

Gloucester County 2023 Situation Analysis Report

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Summary of community issues and Extension office response

Table 1 Summary of Community Issues and Extension Response

Priority Issue	Planned Unit Response
Financial pressures on producers and family farms	Partnership with Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program to offer workshops for beginning farmers and homesteaders; Assistance with Farm Management plans thru ANR
Family financial need and lack of resources	Financial counseling and workshops by FCS agent; Youth financial Education through FCS and 4-H; Stretching food dollars thru FNP
Food insecurity and poor nutrition	Nutrition Education thru FCS, FNP, and 4-H; Workshops on budgeting, stretching food dollars; publication of available resources
Environmental concerns and preserving ecosystems	Natural Resource and Environmental literacy education and BMPs for citizens delivered by Virginia Master Naturalists, Extension Master Gardeners, and 4-H; BMP education for producers delivered by ANR
Youth mental health and behavior problems	Expand Botvin Life Skills and Character Counts training at schools along with traditional 4-H PYD focused on citizenship, leadership, and life skills; Partnership Gloucester Resources for Youth Team

Introduction

This situation analysis was developed to inform future programming by Virginia Cooperative Extension-Gloucester County. Its intent is to identify local priority issues where VCE-Gloucester may provide innovative, research-based solutions drawing on partnerships with Virginia Tech and Virginia State University, our two land grant Extension institutions.

VCE-Gloucester distributed the state survey as a link published on local Extension social media accounts and on the Gloucester County website and its social media through the Department of Community Engagement. The survey link was delivered by email to resource councils and camper families.

Additional input and local knowledge resulted from participation in meetings with Community Services department heads, and the Gloucester Resource Council. the Gloucester Resources for Youth Team which includes representatives from Gloucester Public Schools Student Services, School Counseling, the Middle Peninsula-Northern Neck Community Services Board, the Department of Juvenile Justice, Gloucester County Community Engagement and others. Producer needs were communicated to Extension Agents for Agriculture and Natural Resources, as well as through the County Director for the Farm Services Agency who is a member of the Extension Leadership Council. Data from VCE Data Commons, the Virginia Department of Education, the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Agriculture Statistics Service and the Kids Count Data Center of the Annie E Casey Foundation was consulted.

Unit Profile

Overview

Gloucester County is located on the lower east end of the middle peninsula of the Commonwealth of Virginia and is comprised of 218 square miles of land area and another 70 square miles of waterway and 500 miles of tidal shoreline. The County is bordered on the south by the York River and the lower Chesapeake Bay on the east.

Gloucester is perhaps best described as a gateway community to the greater Hampton Roads metropolitan area to which it is connected to by the Coleman Bridge which spans the York River. Gloucester County is larger in both population and area than its Middle Peninsula neighbors, and considerably more urban. It boasts small town ambience with modern conveniences which includes an expanding medical facility (Riverside Walter Reed Hospital), a community college (Rappahannock Community College, Glenss Campus), and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science campus of the College of William and Mary.

The Route 17 corridor has seen significant commercial, residential, and solar farm development over recent years and is a shopping draw for the Middle Peninsula and the lower Northern Neck. Despite development Gloucester County retains much of its rural character in distance from Rt. 17 and along waterways. Famous for its daffodils, Gloucester attracts numerous visitors who make spring pilgrimage to the Daffodil Festival or who come to take in Powhatan history, enjoy water recreation on the bay or paddle its many scenic tributaries. Recreational areas include numerous local parks as well as Machicomoco, a relatively new State Park with historical Powhatan interpretive area along the York River.

Demographics

Gloucester County's estimated 2023 population is 39,493 with a growth rate of 2% in the past year according to the most recent United States census data. The most prevalent race is White 85.41%. Black or African American individuals account for 8.58% of population; American Indian, 0.12%; Asian, 0.75%; two or more races, 4.266%; 3.89% are Hispanic. The county is slowly trending toward a more diverse population with increases in the number of individuals who identify as Hispanic or 2 or more races. VDOE fall enrollment data shows a similar trend with 2023-2024 enrollment showing 8.3% of the enrolled student population identifies as Hispanic, up from 5.6% in the 2018-2019 academic year.

The median age in Gloucester in 2020 was 44.9 years, nearly 10 years younger than adjoining counties Mathews and Middlesex, but still approximately 5 years older than the statewide median age (U.S. Census Bureau). Median Household income for Gloucester is \$77,733 and approximately 600 families and 12% of children live below the poverty. Nearly 1/3 of households were described as housing cost burdened or Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) in 2022. According to VDOE, 54 children enrolled in Gloucester's public schools for the current year are homeless. The G.U.E.S.T. day shelter serves an increasing homeless population, but there is no permanent night time shelter.

There are 5016 youth enrolled in Gloucester County Public Schools for the school year 2023-2024 (Virginia Dept of Education Fall Enrollment). This is a 5.5% decrease in enrollment from pre-pandemic enrollment (5,306). Approximately 500 youth are currently schooled at home. Whether the increase in homeschooling rates reflects familial changes resulting from the pandemic such as increased ability to work at home or is related to a growing socio-political divide related to parent choice in education is unclear.

Community Health Statistics

According to the Virginia Department of Health, Gloucester County scored better than half of all localities on the six factors/outcomes assessed for community health rankings: length of life, quality of life, clinical care, social and economic, physical and environment, and health behaviors. Despite the presence of Riverside Walter Reed and Sentara Medical, Gloucester has a higher patient to primary care provider ratio (1: 1,778) when compared to the state (1: 1,310). In 2022, Gloucester County had 101 overdose hospitalizations per 100,000 compared to 90 per 100,000 statewide. Opioid abuse continues to be prevalent in the community, and its impacts on families cannot be overestimated.

Agriculture

According to the 2017 Agricultural Census, there are 166 farms in Gloucester and 26,014 acres in farm land. The principal crops are traditional grains: Soybeans for beans 6,106 acres; Corn for grain 5,400 acres; Forage (hay/haylage), all 1,268 acres; Wheat for grain, all 440 acres. Gloucester has additionally seen an increase in the number of small homesteads and niche markets such as cut flowers and organically grown produce. In 2017, 130 of the 300 producers reported in the census, considered themselves to be new or beginning farmers. Livestock production in Gloucester mostly relates to poultry. Cattle, hogs, sheep, goats, horses and alpaca are also farmed in Gloucester. One threat to agriculture is the growth of solar farms in the county. The lack of veterinary services for livestock additionally is an impediment.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Community and resident perspectives were voiced through the needs assessment survey instrument developed by the state and distributed locally as well as in discussion resulting from participation in resource councils (Gloucester County Resource Council and Gloucester Resource Youth Team, GRYT) and other community meetings.

There were 72 responses to the survey. There were no respondents under 25 years of age nor over age 84. Of the 72 respondents, 83% identified as white; 9.7% as Black or African America; 2.7% as Asian; 1.4% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 7% as some other race; 4.2% identified as Hispanic/ Latinx. Although this is not an exact match for county racial demographics, it is close. Our survey indicated that respondents were from well-above median income households. Approximately 42% were retirement age or older.

As can be seen in Table 2, survey respondents stressed environmental concerns as needing Extension effort over nearly all other issues presented. Gloucester residents care about the environment and their natural surroundings. 86% of survey respondents indicated high or very high effort should be directed towards helping youth develop citizenship, leadership, and life skills; 81% indicated similar effort for promoting agricultural, natural resource, and environmental literacy, and towards strengthening the local food system.

Issues selected as needing low or no effort were similar to those selected by respondents to the state-wide survey, and included promoting economic development, building capacity of community non-profits, addressing alcohol use; strengthening couple or marital relations, and promoting small business entrepreneurs.

There were a few surprises in issue ranking by age group. Respondents in the age group most likely associated with raising children (25-34) were least likely to support Extension involvement in strengthening parenting skills. In fact, none selected high or very high effort. 100% of the same age group indicated that Extension should direct high to very high effort helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and life skills, and 80% supported spending the same effort getting more adults involved in mentoring youth.

Only 43% of respondents indicated that Extension should direct high to very high effort to addressing prescription drug abuse despite the problems this issue raises in communities.

Table 2. Top 10 issues based solely on reporting high or very high effort needed.

Issue	Responding high or very high effort
Protecting Water Quality	88%
Helping Youth develop citizenship, leadership, and life skills	86%
Reducing misuse and overuse of pesticides and fertilizers	83%
Protecting the coastal Environment	83%
Protecting the Marine environment	81%
Controlling invasive pests	81%
Promoting agricultural, natural resources, and environmental literacy	81%
Protecting freshwater resources	81%
Strengthening the local food system	78%
Managing Natural Habitats and Eco Systems	74%

A review of the open-ended question responses however offered another take on community perspectives. Youth mental health was mentioned numerous times as well as the need to support agriculture and local producers. Several respondents support an interdisciplinary approach to working through issues facing Gloucester. One respondent wrote “Improving public health and empowerment of youth in our area continues to be a need in our community. The overlap of teaching stewardship of natural resources and strengthening our food supply are great areas that overlap with education and empowering youth of our area.” Another wrote of Gloucester’s most pressing need: “Empowering our youth. We need to get our kids involved within our community. The way it was pre-Covid. Since Covid has declined, our youth have forgotten how to act/behave.” Indeed, behavior concerns are an issue that arises often in discussion with school personnel and other youth serving agencies.

Other areas of concern expressed in the open-ended responses included:

- Helping farmers with technologies in an era of climate change
- Preserving the waterman way of life while also tackling climate change
- Land use issues resulting from the proliferation of solar farms

- Homelessness
- Food insecurity
- Youth and family financial management

Community Issues

In early December 2023, the Gloucester Extension Leadership Council met in person and on Zoom to review the results of the needs assessment survey and prioritize issues. Present at this meeting were Krista Gustafson, Unit Coordinator and Extension agent 4-H Youth Development; Glenn Sturm, Extension agent, Family and Consumer Sciences; Elizabeth Hayes, Family Nutrition Program assistant; Jackie Jefferis, 4-H program assistant; Heather Johnson, Unit administrative assistant; Katina Keener, Director, Student Services, Gloucester County Public Schools GCPS); Lori Lee, G.U.E.S.T. Day Shelter; Janice Majette, USDA FSA County Director; Harrison Dixon, Retired agriculture teacher, GCPS; Kathy Phillips, Retired, Rural Infant Services; Rose Sullivan, Master Gardener Coordinator.

In addition to reviewing the data on issues presented in the needs-assessment survey, the ELC considered the open-ended responses. Additionally, the ELC considered information gleaned from the youth and adult resource councils and those expressed by producers to Extension Agents Robbie Longest and Frank Long who serve Gloucester for Agriculture and Natural Resources.

The Extension Leadership Council supports continued efforts in each of the core Extension programmatic areas, and the following issues were identified as priorities for Extension programming:

- **Financial pressures on family farms and producers** Farm income has been declining over the past decade while the cost of agricultural supplies including fertilizer and pesticide has increased. Competition for land use, including the proliferation of solar farms in Gloucester.
- **Youth mental health and behavior problems** Youth mental health has been an issue for quite some time, but since the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation has only worsened. Apparent at 4-H summer camps, GCPS is also facing numerous issues related to youth behavior and youth mental health-- issues for which 4-H and Extension have already become involved. GRYT members from school counseling and Juvenile Justice additionally support this as a priority issue.
- **Family financial need and lack of resources** Costs for everything from food to housing have increased, and families are struggling. 54 children are listed among the homeless as part of Gloucester's Fall enrollment for the 2023-2024 school year, and 2,150 are considered disadvantaged.
- **Food insecurity and poor nutrition** Numerous food pantries serve those who cannot afford groceries or nutritious food, and 5 of the 8 schools qualify for the USDA free lunch program, but food insecurity persists. Approximately 600 families in Gloucester live below the poverty line, with incomes which make affording nutritious food difficult.
- **Environmental concerns and preserving ecosystems** As mentioned above, the survey returned results indicating that environmental concerns are a priority for Gloucester citizens. As Gloucester continues to lose agricultural and forest land to support development (residential, commercial, solar) it seems this priority will remain up front.

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

The Gloucester Office of Virginia Cooperative Extension already addresses many of the issues summarized above, but significant long-term change will be achieved through intentional interdisciplinary programming.

Issue: Financial pressures on family farms and producers

To assist family farms and producers with the financial pressures of inflationary prices in agricultural supplies, Extension will partner with Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program to assist beginning farmers and small homesteaders with the knowledge they need to be successful. The Gloucester Office will continue to market VSU's SFOP offerings in social media and on the county calendar. Extension will also explore hosting workshops related to farm transition and estate planning. VCE-Gloucester will develop, alongside offices in the Middle Peninsula, a quarterly newsletter and calendar of events related to such support, including workshops conducted by the ANR agents to assist with farm management plans. Extension will also partner with the local FSA office to publicize information related to grants and loans for small farms. Learning to manage a family farm starts in childhood. 4-H will offer workshops and 4-H clubs which promote youth entrepreneurship, responsible animal care and record keeping skills to help prepare youth for futures in agriculture. Partnerships may include Farm Bureau, Agriculture in the Classroom, and FFA.

Issue: Youth mental health and behavior problems

Gloucester County 4-H regularly conducts programming which helps youth develop citizenship, leadership, and life skills through clubs, camp, and school enrichment. In order to target youth mental health and behavior problems specifically, 4-H will partner with GCPS and the department of Community Engagement to expand the Botvin Life Skills programs at the middle schools. In fall 2023, 4-H and Rural Opioid Project Coordinator Maria Murillo-Valdez offered the Botvin Parent Program and Character Counts education for kindergarten families at Petsworth Elementary school. Extension will continue to program collaboratively to meet these needs.

Issues: Family financial need and lack of resources and Food insecurity and poor nutrition

Lack of financial resources and food insecurity go hand-in hand. By offering workshops on budgeting and financial management for adults both in-person and by zoom, the FCS agent has reached several populations of greatest need including those seeking the assistance through the G.U.E.S.T. shelter and those with housing arrangements at Riverbend apartments. Extension will use the resource council as a means to identify additional populations in need of such workshops. The Family Nutrition Program provides nutritional education which includes stretching the food dollar at Bread for Life Food Pantry, located centrally in Gloucester. There is need to reach out to those utilizing the food pantries located at the southern and northern ends of the county.

Youth receive financial literacy education as well as nutrition education through a variety of 4-H and FCS programs including Reality Store, Kids Market Place, and 4-H Food Challenge. These programs will continue, and 4-H will develop funding resources to assist youth with financial need and especially those facing homelessness with the costs of camp attendance. Partnership with GCPS could strengthen work-force readiness programs with workshops on resume writing, interview techniques, and by offering certifications such as the Serv Safe Food Handlers Certificate program that 4-H held with Special Education over the summer. Gloucester's youth resource team is currently working on a compilation of resources available for youth, and VCE is participating in that effort.

Issue: Environmental concerns and preserving ecosystems

With 500 miles of tidal coastline, Gloucester's citizens are concerned about preserving the natural environment. Extension is well positioned to lead the charge here with a variety of educational programs that target youth and adults of all ages. Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences for youth develop conservation mindset in young people which can lead to positive behaviors in nature. Locally, Extension Master Gardeners and Virginia Master Naturalists engage in stewardship volunteerism and public education to instill that same conservation

mindset in audiences of all ages. Extension agents support soil testing efforts for both homeowners and producers as well as education in best management practices to reduce fertilizer and pesticide run-off.

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