Reflections Paper

A Reflection on the Community Foundation’s 50th Anniversary
Spark Grants and the Continuing Needs in the Lehigh Valley

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Introduction

Much has changed in the Lehigh Valley since the Lehigh Valley Community Foundation (LVCF) was founded in 1967 under its original name of the Bethlehem Area Foundation. In the half century since LVCF began its operations, the region has seen its population grow by nearly a quarter of a million people, its suburban areas boom and its urban areas struggle before experiencing a renaissance in the 21st Century.

While the Lehigh Valley is flourishing in many ways, it struggles with a number of the same challenges that are part of contemporary American life. The residents of Lehigh and Northampton counties face an array of social, economic and environmental issues with local governments and nonprofits engaged in efforts to address these concerns. As it has done for the past half-century, the Lehigh Valley Community Foundation has sought to assist these local entities in meeting the challenges they face and to thus meet the Foundation’s mission of “improving the quality of life in our region.”

To mark its 50th year of operation, the Lehigh Valley Community Foundation sought to target a number of the most pressing issues related to the quality of life in the area through the establishment of its Spark grants initiative. Under this initiative, LVCF identified the following issue areas as the structural formation of the application and award process:

- Mental & Behavioral Health
- Cultural Enrichment
- Food & Housing Access
- Environment & Sustainability
- Human Trafficking
- Veterans Affairs

Throughout 2017, LVCF awarded $50,000 in each of the six areas identified with 29 recipients receiving a Spark grant. These grants have been utilized by local agencies to support new initiatives and enhance older programs that are engaged in improving the quality of life in the Lehigh Valley within the six issue realms identified as the target of the Spark grants program.

To help better understand the impact of the Community Foundation’s Spark grants initiative and evaluate what the most pressing needs are in the issue areas identified, LVCF established Dr. Christopher P. Borick as its Lötter Fellow. The fellowship was made possible through a generous grant from the Lötter Family Fund, at the recommendation of Luther J. Hottle. In his capacity as the Lötter Fellow, Dr. Borick, along with the students and staff of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion (MCIPO), engaged in an examination of the particular challenges that the Lehigh Valley is facing in the six areas addressed during the Spark grants program.

Beginning in the fall of 2017, Dr. Borick and his students at the MCIPO gathered contextual information regarding the issues targeted by the Spark grants in an effort to more fully comprehend the challenges that are being faced by residents of the Lehigh Valley. This research helped build a framework in which local conditions are compared to national benchmarks and thus provide insight into some of the external pressures that are affecting conditions in the Lehigh Valley. Over the first
few months of 2018, the Muhlenberg team reached out to Spark grant recipients to ascertain their insight on the experiences they had as their organizations implemented the grants and to gather their perceptions on where the greatest remaining needs are in their areas of interest.

In this paper, the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion examines the six areas in which the Spark grants were directed through a three-part process:

1st
The report seeks to provide contextual perspective regarding the six issue categories that were identified as the focus of the Spark grants. In these sections of the study, the challenges are examined in terms of national, state and local perspectives through both quantitative and qualitative measures.

2nd
The report examines the Spark grants and how the resources allocated are being used to address the underlying problems identified in each issue area.

3rd
The report turns to the most pressing needs that remain in the wake of the Spark sponsored efforts.

Through this process, we hope that LVCF Spark grants initiative can be better understood in terms of its background, impact, and potential for further action. The report certainly does not capture the nuance of the challenges that are facing the Lehigh Valley in the issue areas examined, nor does it provide detailed insight into the tremendous work that the grant recipients are doing to improve the quality of life in the region. Furthermore, the needs expressed in the “Next Steps” sections should, by no means, be considered exhaustive as there are many salient needs that remain unstated in the report. This paper should be read as a reflection on the challenges that are faced by residents of the Lehigh Valley, the role that the Spark grants have played in addressing those challenges, and some perspective on what remaining needs exist and potential steps to addressing these issues.
Mental and Behavioral Health

THE CONTEXT

It is a crisis. The increase in the prevalence of mental illness within American society has become a defining challenge for the nation as the United States moves deeper into the 21st century. The statistics are stark, the personal narratives are wrenching, and the range of mental health concerns is daunting.

The factors behind the growing rates of mental illness in the United States are multi-faceted and complex, and the breadth and effects of this epidemic are far reaching. In 2017, it was estimated that 43 million or nearly 1 in 5 American adults have a mental health condition. In Pennsylvania alone over 1.8 million or 18.2% of the adult population are contending with a diagnosable mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder, other than a developmental or substance use disorder.

The high levels of mental illness among the adult population in the United States have been accompanied by widespread prevalence of mental illness among the nation’s adolescents. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) approximately 1 in 5 (21.4%) of youth aged 13–18 experiences a severe mental disorder at some point during their life. For children aged 8–15, the estimate is 13%. Perhaps most troubling are the increasing rates of mental illness among young Americans in recent years. For example, the rates of young people in the United States with severe depression increased from 5.9% in 2012 to 8.2% in 2015.

The soaring rates of mental illness in the United States have strained the capacity of mental health providers with access to mental health care not readily available to many Americans in need. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, about 40% of mental health needs went unmet, and due to an impending decline in the number of practicing psychiatrists, a situation likely to worsen. As the number of young individuals with mental illness has increased, The National Council Medical Director Institute indicates that Pennsylvania has a severe shortage of practicing child and adolescent psychiatrists. With the confluence of increased mental health needs and a shortage of mental health professionals, individuals are increasingly turning to emergency rooms for care with visits to ERs increasing by more than 50% in the last decade for psychoses, bipolar disorders, depression, anxiety and stress reactions according to the Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project.

The above-mentioned factors have led to significant delays in treatment and diminished quality of mental health services. In the Lehigh Valley, waiting lists to see psychiatrists and waiting days in hospitals for inpatient beds to open are becoming the norm and adding to the mental health crisis that affects this and other regions.

Finally, the Lehigh Valley has felt a deep impact from the wide-ranging heroin and opioid epidemic that has exploded in recent years. The effects of this epidemic are staggering with deaths from these narcotics and other drugs increasing dramatically in recent years. Between 2016 and 2017, there was a 25% increase in drug-related fatalities in Lehigh County (197 deaths in 2017) and a 56% increase
in deaths caused by drugs in Northampton County (109 deaths in 2017) over the same period of time. A number of factors may be contributing to this spike in drug related deaths in the Lehigh Valley, but the expansion of the use of Fentanyl, an extremely potent synthetic opioid, appears to be contributing to the growth in drug overdose deaths.

MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SPARK GRANTS

With growing challenges in the range and intensity of mental illness in the Lehigh Valley, there was no shortage of programs in need of support. Thus, the Spark grants targeted a range of aspects of this challenging issue.

One enormous hindrance to effective treatment of mental illness is the stigma that is still associated with these medical conditions. Although there has been considerable progress made in destigmatizing mental illness, many individuals fail to seek treatment for their afflictions out of concern about the perceptions of others. To help familiarize local residents with the nature and reach of one of the most widespread mental illnesses, depression, a Spark grant was awarded to WLVT-TV PBS39 for production of a film entitled Close to Home: Depression. This film that premiered in May of 2017 explored the aspects of depression such as stigma, care and recovery in order to inspire those whose lives have been affected by this mental illness. As a representative from PBS39 noted, this documentary was designed to help “change the conversation to one of support and understanding” about depression.

Educating the public about mental health issues, and in particular younger individuals in the Lehigh Valley, was also the focus of a Spark grant awarded to Communities In Schools Lehigh Valley for an initiative called Student Voice to raise awareness of suicide prevention, healthy relationships, and eliminating drug and alcohol abuse. This initiative reaches an array of local school districts with programming directed to a demographic that has been particularly hard hit by mental health challenges.

In addition to supporting efforts to raise awareness and educate the public about mental illness, it is also important to highlight and celebrate the importance of recovery for those dealing with addiction or other mental health issues. To this end a grant was awarded to Treatment Trends, Inc. for Rally in the Valley: Caring Across Communities. This annual event at Cedar Crest College focuses on eliminating barriers to recovery through a day of food, fun, music, speakers, and local vendors who join together to role model unity in recovery.
Given the scope of mental health illnesses in the Lehigh Valley, the need for therapy is extremely high. There are numerous therapeutic options that are being employed for individuals dealing with mental illness, but for certain populations some alternatives have proven particularly productive. One approach that has proven to be very effective is using animals as part of therapeutic treatment. A Spark grant was awarded to Equi-librium for their “A New Path” program. A New Path provides therapy utilizing horses to participants from all backgrounds, with varying degrees of cognitive, physical, behavioral, psychological or sensory disabilities.

While providing therapy to individuals is central in the broader effort to confront mental illness, the effects of this epidemic on the family and friends of those afflicted with mental health challenges are often overwhelming. Support services are in essence necessary for the family and friends that are supporting those with mental illnesses. A Spark grant was awarded to Haven House to aid their support group for family and friends of incarcerated or released prisoners with mental illness.

NEXT STEPS

To address the expanding mental health and opioid crises in the Lehigh Valley, it will require significant public and private efforts. These issues have grown into some of the most complex and widespread public health crises in a generation and are enormous challenges for the region to confront. From the overview of the issue presented earlier in this section, it is clear that there are many areas of need but some priorities appear to have emerged.

Support for Juvenile Mental Health Care

While the prevalence of mental health illness in the Lehigh Valley is significant across all age groups, the increase in mental illness among juveniles is particularly notable and worthy of significant immediate attention. The shortage of mental health professionals that serve child and adolescent populations undermines the ability of the region to meet the growing needs of the Lehigh Valley’s youngest residents. Local schools are at the center of increasing mental health challenges within their student populations and strained capacity to meet these student needs. Given already limited budgetary resources, schools are becoming overwhelmed by the mental health service pressures and thus support to these education entities is badly needed. Beyond schools, the Lehigh Valley’s nonprofit organizations serving child and adolescent populations need to build increased capacity and expertise as demands for their services grow and therefore require additional community support.
Build on Mental Illness Destigmatizing Efforts

Despite much progress over recent decades in destigmatizing mental illness there remain significant psychological barriers that prevent individuals from seeking help. Recent efforts by local entities such as PBS39 to build awareness about mental illness in the local community are essential in eroding the stigma that remains associated with mental conditions. Research has shown that social contact is an effective type of intervention to improve stigma-related knowledge and attitudes. The development and enhancement of local programs that connect those with and without mental illness would be beneficial in further breaking down existing stigma related to mental illness. Mental health literacy campaigns that have focused on how to encourage individuals and families to seek needed services have been effective in diminishing stigma within select populations and should be supported and expanded in the region.

Building Treatment Capacity for Mental Health and Drug Addiction

The Lehigh Valley, like many areas across the United States, is experiencing a sizable shortage of mental health professionals. This shortage requires both longer-term efforts to train mental health professionals and shorter-term initiatives to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the region’s mental health care capacity. Local educational and health care organizations have increased efforts to train and attract mental health professionals to the Lehigh Valley and such initiatives should be supported. But in the short term, local mental health treatment providers need immediate support to stabilize and enhance the services that are available to the growing number of Valley residents experiencing mental health challenges.

There is also a severe shortage of health centers in the Lehigh Valley that provide comprehensive treatment options for drug addiction. One such center in the region embracing a medication-assisted treatment program is the Neighborhood Health Centers of the Lehigh Valley (NHCLV). At this Center, clients are provided with access to primary care, mental health counseling and coordinated drug counseling, and rehabilitation programs with other providers. As NHCLV Chief Medical Officer Tim Daly recently told The Morning Call, “Case managers make sure people who have no car get to their appointments” and “also go to court or housing hearing with clients.” He added, “That’s the stuff that make treatments work and builds relationships.” The expansion of such comprehensive treatment options such as the NHCLV should be a priority for the Lehigh Valley community as part of the overall effort to confront the opioid epidemic.
Cultural Enrichment

THE CONTEXT

Quality of life in a region is often associated with fundamental economic, environmental and health factors. While measures such as median income and life expectancy may indicate important information about the condition of a community, these metrics cannot fully capture the vibrancy of life in an area. That’s because quality of life in a community rests not only on how long its residents live but also on how they live. This is where access to the arts is crucial. When the arts are fully integrated into a region, the lives of citizens are enriched for the arts bring individuals together and foster community. As novelist Marcel Proust said, “Only through art can we get outside of ourselves and know another’s view of the universe.”

For a region the size of the Lehigh Valley, the arts have an exceptional presence in the community. With high quality artistic venues, outstanding museums and symphonies, and a vibrant theater scene, the Lehigh Valley provides its residents with access to the arts in a way that is not available to most similarly sized areas.

Yet maintaining and enhancing the arts in the Lehigh Valley is not without its challenges. As with many other communities, access to the arts within the region is not always readily available to all of its residents. Socio-economic, cultural and geographic factors may inhibit a significant number of individuals within Lehigh and Northampton counties from utilizing many of the existing arts assets of the region or from developing artistic resources that may be most desired by certain communities.

There also appears to be a growing concern that the Lehigh Valley’s vibrant nonprofit arts community is feeling negative impacts from the major expansion of for-profit arts and entertainment venues throughout the area. A recent study from a Washington D.C. based arts advocacy group, Americans for the Arts, found that the annual economic activity generated by the Lehigh Valley’s nonprofit arts and culture industry was down about 11% over the past five years. In addition, the Lehigh Valley Arts Council reports that attendance at nonprofit arts events dropped 30% between 2012 and 2017. While these drops in attendance and economic activity among nonprofit arts organizations may be affected by numerous factors, the high levels of attendance at for-profit venues is likely cutting into demand for nonprofit arts events.

SPARK GRANTS FOR CULTURAL ENRICHMENT

The desire to expand access and programs, while promoting the arts were major thrusts of the Spark grants distributed within this category of the broader initiative. Inclusion of residents who have faced a variety of impediments more fully into the arts can be seen in the range of awards to arts and cultural entities in the Lehigh Valley.
The historic State Theatre in Easton is a premiere venue in the Lehigh Valley and home to an array of live musical and theater performances each year, including The FREDDY© Awards, each May. While thousands visit the State Theatre each year, access for many local residents is limited because of financial barriers. As a representative of the Theater told us, “There are many who would love to come that do not have the resources to purchase tickets for our events.” Given this dynamic a Spark grant was awarded to the State Theatre Center for the Arts, Inc., to underwrite the cost of tickets for select FREDDY student populations (and other students) as well as for local veterans to certain Broadway and other performances at the State Theatre during the 2017-2018 show season.

While access to the arts may be constrained by economic forces, other factors may limit individual inclusion within the community. Historically, disabled individuals have faced a number of barriers that have prevented them from being fully engaged in various aspects of life in the region. Breaking down those barriers has been a focus of disability advocacy groups and the inspiration behind an innovative effort receiving a Spark grant. Mikayla’s Voice received funding for their Our Friend Brady program that enabled the organization to produce a book on what it is like to be friends with someone with a disability and serve as a catalyst for further discussion about this topic. Brady, a disabled student at Spring Garden Elementary School in Bethlehem Pa., and his friends tell their story of friendship in the book that was donated to 3rd, 4th and 5th grade classrooms in the Lehigh Valley and across Pennsylvania.

Telling the stories of the Lehigh Valley and its people is a very important function of the arts community in the region. A Spark grant was awarded to The National Museum of Industrial History to help in the development of The Cabinet of Curiosity, an interactive exhibit in the Museum’s Iron and Steel Gallery. This exhibit focuses on the individuals, families and communities from fifty foreign countries who were drawn to South Bethlehem to work at the Bethlehem Steel plant.

In a similar vein, a Spark grant was provided to ArtsQuest, Inc. for their ArtSparks project that is a new initiative that highlights the rich and diverse cultures that make up the Greater Lehigh Valley through the presentation of arts and culture programs at SteelStacks and the Banana Factory.

Finally, live music events are a cornerstone of the Lehigh Valley arts scene and an important venue for bringing diverse sections of the community around shared interests. Jazz has a particularly strong history of bridging racial, ethnic and economic lines and thus a Spark grant was awarded to Performing Arts Live, Inc. to support the 2017 edition of Allentown JazzFest that took place in May 2017.
NEXT STEPS

As noted earlier in this section, the Lehigh Valley has a tremendously vibrant arts community that enriches the quality of life for the residents of Northampton and Lehigh counties. However, the ability of the arts to reach the full range of local residents and communities is precluded by a number of barriers that require strong and prolonged efforts to overcome.

Access to the Arts

For the arts to fully enrich the quality of life within the Lehigh Valley, it is necessary that all of its residents have access to these community assets. However economic factors regularly limit the ability of many of the region’s citizens from engaging in the arts in substantial and meaningful ways. While many artistic entities in the Valley would like to provide enhanced access to their productions to economically challenged populations, the arts organizations need for ticket revenue places them in a difficult situation. As a representative for the State Theatre told us, “Given that tickets are one of our main revenue sources, we just can’t accommodate as many economically disadvantaged individuals as we’d like.” Therefore, it is essential that the community continue to offer support to arts venues to allow these entities the financial capabilities to serve lower income residents of the region.

Supporting Educational Programs in the Arts

A major challenge for public schools is the difficulty of maintaining appropriate funding levels for programs in the arts. The fiscal challenges that many school districts face within the Lehigh Valley have taken its toll on a number of programs. School officials almost universally recognize the value that the arts bring to students, but many are unable to secure the financial resources necessary to maintain programs in the arts. This scenario is more common in the Lehigh Valley’s most economically disadvantaged school districts where fiscal shortfalls have forced administrators to reduce the number of offerings in the arts. Cuts to the arts in less wealthy districts are particularly problematic because for many students coming from impoverished backgrounds, courses and programs in the arts provide creative opportunities that engage the students in school and help them find greater success in core academic subjects. Thus, it is important that the Lehigh Valley community find ways to assure that all students have access to the arts as part of their educational experiences.
Finding Balance Between the For-profit and Nonprofit Arts Sectors

The arrival and growth of major arts and entertainment venues such as the PPL Center and the Sands Events Center have certainly provided Lehigh Valley residents with an array of popular entertainment options. While the Lehigh Valley community benefits from the presence of these new venues, the impact on existing nonprofit arts and cultural entities may be negative with patrons substituting events at for-profit venues for those at nonprofit locations. Therefore, it is necessary to explore options in which for-profit and nonprofit arts entities complement each other’s offering rather than substituting one for the other. Among the options that create such a positive dynamic are increased efforts to attract more patrons from outside the region to local nonprofit arts events and to create more direct coordination and cooperation between the arts sectors within the Valley. One such possibility that was recently suggested by a representative of the Lehigh Valley Arts Council, was for the creation of a regional “business-arts coalition, which would include professionals working toward a common goal — keeping the nonprofit arts alive.” Such an effort seems well justified and worthy of support from the Lehigh Valley community.
Food and Housing Access

THE CONTEXT

They are the basics of life and in the Lehigh Valley, not always as available as one might commonly believe. Food and housing are daily challenges for thousands of individuals living in Northampton and Lehigh counties and the struggles to secure these essentials consume much of the time and effort of many local residents.

Food insecurity is defined as the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable nutritious food. Approximately 1 in 10 residents of the Lehigh Valley live under such conditions. For local children, food insecurity is even more prevalent with 1 in 3 children in the Valley regularly dealing with hunger related conditions.

While access to quality food items is highly related to the economic limitations of local residents, the dynamics of food insecurity in the Lehigh Valley are quite complex. One major contributor to the prominence of food insecurity within Lehigh and Northampton counties is the presence of “food deserts” within the region. A food desert is a geographic area where residents’ access to affordable, healthy food options such as fresh fruits and vegetables is very limited or missing due to the absence of grocery stores within convenient traveling distance. According to the United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley, as of 2016, there were eight food deserts in the region and 20 additional neighborhoods where residents needed to travel over half a mile to a grocery store. For individuals without affordable or reliable transportation, the distance to grocery stores often limits food options to costly convenient stores or fast food restaurants.

The significant challenges for many Lehigh Valley residents that are posed by food insecurity are exacerbated by struggles in finding affordable quality housing. While many aspects of the housing market such as home values and new housing construction have improved in the wake of the Great Recession, the ability of a significant portion of the local population to acquire and maintain adequate housing remains very limited.

The affordable housing challenges that are present in the Lehigh Valley have contributed to the substantial number of local residents that are living in substandard housing. According to the United States Census Bureau, over 1 out of 3 housing units that are occupied in the Lehigh Valley have one or more significant problems including overcrowding, substandard or non-functioning plumbing or repair costs that are beyond the ability of the occupants to maintain.

At its most extreme level, the housing challenges in the Lehigh Valley manifest in individuals utilizing shelters (when available) for their housing needs or ultimately becoming homeless. According to the Third Street Alliance in Easton, there were over 500 households waiting for shelter space or housing to open up during 2017, with over 1,300 individuals homeless during the same period of time.
The food insecurity and affordable housing situations in the Lehigh Valley are among the most significant and difficult challenges that face the community at this time. The situation in these areas requires significant short-term efforts to feed and house the Valley’s most vulnerable populations as they seek to meet their immediate needs, while also looking for longer term options to address the chronic aspects of food and shelter availability in the region. The Spark grants within this realm were focused mainly on programs that are attempting to meet the tremendous daily needs of Lehigh Valley residents as they strive to secure food and housing for themselves and their families.

New Bethany Ministries in Bethlehem is among the largest providers of food to the Lehigh Valley residents struggling with food insecurity, reaching over 6,000 people annually with their services. Like many local social service organizations, New Bethany is facing capacity limits, and in particular with the size and capabilities of its physical space. In order to meet the expanding needs for its food distribution efforts, New Bethany is developing a new pantry. To assist with this effort, a Spark grant was awarded to this pivotal local organization.

The School Sisters of Saint Francis in Bethlehem have a long history of providing assistance to those in need including those with food needs. Their goals include expanding efforts to feeding the hungry while caring for the Earth, and building health communities. A Spark grant was directed to support the Monocacy Farm Project that supplies fresh fruit and vegetables to area organizations serving the hungry.

While there are important federal and state programs that help provide resources for individuals with lower income to purchase food, the presence of food deserts often limits the type of food that can be bought. In particular, fresh produce and healthy foods may not be accessible to many individuals that receive benefits through programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). To help address this situation, a Spark grant was awarded to the Nurture Nature Center in Easton to expand a program that makes fresh produce and healthy foods available to customers using SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps).

As noted earlier, there are well over 1,000 individuals in the Lehigh Valley that are homeless. A complex array of factors contributes to this situation and thus a variety of options are needed to help homeless individuals find shelter. The Spark grant offered support to two local organizations that have focused their attention on specific groups within the local homeless population. The Valley Youth House Committee, Inc. in Allentown received funding to expand
its inclusive housing for homeless LGBTQ teenagers in the Lehigh Valley. In addition, Pinebrook Family Answers was awarded a grant to support its transitional residence program in Allentown that provides homeless women, often single mothers, with an affordable and safe place to live.

THE NEXT STEPS

The scope and scale of the housing and food insecurity challenges in the Lehigh Valley require consistent and expansive efforts to address. The existing capacity of local providers of food and shelter is being strained, and the underlying causes of these problems remain.

Continued Support for Existing Food Security Efforts

The statistics on the number of individuals in the Lehigh Valley that are utilizing food banks and pantries are daunting. Despite many positive economic indicators within the region there remains persistent and broad levels of poverty and accompanying food insecurity. While it is very important to try and address the underlying causes of food insecurity, the need for immediate and enhanced support for the area’s efforts to provide food to those in need is paramount. Recent expansion of capacity in key local providers such as New Bethany Ministries have helped to meet the current demands for food, but demands on providers like New Bethany and the Second Harvest Food Bank continue to grow. Thus the Lehigh Valley community must prioritize its support for local efforts to address the immediate effects of food insecurity.

Enhance Efforts to Bring Relief to Those Living in Food Deserts

The prevalence of food deserts in Lehigh and Northampton counties is a contributing factor to the high levels of food insecurity in the region. For many local residents there simply aren’t enough locations for them to acquire healthy and affordable food for themselves and their families. Despite efforts from local mass transportation entities, it remains extremely difficult for lower income individuals to reach supermarkets.
It is key to bring healthy and affordable food options closer to these populations living in food deserts. The work of the Nurture Nature Center in Easton is a great example of a program that is making healthy food options accessible to individuals residing in local food deserts. Expansion of such programs in other Lehigh Valley locations would be a valuable approach to reducing the scope and magnitude of food insecurity within the region.

Development of Permanent Supportive Housing

With housing costs in the Lehigh Valley continuing to rise, the challenges of affordable housing and homelessness in the region are being exacerbated. With growing demand for housing stock in the Valley’s urban centers, options for lower income residents has become even more limited. It is, therefore, imperative that in addition to continued support for emergency shelters, longer-term strategies, and efforts for housing need to be enacted. One option that should be explored is development of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) that is a model that has been shown to be a successful and cost-effective solution to homelessness in other communities. The PSH model combines affordable housing assistance with support services for individuals living with mental illness or other serious health problems. It successfully reduced homelessness in New York City and saved taxpayer dollars that would otherwise have been spent on costly shelters and hospitalizations.
Environment & Sustainability

THE CONTEXT

As the Lehigh Valley’s population has grown so have the demands on its natural resources. The Census Bureau reported that Lehigh and Northampton counties have grown by 4.66% and 1.83%, respectively between 2010 and 2017.

Increased demand for water resources, commercial and residential land development, air quality impairment and an array of legacy environmental concerns are among the environmental and sustainability challenges that face the Lehigh Valley as it moves deeper into the 21st century.

The quality of life of an area is tied to its citizens’ access to green and open spaces. Parks, farmland and natural reserves not only provide recreational opportunities and aesthetically pleasing environments for residents of a community but also provide necessary habitat for wildlife and help in protection of water quality. The Lehigh Valley is rich in green spaces such as parks, recreational areas and preserves along with many working farms, but continued demands from population growth and development are placing stress on open spaces within the region.

Water quality issues have also become a more salient concern for many Americans in recent years with high profile contamination incidents occurring in places such as Flint, Michigan. While the Flint case may have received the most national attention, it is by no means uncommon. In 2015, nearly 21 million people relied on community water systems that violated health-based quality standards, according to the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The NAS study found that the amount of violations varied by year, affecting as many as 45 million people in some years, representing about 28% of the U.S. population. Most studies of Lehigh Valley drinking water indicate generally healthy conditions, but the region’s rapidly aging drinking water infrastructure is worthy of concern not only for cost implications but also preservation of water quality.

Air quality, both nationally and in the Lehigh Valley, has seen some progress in recent years but also some setbacks and increased challenges. In particular, lower atmospheric ozone levels (commonly known as smog) have been rising in the region. These increasing ozone levels are worrisome for a number of reasons, but particularly in terms of public health concerns. Exposure to ozone can trigger a variety of health problems including chest pain, coughing, throat irritation, and airway inflammation. Ozone can also worsen respiratory conditions such as bronchitis, emphysema, and asthma.

And while air quality concerns regarding problems like ozone are challenges for the region, the threats from climate change on the region cannot be overlooked. As the region experiences a warming climate, problems like ozone are magnified as excessive heat compounds the health impacts of this pollutant. The changing climate has also played a role in the expansion of vectors such as ticks that carry infectious diseases, including Lyme disease.
SPARK GRANTS FOR ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

With an array of needs within the realm of environmental and sustainability matters, the Spark grants program in this issue area focused much of its attention and resources on efforts to educate the public on sustainable practices and lifestyles.

Traffic and congested roadways are increasingly part of life in the Lehigh Valley as the region’s population continues to grow and the local economy turns to more transportation-centered businesses such as warehouses and distribution centers. In addition to the costs associated with time lost while sitting in traffic, the impact of traffic and higher volumes on area roadways is felt in diminished air quality and corresponding impact on public health. While there are many policy approaches that may alleviate increased traffic and its negative impacts on a community, alternative means of transportation such as bicycling are increasingly important.

To assist in the expansion of bicycle use in the Lehigh Valley, the Spark grant supported Community Bike Works’ Bike to Sustainability program. The youth of Community Bike Works recycle hundreds of bicycles a year, working with mentors to refurbish donated bikes they can ride across the city. The grant helped to build a stronger culture of sustainability, serving more students in the Earn a Bike program, and offering those students more meaningful experiences in nature, including the opportunity to create and maintain a bike trail. Finally, students who attended the Youth Bike Summit in Washington D.C. helped develop a sustainability plan for the organization.

As noted earlier, threats to water resources are substantial as the Lehigh Valley’s population grows, open spaces are lost and drinking water infrastructure ages. Thus, education about the Lehigh Valley’s water resources was a key focus of the Spark grants with financial support given for outreach efforts to the Wildlands Conservancy and the Watershed Coalition of the Lehigh Valley regarding local water concerns. The Wildlands Conservancy in partnership with Lehigh Gap Nature Center received support for their Collaborative Watershed Education Program to provide multiple watershed education experiences for students from low-income neighborhoods in the Lehigh Valley. The Watershed Coalition of the Lehigh Valley was awarded a grant for their Youth Watershed Steward Program that helps establish a school district-based, county level-coordinated “stream team,” reaching youth where they live and go to school in learning and hands-on projects that relate to environmental assets and challenges in their communities.
Managing waste production is also a continued and growing challenge for the region as population expands. While robust recycling programs do exist in many Lehigh Valley municipalities, composting of waste remains an underutilized tool that can diminish the amount of waste destined for landfills or incineration. To help expand composting in the region, a Spark grant was awarded to the Greater Easton Development Partnership for their Easton Compost Project that serves as a pilot to provide food waste education and a composting option at the Easton Farmers’ Market and for a pilot group of local residents.

Finally, the crucial role of vibrant urban green spaces has only grown as the Lehigh Valley continues to develop. While there are many quality parks within the urban centers of the Valley, it is essential that these spaces be both maintained and improved to attract residents to these resources. A Spark grant was directed to the Bethlehem Economic Development Corporation for their project Reimagining the Bethlehem Rose Garden. The grant is being used to engage a landscape architecture firm to develop a revised plan for the park that will include an inventory of structures and trees and focus on adding signage and pathways, planting native gardens and specimen trees, and installing bike racks.

NEXT STEPS

For the Lehigh Valley to be the type of community that provides high quality of life to its residents, it is essential that greater attention be paid to the protection and improvement of its natural resources and environmental health. Population growth and development pressures pose challenges for sustaining and enhancing air and water quality and the broader public health. As the Lehigh Valley Community Foundation looks towards supporting initiatives in this realm, there are a number of needs that seem most pressing:

**Alternative Transportation**

Congested roadways and the impact on air quality from the increased volume of vehicles in the Lehigh Valley increase the need for added attention towards alternative means of transportation. Efforts like those of the Community Bike Works that try to build a culture of biking are an essential part of a broader effort to get residents out of their cars. However, more attention should be given to infrastructure in the Lehigh Valley that supports transportation options such as biking and mass transit.
Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation

As the evidence of climate change continues to mount, it is very important for a region to both examine the ways that it can reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases and to study and prepare for how a changed environment may affect life within a region. Expansion of renewable energy use from options such as solar and wind should be explored and efforts to support the transition to such options enhanced. Study of climate change effects on the local environment must also be expanded. For example, more intense analysis of the effects of climate change on the expansion of invasive species and vectors is needed as these issues impact local ecosystems and human health.

Protection of Water Resources

The Lehigh Valley’s abundant water resources are one of the region’s greatest assets. The Delaware and Lehigh Rivers and the many smaller waterways that are located in this area have helped define where and how we live and remain centerpieces of the environmental, social and economic health of the Valley. While improvements in water quality have been hard fought over the years, the gains are tenuous as development strains the health of these rivers and streams. The Spark grants to the Wildlands Conservancy and the Watershed Coalition of the Lehigh Valley have helped expand awareness of issues and challenges facing the area’s waterways, but expansion and continued support of these efforts seems clearly warranted.
THE CONTEXT

The term “human trafficking” is not one that is readily understood by most individuals. Despite being used more regularly in media coverage, human trafficking remains a largely undefined concept for many Americans. However, if one was to break out the various components of human trafficking for individuals, there is often strong recognition that this issue is a major challenge facing the nation and the residents of the Lehigh Valley.

Human trafficking is the closest iteration of slavery that exists in contemporary America. It is the application of coercion, force, and/or deceit in order to elicit some kind of labor or sexual act. Because it is such a hidden issue, where victims are not immediately obvious and are not likely to come forward due to fear of authorities, kidnappers, or repercussions, it is extremely hard to track, estimate, and prevent.

Thus an effort to lift the veil on human trafficking and expose these crimes has the potential to make an incredible difference in reducing and eventually ending these terrible acts.

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTL), there were 1,955 victims of human trafficking identified in Pennsylvania in 2017. While statistics from organizations like the NHTL provide a glimpse into the breadth and depth of this crisis, it is generally accepted that there are many more cases of human trafficking that are never reported or uncovered. In the Lehigh Valley, local experts estimate that anywhere between 100 to 300 women men and children are exploited by human traffickers each year.

The challenges of measuring the prevalence of human trafficking highlights how important it is for a community to be knowledgeable about these issues in order to facilitate more complete reporting as a first step in offering support to victims. By continuing research and funding initiatives to help understand and prevent these issues, the hope is that the effects of human trafficking can be significantly reduced and ideally eliminated.
SPARK GRANTS FIGHTING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The Spark grants initiative funded four programs related to aspects of the broad issue of human trafficking in the Lehigh Valley. The focus of these grants was largely on providing an array of support for the victims of sex trafficking and on building capacity to identify and prevent human trafficking throughout the region.

Given the prominent need for recovery and support services for the victims of human trafficking in the Lehigh Valley, the Spark grants funded a number of existing programs in the region that offer such services. One such program was the KidsPeace Enhanced Clinical Trauma and Life Skills Program (ECTLSP) that has been engaged in providing holistic mental health treatment to survivors of human trafficking. This key program has worked to impart new self-value and skills to child survivors, and to provide them with opportunities to use those skills in meaningful ways. As KidsPeace Senior Director of Clinical Services for PA Residential, Dominick DiSalvo, notes, “The KidsPeace ECTLSP fosters resilience and empowers girls to move beyond a life of trauma and trafficking.”

Spark funding also went to Truth for Women, Inc. to support their efforts to provide a safe family setting for women, in an intensive therapeutic environment. Its Truth Home program offers survivors of sex trafficking the opportunity for individualized recovery plans that include mentoring, counseling, coaching, life skills, education, family therapy, and spiritual encouragement.

The efforts of Valley Against Sex Trafficking (VAST) to provide support for survivors of human trafficking also received Spark funding, with resources directed to the VAST Community Center and its programming that offers community-based, peer-led support to survivors of sex trafficking.

While providing support to survivors of human trafficking is certainly a primary need in the Lehigh Valley and a focus of the Spark grants in the area, the need to expand public awareness about the issue and its underlying causes was also a target of this program. As noted earlier, the issue of human trafficking is beginning to draw broader public recognition but remains undefined or unknown to many individuals. Thus funding was awarded to the Crime Victims Council of the Lehigh Valley for the development and implementation of the 2018 Lehigh Valley Human Trafficking Conference: Hiding in Plain Sight. This conference, held during June 2018, brought together multiple disciplines from across the entire Lehigh Valley to address, identify and prevent human trafficking crimes.
The profile of human trafficking continues to grow among the public and policymakers, but significant work in raising awareness, developing interventions, and establishing and enforcing policies remains for the Lehigh Valley community. In addition, while a number of local organizations are now offering high quality services for the victims of human trafficking, their capacity to sustain and expand such services appears to be highly limited.

**Building Capacity to House and Support Survivors**

As the devastating effects of human trafficking become more known and survivors become more willing to come forward for support, the capacity of organizations seeking to provide services has become increasingly strained. Within the Lehigh Valley, the number of residential spaces to support victims of human trafficking remains highly limited with demand for such facilities outpacing the available resources. Similarly, modest resources to support counseling services to victims of human trafficking limit the range of services that can be offered to survivors. Thus, continued support for services remains a priority. In addition to the financial resources to expand capacity of services, it is essential that providers of services also increase the cooperation and cross-agency communication.

**Expanding Awareness**

Human trafficking remains an overlooked and misunderstood issue for many individuals despite strong efforts at both the national and local levels to build awareness of the issue. When asked about remaining challenges, a representative from Truth for Women Inc. responded, “It is vital for our community to continue to bring awareness on the issue of sex trafficking. As we educate each other, we will have a better understanding of this issue as well as how to support survivors.” These awareness efforts are needed for both the general public and those most directly affected by the existence of human trafficking.
Targeting Demand for Human Trafficking

The problem of human trafficking is highly complex with many factors contributing to its existence and continued prevalence. However, one key driver of the crisis is the underlying demand for the types of services that are part of this exploitation of individuals. Legal authorities and legislative bodies in some localities have worked to increase the penalties for individuals who seek services from sex traffickers (e.g. purchasing services from those in the sex trade). While these actions are important disincentives for those who engage on the supply-side of human trafficking, there is the need to increase the public awareness about the costs, and increase the penalties (i.e. jail time, fines) for those who purchase services from human traffickers.
THE CONTEXT

“Thank you for your service.” In the United States, this expression has become a ubiquitous statement of appreciation provided by the public to the women and men that served the nation in the armed services. While this expression is certainly a way for individuals to offer their thanks for the sacrifices made by veterans, it raises questions about how the society as a whole supports service men and women after their time in the military has been completed. With the United States engaged in prolonged military actions in Afghanistan and the broader “War on Terror,” a generation of veterans is dealing with the effects of engaging in armed conflict.

While veterans return from their service with many skills and experiences that are highly valued within civilian life, they also are more likely to deal with mental illness, homelessness, food insecurity and unemployment than the non-veteran populations. In terms of mental health challenges facing veterans, approximately 1 out of 5 service members returning from Iraq or Afghanistan have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, and nearly 1 in 5 veterans from these wars report experiencing a traumatic brain injury (TBI) during deployment.

Veterans also make up a disproportionately large share of the homeless population in the United States with 11% of homeless Americans having served in the armed forces compared to only about 7% of Americans that are not veterans. Among the male homeless population, 1 in 5 individuals is a veteran. Food insecurity is also very common among veterans. A recent Cambridge University study found that one-quarter of Americans that served in the military have been food insecure in the last year.

As of 2016, the United States Census Bureau reports that there are approximately 21,000 veterans in Lehigh County and 20,000 veterans in Northampton County. While detailed statistics regarding the prevalence of mental illness and homelessness among the Lehigh Valley veteran population are not available, it is highly likely that local vets are facing the same challenges as their counterparts throughout the nation.
SPARK GRANTS FOR VETERANS AFFAIRS

With veterans in the Lehigh Valley facing an array of challenges, the Spark grants in this issue area were targeted to a variety of programs serving the population. One central focus of the Spark grants was support of primary needs of food and shelter for veterans. As noted earlier, veterans are more likely than their non-veteran counterparts to be homeless or have food insecurities.

In response, one of the largest Spark grants was to the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley (CACLV), through the Second Harvest Food Bank of the Lehigh Valley and Eastern Pennsylvania, to assist in the establishment of the Military Share: Food Access for Veterans program. This new initiative addresses the food security needs of veterans as part of a broader effort, working in partnerships with three local veterans organizations, to provide veterans with a monthly box of food that is packaged and delivered by fellow veterans.

The Spark grant to the Lehigh Valley Military Affairs Council (LVMAC) for its Veterans Homelessness Programs was designed to support LVMAC’s efforts to provide financial assistance to homeless veterans for transitional housing. This program also provides broader outreach services for the challenging goal of identifying homeless veterans and helps coordinate the various services available to vets through local and government agencies.

While direct support for housing and food needs was a key focus of the Spark grants directed towards veterans programs, resources were also targeted to help veterans find and receive other important services in areas such as healthcare. To this end, the Lehigh Valley Health Network (LVHN) was awarded a grant for its Military and Veteran Resource/Information Center that provides vets with services that help secure medical care eligibility and enrollment. As an LVHN representative reported to us, “The aim is to alleviate the complexity of the referral process within our healthcare system to the greatest extent possible and help veterans navigate the VA.”

Victory House of Lehigh Valley was awarded a Spark grant for their Veteran Aftercare Services Program that provides medical and case management services, including mental health and substance abuse counseling, to homeless veterans who have successfully discharged to self-sufficiency.
There is a major need for programs that can provide therapeutic services to veterans who suffer from PTSD. A Spark grant supported such a program with a financial award provided to Equi-librium for the Horsemanship for Heroes program. Horsemanship skills are taught to meet the physical, mental or emotional needs of service men and women who suffer from PTSD, traumatic brain injuries or other combat-related injuries.

NEXT STEPS

As the challenges facing the Lehigh Valley’s veteran community evolve, and in some areas intensify, it is imperative that public attention and support for this group remain robust. The population of veterans in the region continues to grow and the issues that confront the men and women who served in uniform are generally more numerous and intense than among non-veterans in the Lehigh Valley. With higher levels of poverty, homelessness, mental illness and suicide among vets, there is an abundance of needs that require attention.

Housing, Food Security, and Medical Care

Sustaining and enhancing ongoing programs that provide vets with necessities such as food and shelter should be a priority for the community as these important members of the region continue to have substantial needs. Similarly, the large health needs of veterans must be prioritized. While physical and mental services are often available, many veterans require assistance to locate and fully utilize this care.

As a LVHN veteran health program representative stated, “The ongoing need to fund peer-to-peer support programs that allow veterans to accelerate their medical and mental healing process or coping strategies is among the greatest challenges facing veterans.”
Locating Homeless Veterans in the Lehigh Valley

One major challenge that organizations face in trying to serve the primary needs of veterans is locating them. With a significant portion of Lehigh Valley veterans that are homeless or in shelters, it is difficult to assure delivery of necessary services (e.g. healthcare, counseling) in a timely and effective manner. As an LVMAC member stated, “Finding the homeless veterans and dealing with privacy laws are significant barriers that must be overcome.” Thus, increased support for identifying veterans in need would be valuable in meeting the broader goals of supporting those who have served their nation in uniform.

Support and Expand Programs for Female Veterans

The percentage of veterans that are women is steadily increasing in the Lehigh Valley. While female veterans share some of the same challenges as their male counterparts, their experiences in the armed services and as veterans may have produced varied needs. For example, the Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN) surveyed more than 1,300 service women in 2017 about the effects their military service had on their mental health. The SWAN survey found military sexual trauma (MST) as the number one factor negatively affecting female veterans’ mental wellness. Female veterans also report negative experiences at Veteran Administration (VA) facilities and limited women’s health services at VA hospitals. Increased support for women veterans within the Lehigh Valley appears needed.
Conclusion

For a philanthropic organization such as the Lehigh Valley Community Foundation, the best way to celebrate a major anniversary is by leveraging its resources to affect change in the areas it serves. The Spark grants did just that. The 29 recipients of grants under this initiative have employed the financial support from LVCF to improve the quality of life for residents of Northampton and Lehigh counties. The resources provided through this program have helped key local organizations build and continue efforts that are addressing some of the most salient issues facing the region today.

Moving forward, there is no shortage of needs in the Lehigh Valley that require substantive and immediate attention. This reflection paper calls attention to a number of the most prominent needs and puts forth potential paths for the allocation of resources. As LVCF has completed the Spark grants phase and turns its attention to subsequent grant programs, there are numerous opportunities to build upon the investments made with the Spark funding. In this next stage, LVCF’s “Igniting Change Fund” will provide a new series of grants to harness the momentum of the Spark grants and provide additional resources to expand on the important work that has begun. The fund is scheduled to open to grant applications from Lehigh Valley nonprofits in 2018.

As the next round of funding from LVCF approaches, it is essential that there is a focus on sustaining many of the key programs meeting community needs. While “sparking” new initiatives to address the challenges that face the Lehigh Valley is a worthy goal, it is critical that the community continue to support the existing organizations and programs that have been engaged in ongoing efforts to improve life in the Valley. It’s certainly exciting to get behind a new idea or effort, but sustaining effective and efficient programs must be a priority for the Lehigh Valley community and organizations such as LVCF.

Encouraging partnerships between community organizations should also be a key consideration as the Spark grants transition into a new round of grants that will emerge from the Igniting Change Fund. Collaborations between organizations allow for the strengths of community players to be brought together to produce outcomes that are often unattainable by a single entity. The complex and intertwined nature of many of the core challenges facing the area requires partnerships that bring together the knowledge, experience and capacity of varied individuals, groups and institutions.

So as the Lehigh Valley Community Foundation moves past its Golden Anniversary towards other milestones, its importance to the Lehigh Valley seems very likely to increase. The Spark grants program has been a very worthy way for LVCF to celebrate 50 years of service to the Lehigh Valley, and the Igniting Change Fund and the grants that emerge from this resource will be an important next step for funding these important issues.
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A professor of political science, Christopher P. Borick is the director of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion. His research and teaching interests are primarily in the areas of public policy and public opinion. He is a nationally recognized public opinion researcher who has conducted over 300 large-scale public opinion surveys during the past fifteen years. The results of these surveys have appeared in numerous periodicals including *Time Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Los Angeles Times and Washington Post*.

He has also provided analysis for the BBC, National Public Radio, PBS, CBS News and NBC Nightly News and had his survey results aired on, CNN, FOX News and C-Span. During his career, he has conducted surveys for a variety of government agencies and organizations including the Center for Disease Control, The United Way, Wisconsin Public Radio, The Wisconsin Department of Commerce, the Oneida Indian Nation, The U.S. Department of Labor, and Habitat for Humanity.

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