Basic Needs & Economic Development Focus Area

As the Community Foundation looks toward deepening its community impact, anchoring efforts in Basic Needs and Economic Development offers a powerful opportunity to both meet urgent challenges and invest in lasting change. Basic needs, such as food security, housing, transportation, and financial stability, will always be part of the Foundation's work. However, there is growing recognition that addressing these needs effectively requires not only responsive funding, but also proactive efforts to disrupt the cycles that cause individuals and families to struggle in the first place.

By positioning itself as a convener, the Foundation can support bringing together the diverse network of basic needs providers to share learning, coordinate efforts, and collectively respond to emerging pressures. While also supporting the group to not only address short-term crisis intervention but also long-term systems change, aligning more support toward root cause solutions that prevent families/individuals from falling into poverty in the first place. Supporting new approaches, piloting innovations, and connecting stakeholders across sectors will be critical to this transformation.

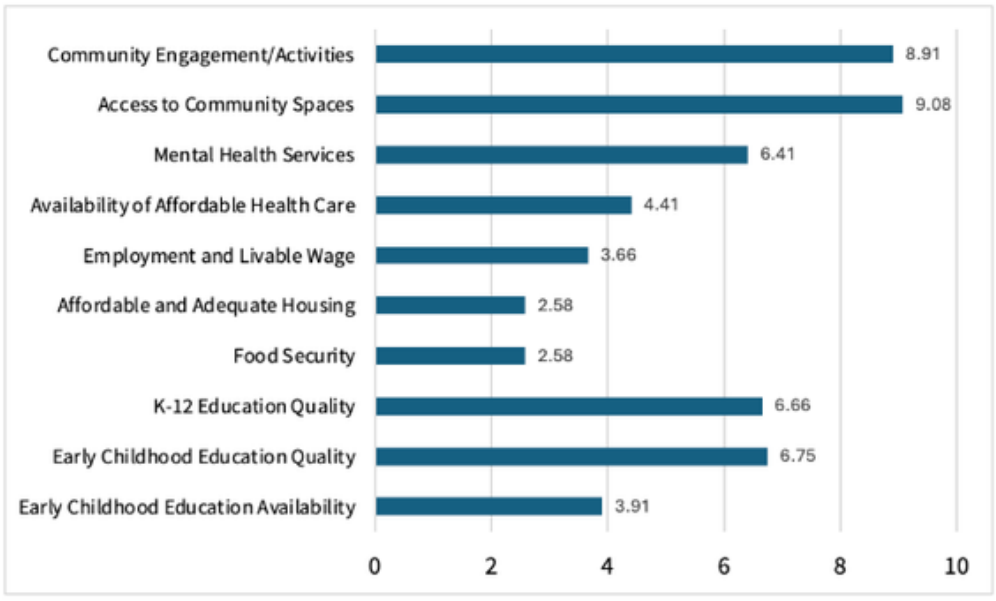
At the same time, the Foundation has a key role to play in supporting inclusive economic development, ensuring that local economic growth translates into opportunity for all residents. With diverse funding strategies, such as impact investing, the Foundation could direct capital toward small business development, workforce pipelines, and community infrastructure projects that foster economic mobility. By actively partnering with economic development leaders, the Foundation can help support job creation, entrepreneurship, and investment efforts that align with community values and needs.

Taken together, a focus on Basic Needs and Economic Development allows the Foundation to not only respond to the most pressing issues facing residents today, but to shape a more stable, equitable, and thriving future for Isabella County. It is an approach rooted in compassion, aligned with strategy, and uniquely suited to the Foundation's credibility, connections, and commitment to long-term impact.

HOW WE GOT HERE

As part of its early strategic planning, the Mt. Pleasant Area Community Foundation gathered both data and community input to better understand needs and opportunities in Isabella County. This included public data, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and a cross-sector survey of local leaders. Insights were organized using a framework adapted from the OECD's Better Life Index, with a focus on four key areas: early care and education, basic needs and economy, health, and community engagement.

IT'S MORE THAN ONE "ISSUE" TO TACKLE



Community leaders surveyed ranked employment and livable wage, affordable and adequate housing, food security, and childcare availability as the top issues affecting quality of life for those living below the poverty line or ALICE threshold in the community, highlighting not just one issue, but multiple interconnected issues of significance.



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SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS INVOLVED

65% of housing units are owner-occupied, meaning over 10,000 households rent, often with limited long-term stability.

Food insecurity in the county is 3–4% higher than state and national averages.



1,158 households in Isabella County receive Food/SNAP Benefits



Isabella County has a median property value of $165,000 and a median monthly rent of $863, making quality housing out of reach for many residents.

7.2% of households in Isabella county don't have a vehicle, yet only .5% use public transport to get to work

26% of Isabella County residents live below the poverty level, with 49% below the ALICE Threshold, and child poverty is 10% higher than the Michigan average and 8% higher than the national average for children under 6.

Stakeholders highlighted that existing transit systems do not connect housing, child care, and job centers, making it difficult for residents to access employment, education, and health services.



Isabella County has 1,411 employer establishments, and the area is currently ranked 22nd of 83 Michigan counties by unemployment rate.



Single parents with two kids need $83,287 to cover living expenses in Isabella County. The median household income in the county is $53,759.



Based on educational attainment data, about 31% of local adults have a bachelor's+, but many of their skills are underutilized in the local job mix. Half of the local workforce has a high school diploma or less, and only about 40% hold an associate degree or higher.

Food preparation and serving related jobs are the 2nd highest occupation in Isabella county, and stakeholders described a local economy that fails to provide reliable pathways to financial stability, particularly for individuals and families earning modest incomes.

THE COMMUNITY IS READY TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES



Stakeholders interviewed value the strong nonprofit network, citing food security organizations, housing support services, and job training providers as vital community assets. But they also noted fragmentation across sectors and called for the Foundation to serve as a convener, aligning efforts to tackle root causes and shift from emergency response to systems-level solutions.

Stakeholders stressed the need to expand career pipelines, including vocational training, advanced manufacturing, and entrepreneurship to retain young talent.

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