

Genesee Valley Health Partnership (GVHP)

FINAL REPORT OF FINDINGS

6 FOCUS GROUPS WITH LIVINGSTON COUNTY RESIDENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE MAPP PROCESS

COMMUNITY THEMES AND STRENGTHS ASSESSMENT

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Prepared for: Reid Perkins, REID Consulting, Inc.
Genesee Valley Health Partnership

Prepared by: Nan Burgess-Whitman, Research Consultant and Moderator
Qualitative Research Practice

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1.0 Executive Summary

This report is a summary of qualitative findings derived from six focus groups held with residents of Livingston County, New York. The groups were engaged as result of the MAPP Planning Process (Mobilizing Action through Planning and Partnerships) ¹ assessment initiative being conducting by the Genesee Valley Health Partnership. This particular phase of the project is designed to obtain community-fed information and insight about quality of life issues and assets; it will serve to inform a larger community-wide strategic plan for improving public community health.

The focus group participants addressed the “Community Strengths and Themes” Assessment, which provided an opportunity to understand the perceived challenges and opportunities for living in Livingston County. Findings from the research are presented in themes and strengths identified by the participants of the focus groups. The themes are then detailed in the remaining narrative report with supporting verbatim included where appropriate.

GENERAL FINDINGS

Impact on Quality of Life	Themes
<i>Strengths</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment: rural, peaceful, natural beauty • Social Network Support: From neighbors, for elderly and for kids • Community Pride
<i>Weaknesses</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More access to health care services needed • Public Transportation : does not meet needs • Lack of economic opportunity and growth • Elderly housing is limited • Community leaders not advocates of change • Increase drug problem among young adults

Participants in the group discussed their top-of-mind priorities for change. Their recommendations are outlined in the report that follows.

¹ For more information, visit www.naccho.org

2.0 Introduction

2.1 Background

As of the year 2000, there are an estimated 65,000 residents in Livingston County., primarily a farming community with light industrial manufacturing, a prison system, a State University and small business owners. Livingston County is also home to approximately 6,000 families at poverty level and a significant number of unemployed, welfare-dependent residents.

In an effort to assess and address public health issues in Livingston County, the **Genesee Valley Health Partnership**, a consortium of public health providers and officials in the County, has initiated and implemented the **MAPP** Assessment strategic planning process. **MAPP** (Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships) is a carefully outlined assessment effort driven primarily by the community's strengths, needs and desires. It is a collaborative effort of County health stakeholders and community members that seeks to result in a successful "roadmap" of Livingston County's quality of living and public health activities.

Briefly stated, there are four MAPP assessments supported by the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) that provide critical insights into challenges and opportunities throughout the community. The results of each assessment are not held in isolation; in fact, the issues and systems under study inform each other in a cyclical fashion.

- ❑ **Community Themes and Strengths Assessments:** Identifies issues that interest the community, perceptions about quality of life and community assets.
- ❑ **Local Public Health System Assessment:** Measures the capacity and performance of the local public health system as well as all entities that contribute to the public's health.
- ❑ **Community Health Status Assessment:** Assesses data about health status, quality of life, and risk factors in the community.
- ❑ **Forces of Change Assessment:** Identifies forces that are or will be affecting the community or the local public's health system.

2.2 The MAPP Assessment: Community Themes and Strengths Assessment

The Themes and Strengths Assessment identifies issues that interest the community, uncovers perceptions about the quality of life and the community assets of Livingston County as defined by its residents. As mentioned earlier, the process informs the other three assessments and results in a collaborative effort of findings for pursuing long-range planning goals.

This report is a summary of findings that represent “voices of Livingston County”. The research was conducted in February of 2002. The findings outlined in this report reflect six community focus groups held in Geneseo, Dansville and Mt. Morris, Livingston County.

The MAPP Assessment Model



2.3 About This Report: Research Approach

This report summarizes key findings from qualitative focus group research implemented by Harris Interactive. The report was prepared from review of the moderator’s focus group notes, the post-group debriefing sessions, audio tape review, and transcript review. It is intended to provide **directional information** only for the overall MAPP effort being conducted by the Genesee Valley Health Partnership.

Performing focus groups is an appropriate method for obtaining the feedback GVHP seeks because focus groups help researchers to identify key issues, as well as to explore in some depth the factors that influence differences in attitudes and behaviors. This methodology is an excellent tool for conducting exploratory research.

2.6 About The Groups

Six focus groups were conducted at three sites: The Genesee Government Center, a conference room at the Noyes Community Hospital in Dansville, and the offices of the Genesee Valley Cooperative Extension in Mt. Morris.

COMMUNITY THEMES AND STRENGTHS:		FOCUS GROUP DATA
Group	Date	Segment
#1/Genesee	2/11/02	DSS Job training program
#2/Genesee	2/14/02	26-40 year olds
#3/Dansville	2/14/02	26-40 year olds
#4/Genesee	2/21/02	Office of Aging: 50+
#5/Mt. Morris	2/21/02	4H/Teens
#6/Mt. Morris	2/21/02	Parents of Teens

All sessions were audio taped; Group #1,3,4, and 6 were observed by Harris Interactive. A combined total of 55 residents participated in the groups.

The Genesee Valley Health Partnership, in coordination with REID Consulting, Inc., was identified as the sponsor of the study during both the recruiting and the actual groups. The groups were led by graduate students from the Greater Rochester Collaborative Masters of Social Work. A moderator’s discussion guide was developed based on recommendations set forth by the MAPP organization and was used in all groups. It is attached in the Appendix.

2.8 Recruiting Respondents

Every attempt to recruit participants to ensure representation across a wide range of ages, genders, cultural/ethnic heritages, years of experience, etc, was made. The study budget allowed for the Harris Interactive Field Team to recruit two groups, which included 26-40 year olds in Geneseo and Mt. Morris. Other groups represented were recruited from existing organizations and clubs within the county. Nonetheless, our respondent base was quite diverse both across groups and within each individual group.

2.9 The Group Discussion

This report is presented in the format of which the discussion was to occur in the groups. The topic areas start broad and get specific as the respondents warm-up to the topic and a rapport is established with the moderator.

The guide was developed and designed to move smoothly in order to address two broad topic areas: 1) *A Quality of Life* section (access of services, concerns, recommendations) and 2) *Health related issues* (access of services for health, quality, services and cost). Specific topics for discussion as described below and were designed to address these topic areas:

- I. **Identifying the “Ideal Community”:** The purpose of this topic was to identify resident's perception of what elements that are found in an ideal community.
- II. **One Word** to describe the community in which you live: The purpose of this exercise was to hear how residents would identify their community from a “top of mind” framework. Typically, as was the case during the groups, this gives us an immediate read on their opinions about the quality of life.
- III. **Identifying Weaknesses:** Residents were given an opportunity to discuss negative aspects of living in Livingston Co.
- IV. **Identifying Strengths:** Residents were given an opportunity to discuss positive aspects of living in Livingston Co.
- V. **Discussion Points:** These specific topical areas were critical to address as they identify categories of strengths and weaknesses. The topics defined have a direct impact on residents; they were addressed by varying degree in each of the groups. A list of these

questions is available in the moderator's guide, and is also presented in the section to follow.

VI. **Recommendations:** Feedback from participants is included as summary information.

Verbatim Comments

Where appropriate, verbatim comments have been provided to support the overall finding. To this end, verbatim comments are annotated as follows:

Group #1→G1	DSS Job training Program <i>Total in attendance: 19</i>
Group #2→G2	26-40 year olds (Geneseo) <i>Total in attendance: 10</i>
Group #3→G3	26-40 year olds (Dansville) <i>Total in attendance: 3</i>
Group #4→G4	50 years old + <i>Total in attendance: 8</i>
Group #5→G5	Teens in 4H (Mt. Morris) <i>Total in attendance: 8</i>
Group #6→G6	Parents of Teens(Mt. Morris) <i>Total in attendance: 7</i>

Note: Respondents recruited by Harris Interactive (Groups 2 and 3) were paid an incentive of \$25 for their participation. This incentive was necessary when recruiting for the specific age groups; they were not easily identified through existing clubs and organizations.

3.0 Summary of Findings with Verbatim Comments

3.1 The Ideal Community: As defined by Livingston County Residents

Respondents were asked how they would define an ideal community. They were encouraged to engage in an open-ended brainstorm, and not think specific to Livingston County. Many of the same themes arose in each of the groups, suggesting that these may be starting points for any action plans developed.

- ❑ Safe and Secure Community
- ❑ Community that has natural beauty of surroundings
- ❑ Supportive networks of people
- ❑ Available activities
- ❑ Employment Opportunities

As expected, these themes mirror the later identification of strengths and weaknesses.

3.1.1 *Theme #1: Safe and Secure*

Feeling safe and knowing your neighbor is "secure" from outsiders is critical for residents in Livingston Co. They want a visible presence of law enforcement officials, and programs to inform residents on keeping your home from "harms way", (ie:fire safety and prevention). The Dansville group was particularly outspoken about this area:

"...a safe community, especially for kids, a supervised setting" (G3)

"...the drug problem is really bad and I don't like that my kids are exposed to it" (G3)

Teens from Mt. Morris say their ideal community includes shopping malls; they can meet up with friends, or shop without having to drive the distance:

" ...gotta have a mall.. Right now, we go into the City (Rochester) and there is less reason to get in trouble when you have somewhere to hang out" (G5)

3.1.2 *Theme #2: Maintain Natural Beauty*

Respondents like their ideal community to have parks, camping areas, hiking trails and "open spaces". They felt especially strong about this as it relates to their children:

"..they need to understand that everything good doesn't look like suburbia" (G1)

3.1.3 *Theme #3: Supportive Networks of People*

Residents in all groups comment enthusiastically that their ideal community would have a "small town" feel:

"...a place where everyone knew each other" (G4)

In addition, residents would be able to rely on each other for support during difficult times or when encountering a hardship:

"...people would help each other out, ya know, and take them to appointments and shopping" (G4)

3.1.4 *Theme #4: Plenty of Activities*

Respondents are quick to mention events, outdoor activities and community get-togethers as a part of their ideal community. Most comments reflect **strong family and friendship values**:

"...close the stores on Sunday and have a family day!" (G6)

"...a community that has a "know your neighbors" theme to it" (G6)

The kids have similar recommendations and desires:

"...Places we can go to socialize "(G5)

The teens in particular would like a McDonalds restaurant, and a place to play sports in the winter:

“...I can’t live without McDonald’s.” (G5)

“...something like a sports complex, or a central athletic facility where we can hang out with friends” (G5)

“...an amusement park, movie theatres and nice restaurants, like Bahama Breeze” (G5)

3.1.3 Theme #4: Employment Opportunities

Respondents also acknowledge that an ideal community has employment and job opportunities to attract and retain new residents. The community would have economic growth and opportunity for the younger residents as well. These jobs would pay above minimum wage, enough to stimulate the economy and keep it strong:

“...there should be industry that pays well, and jobs close by” (G2)

“...the community would attract good teachers and the schools would improve” (G2)

Teens in particular talk about wanting to return to their hometown after college to work. The ideal community would have those work opportunities for the future generation.

Other characteristics of an ideal community included:

- Updated libraries and internet access
- Combined activities for youth and seniors alike
- Comprehensive and accessible health services
- Annual county-wide events

Respondents in these focus groups say they borrow “ideal community” attributes from their knowledge of what is provided in Rochester, and to some extent, Geneseo.

... “we rely on Geneseo for everything” (G6)

3.2 One Word: Defining the Livingston County Communities

A quick but powerful verbal exercise was conducted with each of the groups. Themes that impact "quality of life" emerged rapidly as respondents revealed one word that described their community. The answers proved to be a springboard for lively discussions centered on strengths and weaknesses.

The responses range from negative to positive, and include the following adjectives.

- **Family:** *"I am related to everyone!"*
- **Self-serving:** *"People are just confined to what they need to do"*
- **Rural:** *"...but getting to be a suburb of Rochester"*
- **Cliques:** *"...little groups of people doing their own thing"*
- **Narrow-minded:** *"...not really thinking of the big picture"*
- **Isolated:** *"...we have to drive a ways to get sugar at a supermarket"*

Other words used to describe the Livingston County community:

Provincial Intimate Apathetic "Small-town" feel Friendly

3.3 Respondent Perceptions Regarding Quality of Life in Livingston County

All six groups of respondents were appreciative of the opportunity to discuss their viewpoints of the Livingston County life. Nearly all of them were quite verbal; and not surprisingly, many were informal leaders of various clubs, organizations and civic groups.

According to respondents, quality of life in Livingston County is defined in purely positive and negative terms. Given a forum, respondents were apt to discuss more negatives than positives in hopes of being "heard." Many wanted to understand how the information was being used and to whom would it be shared.

Interestingly, each group had their own character, and despite being led into diverse directions from the moderator, it was apparent that discussions would center naturally around one or two particular themes or concerns. Although *group-think* can often contribute to this, it wasn't the case with these discussions. Respondents were very clearly homogenous in their thinking **within** groups, but **across** groups, there were significant differences. The differences surfaced as "priority concerns" and are illustrated in the charts below.

From A Citizen's Point of View: The Quality of Life

GROUP #1

Type of Respondent	Negatives	Positives
DSS Job Training program members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ More social activities needed ✓ Scarcity of jobs, good pay ✓ Lack of industry ✓ Migration of youth out of LC ✓ Lack of trust in leadership ✓ Entrenched bureaucracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Great place for being outdoors

Priorities: Economic Opportunity

Group #2

Type of Respondent	Negatives	Positives
26-40 y/o, Geneseo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Lack of involvement ✓ Conservative climate ✓ Isolation from neighboring communities ✓ Public transportation not existent or reliable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Strong faith-based organizations ✓ Family and friends powerful support ✓ Volunteer services, fire and ambulance ✓ Comprehensive health care available

Priorities: Maintain Relationships

Group 3

Type of Respondent	Negatives	Positives
Dansville 26-40 y/o	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Unemployment ✓ Property appearance ✓ Drug use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Small community, close knit ✓ Neighbors are helpful and supportive ✓ Beautiful surroundings

Priorities: Aesthetic and visual appeal

Group 4

	Negatives	Positives
Office of Aging 50+	Transportation Housing for elderly Access to respite services Social isolation Segregation of classes Drug use	"We take care of own" Church-based support and services

Priorities: Support Services

Group 5

	Negatives	Positives
Teens	Transportation Lack of jobs Activities, recreational facilities Safety and security	Town parades and events Activities associated with other towns Outdoor sports Community support of kids

Priorities: Opportunities and Activities

Group 6

	Negatives	Positives
Parents of Teens	Reduction of nursing homes Parental involvement Lack of adequate transportation	Safe feeling Know each other Opportunities from SUNY campus Strong faith community Good place to raise children

Priorities: Caretaker resources

The focus groups served to prove there is a great deal of respect for others, and a sense of group cohesiveness among respondents from Livingston County. This is both unique and noteworthy. The Livingston County is diverse in its composition, but seemingly homogenous as a voice.

3.4 Discussion Points

Throughout the structure of the focus group, respondents commented on the "current state" of Livingston County, which helped to provide background and contrast to the identified positives and negatives. Below is a summary of what residents are saying about the "state of the county".

◆ Is the community a good place to raise children?	General opinion: Mixed
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Residents in these focus groups emphasize family values throughout their discussions. Quality of day care, in particular, does not appear to be an issues, but school-age based activities are lacking. Respondents suggest community gatherings to keep kids busy and active, and stress that kids "need to meet other people "from around the county.

Is this a good community to grow old?

General opinion: No

There are signals from demographics alone (aging baby boomers, people living longer) that the demand for services for the elderly will increase dramatically by the turn of the century.

Livingston County residents say they need better, more reliable transportation to medical appointments and social services. The respondents also say the elderly rely heavily on friends and family to provide support, both physical and emotional. The migration of young adults and families out of the county often results in aging parents and grandparents being left behind.

Is there economic opportunity in the community?

General opinion: No

Affordable housing, maybe, but jobs and job security, training and education are high on a list of concerns for these residents. Small, locally owned businesses are having a difficult time surviving. There is a high percentage of welfare recipients that cannot jobs that are above minimum wage.

Is the community a safe place to live?

General opinion: Mixed

On the whole, residents feel safe and rely on "neighborhood watch" to maintain a sense of security. However, there is a growing concern centered on increased drug use and the potential for resulting violence. Teens express they do not feel as safe as they used to, but the parents of these teens nearly brag about the safety of the community.

Are there networks of support for individuals and families? General opinion: Yes

The willingness to provide support to those in need, often at the expense of personal wants and needs, is mentioned with regularity. Residents feel compelled to help the elderly, support the kids and look after each other whenever it is necessary. This informal network of care-giving is a significant player in the defining the quality of life.

Do you think a lot of people feel they can make the community a better place to live? General opinion: Mixed

Residents have the impression that it is difficult to change the leadership's conservative viewpoint and witness any changes in Livingston County. Despite feeling powerless, they are convinced that people care and when rallying together, they can make a difference.

Do you think there is respect among community leaders and partners as they make decisions about the community goals? General opinion: No

From the respondent's point of view, residents have little influence and sometimes respect for community leadership on the whole. There is appears to be evidence of networks of "decision-makers" that are grouped together and that oppose one another. It was mentioned there are leaders that seem to be rooted in an "old boys" network.

Is there a sense of responsibility, or shared pride about the community? General opinion: Yes

Livingston County residents have great pride in their towns and villages. Many come from families that settled as LC was being established. Their pride in the beauty of the Genesee Valley is un-mistakable.

3.5 Respondent Recommendations

Through these focus groups, respondents were given the opportunity to discuss issues and related recommendations for change. The compiled summaries of these recommendations are outlined below.

3.5.1 Issues in Education

From local to national scenarios, concerns about the level of quality instruction and resources has been widely raised. Curriculum decision, budget considerations and teacher salaries are all contributing factors to an often chaotic system. Livingston County is not immune to this, but overall the quality of education provided to children is acceptable, according to the study respondents.

Two focus groups were particularly vocal about educational issues in Livingston County. The DSS Job Training recipients (G1), and the parents of teens (G6). The discussion was largely centered on activities for their children, but they also spoke about the formal education their kids receive in the Geneseo and Mt. Morris school districts. Although these respondents report being reasonably satisfied with the educational system, they did have some recommendations, or a “vision for the future”.

Respondent suggestions include:

- Make a concerted attempt to lower the student to teacher ratio
- Less focus on standardized testing and pressure to improve test scores
- More education available in specific industries, such as automotive and carpentry
- More computers and well-stocked libraries

3.5.2 Issues in Housing

Key recommendation themes emerged from all groups (with the exception of the teens) when housing was discussed. The revitalization of substandard housing is a major issue in Dansville; the elderly need choices that will keep them among loved ones. Residents say:

- Village ordinances should meet minimal standards for property upkeep and appearance. Section 8 Housing in Dansville is an “eyesore”, and shows a lack of concern on the County and welfare recipient’s part to care about the community. Most low to poverty level income residents reside around Main Street in Dansville, so residences are clearly visible to those traveling through the center of town.
- Housing options should be increased, especially for the elderly who are less mobile or need assisted living arrangements. If residents were housed locally, family support would be maximized.

3.5.3 Issues in Health Care

There are indications from these respondents that Livingston County meets the health care needs of its' residents. However, the community voices a concern about the lack of access to some services. It is apparent that existing resources have not met those needs. In addition, the increased presence of illegal drugs has prompted some residents to wonder if treating physicians are able to recognize drug-related emergencies, for example.

Overall, few recommendations were made when it came to looking at improvements for health care and services. There were several, however, from Group 6 (Parents of teens), Group 3 (Dansville, 26-40 y/o), and Group 4 (Over 50+):

- Create a clearinghouse of services for the elderly and their caretakers to draw upon. Although services are perceived as existing, they are decentralized, and unknown.
- Transportation: Increase access to medical services and appointments: Especially significant for the less mobile and those without immediate family and friends (ie: elderly). Some specialists, based primarily in Rochester, are hard to access.

- Extend or increase medical services hours of operation, to A) accommodate large families (who can all see the Dr. at once) , and B) for convenience of single parents who work. Evening and Saturday hours were suggested.

3.5.4 Economic issues

Livingston County lacks evidence of momentum in economic growth. Many factors contribute to this, and together they demonstrate a lack of opportunity to the degree that a significant number of adults migrate out of the area. Most respondents say at the top of their list is a better economic base for young adults. They suggest major industrial companies should move their operations to Livingston County to stimulate the economy. Higher wages and quality benefits packages are naturally desired.

Suggestions also included the town and village leadership should do whatever they can to promote the small business owner and help financially, if necessary.

All indications point to investments on the part of key stakeholders:

- ✓ Expand social conscience
- ✓ Invest in neighborhoods
- ✓ Invest in families
- ✓ Invest in children

3.3 Community Assets

Despite problematic issues in all of the identified areas, Livingston County maintains its foundation of physical, emotional and cultural assets. Residents identify most with their beautiful natural environment – it is a strikingly powerful observation. Notably obvious is the abundance of social and emotional support networks among family and friends. Respondents further identify the opportunities brought forth by SUNY Geneseo as well as a widening base of culturally diverse residents.

These assets should be seen as existing **core strengths**; they have remained relatively stable over time.

Core Assets: Strengths of Livingston County

- **Environmental Assets:** The natural beauty and rural landscape of the Genesee Valley offers the timeless benefit of peace for its residents. Stoneybrook and Letchworth State Parks attract tourists year round. Low population density and undeveloped land is of significant appealing for many who choose to live in Geneseo, Mt. Morris and Dansville. This is the cornerstone to retaining residents and driving economic development through tourism.
- **Social Support Assets:** "Connections " occur regularly among the people of Livingston County in a number of ways. Residents express they feel a great sense of community and support from one another through activities, churches, clubs, schools and individually-owned businesses. This outreach and support is felt particularly with the aging population, who come to rely on family and friends for emotional and physical support. Community pride is strongly evident.
- **Cultural Assets:** The historical landscape, the State college and its students, and an increase in diversity of residents make up the cultural tapestry of Livingston County. Most respondents in this study say they welcome people from all backgrounds; it is their way of understanding the larger world.

What Can Be Done?

Without a doubt, the discussion groups understand that all of these identified Themes and Strengths are powerfully inter-related. Some issues are sequences of larger problems, for example insufficient economic development leads to insufficient family income, which leads to a poor starts in life. The problems build on each other, and have an ever-increasing impact on the community as a whole.

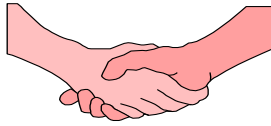
The time is right for the MAPP Initiative to develop strategies for change. Although the assets as defined earlier have remained relatively stable, they will be threatened by the current forces of change alive in the county and nation-wide. The Genesee Valley Health Partnership has created a challenging and socially significant opportunity for themselves to strategize against the loss of assets.

Course for Action: Applying Strengths and Themes to MAPP Strategy



Environmental Assets

"We have beautiful land"



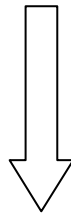
Social Assets

"We help each other"

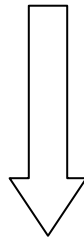


Cultural Assets

"We have new strengths among us"



FORCES OF CHANGE IDENTIFIED



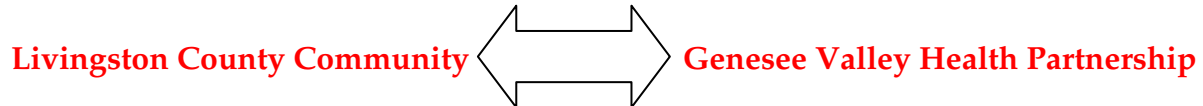
Establish Priority Forces

How do forces of change impact identified assets?

Can assets be maintained under these forces?

What strategies can be employed to embrace assets and create new ones?

ACTION PLAN AND IMPLEMENTATION



- **Community participation**
- **Democratic Problem solving**
- **Consensus and Communication**