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Quitman County Child Wellbeing Project Final Report

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Executive Summary

Non-profit organizations in Quitman County, MS commissioned the University of Mississippi, Community First Research Center for Wellbeing and Creative Achievement (CREW) to conduct research and develop a child wellbeing assessment for their community. CREW used community-based participatory research methods to determine the community's top concerns in child health, education, and safety and identify existing local programs available to address each concern.

Background

In February 2022, The Marks Project based in Marks, MS commissioned CREW through the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi to assess child wellbeing in Quitman County, MS. In August 2022, CREW began research with the following goals:

- Identify unique child wellbeing concerns in Quitman County.
- Identify existing local programs most likely to address each concern.

These findings were discussed with community members and local programs at a town hall event in Marks, MS, at which the community was able to prioritize the concerns as they saw necessary to their children's wellbeing.

Research Design

CREW used the community-based participatory research approach for this assessment, which consisted of interviews focusing on child mental and physical health, education, and safety. CREW staff interviewed Quitman County community members who were most likely to interact with children in one or more of these arenas, such as:

Community Members	Number of Participants
School Teachers + Staff	15
Medical Professionals + Staff	5
Law Enforcement	2
Parents/Guardians	2
Children	1

These interviews were analyzed in four stages:

1. *Coding*: Interviews were transcribed and filtered into a list of ideas.
2. *Categorizing*: Ideas were separated into the following outline: Concerns, Needs/Wants, and Current Resources; then, separated into three categories: Concerns Across the Board, Most Serious Concerns, and Concerns with Easiest Solutions.
3. *Ranking*: Concerns were itemized and tallied among interviewees to determine how many times each concern was mentioned.
4. *Programming*: The top three concerns and needs/wants in each category were matched with existing local programs or used to design simple additions to existing programs.

Finally, CREW hosted a town hall meeting to present these findings to the Marks Project, the Quitman County Arts Council, the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, and interested community members. Town hall attendees were asked to prioritize the proposed concerns to inform participating organizations for their future programming.

Qualitative Findings

During the interview process, community members were asked about their concerns for children in their community, and many community members proposed solutions to their concerns. The following concerns are the top-rated concerns along with community-proposed solutions in each category.

Lack of Resources:

This category included specific and generalized concerns regarding lack of established resources in the health, education, and safety categories. Mentioned 75 times in the interview process, lack of resources was the top concern among those interviewed.

Examples:

- Nothing for children to do
- Need for diversity of grocery options
- Limited options for preventive care or minor treatment

Proposed Solutions:

- Additional daycare options
- Afterschool programming
- Neighborhood parent groups
- 24-hour daycare
- Boys & girls club
- Community arts clubs (music, theater, art)
- Bike track
- Diversified grocer options
- Additional clinical or healthcare support

Exhaustion of Existing Resources:

This category is the culmination of individual variables indicating a concern for the limited current resources in the community. When reporting current/established resources, those interviewed refer either directly to over-utilized resources or expressed concern for the effectiveness of resources when “spread thin” a total of 39 times in the interview process.

Examples:

- Teacher & administration conflicts
- Shared social workers in school district
- Inactive child protective services

Proposed Solutions:

- Additional social workers
- Increased CPS presence

Safety:

This category regards specific safety concerns of those interviewed for the children of Quitman county at home, school, and in the community.

Examples:

- Access to guns
- Gang activity
- Drug use in homes
- Cars speeding in neighborhoods with children

Proposed Solutions:

- Weapon safety education
 - Drug-free safe spaces
 - Crossing guards
 - More street signs
-

Nutrition & Food Access:

This category encompasses lack of resources related to children’s diets as well as specific health conditions affecting their overall health.

Examples:

- Large Junk Food/Fast Food Consumption
- Obesity, Diabetes, Hypertension, & Malnutrition
- Lack of Food Access Outside of School

Proposed Solutions:

- Farm-to-table programs
 - Encourage SNAP participation
 - Diversify grocery options
-

Mental Health Issues:

This category concerns the mental health of children in the community, ranging from documented concerns and community perception of mental health related topics.

Examples:

- Suicidal Thoughts & Actions
- Behavioral Issues In School
- Negative Stigma of Mental Health

Proposed Solutions:

- Advertisements/Education on conditions and resources
 - Mental health education
 - Increased teacher referrals to school counselors
-

Education:

This category concerns challenges and concerns associated with educational resources and programming.

Examples:

- Low classroom involvement
- Lack of awareness of higher education options

Proposed Solutions:

- Class facebook pages
- More zoom options
- Parent Teacher Association
- College fairs
- Campus tours
- Contact University Diversity and Inclusion offices

Community-Prioritized Concerns

Town hall attendees reviewed the research findings and developed their own prioritized list of concerns and solutions for children in Quitman County. The first table represents the original prioritization, while the second table outlines action items the community, in partnership with CREW will pursue in the next 12 months. While community organizations in Quitman County may review the categorized concerns, organizations have a better chance at meeting the community’s primary needs by acting on the following prioritized concerns.

Concern	Solutions
First: Gun Safety	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Gun Lock Giveaway* 2) Obtain Grants for Gun Safety Training* 3) Provide Transportation*
Second: Overall Safety	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Safety Day* 2) Insurance Access Guide (pamphlet) 3) Pursue infrastructure grants to build speed bumps & add additional signage
Third: Higher Education & Career Options	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Increase After-School Transportation Options 2) College Fairs & Campus Tours 3) Groundhog Day

*indicates a solution with an associated action item below

Next Steps:

1. Safety Day

Quitman County non-profits and leaders, with support from UM CREW and UM CPS will plan a “Safety Day” for spring 2023. Safety Day will be hosted simultaneously in each of Quitman County’s communities (Marks, Lambert, Sledge, Falcon, & Darling). Safety Day will address several aspects of safety (to be identified by each community), but commonly will include gun safety training and resource education.

2. Entrepreneur Day

Community leaders will work through school counselors to host an Entrepreneur Day. These activities will partner local high school students with local businesses, schools, and non-profits focused on economic and workforce development.

3. Social Media Best Practices Guide

UM CPS will collaborate with local educators to establish a set of best practices for social media use in the classroom. This “best practices” guide will outline potential legal concerns, include templates for forms (parental permission), and guidance on safely posting information.