents most often chose the natural environment/parks/open space (41%) as a great factor, followed by diversity and proximity to Boston or Worcester (both at 38%).

What are some of the biggest challenges in our community?

Affordability/cost of living	76%
Transportation	57%
Housing	42%
Diversity	36%
Support for families/child care	20%
Sense of community/civic engagement	16%
Accessibility of arts & cultural activities	14%
Availability of social services	14%
Economy/employment opportunities	14%
Schools/education	11%
Other (please specify)	10%
Natural environment/parks/open space	10%
High-tech job opportunities	7%
Safety	6%
Proximity to Boston or Worcester	5%
People	4%

As for the region's challenges, affordability or cost of living was by far the most frequent response (76%), followed by transportation (57%), housing (42%) and diversity (36%). Of the 138 respondents who fill in their own responses, 22% were about traffic and congestion. Other themes that emerged in open responses included variations on problems with housing affordability and growth, inadequate public transportation, and concerns about services for seniors, mental health and substance abuse.

Respondents of all racial and ethnic groups cited affordability, housing and transportation among the region's top challenges. African American respondents chose support for families/child care as a challenge at a higher rate than other groups (38%).

What services do you feel we need or need more of in your community?

Public transportation	64%
Affordable housing	63%
Affordable child care	40%
Access to adult education (English as a second language, GED, etc.)	20%
Job readiness and placement support	19%
Access to nutritious food	17%
Access to health care	16%
Access to parks/open space	15%
Quality child care	15%
Other (please specify)	13%

Participants were asked about services they feel their community needs, or needs more of. Public transportation and affordable housing were the two most frequent responses, followed by affordable child care.

Of the 171 respondents who filled in their own responses, support services for seniors, special needs, and access to mental health services and support emerged as themes. Others underscored housing affordability and cost of living problems, particularly for empty nesters or first-time homebuyers. Some respondents also suggested additional bilingual services for Spanish and Portuguese speakers.

Hispanic respondents most often cited affordable housing as the service most needed (65%). This group also selected access to adult education (English as a second language, GED, etc.) as a key need (47%). African American respondents also most often selected affordable housing as a need (72%), followed by affordable child care (66%). Responses from Asian participants largely mirrored the overall results.

What are reasons why people aren't able to access available services?

People don't know what services are available	68%
Lack of financial resources	50%
Transportation	47%
Fear of or discomfort with asking for support	38%
Lack of collaboration among service providers	24%
Lack of child care	22%

Lack of culturally or linguistically appropriate service providers	22%
Services provided aren't effective	15%
Other (please specify)	9%

Asked why people are unable to access available services, 68% of respondents felt that people don't know what services are available. Half the respondents thought that lack of financial resources was another possible reason. Another 47% identified transportation as a barrier, and 38% said people have fear or discomfort with asking for support. 119 respondents provided their own reasons, which included fragmented or ineffective information about services, or a lack of adequate service offerings.

Respondents across racial and ethnic groups most often selected lack of awareness of available services as a top barrier. A little more than half of African American respondents also selected fear of or discomfort with asking for support. A lack of culturally or linguistically appropriate services also was cited more often as a barrier among African American, (38%), Asian (37%) and Hispanic respondents (33%).

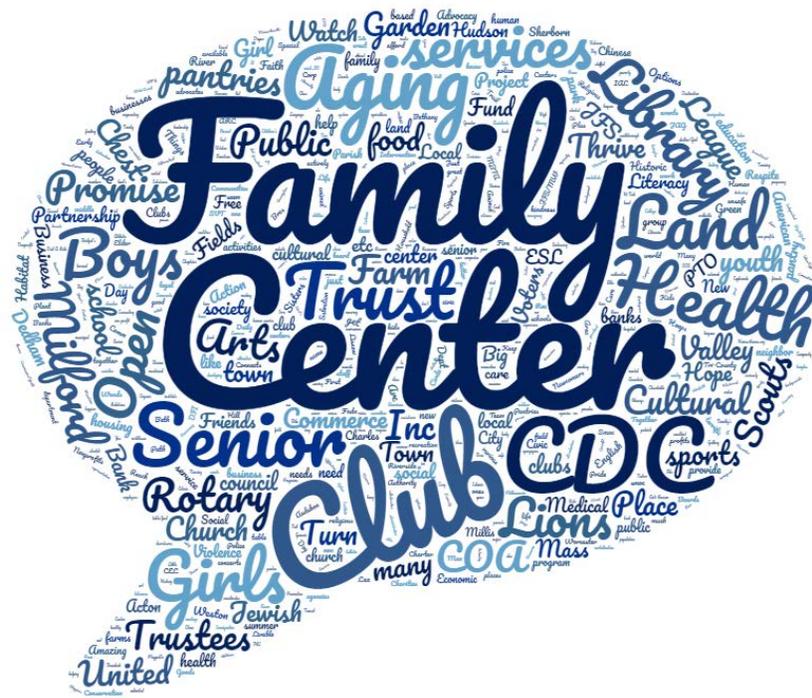
Finally, participants were asked if there are specific leaders, community members, institutions or organizations of importance to the community.

Are there specific leaders, community members, institutions or organizations that you think are especially important to our community?

People	58%
Institutions	59%
Organizations	69%

Organizations

934 respondents also named organizations they perceived as particularly important to the community. CGR again sought to group similar responses together and make note of trends. In some cases, these overlapped with responses to the question about institutions. Organizations that provide human services or mental / behavioral health services – including South Middlesex Opportunity Council, Advocates, and Wayside Youth and Family Support Network – were the most common response. This was followed closely by organizations that provide recreational opportunities or other types of youth-focused programming, including Boys and Girls Clubs, youth centers and Waltham Partnership for Youth. Food pantries and cupboards, along with other types of anti-hunger organizations, also were a frequent response. We provide a more detailed breakdown of categories below.



Human service or mental / behavioral health providers	100
Youth recreation / programming organizations	94
Food pantry / anti-hunger groups	86
Civic groups (e.g. neighborhood groups, Lions Club)	73
Philanthropic groups / funders (e.g. foundations)	69
Senior services (e.g. Councils on Aging)	61
Conservation / environmental groups	59
Houses of worship	59
Arts / cultural organizations or venues	51
Community development organizations	46
Schools and school districts	38
Basic needs / emergency assistance programs	37
Ethnic / cultural organizations	28
Local charities (e.g. community chests)	25
Municipal government workers or departments	23