

Cass County, Illinois Community Assessment Study

September 2006

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
I. BACKGROUND.....	7
II. STUDY METHODOLOGY.....	7
III. STUDY FINDINGS – CASS COUNTY	9
A. COMMUNITY PROFILE	9
1. History of Cass County	9
2. Location	10
3. Demographics.....	11
4. Cultural Diversity.....	19
5. Social Environment	21
B. ECONOMIC INDICATORS.....	24
1. Employment	24
2. Income and Poverty Status	27
3. Economic Development	31
4. Housing.....	32
C. INFRASTRUCTURE	36
D. EDUCATION	38
1. Public Schools.....	38
2. Adult Education and Job Training	44
E. HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES	46
1. Health Indicators	46
2. Health Care Access	54
3. Human Services.....	57
IV. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION	59
 Appendices:	
Appendix I - Advisory Group Participants.....	62
Appendix II - Sources of Secondary/Existing Data.....	63
Appendix III - Cass County Community Survey	64
Appendix IV - Cass County Survey Summary Tables	67
Appendix V - Interview and Focus Group Question Guide.....	76
Appendix VI - Interview and Focus Group Participants	78

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Executive Summary

In 2006, a collaboration of community leaders in Cass County contracted The Medical Foundation (TMF) to complete a comprehensive survey of the area. The study aims to provide a rich portrait of Cass County and examine a number of issues including the County's demographic, economic, health, and social factors. Study findings are to be shared with an array of individuals and agencies serving the Cass County region. The goal of this effort is to provide community leaders with information to prioritize the needs and resources within the County and develop a comprehensive county-wide strategic plan to improve the quality of life in the area.

Collaborating with the 34 member Advisory Group, TMF staff worked over several months to review existing data from a variety of sources and conduct primary qualitative research through interviews and focus groups with diverse groups of people in Cass County.

Key Findings

Community Profile

Formed in 1837, Cass County is one of 102 counties in Illinois and is located in the west-central part of the state, 45 miles west of Springfield and 30 miles northwest of Jacksonville. The 2000 Census noted that Cass County's population was 13,695, increasing 1.9 percent from the 1990 figure. However, recent evidence suggests that the population data might be underreported, as the area has experienced significant changes over the last several years. Since the 2000 Census, the population has grown significantly due to migration to the area.

Most of the growth in Cass County was largely the result of an increase in the Hispanic population, mainly in Beardstown. The Hispanic population in Cass County was over 1,000 people in the 2000 U.S. Census, about 8.5 percent of the population but in 2005 comprised approximately 45 percent of children entering kindergarten in Beardstown. This population growth also has transformed the age distribution of the area, since the incoming population has a significantly younger age profile than the already existing Cass County residents. Hispanic participants in the community assessment reported that they moved to Cass County for employment opportunities with good wages and benefits and for a safe, rural environment to raise a family. However, integration between the new influx of immigrants and residents who have lived in the area for generations has not been easy. It appears that the different population groups appear to be living as two cultures side by side. While the population growth has resulted in a dramatic rise in school enrollment as well as an

increased demand for needed social services, this new, younger population has also brought with it a great sense of vitality and enthusiasm for the future of Cass County.

Participants in the community assessment believed that Cass County possessed numerous assets related to its population and quality of life. Churches and their leaders were noted as a keystone in the community, providing people with a place for worship, socialization, as well as medical and human services. Outdoor activities for individuals and families were also reported frequently as contributing to a positive quality of life in the region. Besides the ability to fish, boat, camp, and hunt within Cass County, participants in the assessment spoke frequently of the availability of organized sports for adults and young people including soccer, football, baseball, and softball.

Economic Indicators

Cass County saw an increase in the labor force over the last decade. The lead sector for employment in Cass County is non-durable goods manufacturing, which comprised nearly 30 percent of jobs in 2002. This is a distinguishing characteristic of the County economy as fewer than ten counties in Illinois have this large a proportion of employment in the manufacturing sector. Cargill Meat Solutions is the largest employer in the area followed by education and health services agencies.

The median income in Cass County (\$39,112) falls below that of the region (\$42,064) or of the state (\$53,053). Similarly, the County poverty rate is slightly above that of Illinois (10.9% vs. 9.9%). However, in the last several years, the number of persons and households below the poverty level decreased for the County as a whole and for all its individual towns except Beardstown.

Not surprisingly, economic development and revitalization of Cass County were identified as major priorities by participants in the community assessment. Many study participants were not optimistic about the future of the County and the prospect of good paying jobs being available. Respondents believed that the County should support the development and retention of small businesses in the area, increase the number retail stores, enhance tourism to the area, develop more employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and continue the work of the Overall Economic Development Commission of Cass County.

Housing

Due to the population growth of the area, the housing vacancy rate in Cass County has decreased in the last several years, yet the quality of housing stock has not improved. Over half of all of Cass County housing was built over 50 years ago. While some new construction has happened in Ashland and Chandlerville, very little has happened in other Cass County communities.

Many participants in the community assessment cited overcrowding within housing units and properties in poor condition as two major problems in the area. Other

infrastructure-related concerns that were addressed by study respondents related to the County's lack of public transportation services, the quality and availability of the water supply, and the needed growth of certain municipal services such as road repair, recycling services, and police.

Education

Overall, participants in the community assessment were satisfied with the quality and support of the Cass County educational system. The schools in Cass County were seen as assets that draw and keep families in the community. However, schools were still viewed as an area needing some improvement.

Compared to other high schools in west central Illinois, ACT test scores were similar for Cass County districts, although slightly lower for Virginia and Beardstown. All of the schools lagged behind the Illinois state average of 20.3 in 2004 and 20.1 in 2005. Many focus group and interview participants stressed that the students would benefit if a more rigorous curriculum were introduced in the classroom.

Study participants also provided other suggestions for educational improvements, including more discussion over further school consolidation, a growth in the technology and vocational programs offered to youth and adults, added job training programs, encouragement of higher educational opportunities for youth, and an increase in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for non-English speaking residents.

Health

Similar to other counties in Illinois, the most significant risk factors facing Cass County residents are obesity and tobacco, alcohol, and drug use. The population's leading causes of death are heart disease, cancer, and cerebrovascular disease (stroke). Many residents suffer from risk factors for chronic disease such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Additionally, County residents' physical inactivity, poor nutrition, and high smoking rates are significant lifestyle behaviors that are most likely contributing to its chronic disease rates.

Survey respondents cited lack of health insurance as a significant issue related to health. According to participants in the community assessment, lack of health insurance often results from working less than full-time in a paid position, working for an employer who doesn't offer benefits, affordability of employer offered benefits or being unemployed. About one in ten County residents avoided going to the doctor because of cost, which is similar to the statewide proportion. While many respondents saw that the County has significant assets in its dental, medical, and mental health services, opinions on accessibility differed by town. Participants in the community assessment were also concerned about the few number of primary care providers in the area, the lack of medical specialists, transportation needed to reach health care professionals, few medical interpreter services available, the cultural

competence of providers, the increasing demand for home health services for the elderly, and the barriers that low-income families face in accessing medical care.

Additionally, family and social service programs were important to many study participants. Cass County was viewed as having numerous assets in this area, including faith-based services, food pantry and meal delivery services, pre-school programming for low income children, and other support services for low income families. However, participants saw the lack of child care options as an issue. Less than half of study participants agreed that there are affordable child care services available in Cass County or that child care providers and services are adequate. An increase in quality affordable daycare, pre-school, and after-school programs was seen as much needed for parents.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Based on the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected, TMF has developed a set of recommendations to help facilitate the process of developing a county-wide strategic plan to improve the quality of life for all residents in Cass County. It is our hope that these recommendations will continue to mobilize community members to build on existing community assets in a multifaceted, coordinated approach.

Collaborative Planning

- Develop a strategic plan to improve the quality of life in Cass County and increase available resources to support plan implementation.
- Utilize existing organizations, groups and networks, such as the Overall Economic Development Commission and The Cass County Interagency Council, to develop priorities for new programs and services.
- Explore new collaborations to bring in additional resources to support the development of effective responses to identified priorities and emerging needs.
- Continue to support, promote and develop The Cass County Interagency Council to facilitate communication, networking, strategy development, implementation and evaluation.

Diversity

- Build bridges and identify and involve diverse community members in local and county-wide planning and decision making.
- Ensure that programs and services are culturally competent to meet the needs of the diverse community.
- Support programming that assists immigrants in obtaining legal status.

Infrastructure

- Continue to pursue the development of Corridor 67.

- Continue to pursue the remediation of Mascouten Bay to increase usage of the Beardstown Marina.
- Identify new and support existing initiatives to improve access to drinking water and wastewater treatment.
- Encourage and promote the revitalization of downtown areas.
- Increase public transportation options.

Economic Development

- Increase and diversify employment opportunities by working with existing employers and attracting new employers.
 - Include increased employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities.
- Encourage initiatives to support and retain existing businesses.
- Support initiatives to encourage small business development.
- Involve existing businesses in strategizing and recruiting new businesses.
- Build on existing tourism opportunities.

Housing

- Increase the supply of senior citizen residential housing, assisted living facilities and nursing homes, particularly in or around Arenzville and Virginia
- Improve quality of existing housing.
- Increase the supply of affordable rental housing.
- Increase the supply of quality affordable single family housing.

Health and Social Services

- Work with health clinics and medical specialists to improve access to medical care in Cass County including:
 - Primary and prenatal care
 - Specialists, particularly in obstetrics and gynecology
 - Dental care
 - Mental health care, including the volume and variety of practitioner types.
- Improve services that support access to health care including:
 - Transportation to medical appointments
 - Trained interpreters particularly for the Hispanic population
 - Access to affordable health insurance
 - Cultural competency training for service providers.
- Increase health promotion and disease prevention programming; topic areas are, for example, physical activity, nutrition, heart health, and teen pregnancy prevention.
 - Provide programming in English and Spanish.
- Increase services for the elderly, particularly home health services.
- Increase availability of quality child care for infants as well as preschool and after school care.

- Increase services for alcohol and other drug abuse prevention, intervention, and treatment.

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I. BACKGROUND

To gain a current picture of the quality of life of Cass County residents, a collaborative of community leaders in Cass County engaged The Medical Foundation (TMF) to conduct a comprehensive county-wide study. This study examines a broad range of demographic, economic, education, and health and social factors that impact the lives of individuals, families, and institutions within the area. The findings of the study will be shared with individuals and agencies serving Cass County residents so they may prioritize the needs and resources within the County and develop a comprehensive county-wide strategic plan to improve the quality of life in Cass County. Funding for this study was provided by Cargill Meat Solutions, Illinois Department of Public Health, Cass County Health Department, and The Tracy Family Foundation.

This written report of study findings by The Medical Foundation is organized as follows:

- I. Background
- II. Study Methodology
- III. Study Findings for Cass County
 - A. Community Profile
 - B. Economic Indicators
 - C. Infrastructure
 - D. Education
 - E. Health and Human Services
- IV. Recommendations and Conclusions

II. STUDY METHODOLOGY

To conduct the Cass County study, The Medical Foundation used a participatory community assessment process that included quantitative and qualitative information collection and analysis. The study methods were guided and informed by a 34 member Advisory Group; a list of members is provided in Appendix I. Information was collected and analyzed from September 2005 to August 2006.

Quantitative Information

One component of the quantitative information is a numerical depiction of the demography and quantifiable aspects of health and wellbeing of the communities in Cass County with a comparison to the state as a whole. The majority of the data is reported for a point in time, but where relevant, data are documented over time.

Appendix II contains a list of national, state, county, and town data sources that were utilized; examples are the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Illinois Department of Public Health, Illinois Department of Education, Cass County Health Department, Cass County Human Resource Center, Overall Economic Development Commission, AC Central School District, Beardstown School District, Virginia School District, Illinois Trails, and ESRI Business Analyst.

A second component of the quantitative data is a community survey that assessed opinions regarding a variety of aspects of living in Cass County and priorities for Cass County. A copy of this survey is provided in Appendix III. Respondents to this survey are from a convenience sample rather than a random sample. The survey was made available in English and Spanish, on-line and through the Cass County Star-Gazette and a variety of community based locations such as schools, churches, libraries, town offices, local businesses and community meetings. The total number of respondents to the survey was 671. The age range of respondents was 17 to 93 years; 568 respondents reside in Cass County; 76 respondents reside in another county but have an interest in and ties to Cass County; and, 27 respondents did not indicate their town or county of residence. For respondents who reside in Cass County, the majority of respondents are female (71%), under the age of 66 years (77%), white–non Hispanic (84.8%), and have lived in Cass County six years or more (90%). One third of respondents have lived in the County their whole life; two thirds reported that they are currently employed, most in Cass County; and nearly two thirds (61%) indicated that there were no children in their household. The percentage of respondents who reported that their ethnicity was Hispanic/Latino was 7.5 percent (8.5 percent of County residents identify as Hispanic/Latino in the 2000 US Census). Detailed demographics for the respondents and tables with results are provided in Appendix IV. Throughout the report narrative, the results for individual survey questions are included within the appropriate topic area, as are selected anonymous comments from open-ended questions in the survey. Of note, the results in the report narrative are presented *without* inclusion of “Don’t Know” responses. The Tables in Appendix IV include the results both with and without “Don’t Know” responses.

Qualitative Information

The purpose of the qualitative data collection was to add depth and breadth to the quantitative data by inclusion of the voice of community leaders and residents regarding the current assets, needs and resources of Cass County. Qualitative information was gathered through a series of eight (8) focus groups (comprising 53 individuals) and interviews with 38 key informants (a total of 91 individuals). Participants in the focus groups and interviews included representatives of area non-profit community based organizations, the faith community, the Hispanic community, schools, businesses, elected officials and other community leaders. There was representation by youth, working-age adults, and senior citizens.

