

Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast

Sacred Heart Health System, Inc.

2024 Community Health Needs Assessment Okaloosa and Walton Counties, Florida

Conducted July 2024 to February 2025 (*Tax Year 2024*)



Ascension

Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast

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The goal of this report is to offer a meaningful understanding of the most significant health needs across Okaloosa and Walton Counties, with emphasis on identifying the barriers to health equity for all people, as well as to inform planning efforts to respond to those needs. Special attention has been given to the needs of individuals and communities who are at increased risk for poor health outcomes or experiencing social factors that place them at risk. Findings from this report can be used to identify, develop, and focus hospital, health system, and community initiatives and programming to better serve the health and wellness needs of the community.

The 2024 Community Health Needs Assessment report was approved by the Ascension Florida Board of Directors on February 4, 2025 (2024 tax year), and applies to the following three-year cycle: July 1, 2025 to June 30, 2028. This report, as well as the previous report, can be found at our public website.

We value the community's voice and welcome feedback on this report. Please visit our public website (<https://healthcare.ascension.org/chna>) to submit your comments.

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Message from the President



Trey Abshier
President and CEO
Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast

I am honored to serve as the President and CEO of Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast hospital. Deeply rooted in our community for over 20 years, the residents supported opening the hospital through a grassroots effort following the closure of the nearest facility. Since then, our Ministry of the Catholic Church has served our neighbors, with special attention to those struggling most with continued support from the community we serve.

Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast continually earns recognition for the quality of care it provides, patient satisfaction, and patient outcomes. As a top 15 health system named by Fortune/PINC AI, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast is a destination for specialty care – including spine and joint replacement surgery, heart care, cancer care, women’s health and more. The hospital, which achieved a 5-star rating on 2024 CMS Overall Hospital Star Ratings and was recognized as one of the top hospitals in Florida in 2024, offers a wide range of minimally invasive procedures using robotic-assisted technology, and imaging, all on one campus. The Family Birth Place is recognized as one of the top maternity facilities in the country. These recognitions are a testament to our physicians’ and care teams’ commitment to our patients and a reflection of our devotion to our Ministry’s values to serve all persons with special attention to the poor and vulnerable. We will continue to expand services to meet the growing needs of our community.

Our commitment to Northwest Florida goes well beyond the walls of our hospital. We are blessed to be able to support local organizations such as Walton County Community Health Center, Emerald Coast, Healthy Start Okaloosa/Walton, Destin, Caring and Sharing of South Walton, and PanCare of Florida, Inc. These partnerships are an integral part of our broader mission to enhance the health of our neighbors. However, our most significant commitment is to the most vulnerable members of Northwest Florida. Our initiatives, including the Women’s Services Fund, MyGULFCare, a rural medical residency program in partnership with UF Health and the Florida Department of Health in Walton County/Walton County Community Health Center, and our various community benefit and outreach initiatives, are a testament to this commitment. We value each member of our community and strive to impact their lives positively.

Executive Summary

Purpose of the CHNA

The purpose of the community health needs assessment (CHNA) is to understand the health needs and priorities, with emphasis on identifying the barriers to health equity, for all people who live and/or work in the communities served by the hospital, with the goal of responding to those needs through the development of an implementation strategy (IS) plan. As part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, all not-for-profit hospitals are required to conduct a CHNA and adopt an IS every three years.

Community Served

For the 2024 CHNA, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast has defined Okaloosa and Walton counties, Florida, as its communities served. While the hospital provides services to Okaloosa and Walton counties and surrounding areas, Okaloosa and Walton counties were chosen as the focus due to its status as the primary service area for both the hospital and its community partners.

Data Analysis Methodology

The 2024 CHNA was conducted from July 2024 to February 2025, and, with contracted assistance from Kleinhaus Consulting Group, LLC., utilized an integrative analysis process that incorporated data from both primary and secondary sources.

- Community input (primary data) was collected to reflect the voice of the community. Focus groups and key stakeholder interviews with over 20 people representing health care consumers, health care professionals, community stakeholders, and multi-sector were held. Special attention was given to the needs of individuals and populations who are more marginalized and to unmet health needs or gaps in services.
- Secondary data was compiled and reviewed to understand the health status of the community. Over 35 indicators from reputable and reliable sources reflecting chronic disease, social and economic factors, and healthcare access were reviewed as well as utilization trends in the community.

Community Needs

In collaboration with community partners, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast used a phased prioritization approach to determine the most crucial needs for community stakeholders to address. The significant needs are as follows (in alphabetical order):

- Access to care
- Affordable housing
- Childcare
- Chronic disease and obesity
- Mental health and substance abuse
- Transportation

Next Steps and Conclusion

The 2024 CHNA was presented to the Ascension Florida Board of Directors for approval and adoption on February 4, 2025. Findings from this report can be used to identify, develop, and focus hospital, health system, and community initiatives and programming to better serve the health and wellness needs of the community.

Following approval of the CHNA, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast will complete a prioritization matrix and develop an IS. The IS will focus on all or a subset of the significant needs, and will describe how the hospital intends to respond to those prioritized needs throughout the same three-year CHNA cycle: July 2025 to June 2028.

About Ascension

As one of the leading non-profit and Catholic health systems in the United States, Ascension is committed to delivering compassionate, personalized care to all, with special attention to individuals and communities who are at increased risk for poor health outcomes or experiencing social factors that place them at risk.

Ascension

Ascension is one of the nation's leading non-profit and Catholic health systems, with a Mission of delivering compassionate, personalized care to all with special attention to persons living in poverty and those most vulnerable. In fiscal year 2024, Ascension provided \$2.1 billion in care of persons living in poverty and other community benefit programs. Ascension includes approximately 131,000 associates, 37,000 affiliated providers and 136 hospitals, serving communities in 18 states and the District of Columbia.

Ascension's Mission provides a strong framework and guidance for the work done to meet the needs of communities across the U.S. It is foundational to transform health care and express priorities when providing care and services, particularly to those most in need.

Mission: Rooted in the loving ministry of Jesus as healer, we commit ourselves to serving all persons with special attention to those who are poor and vulnerable. Our Catholic health ministry is dedicated to spiritually-centered, holistic care which sustains and improves the health of individuals and communities. We are advocates for a compassionate and just society through our actions and our words.

For more information about Ascension, visit <https://www.ascension.org>.

Ascension Florida

In Florida, Ascension operates Ascension Sacred Heart based in Pensacola and Ascension St. Vincent's based in Jacksonville. Together, Ascension Florida operates nine hospitals and more than 190 other sites of care and employs more than 12,000 associates. Across the region, Ascension Sacred Heart and Ascension St. Vincent's have served North Florida communities for more than 165 years. In fiscal year 2024, they provided more than \$395 million in community benefit and other care for vulnerable persons.



Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast

As a Ministry of the Catholic Church, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast is a non-profit hospital governed by a local board of trustees represented by community members, medical staff, and sister sponsorships, and has been providing medical care to Okaloosa and Walton counties. Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast operates one hospital campus, 26 related healthcare facilities, and employs more than 45 primary and specialty care clinicians.

Serving Florida since 2003, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast is continuing the long and valued tradition of responding to the health needs of the people in our community, following in the footsteps of legacy. Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast was built through a grassroots community effort and with land donated by the St. Joe Community Foundation. The community continues to support the hospital and its expansions, including adding a Level II NICU in 2020, purchasing an advanced CT machine, and improving cardiovascular care, including pulse-field ablation.

For more information about Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast, visit ascension.org/EmeraldCoastFL.

About the Community Health Needs Assessment

A community health needs assessment is essential for community building, health improvement efforts, and directing resources where they are most needed. CHNAs can be powerful tools with the potential to be catalysts for immense community change.

Purpose of the CHNA

A CHNA is defined as “a systematic process involving the community that identifies and analyzes community health needs and assets to plan and act upon priority community health needs.”¹ The process serves as a foundation for promoting the health and well-being of the community by identifying the most pressing needs, leveraging existing assets and resources, developing strategic plans, and mobilizing hospital programs and community partners to work together.

This community-driven approach aligns with Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast’s commitment to offer programs designed to respond to the health needs of a community, with special attention to persons who are medically underserved and at risk for poorer health outcomes because of social factors that put them at increased risk.

Advancing Health Equity

Health equity is the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health.² Progress toward achieving health equity can be measured by reducing health disparities. Health disparities are particular health differences closely linked with economic, social, and/or environmental disadvantage. Health disparities adversely affect groups of people who have systematically experienced such obstacles to health based on their race or ethnicity; religion; socioeconomic status; gender identity; sexual orientation; age; cognitive, sensory, or physical disability; geographic location; or other characteristics historically linked to discrimination or exclusion.³

Focusing on the root causes that have perpetuated these differences contributes to the advancement of health equity. By identifying the conditions, practices, and policies that perpetuate differences in health outcomes, we can better respond to root causes when pursuing health equity.

Ascension acknowledges that health disparities in our communities go beyond individual health behaviors. Ascension’s Mission calls us to be “advocates for a compassionate and just society through our actions and words”; therefore, health equity is a matter of great importance to Ascension.

¹ Catholic Health Association of the United States. (2022). *A guide for planning and reporting community benefit, 2022* (p.146).

² National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2023, January 4). *Advancing health equity in chronic disease prevention and management*. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Retrieved October 11, 2023, from <https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/healthequity/index.htm>

³ Braveman, P. (2014). What are health disparities and health equity? We need to be clear. *Public Health Reports*, 129(Suppl 2), 5-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00333549141291S203>

IRS 501(r)(3) and Form 990 Schedule H Compliance

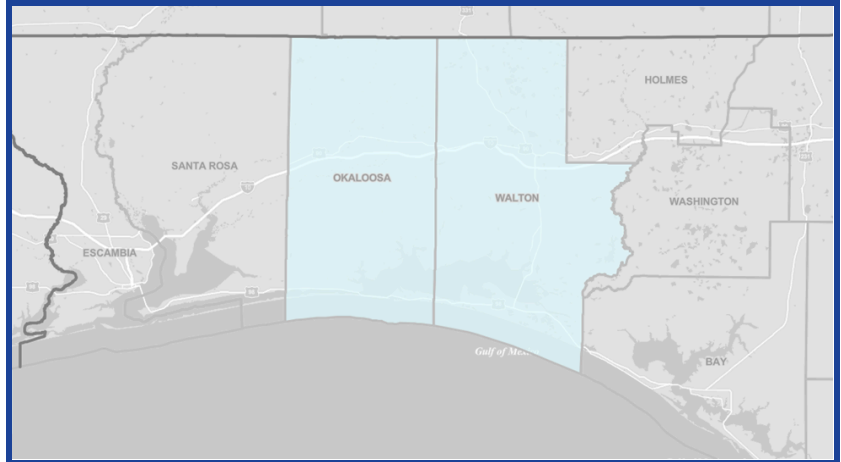
The CHNA also serves to satisfy certain requirements of tax reporting, pursuant to provisions of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, more commonly known as the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Requirements for 501(c)(3) hospitals under the ACA are described in Code Section 501(r)(3).

Under the ACA, all not-for-profit hospitals must conduct a CHNA and adopt an IS every three years. Additionally, both current and previous CHNA and IS reports must be made widely available to the public. To meet this requirement, electronic versions of these reports are accessible at <https://healthcare.ascension.org/CHNA>, and paper copies can be requested from the administrative offices at Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast.

Community Served and Demographics

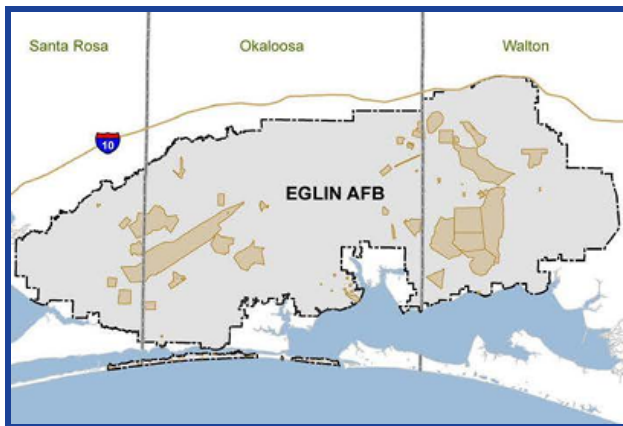
Community Served

For the purpose of the 2024 CHNA, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast has defined its communities served as Okaloosa and Walton counties in Florida. Although Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast serves Okaloosa and Walton counties and surrounding areas, the “community served” was defined as such because (a) most of our service area is in each county; (b) most of our assessment partners define their service area at the county level; and (c) most community health data is available at the county level.



Okaloosa and Walton counties in Florida, located in the Panhandle, are shaped by a mix of tourism, military presence, and rural landscapes. The resident population is primarily concentrated in the northern and southern parts of the counties, as Eglin Air Force Base’s expansive 720+ square miles stretch across both, dividing the area and limiting development.

Outside of the urban hubs of Fort Walton Beach, Destin, and Crestview in Okaloosa County, and Santa Rosa Beach and DeFuniak Springs in Walton County, much of the region is rural, with large stretches of forested areas, farmland, and small communities.



Okaloosa County’s economy is heavily influenced by the military presence at Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field, as well as tourism along its Gulf Coast beaches. Walton County has experienced rapid growth, driven by tourism and second-home development, particularly along the scenic 30A corridor. However, both counties have significant rural areas where access to services, transportation, and infrastructure can be limited.

Challenges include a lack of affordable housing, transportation barriers, and disparities in healthcare access, particularly for rural residents who often travel long distances to access basic services. Despite these difficulties, the communities are characterized by their resilience and efforts to support their diverse and growing populations while addressing the unique needs of rural areas.

Demographic Data

Located in the Florida Panhandle, the Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast service area has a population of 304,818 and is one of the fastest growing areas in the state. Below are demographic data highlights for Okaloosa and Walton counties:

- In Okaloosa County, 16.7% of **residents are aged 65 or older**, compared to 20.5% in Walton County and 17.3% statewide in Florida.
- 88.6% of Okaloosa County residents and 91.5% of Walton County residents are non-Hispanic, while 11.4% of Okaloosa and 8.5% of Walton residents identify as Hispanic or Latino (of any race).
- The **racial composition** in Okaloosa County includes 70.9% non-Hispanic White, 3.4% Asian, 0.08% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 10.5% non-Hispanic Black or African American. In Walton County, these figures are 82.2%, 1.4%, 0.09%, and 5.1%, respectively.
- From 2020 to 2023, the **total population** increased by 6.2%, with Walton County experiencing the highest growth at 14.7%, while Okaloosa County saw a more modest increase of 3.2%.
- The **median household income** is higher than the state median: Okaloosa County's median is \$73,988, Walton County's is \$74,832, and the state median is \$67,917.
- The **poverty rate** for individuals of all ages is significantly lower in Okaloosa County (6.5%) compared to the state average (12.7%), while Walton County's rate (11.9%) is comparable to the state rate.
- The **uninsured rate** is lower in Okaloosa County (11.9%) than the state average (13.4%), while Walton County's rate (13.8%) is similar to the state's.

Table 1: Demographics

Population				
Indicator	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	Description
Residents living in rural communities	10.3%	49.0%	8.1%	N/A
Residents below 18 years of age	22.2%	20.3%	19.3%	N/A
Residents 65 years of age and over	16.7%	20.5%	21.6%	N/A
Asian	3.3%	1.4%	3.1%	N/A
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8%	0.8%	0.5%	N/A
Hispanic	10.5%	7.1%	27.1%	N/A
Non-Hispanic Black	10.6%	5.2%	17.0%	N/A
Non-Hispanic White	70.9%	82.2%	51.9%	N/A
Social and Community Context				
English proficiency	4	2.8	11.9	Proportion of community members who speak English "less than well"
Median household income	\$73,988	\$74,832	\$67,917	Income level at which half of households in a county earn more and half of households earn less
Children in poverty	9.2%	27.3%	17.1%	Percentage of people under age 18 in poverty
Uninsured	11.9%	13.8%	13.4%	Percentage of population under age 65 without health insurance
Educational attainment	93.0%	91.9%	89.3%	Percentage of adults ages 25 and over with a high school diploma or equivalent
Unemployment	3.0%	3.3%	3.2%	Percentage of population ages 16 and older unemployed but seeking work

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023. [American Community Survey](#)

To view community demographic data in its entirety, see [Appendix B](#) (Page 34).

Process and Methods Used

Collaborators and/or Consultants

With the contracted assistance of Kleinhaus Consulting LLC., Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast completed its 2024 CHNA with input from the following organizations:

- Boys and Girls Club of the Emerald Coast
- Caring and Sharing South Walton
- City of Freeport
- Emerald Coast Regional Planning Council
- First Judicial Circuit of Florida
- Florida Department of Children and Families
- Florida Department of Health
- Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce
- Gulf Coast Veterans Health System
- Healthy Start Coalition of Okaloosa and Walton Counties
- My Families First
- NWF Health Network
- Tri-City Transportation
- University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) Extension Center

Kleinhaus Consulting Group, LLC is an external firm that conducted the previous CHNA, and was again contracted to conduct the 2024 CHNA for the following hospitals: Ascension Sacred Heart Bay, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast, and Ascension Sacred Heart Gulf. Kleinhaus Consulting Group, LLC. specializes in community health needs assessments, planning, and healthcare strategy, and Julie Klein, MBA, served as the principal investigator, leading both primary and secondary research efforts to provide a comprehensive analysis of community health needs.

Kleinhaus Consulting Group, LLC. worked closely with the Ascension Florida Community Benefit team to evaluate the health needs of the local community, gather data, and provide insights that would guide the development of effective implementation strategies. Their collaboration ensures that Ascension Sacred Heart's services are aligned with the needs of the communities served, fostering improved health outcomes and strategic planning for healthcare delivery.

Data Collection Methodology

Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast is committed to using national best practices in conducting the CHNA. In collaboration with various community partners, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast's approach relies on the collection and analysis of secondary data, and the collection of primary data through interviews and focus groups held between October and November 2024.

Interview participants included public health officers, key informants, and community partners. Eight (8) focus groups were held for the service area and included community partners and leaders of area non-profits.

Secondary data was collected from sources including, but not limited to, the U.S. Census Bureau, Florida Department of Health, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Kaiser Family Foundation, Department of Veteran Affairs, Centers for Disease Control, National Institute of Health, University of Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Summary of Community Input

Community input, also referred to as “primary data,” is an integral part of a CHNA and is meant to reflect the voice of the community. This input is invaluable for efforts to accurately assess a community's health needs. A concerted effort was made to ensure that the individuals and organizations represented the needs and perspectives of:

1. public health practice and research.
2. individuals who are medically underserved, low-income, or considered among the minority populations served by the hospital.
3. the broader community at large and those who represent the broad interests and needs of the community served.



Multiple methods were used to gather community input, including key stakeholder interviews, key stakeholder focus groups, and community focus groups. These methods provided additional perspectives on selecting and responding to top health issues facing Okaloosa and Walton counties.

A summary of the process and results is outlined below. To view the primary data and sources in its entirety, see [Appendix C](#) (Page 36).

Community Focus Groups

A series of eight (8) focus groups were conducted by Kleinhaus Consulting Group, LLC. to gather feedback from the community on the health needs and assets of Okaloosa and Walton counties. Seventeen individuals participated in the focus groups, held between October and November 2024. Populations represented by participants included medically underserved, low-income, and minority groups.

Key Summary Points	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Okaloosa and Walton Counties face critical health challenges, including opioid abuse, mental health needs, obesity-related chronic diseases, and limited access to specialty and primary care, especially in rural areas. ● High housing costs, poverty, food deserts, transportation barriers, and lack of providers exacerbate health disparities. Social issues like stigma, lack of education, and stress contribute to substance abuse and mental health challenges. ● Affordable housing, childcare, transportation, and specialty care services such as OB/GYN, cardiology, and mental health are major gaps. Many residents face long wait times and difficulty navigating the system. ● Distance and infrastructure issues, including the divide created by Eglin Air Force Base, make accessing healthcare difficult. Rural areas in particular struggle with transportation and availability of services. ● Vulnerable populations, including veterans, children, LGBTQ+ individuals, and the disabled, face significant barriers due to stigma, language barriers, and limited targeted programs. ● Programs like WIC, emergency preparedness, and community education have a positive impact, but more outreach, collaboration, and community engagement are needed, especially in rural and underserved areas. ● Strong partnerships, military presence, and collaborative attitudes are strengths, but rapid growth, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of coordinated planning pose challenges to meeting community health needs. 	
Sectors Represented	Common Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Healthcare ● Transportation ● Government ● Finance ● Judicial ● Small business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limited providers and transportation barriers make accessing care, especially in rural areas, difficult. ● High housing costs, poverty, and food deserts worsen health disparities and access to resources. ● Opioid abuse, overdoses, and untreated mental health conditions highlight a need for more resources and support.
Meaningful Quotes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “There are more services available in Okaloosa County than in Walton.” ● “We need more childcare! If the children aren’t looked after, it creates a domino effect of problems.” ● “You need transportation...to access transportation.” 	

Key Stakeholder Interviews

A series of eight one-on-one interviews were conducted by Kleinhaus Consulting Group, LLC. to gather feedback from key stakeholders on the health needs and assets of Okaloosa and Walton counties. Nine representatives from eight different organizations and agencies participated in the interviews, held between October and November 2024. Sectors represented by participants included public health, small business and government.

Key Summary Points	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Okaloosa and Walton Counties face critical challenges with opioid use and overdoses, high rates of obesity and mental health concerns, and limited access to specialty and primary care, especially in rural areas. Major barriers include high housing costs, poverty, transportation challenges, lack of healthcare infrastructure, and the physical divide caused by Eglin Air Force Base, which limits accessibility across the counties. Residents struggle with inadequate resources for substance abuse treatment, affordable housing, transportation systems, childcare, and specialty care services such as OB/GYN, cardiology, endocrinology, and dental care. Disparities persist due to income inequality, rural isolation, language barriers, and gaps in resources for vulnerable populations, including veterans, LGBTQ+ individuals, children, and people with disabilities. Collaborative partnerships, a strong military presence, mission-driven organizations, and public health programs like WIC, safety initiatives, and emergency preparedness contribute positively to addressing these challenges. However, infrastructure and service expansion remain critical needs as the population grows. 	
Sectors Represented	Common Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public Health Small Business Government Transportation Judiciary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited availability of care, especially in rural areas, worsened by transportation challenges. High housing costs, poverty, and the cost of living impact access to healthcare and basic needs. Strong partnerships exist but need expansion to meet growing demands.
Meaningful Quotes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Not having specialty care puts a strain on primary care doctors." "There is a correlation between median household income and life expectancy. In some Census tracts in Walton County, the difference in life expectancy is 13 years." "Many residents can no longer afford to live in the south end of the county, where most services are concentrated. We need to expand support to rural areas, too." 	

Summary of Secondary Data

Secondary data is data that has already been collected and published by another party. Both governmental and non-governmental agencies routinely collect secondary data reflective of the population's health status at the state and county levels through surveys and surveillance systems. Secondary data for this report was compiled from various reputable and reliable sources.

Health indicators in the following categories were reviewed:

- Health outcomes
- Physical environment
- Clinical care
- Social determinants that impact health
- Disparities

A summary of the secondary data collected and analyzed through this assessment is outlined below.

- **Population Growth and Infrastructure:** Okaloosa and Walton Counties have experienced significant growth, particularly in Walton County, leading to higher housing costs and increased strain on infrastructure. Despite rising incomes, poverty rates, especially among children in Walton, have also risen.
- **Healthcare Access and Affordability:** Healthcare access remains a challenge, with fewer residents in Walton County being insured or able to afford care.
- **Chronic Health Conditions and Opioid Crisis:** Chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, along with a rise in opioid-related overdoses, are major health concerns.
- **Maternal and Infant Health:** Maternal and infant health outcomes are mixed, with Okaloosa County showing higher breastfeeding rates but also an increase in infant mortality.
- **Life Expectancy Trends:** Life expectancy has declined, reflecting the lasting impacts of COVID-19 and other ongoing health issues.

To view the secondary data and sources in their entirety, see [Appendix D](#) (Page 38).

Written Comments on Previous CHNA and Implementation Strategy

Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast's previous CHNA and implementation strategy are available to the public and open for public comment via the website: <https://healthcare.ascension.org/chna>.

No comments pertaining to the 2021 CHNA have been received as of the publication of this report.

Data Limitations and Information Gaps

Although it is quite comprehensive, this assessment cannot measure all possible aspects of health and cannot represent every possible population within Okaloosa and Walton counties. This constraint limits the ability to assess all the community's needs fully.

For this assessment, three types of limitations were identified:

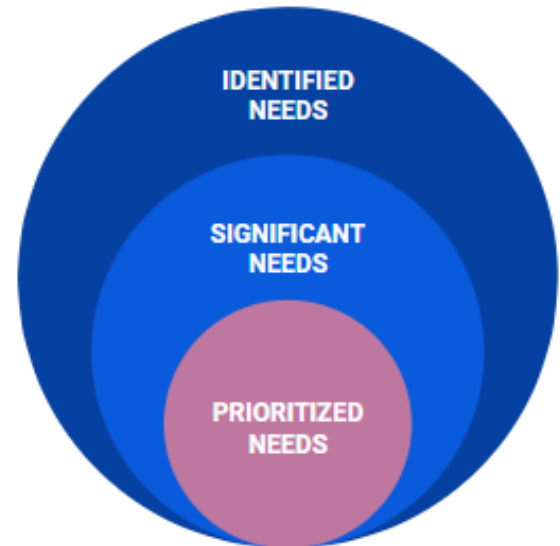
- Some groups of individuals may not have been adequately represented through the community input process. For example, engaging with non-English speaking populations and individuals experiencing homelessness posed significant challenges in locating and conducting interviews.
- Secondary data is limited in a number of ways, including timeliness, reach, and ability to fully reflect the health conditions of all populations within the community.
- An acute community concern may significantly impact a hospital's ability to conduct portions of the CHNA assessment. An acute community concern is defined by Ascension as an event or situation that may be severe and sudden in onset or newly affects a community. Such an event or situation may impact the ability to collect community input, may not be captured in secondary data, and/or can present in the middle of the three-year CHNA cycle. For the 2024 CHNA, no acute community concerns were identified.

Despite the data limitations, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast is confident of the overarching themes and health needs represented through the assessment data. This is based on the fact that the data collection included multiple qualitative and quantitative methods, and engaged the hospital and participants from the community.

Community Needs

Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast, with contracted assistance from Kleinhaus Consulting Group, LLC., analyzed secondary data of 35 indicators and gathered community input through focus groups and interviews to identify the needs in Okaloosa and Walton counties. In collaboration with community partners, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast used a phased prioritization approach to identify the needs.

- First phase: Determine the broader set of **identified needs**.
- Second phase: Narrow identified needs to a set of **significant needs**.
- Third phase: Narrow the significant needs to a set of **prioritized needs** to be addressed in the implementation strategy plan.



Following the completion of the CHNA assessment, Ascension Sacred Heart will select all, or a subset, of the significant needs as the hospital's prioritized needs to develop a three-year implementation strategy. Although the hospital may respond to many needs, the prioritized needs will be at the center of a formal CHNA implementation strategy and corresponding tracking and reporting. The image above portrays the relationship between the needs categories.

Identified Needs

The first phase was to determine the broader set of *identified needs*. Ascension has defined *identified needs* as the health outcomes or related conditions (e.g., social determinants of health) impacting the health status of Okaloosa and Walton counties. The identified needs were categorized into health behaviors, social determinants of health, length of life, quality of life, clinical care, and systemic issues to develop better measures and evidence-based interventions that respond to the determined condition.

Significant Needs

In the second phase, identified needs were then narrowed to a set of *significant needs* determined most crucial for community stakeholders to address. In collaboration with various community partners, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast synthesized and analyzed the data to determine which of the identified needs were most significant. Ascension has defined *significant needs* as the identified needs deemed most significant to respond to based on established criteria and/or prioritization methods.

Kleinhaus Consulting Group, LLC. collaborated with the Ascension Florida Community Benefit team to synthesize and analyze data, identifying the most significant needs from those identified. An integrative analysis approach was used to uncover patterns, trends, and themes within both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from reliable sources and community input. Quantitative data provided measurable outcomes, while qualitative insights captured the context and lived experiences behind those numbers. This comprehensive approach supported well-rounded conclusions and informed decision-making, guided by key criteria:

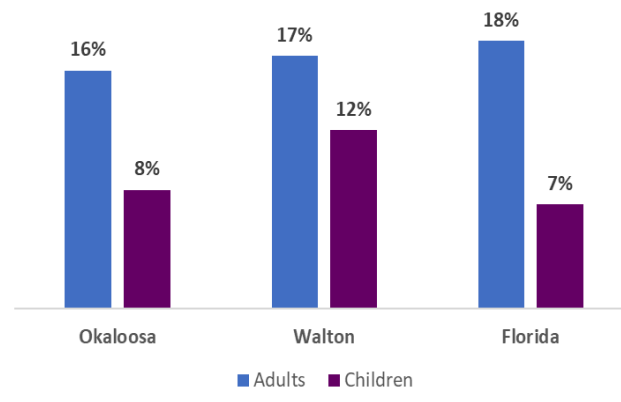
- The burden, scope, severity, or urgency of the health issue within the community.
- The presence of health disparities associated with the need.
- The importance the community places on addressing the need.

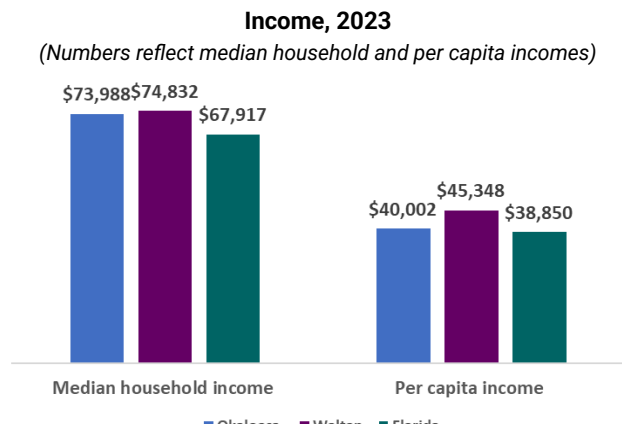
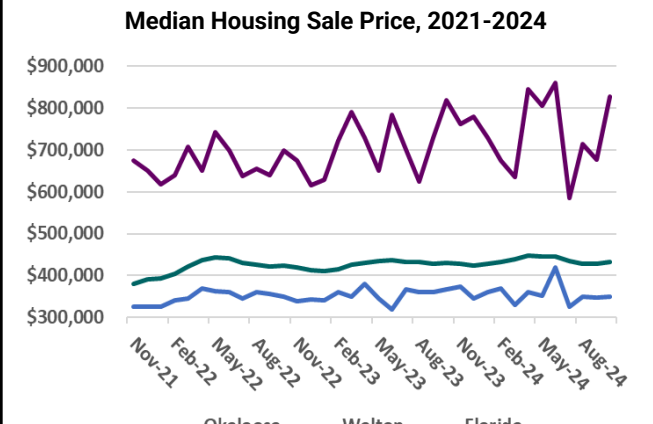
Based on the synthesis and analysis of the data, the significant needs for the 2024 CHNA are as follows (in alphabetical order):

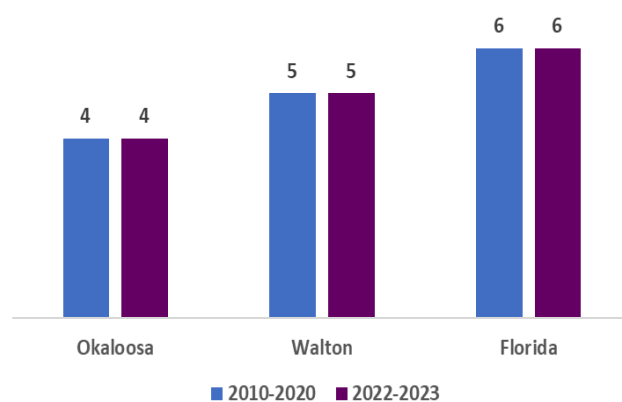
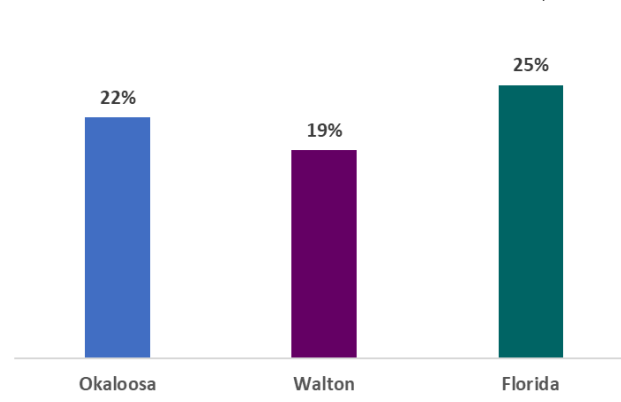
- Access to care
- Affordable housing
- Childcare
- Chronic disease and obesity
- Mental health and substance abuse
- Transportation

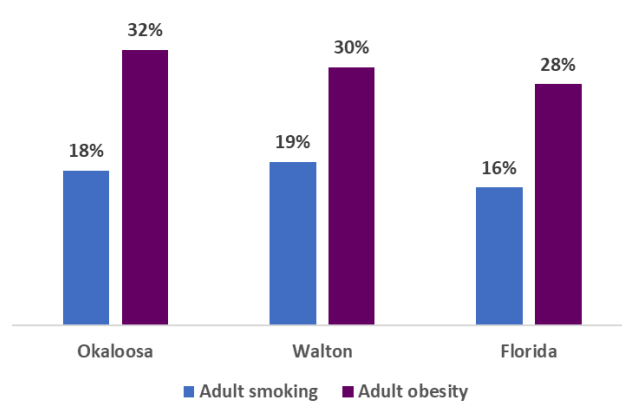
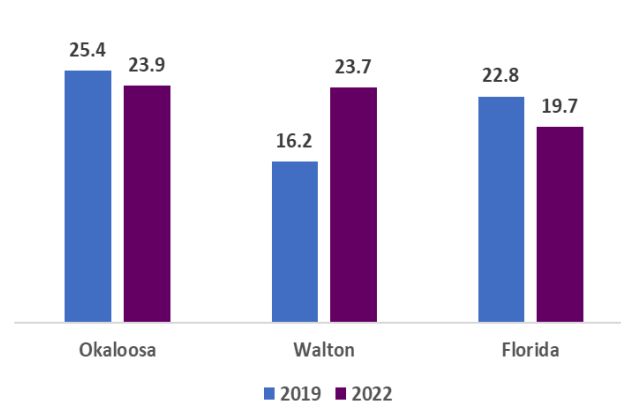
The following pages contain a description (including data highlights, community challenges and perceptions, and local assets and resources) of each significant need.

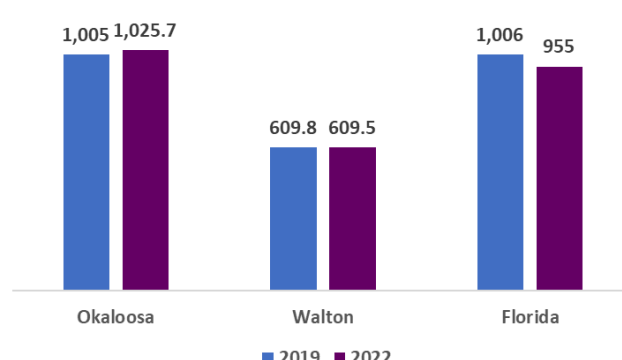
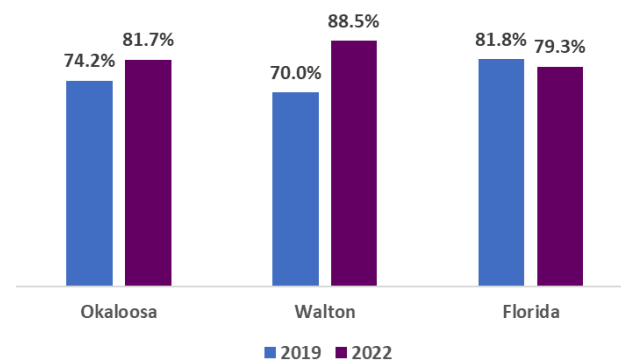
To view healthcare facilities and community resources available to respond to the significant needs, please see [Appendix E](#) (Page 44).

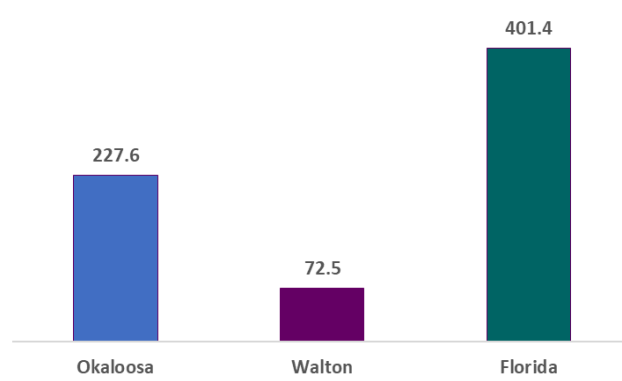
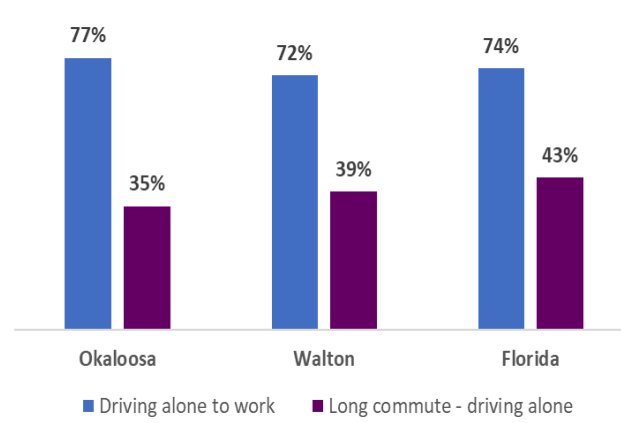
Access to Care																													
<p>Significance</p> <p>Limited access to care exacerbates health disparities, resulting in untreated chronic conditions and unaddressed mental health needs, particularly among underserved populations. This not only compromises individual well-being but also hinders efforts to achieve health equity.</p> <p>Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</p>																													
Drivers	Populations Most Impacted																												
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shortage of Providers and Specialists: Limited access to care due to an insufficient number of healthcare providers and specialists. ● Affordability Barriers: High costs of care create financial obstacles for individuals seeking medical services. ● Rural Access Issues: Geographic obstacles in rural areas that restrict access to healthcare services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low-income households ● Children/Adolescents ● Elderly ● Disabled ● LGBTQ+ 																												
<p>Community Input Highlights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Distance and infrastructure issues, including the divide created by Eglin Air Force Base, make accessing healthcare difficult. Rural areas in particular struggle with availability of services. ● “Some special needs patients and caregivers do not even have access to information. They don’t have the technology a lot of the time, too.” ● There are fewer insured adults in the area. 																													
<p>Secondary Data Highlights</p>																													
<p>Clinical Providers, 2021 (Numbers reflect the ratio of residents per provider)</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>County</th> <th>Primary care physicians</th> <th>Dentists</th> <th>Mental health providers</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>1,430</td> <td>1,220</td> <td>480</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>2,220</td> <td>1,940</td> <td>1,190</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>1,370</td> <td>1,560</td> <td>490</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2024)</p>	County	Primary care physicians	Dentists	Mental health providers	Okaloosa	1,430	1,220	480	Walton	2,220	1,940	1,190	Florida	1,370	1,560	490	<p>Residents with No Health Insurance, 2021 (Percent of population without health insurance)</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>County</th> <th>Adults</th> <th>Children</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>16%</td> <td>8%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>17%</td> <td>12%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>18%</td> <td>7%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2024)</p>	County	Adults	Children	Okaloosa	16%	8%	Walton	17%	12%	Florida	18%	7%
County	Primary care physicians	Dentists	Mental health providers																										
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County	Adults	Children																											
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Florida	18%	7%																											

Affordable Housing													
Significance													
<p>High housing costs create financial strain, forcing individuals to choose between housing and essentials like food and healthcare. This can lead to mental health issues, increased stress, and limited access to quality housing and healthcare services.</p> <p>Source: Healthy People 2030</p>													
Drivers	Populations Most Impacted												
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Population Growth: Increased demand from population growth places additional pressure on housing markets. ● Rising Construction Costs: Increased costs for labor, materials, and land development make building affordable housing more expensive. ● Economic Inequality: Widening income gaps make it harder for lower-income households to compete for available housing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low-income households ● Elderly ● Children/Adolescents ● Working families ● Minority households 												
Community Input Highlights													
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Many residents perceive a significant gap between housing costs and wages, as the local economy is heavily reliant on service-based and retail jobs that often offer lower pay. ● “Lack of affordable housing eats into other needs, like childcare.” ● Rising housing prices are partly fueled by demand from displaced residents of Hurricane Michael in Walton County, while the strong military presence in Okaloosa County helps stabilize prices, though they remain significantly high. 													
Secondary Data Highlights													
<p style="text-align: center;">Income, 2023</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Numbers reflect median household and per capita incomes)</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Category</th> <th>Okaloosa</th> <th>Walton</th> <th>Florida</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Median household income</td> <td>\$73,988</td> <td>\$74,832</td> <td>\$67,917</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Per capita income</td> <td>\$40,002</td> <td>\$45,348</td> <td>\$38,850</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2023). American Community Survey</p>	Category	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	Median household income	\$73,988	\$74,832	\$67,917	Per capita income	\$40,002	\$45,348	\$38,850	<p style="text-align: center;">Median Housing Sale Price, 2021-2024</p>  <p>Source: Realtor.com (2024)</p>
Category	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida										
Median household income	\$73,988	\$74,832	\$67,917										
Per capita income	\$40,002	\$45,348	\$38,850										

Childcare																					
Significance																					
<p>Unavailable childcare increases financial stress for caregivers, leading to missed medical appointments, and contributing to mental health challenges. It can also limit children's developmental opportunities and place them in unsafe environments, affecting both immediate and long-term family well-being.</p> <p><i>Source: Annals of Family Medicine, 2024</i></p>																					
Drivers	Populations Most Impacted																				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High Costs of Childcare: Rising costs make childcare unaffordable for many families, limiting access to quality services. ● Limited Availability: Insufficient numbers of childcare centers, particularly in rural or underserved areas, result in fewer options for families. ● Lack of Flexible Hours: Many childcare centers do not accommodate non-traditional work schedules, such as night shifts or weekends. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low-income households ● Single-parent households ● Women ● Children ● Military families ● Disabled 																				
Community Input Highlights																					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The high cost and shortage of childcare facilities, compounded by staff shortages, waiting lists, and limited resources, create workforce challenges and economic stress. ● “Childcare is an issue – who is watching the kids? Who is feeding them? How can they be healthy when parental stress falls onto them?” ● The military's childcare shortage is further straining the community. 																					
Secondary Data Highlights																					
<p style="text-align: center;">Child Care Facilities, 2010-2023 <i>(Number of child care centers per 1,000 population under 5 years old)</i></p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Child Care Facilities, 2010-2023</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Location</th> <th>2010-2020</th> <th>2022-2023</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>4</td> <td>4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>5</td> <td>5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>6</td> <td>6</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Location	2010-2020	2022-2023	Okaloosa	4	4	Walton	5	5	Florida	6	6	<p style="text-align: center;">Childcare Cost Burden, 2022-2023 <i>(Percent of median household income spent on child care costs for a household with two children)</i></p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Childcare Cost Burden, 2022-2023</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Location</th> <th>Percent of Median Household Income</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>22%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>19%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>25%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Location	Percent of Median Household Income	Okaloosa	22%	Walton	19%	Florida	25%
Location	2010-2020	2022-2023																			
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Walton	5	5																			
Florida	6	6																			
Location	Percent of Median Household Income																				
Okaloosa	22%																				
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Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2024)	Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2024)																				

Chronic Disease and Obesity																									
<h3>Significance</h3> <p>Chronic diseases and obesity heighten the risk of comorbidities, lower life expectancy, and reduce quality of life. The area faces high rates of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and a rising prevalence of chronic liver disease in Okaloosa. These conditions complicate treatment, increase healthcare costs, and affect mental health due to stigma and stress. Source: Florida Department of Health</p>																									
<h3>Drivers</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unhealthy Diets: High consumption of processed foods, sugary beverages, and nutrient-poor foods contributes to weight gain and chronic diseases. ● Physical Inactivity: Sedentary lifestyles, often driven by technology use and limited access to recreational spaces, increase the risk of obesity and related conditions. ● Stress and Mental Health: Chronic stress and mental health conditions can lead to overeating, poor dietary choices, and reduced physical activity. 	<h3>Populations Most Impacted</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low-income households ● Rural populations ● Minority populations ● Children ● Elderly 																								
<h3>Community Input Highlights</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The community faces obesity-related chronic diseases, limited access to specialty care and a shortage of providers, especially in rural areas. ● "We are seeing more people rely on social media, unscientific sources, and opinions for health information instead of trusted, credible resources." ● The rate of diabetes is increasing in the area. 																									
<h3>Secondary Data Highlights</h3>																									
<h4>Health Behaviors, 2021</h4> <p>(Percent of adult population)</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Location</th> <th>Adult smoking</th> <th>Adult obesity</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>18%</td> <td>32%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>19%</td> <td>30%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>16%</td> <td>28%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Location	Adult smoking	Adult obesity	Okaloosa	18%	32%	Walton	19%	30%	Florida	16%	28%	<h4>Diabetes Death Rate, 2019-2020</h4> <p>(Number of deaths per 100,000)</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Location</th> <th>2019</th> <th>2022</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>25.4</td> <td>23.9</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>16.2</td> <td>23.7</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>22.8</td> <td>19.7</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Location	2019	2022	Okaloosa	25.4	23.9	Walton	16.2	23.7	Florida	22.8	19.7
Location	Adult smoking	Adult obesity																							
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Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2024) .	Source: Florida Department of Health (2023) .																								

Mental Health and Substance Abuse																									
<p>Significance</p> <p>Poor mental health and substance abuse heighten illness risks, delay care, and increase mortality rates, with suicide ranking among the top 10 causes of death in Walton. These issues also drive higher healthcare costs and social challenges, such as unemployment and homelessness.</p> <p>Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</p>																									
Drivers	Populations Most Impacted																								
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Socioeconomic Factors: Poverty, unemployment, and housing instability are closely linked to mental health struggles and addiction. ● Stigma: Societal stigma discourages seeking help for both mental health and substance use disorders. ● Substance Use and Self-Medication: Substance use often worsens mental health conditions, creating a cyclical relationship. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low-income households ● Military veterans ● Children/Adolescents ● LGBTQ+ ● Homeless ● Disabled 																								
<p>Community Input Highlights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Okaloosa and Walton County residents face challenges like opioid abuse, mental health needs, limited specialty care, and treatment stigma, especially in rural areas. ● "Effective treatment means addressing the root behavior, like focusing on control issues instead of just anger management." ● Opioid overdose deaths rose at alarming rates in both counties. 																									
<p>Secondary Data Highlights</p>																									
<p>Hospitalizations for Mental Disorders, 2019-2022 (Number of hospitalizations per 100,000)</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Location</th> <th>2019</th> <th>2022</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>1,005</td> <td>1,025.7</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>609.8</td> <td>609.5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>1,006</td> <td>955</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Location	2019	2022	Okaloosa	1,005	1,025.7	Walton	609.8	609.5	Florida	1,006	955	<p>Opioid Overdose Deaths, 2019-2022 (Percent of total overdose deaths)</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Location</th> <th>2019</th> <th>2022</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>74.2%</td> <td>81.7%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>70.0%</td> <td>88.5%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>81.8%</td> <td>79.3%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Location	2019	2022	Okaloosa	74.2%	81.7%	Walton	70.0%	88.5%	Florida	81.8%	79.3%
Location	2019	2022																							
Okaloosa	1,005	1,025.7																							
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Okaloosa	74.2%	81.7%																							
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<p>Source: Florida Department of Health (2023).</p>	<p>Source: Florida Department of Health (2023).</p>																								

Transportation																					
Significance <p>The area is highly rural with no public transportation, and alternative options are often unreliable. These challenges delay care, restrict access to services, and exacerbate health disparities, resulting in poorer outcomes and increased costs. Source: National Institutes of Health</p>																					
Drivers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographic Barriers: The presence of a large military base, coupled with natural features such as bays and vast rural areas, can make transportation infrastructure costly and difficult to implement. • Socioeconomic Disparities: Lower-income areas often lack access to reliable transportation due to systemic disinvestment. • Technological Limitations: Inadequate adoption of modern transit solutions, such as ridesharing or electric buses, can restrict options. 	Populations Most Impacted <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-income households • Rural communities • Elderly • Children • Disabled • Military veterans 																				
Community Input Highlights <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The absence of reliable transportation in both counties significantly hinders access to care, compounded by their large, rural geography. • "Transportation disadvantaged funding covers costs based on disability, age, and income, and rides are priced at \$2 each way, but even that can be a barrier for some." • "Eglin Air Force Base literally divides Okaloosa County." 																					
Secondary Data Highlights																					
<p>Population per Square Mile, 2023</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Location</th> <th>Population per Square Mile</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>227.6</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>72.5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>401.4</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2023). American Community Survey</p>	Location	Population per Square Mile	Okaloosa	227.6	Walton	72.5	Florida	401.4	<p>Daily Commute, 2017-2021 <i>(Reflects the percentage of the workforce that drives alone to work and percentage that commute more than 30 minutes)</i></p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Location</th> <th>Driving alone to work</th> <th>Long commute - driving alone</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Okaloosa</td> <td>77%</td> <td>35%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Walton</td> <td>72%</td> <td>39%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Florida</td> <td>74%</td> <td>43%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2024).</p>	Location	Driving alone to work	Long commute - driving alone	Okaloosa	77%	35%	Walton	72%	39%	Florida	74%	43%
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Florida	74%	43%																			

Next Steps

In the third phase, which will take place following the completion of the community health needs assessment as outlined in this report, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast will narrow the *significant needs* to a set of *prioritized needs*. Ascension defines *prioritized needs* as the significant needs that the hospital has prioritized to respond to through the three-year CHNA implementation strategy (IS).

The IS will detail how Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast will respond to the prioritized needs throughout the three-year CHNA cycle: July 1, 2025 to June 30, 2028, and will also describe why certain *significant needs* were not selected as *prioritized needs* to be addressed by the hospital.

Summary of Impact of the Previous CHNA Implementation Strategy

An important piece of the three-year CHNA cycle is revisiting the progress made on priority needs set forth in the preceding CHNA. By reviewing the actions taken to respond to the prioritized needs and evaluating the impact those actions have made in the community, it is possible to better target resources and efforts during the next CHNA cycle.

Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast's previous CHNA implementation strategy was completed in March 2022 and responded to the following priority health needs: Access to Care.

Highlights from the Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast's previous implementation strategy include:

- **Access to telehealth appointments:** Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast hospital teams improved access to medical care by increasing virtual care visits, and allowing patients who have difficulty with transportation, mobility, child care, etc; to visit with a medical provider. Teams trained and supported Ascension Medical Group (AMG) providers and offices on increasing access for patients appropriate for telehealth appointments.
- **Implementation of ED Concierge Program:** Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast partnered with Care Continuity to connect Emergency Department patients who do not have a primary care provider. The hospital team implemented the ED Concierge Program, with a concentration on charity and self-pay patients, to address barriers to accessing care through the identification and resolution of barriers related to social determinants of health. Over 1,500 patients were offered assistance throughout the year, of which 273 were connected to a provider.

Written input received from the community and a report on the actions taken to respond to the significant health needs prioritized in the 2024 CHNA implementation strategy can be found in [Appendix F](#) (Page 46).

Approval by Ascension Florida Board of Directors

To ensure Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast's efforts meet the needs of the community and have a lasting and meaningful impact, the 2024 CHNA was presented to the Ascension Florida Board of Directors for approval and adoption on February 4, 2025. Although an authorized body of the hospital must adopt the CHNA and implementation strategy reports to be compliant with the provisions in the Affordable Care Act, adoption of the reports also demonstrates that the board is aware of the findings from the CHNA, endorses the health needs identified, and supports the strategies developed to respond to those needs.

Conclusion

Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast hopes this report offers a meaningful and comprehensive understanding of the most significant (health-related) needs of Florida's Okaloosa and Walton counties. The 2024 CHNA will be used by internal stakeholders to guide the implementation strategies and community health improvement efforts as required by the Affordable Care Act. This report will also be available to the broader community as a useful resource for nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and community partners to further health improvement efforts.

The hospital values the community's voice and welcomes feedback on this report. Please visit Ascension's public website (<https://healthcare.ascension.org/chna>) to submit any comments or questions.

As a Catholic health ministry, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast is dedicated to spiritually centered, holistic care that sustains and improves the health of not only individuals but the communities it serves. With special attention to those who are underserved and marginalized, we are advocates for a compassionate and just society through our actions and words. Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast is dedicated to serving patients with compassionate care and medical excellence, making a difference in every life we touch.

Appendices

Table of Contents

Appendix A: Definitions and Terms

Appendix B: Community Demographic Data and Sources

Appendix C: Community Input Data and Sources

Appendix D: Secondary Data and Sources

Appendix E: Health Care Facilities and Community Resources

Appendix F: Evaluation of Impact From Previous CHNA Implementation Strategy

Appendix A: Definitions and Terms

Catholic Health Association of United States (CHA) “is recognized nationally as a leader in community benefit planning and reporting.”³ The definitions in Appendix A are from the CHA guide *Assessing and Addressing Community Needs, 2015 Edition II*, which can be found at chausa.org.

Community Focus Groups

Group discussions with selected individuals. A skilled moderator is needed to lead focus group discussions. Members of a focus group can include internal staff, volunteers and the staff of human service and other community organizations, users of health services and members of minority or disadvantaged populations.

Demographics

Population characteristics of your community. Sources of information may include population size, age structure, racial and ethnic composition, population growth, and density.

Key Stakeholder Interviews

A method of obtaining input from community leaders and public health experts one-on-one. Interviews can be conducted in person or over the telephone (including computer/video calls). In structured interviews, questions are prepared and standardized prior to the interview to ensure consistent information is solicited on specific topics. In less structured interviews, open-ended questions are asked to elicit a full range of responses. Key informants may include leaders of community organizations, service providers, and elected officials. Individuals with special knowledge or expertise in public health may include representatives from your state or local health department, faculty from schools of public health, and providers with a background in public health. Could also be referred to as Stakeholder Interviews.

Medically Underserved Populations

Medically underserved populations include populations experiencing health disparities or that are at risk of not receiving adequate medical care because of being uninsured or underinsured or due to geographic, language, financial, or other barriers. Populations with language barriers include those with limited English proficiency. Medically underserved populations also include those living within a hospital facility’s service area but not receiving adequate medical care from the facility because of cost, transportation difficulties, stigma, or other barriers.

³ Catholic Health Association of the United States. (2015). *Assessing & Addressing Community Health Needs, 2015 Edition II*.

Appendix B: Community Demographic Data and Sources

The tables below provide further information on the community’s demographics. The descriptions of the data’s importance are largely drawn from the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps website.

Table 2: Population

Why it is important: The composition of a population, including related trends, is important for understanding the community context and informing community planning.

Population	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.
Total	218,464	86,354	22,610,726	334,914,895
Male	50.8%	50.5%	49.1%	49.5%
Female	49.2%	49.5%	50.9%	50.5%

Source: [U.S. Census Bureau, 2023\). American Community Survey](#)

Table 3: Population by Race and Ethnicity

Why it is important: The racial and ethnic composition of a population is important in understanding the cultural context of a community. The information can also be used to better identify and understand health disparities.

Race or ethnicity	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.
Asian	3.4%	1.4%	3.1%	6.3%
Non-Hispanic Black / African American	10.5%	5.1%	17.0%	13.6%
Hispanic / Latino	11.4%	8.5%	27.4%	19.5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8%	0.9%	0.6%	1.3%
Non-Hispanic White	70.9%	82.2%	51.9%	58.4%

Source: [U.S. Census Bureau, 2023\). American Community Survey](#)

Table 4: Population by Age

Why it is important: The age structure of a population is important in planning for the future of a community, particularly for schools, community centers, healthcare, and child care. A population with more youths will have greater education and childcare needs, while an older population may have greater healthcare needs.

Age	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.
Median age	38.6	43.6	42.8	38.9
Ages 0-17	28.6%	26.1%	24.4%	27.2%
Ages 18-64	54.4%	53.4%	53.9%	55.1%
Ages 65+	17.0%	20.5%	21.7%	17.7%

Source: [U.S. Census Bureau, 2023\). American Community Survey](#)

Table 5: Income

Why it is important: Median household income and the percentage of children living in poverty, which can compromise physical and mental health, are well-recognized indicators. People with higher incomes tend to live longer than people with lower incomes. In addition to affecting access to health insurance, income affects access to healthy choices, safe housing, safe neighborhoods, and quality schools. Chronic stress related to not having enough money can have an impact on mental and physical health as well. ALICE, an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, are households that earn more than the U.S. poverty level but less than the basic cost of living for the county. Combined, the number of poverty and ALICE households equals the total population struggling to afford basic needs.

Income	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.
Median household income	\$73,988	\$74,832	\$67,917	\$75,149
Per capita income	\$40,002	\$45,348	\$38,850	\$41,261
People with incomes below the federal poverty guideline	8.0%	11.1%	12.3%	11.1%
ALICE households	30.0%	30.0%	33.0%	29.0%

Source: [U.S. Census Bureau, 2023\). American Community Survey](#)

Table 6: Education

Why is it important: There is a strong relationship between health, lifespan, and education. In general, as income increases, so does lifespan. The relationship between more schooling, higher income, job opportunities (e.g., pay, safe work environment), and social support helps create opportunities for healthier choices.

Income	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.
High school diploma or higher	93.0%	91.9%	89.3%	89.1
Bachelor’s degree or higher	33.3%	33.1%	32.3%	34.3%

Source: [U.S. Census Bureau, 2023\). American Community Survey](#)

Table 7: Insured/Uninsured

Why it is important: Lack of health insurance can have serious health consequences due to lack of preventive care and delays in care that can lead to serious illness or other health problems.

Income	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.
Uninsured	11.9%	13.8%	13.4%	9.5%

Source: [U.S. Census Bureau, 2023\). American Community Survey](#)

Appendix C: Community Input Data and Sources

Community Focus Groups

The following questions were discussed with participants of the Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast community focus groups conducted via Zoom in Okaloosa and Walton counties, Florida:

1. What would you say are the most significant health issues (top 2-3) and needs in Okaloosa/Walton counties, including the contributing factors and unmet or under-addressed needs, and why?
2. In Okaloosa/Walton County, which kind of care is more difficult for residents to access?
3. If you could pick 3 things to change in your county that would improve access to care, what would those be?
4. How is health equity affecting your community and how can it be improved?
5. How do you see barriers to service affecting vulnerable populations?
6. Have you noticed improvements or other changes to these significant health needs since the last CHNA (in the last 3 years, since 2021)?
7. What do you consider the strengths and weaknesses of Okaloosa/Walton County?
8. How do you see public health programs helping meet the community health needs?
9. How can Ascension be a better partner?

The focus groups were held via Zoom. Ascension was integral in recruitment efforts for the focus groups.

1. Boys and Girls Club of the Emerald Coast
2. Caring and Sharing South Walton
3. City of Freeport
4. Emerald Coast Regional Planning Council
5. First Judicial Circuit of Florida
6. Florida Department of Children and Families
7. Florida Department of Health
8. Gulf Coast Veterans Health System
9. Healthy Start Coalition of Okaloosa and Walton Counties
10. My Families First
11. NWF Health Network

Key Stakeholder Interviews

Ascension Sacred Heart reached out to several organizations and agencies in Okaloosa and Walton counties with an invitation to participate in the key stakeholder interviews. We thank the following individuals for their willingness to volunteer their time and knowledge to this effort:

- Florida Department of Children and Families
- Florida Department of Health
- Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce

- Healthy Start Coalition of Okaloosa and Walton Counties
- Tri-City Transportation
- University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) Extension Center

Conducted via Zoom, the key stakeholder interviews loosely followed the following set of questions:

1. What would you say are the most significant health issues (top 2-3) and needs in Okaloosa and Walton counties, including the contributing factors and unmet or under-addressed needs, and why?
2. In Okaloosa and Walton counties, which kind of care is more difficult for residents to access?
3. If you could pick 3 things to change in your county that would improve access to care, what would those be?
4. How is health equity affecting your community and how can it be improved?
5. How do you see barriers to service affecting vulnerable populations?
6. Have you noticed improvements or other changes to these significant health needs since the last CHNA (in the last 3 years, since 2021)?
7. What do you consider the strengths and weaknesses of Okaloosa and Walton counties?
8. How do you see public health programs helping meet the community health needs?
9. How can Ascension be a better partner?

Appendix D: Secondary Data and Sources

The tables below are based on data vetted, compiled, and made available on the County Health Rankings and Roadmaps (CHRR) website (<https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/>). The site is maintained by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, School of Medicine and Public Health, with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. CHRR obtains and cites data from other public sources that are reliable. CHRR also shares trending data on some indicators.

CHRR compiles new data annually and shares it with the public. The data below is from the 2024 publication. It is important to understand that reliable data is generally two to three years behind due to the importance of careful analysis.

How to Read These Charts

Why they are important: Explains why we monitor and track these measures in a community and how it relates to health. The descriptions for “why they are important” are largely drawn from the CHRR website.

County vs. state: Describes how the county’s most recent data for the health issue compares to the state average.

United States (U.S.): Describes how the county’s most recent data for the health issue compares to the U.S.

Description: Explains what the indicator measures, how it is measured, and who is included in the measure.

N/A: Not available or not applicable. There might not be available data for the community on every measure. Some measures will not be comparable.

Table 8: Health Outcomes

Why they are important: Health outcomes reflect how healthy a county is right now. They reflect the physical and mental well-being of members within a community.

Indicators	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.	Description
Length of Life					
Premature death	8,900	8,800	8,300	8,000	Years of potential life lost before age 75 per 100,000 population (age-adjusted)
Life expectancy	76.5	77.6	78.5	77.6	How long the average person is expected to live
Infant mortality	6	5	6	6	Number of all infant deaths (within one year) per 1,000 live births
Physical Health					
Poor or fair health	14%	14%	13%	14%	Percentage of adults reporting fair or poor health
Poor physical health Days	3.3	3.6	3.0	3.3	Average number of physically unhealthy days reported in the past 30 days (age-adjusted)
Frequent physical distress	4.6	5.3	9%	10%	Percentage of adults with 14 or more days of poor physical health per month
Low birth weight	8%	8%	9%	8%	Percentage of babies born too small (less than 2,500 grams)
Mental Health					
Poor mental health days	4.6	5.3	4.2	4.8	Average number of mentally unhealthy days reported in the past 30 days
Frequent mental distress	16%	16%	13%	15%	Percentage of adults reporting 14 or more days of poor mental health per month
Suicide	20	14	14	14	Number of deaths due to suicide per 100,000
Morbidity					
Diabetes prevalence	9%	9%	10%	10%	Percentage of adults ages 20 and above with diagnosed diabetes
Cancer deaths (by state)	164.1	147.5	138.8	146.0	Average annual cancer death rate per 100,000
Communicable Disease					
HIV prevalence	260	152	625	382	Number of people ages 13 years and over with a diagnosis of HIV per 100,000
Sexually transmitted infections	486.3	329.7	479.3	495.5	Number of newly diagnosed chlamydia cases per 100,000

Source: [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Okaloosa County FL](#), [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Walton County, FL](#)

Table 9: Social and Economic Factors

Why they are important: These factors have a significant effect on our health. They affect our ability to make healthy decisions, afford medical care, afford housing and food, manage stress, and more.

Indicator	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.	Description
Economic Stability					
Median household income	\$73,988	\$74,832	\$67,917	%75,149	The income where half of households in a county earn more and half of households earn less
Unemployment	3.0%	3.3%	3.2%	3.8%	Percentage of population ages 16 and older unemployed but seeking work
Poverty	6.5%	11.9%	12.7%	11.5%	Percentage of population living below the federal poverty line
Childhood poverty	9.2%	27.3%	17.1%	16.3%	Percentage of people under age 18 in poverty
Educational Attainment					
High school completion	93.0%	91.9%	89%	89%	Percentage of adults ages 25 and over with a high school diploma or equivalent
Some college	70%	62%	65%	68%	Percentage of adults ages 25-44 with some post-secondary education
Social/Community					
Children in single-parent homes	24%	21%	28%	25%	Percentage of children who live in a household headed by a single parent
Social associations	9.1	10.7	7.1	9.1	Number of membership associations per 10,000 population
Disconnected youth	5%	n/a	7%	7%	Percentage of teens and young adults ages 16-19 who are neither working nor in school
Violent crime	109.6	126.9	150.7	363.8	Number of reported violent crime offenses per 100,000 population
Access to Healthy Foods					
Food environment index	7.5	7.5	7.2	7.7	Index of factors that contribute to a healthy food environment (0 = worst, 10 = best)
Food insecurity	10%	11%	11%	10%	Percentage of the population who lack adequate access to food
Limited access to healthy foods	11%	10%	8%	6%	Percentage of the population who are low-income and do not live close to a grocery store

Source: [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. \(2024\). Okaloosa County FL](#), [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. \(2024\). Walton County FL](#)

Table 10: Physical Environment

Why they are important: The physical environment is where people live, learn, work, and play. The physical environment impacts our air, water, housing, and transportation to work or school. Poor physical environment can affect our ability and that of our families and neighbors to live long and healthy lives.

Indicator	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.	Description
Physical Environment					
Severe housing cost burden	13%	12%	17%	14%	Percentage of households that spend 50 percent or more of their household income on housing
Severe housing problems	13%	12%	19%	17%	Percentage of households with at least one of four housing problems: overcrowding, high housing costs, lack of kitchen facilities, and/or lack of plumbing facilities
Air pollution: particulate matter	9.1	8.8	7.8	7.4	Average daily density of fine particulate matter in micrograms per cubic meter (PM2.5)
Homeownership	67%	78%	67%	65%	Percentage of occupied housing units that are owned

Source: [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Okaloosa County FL](#), [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Walton County FL](#)

Table 11: Clinical Care

Why it is important: Access to affordable, quality care can help detect issues sooner and prevent disease. This can help individuals live longer and have healthier lives.

Indicator	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.	Description
Healthcare Access					
Uninsured	14%	15%	15%	10%	Percentage of population under age 65 without health insurance
Uninsured adults	16%	17%	18%	12%	Percentage of adults under age 65 without health insurance
Uninsured children	8%	12%	7%	5%	Percentage of children under age 19 without health insurance
Primary care physicians	1,430:1	2,220:1	1,370:1	1,330:1	Ratio of the population to primary care physicians
Mental healthcare providers	480:1	1,190:1	490:1	320:1	Ratio of the population to mental healthcare providers
Hospital Utilization					
Preventable hospital stays	2,802	2,755	3,035	2,681	Rate of hospital stays for ambulatory-care sensitive conditions per 100,000 Medicare enrollees
Preventive Healthcare					

Flu vaccinations	34%	37%	43%	46%	Percentage of fee-for-service Medicare enrollees who had an annual flu vaccination
Mammography screenings	41%	41%	44%	43%	Percentage of female Medicare enrollees ages 65-74 who received an annual mammography screening

Source: [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Okaloosa County FL](#), [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Walton County, FL](#)

Table 12: Health Behaviors

Why they are important: Health behaviors are actions individuals take that can affect their health. These actions can lead to positive health outcomes or they can increase someone’s risk of disease and premature death. It is important to understand that not all people have the same opportunities to engage in healthier behaviors.

Indicator	Okaloosa	Walton	Florida	U.S.	Description
Healthy Lifestyle					
Adult obesity	32%	30%	28%	34%	Percentage of the adult population (ages 20 and older) that reports a body mass index (BMI) greater than or equal to 30 kg/m2
Physical inactivity	23%	25%	26%	23%	Percentage of adults ages 20 and over reporting no leisure-time physical activity
Access to exercise opportunities	77%	75%	87%	84%	Percentage of population with adequate access to locations for physical activity
Insufficient sleep	35%	37%	34%	33%	Percentage of adults who report fewer than seven hours of sleep on average
Motor vehicle crash deaths	16	21	15	12	Number of motor vehicle crash deaths per 100,000 population
Teen births	21	25	16	17	Number of births per 1,000 female population ages 15-19
Substance Misuse					
Adult smoking	18%	19%	16%	15%	Percentage of adults who are current smokers
Excessive drinking	19%	20%	17%	18%	Percentage of adults reporting binge or heavy alcohol drinking
Alcohol-impaired driving deaths	22%	28%	22%	26%	Alcohol-impaired driving deaths
Overdose deaths: any opioids by state	50.4	27.2	29.0	32.6	Rate of opioid-related deaths by state per 100,000 persons

Sources: [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Okaloosa County FL](#), [Florida Department of Health, \(2024\). Substance Use Dashboard](#), [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Walton County, FL](#), [Florida Department of Health, \(2024\). Substance Use Dashboard](#)

Table 13: Disparities

Why they are important: Differences in access to opportunities that affect health can create differences between groups of people in the community. A focus on equity is important to improve health for everyone in the community.

Indicator	Population	Okaloosa	Walton
Health Disparities			
Premature death: Years of potential life lost before age 75 per 100,000 population (age-adjusted)	Overall	8,900 per 100,000	8,800 per 100,000
	Asian	n/a	n/a
	Non-Hispanic Black / African American	11,900 per 100,000	8,400 per 100,000
	Hispanic / Latino	7,200 per 100,000	n/a
	American Indian or Alaska Native	n/a	n/a
	Non-Hispanic White	8,800 per 100,000	9,300 per 100,000
Low birthweight: Percentage of live births with low birthweight (< 2,500 grams)	Overall	8%	8%
	Asian	8%	n/a
	Non-Hispanic Black / African American	13%	11%
	Hispanic / Latino	8%	7%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	n/a	n/a
	Non-Hispanic White	8%	8%

Sources: [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Okaloosa County FL](#), [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, \(2024\). Walton County, FL](#)

Appendix E: Health Care Facilities and Community Resources

As part of the CHNA process, Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast has cataloged resources available in Okaloosa and Walton counties that respond to the significant needs identified in this CHNA. Resources may include acute care facilities (hospitals), primary and specialty care clinics and practices, mental health providers, and other non-profit services. State and national resources can also provide information regarding programs that can better serve the needs of a person experiencing a specific problem.

The resources listed under each significant need heading are not intended to be exhaustive.

Access to Care

Organization	Phone	Website
Hope Medical Clinic	(850) 270-7130	www.hopemedicalclinic.org
Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast	(850) 278-3000	www.ascension.org
Walton County Health Department	(850) 892-8015	www.rightservicefl.org

Affordable Housing

Organization	Phone	Website
Walton County Housing Agency	(850) 892-8185	www.affordablehousing.com
Homeless and Housing Alliance	(850) 409-3070	www.hhalliance.org
Okaloosa County Affordable Housing Programs	(850) 609-7024	www.myokaloosa.com

Childcare

Organization	Phone	Website
Early Learning Coalition of the Emerald Coast	(850) 833-3627	www.elc-ec.org
Florida Childcare Assistance Programs	(202) 690-6782	www.childcare.gov
Childworld Learning Center	(850) 785-7322	www.childworldlearningcenter.com

Chronic Disease and Obesity

Organization	Phone	Website
Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast	(850) 278-3000	www.ascension.org
North Okaloosa Medical Center	(850) 689-8100	www.northokaloosa.com
North Walton Doctors Hospital	(850) 920-2065	www.nwdhospital.com

Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Organization	Phone	Website
Mental Health Association of Okaloosa and Walton Counties	(850) 244-1040	www.mhaow.org
Bridgeway Center	(850) 833-7500	www.bridgewaycenter.org
Lakeview of Walton County	(850) 332-6371	www.elakeviewcenter.org

Transportation

Organization	Phone	Website
Emerald Coast Regional Planning Council	850-332-7976	www.ecrc.org
Emerald Coast Rider	(850) 833-9168	www.ecrider.org
Walton Transportation	(850) 892-2422	www.tricountycommunitycouncil.com

Appendix F: Evaluation of Impact from the Previous CHNA Implementation Strategy

Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast’s 2021 CHNA implementation strategy will complete in June 2025, and responded to the following priority health need: Access to Care.

Note: At the time of the report publication (February 2025), the third year of the cycle will not be complete. The hospital will accommodate for that variable; results from the last year of this cycle will be reported and attached to the Tax Year 2024 IRS Form 990/Schedule H.

The table below describes the actions taken during the 2021-2024 CHNA implementation strategy cycle to respond to the priority need.

Priority Need: Access To Care

Strategy	Action(s) Taken	Status of Action(s)
Improve Access to Care by increasing the overall % of Virtual Care Visits of Ascension Medical Group (AMG) patients, as compared to the total number of AMG patient visits, over 3 years	Trained office staff and providers on the use of Virtual Visits	Complete
	Trained scheduling staff to offer and book Virtual Visits	Complete
	Providers set time available for Virtual Visits	On-going
	Reported progress regularly to Ascension Florida leadership	On-going
Increase Access to Care by Care Continuity connecting Emergency Dept. patients who do not have a Provider (aka unattached patients) assisted through the ED Concierge program	Onboarded Care Continuity into Ascension Florida and Gulf Coast facilities	Complete
	Implemented ED Concierge program in partnership with Emergency Dept. and Nursing leadership	Complete
	Completed Care Continuity set-up and connection of workstations in the Emergency Dept.	Complete
	Deployed Care Continuity staff into the Emergency Dept.	Complete
	Reported progress regularly to Ascension Florida leadership	On-going