AppCAA

APPALACHIAN COMMUNITY ACTION & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY, INC.

2024 Community Needs Assessment

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Contents

Acronyms

ACP	Affordable Connectivity Program
AppCAA	Appalachian Community Action and Development Agency
CASA	Court-Appointed Special Advocate
CMS	Client Management System
CNA	Community Needs Assessment
CSBG	Community Services Block Grant
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KII	Key Informant Interview
MEOC	Mountain Empire Older Citizens
PWD	People with Disabilities
VITA	Volunteer Income Tax Assistance

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Executive Summary

Background

This Community Needs Assessment was carried out by the Appalachian Community Action & Development Agency, Inc. (AppCAA) and the Community Needs Assessment Team[1] with support from members of the AppCAA Board of Directors. The Assessment was completed in adherence to the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) requirements and Organizational Standards. The purpose of the CNA is to: identify and assess gaps in service delivery; to determine complementarity between activities; and to develop priority action areas to continue adapting activities and services to emergent community needs. The results of the 2024 Community Needs Assessment will guide programmatic and fundraising efforts and will be used in the yearly review of AppCAA's Strategic Plan for Fiscal Year 2022-2027. AppCAA's communities live in poverty and struggle to obtain affordable housing and social support; this Community Needs Assessment will help define the scope of those problems and generating community feedback and buy-in for solutions.

Summary Methodology

AppCAA administered a survey to clients after each interaction, the results were analyzed along with demographic information from program records. Qualitative data were captured in surveys, focus group discussion (FGD) and via Key Informant Interviews (KII). Secondary data were collected and analyzed to support assumptions and make comparisons with the greater Southwest Virginia population while highlighting retrospective trends. Results were analyzed at the family, Agency, and community level to develop targeted recommendations.

Summary of Findings

Outcomes of the surveys, focus group discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII) reinforced and confirmed trends borne out in the secondary data, namely:
- Poverty remains a challenge for the area and inflation/rising utility costs are especially hard for the working poor. Some poverty alleviation projects have been marginally effective. (However, the improvement in poverty evinced in recent data may be due to utility/internet vouchers and other social programs that are only available for a limited time and are now disappearing.)
- Transportation continues to be a problem for some vulnerable sub-populations (e.g. PWD and the elderly). Costs for used vehicles, maintenance and fuel have risen over the past few years, leaving families without a means to get to work or medical appointments.

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1 The Assessment Team included: AppCAA staff, a community representative and a Board representative.

- Drug abuse (particularly use of opioids) seems to have declined. The service area has not seen any large-scale anti-drug campaigns that could account for the change. Falling use of methamphetamine and opioids has been attributed to the decriminalization of marijuana and its general storefront availability in Southwest Virginia.
- Childcare facilities continue to fall short of the need in the service area. Limited day and evening childcare negatively impacts the working poor and family structures that used to provide childcare are no longer widespread.
- Barriers to affordable housing (including credit worthiness) are being lowered through the work of AppCAA, but structural problems (i.e. lack of housing units) and systemic issues (i.e. rising housing costs and interest rates) and influx of out-of-towners continue to make affordable housing unattainable.
- Eldercare is gaining more focus as certified nursing home facilities are unavailable or unaffordable and as older individuals prefer to age in place. Provision of some minimal assistance (e.g. housing maintenance, light housework) for many who are over 65 years would help maintain their independence and social functioning.
- Influx of individuals (either retired or working remotely) from outside the region has spiked since 2020. This increase has made housing more expensive, strained infrastructure, and heightened the demand for broadband internet access.

Methodology

Data Collection

AppCAA collects demographic and client needs information as well as customer service feedback from every client interaction. These data were compiled to develop client profiles for each county AppCAA serves. Compared against secondary data, this information provides for a more granular analysis of the present needs and growing trends among those living in poverty in Southwest Virginia.

The participant surveys (i.e. Client Satisfaction and Needs Assessment) were developed with questions aimed to capture:
- Basic Demographic Data
- Needs within the household and community
- Satisfaction with AppCAA services

For the Client Satisfaction survey, the questions are closed, with multiple choices answers, except for space for additional comments. The Needs Assessment survey provided one closed question on priority needs and the remainder were open to collecting more qualitative data. The Client Satisfaction Survey was completed by 581 respondents. In addition, AppCAA carried out a Broadband Survey with 149 respondents. Roughly 15 percent of AppCAA's clients were represented in the surveys.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data
Data collected from surveys were recorded electronically and merged. Quantitative data from additional questions from participant questionnaires were separately tabulated using Excel. Frequency and percentage were used to determine if there are strong preferences for one outcome over another.

Qualitative Data
Qualitative responses to survey questions, FGD and KII were compiled in an excel spreadsheet and reviewed for patterns or commonalities. Open-ended responses were ranked and presented by prevalence.

Community Profiles

Poverty

Important to AppCAA's operations and program planning is an understanding of poverty in Southwest Virginia. According to 2022 Census estimates, poverty is generally improving in AppCAA's program areas, with Scott County as the outlier where there was a one percent increase and a less than one percent increase in poverty in Norton (see Table below).

Table 1: Percent in Poverty by County[2]

Report Area	Age 0-17 No of Persons in poverty	Age 0-17 in Poverty	Age 5-17 No of Persons in poverty	Age 5-17 in Poverty	All Ages Number in Poverty	All Ages percentage in Poverty	Change overall poverty since 2018
All Counties/ Norton	4,125	27.7% (avg)	2,883	25.8%	17,006	21.6% (avg)	-2.1%
Lee County, VA	1,255	31.3%	909	30.5%	4,981	24.4%	-0.4%
Scott County, VA	863	22.7%	600	20.4%	4,021	19.5%	+1.0%
Wise County, VA	1,777	26.6%	1,214	24.3%	7,279	22.2%	-3.2%
Norton City, VA	230	29.0%	160	27.9%	725	20.3%	+0.5%
Virginia	253,48	13.8%	169,9	12.8%	893,599	10.6%	+0.1%

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2 United States Census Bureau. (2022). *Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates.*

	1		39				
United States	11,582,950	16.3%	8,075,849	15.5%	40,951,625	12.6%	+0.3%

While it is difficult to know which exact factors influenced the poverty alleviation in the service area, some state-wide initiatives may have a role. For example, Virginia's minimum wage was raised to $12.00 and Medicaid expansion helped low-wage workers to access affordable healthcare. Job training initiatives have generated skilled workers with higher earning power.

Despite the slight improvement in the most populous part of AppCAA's service area, a majority of those in poverty in Southwest Virginia are under 18 years old. In the Chart below, data are presented on the percentage of individuals in poverty in the assessment area versus the Commonwealth as a whole.

Chart 1: Poverty by Age
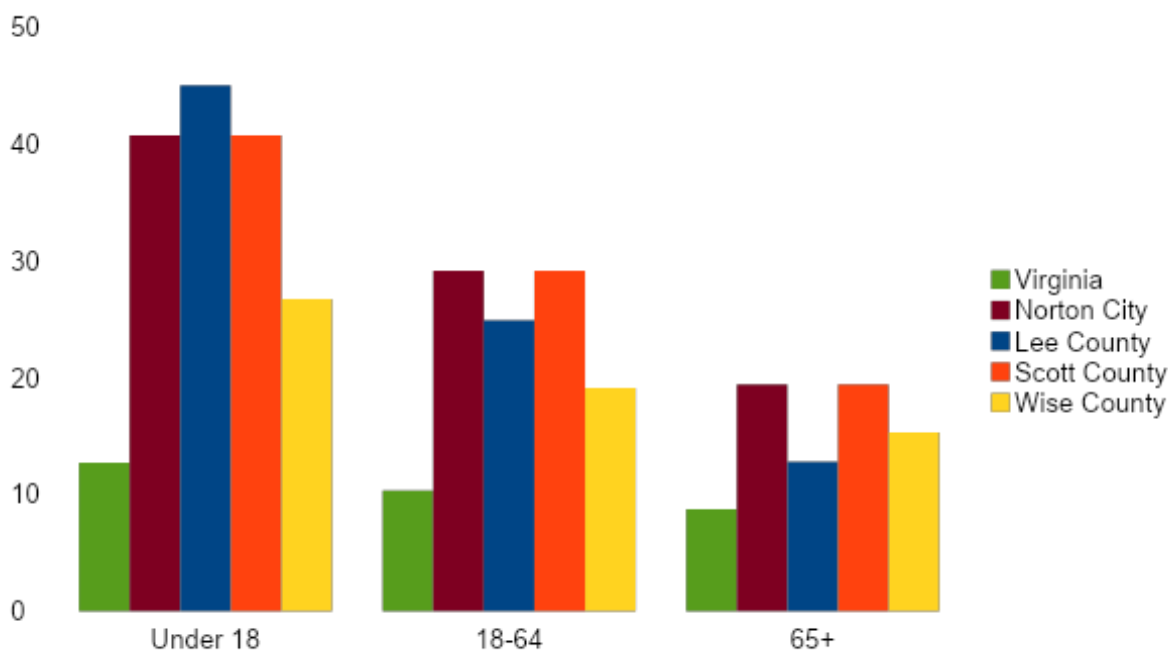
2022 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates

Whereas Virginia's percentage in poverty is at relative parity across all ages, in the AppCAA service area, a majority of children are in poverty and in some counties, up to a quarter of the population lives in poverty. The poverty-associated issues of nutrition, education and safe housing disproportionately affect children over the long-term, thereby depriving them of necessary developmental support to become successful adults.

Unemployment

Below is a chart indicating levels of unemployment in AppCAA's targeted counties. Over all areas, unemployment has decreased by nearly five percent since the pandemic, reflecting national trends in falling unemployment. Scott County is fairing the best in overall employment, while in Norton, roughly four percent of residents are unemployed. These data may be skewed, however, due to the pandemic and the resulting layoffs and business closures. Individuals leaving the workforce due to disability, family responsibilities, or lack of transportation may also contribute to the downward trend in employment. The high number of unemployed in May 2020 normalized to track with national unemployment rates by December 2023.

Table 2: Employment Status by County (December 2023 and change from May 2020)[3]

Report Area	Unemployment May 2020	Unemployment December 2023	Unemployment Rate May 2020	Unemployment Rate December 2023	Rate Change
Report Location	2,692	1,075	8.45% avg	3.2% avg	-5.25%
Lee County, VA	714	268	8.76%	3.2%	-5.56%
Scott County, VA	638	261	7.28%	2.8%	-4.48%
Wise County, VA	1,174	481	9.06%	3.6%	-5.46%
Norton City	166	65	10.2%	4.0%	-6.2%
Virginia	397,994	139,000	9.19%	3.0%	-6.19%
United States	20,513,638	6,000,000	12.99%	3.7%	-9.29%

Wages and Industry

Chart 2: Annual Wages by Industry in Service Area

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3 United States Department of Labor. (2022). Bureau of Labor Statistics.
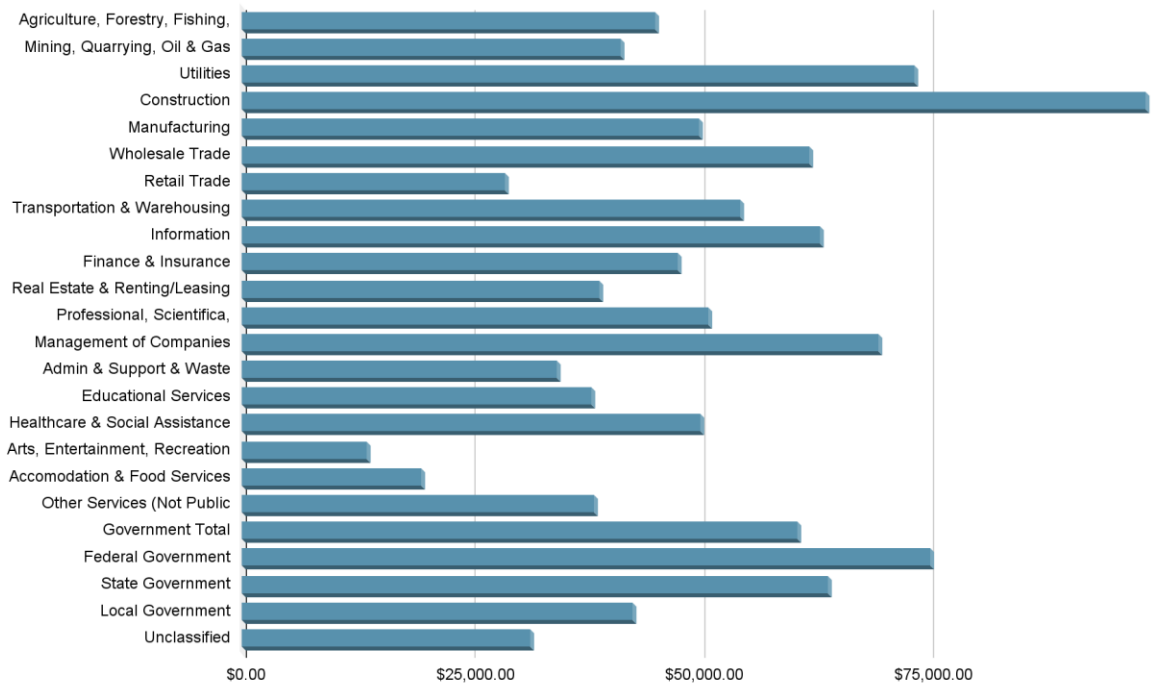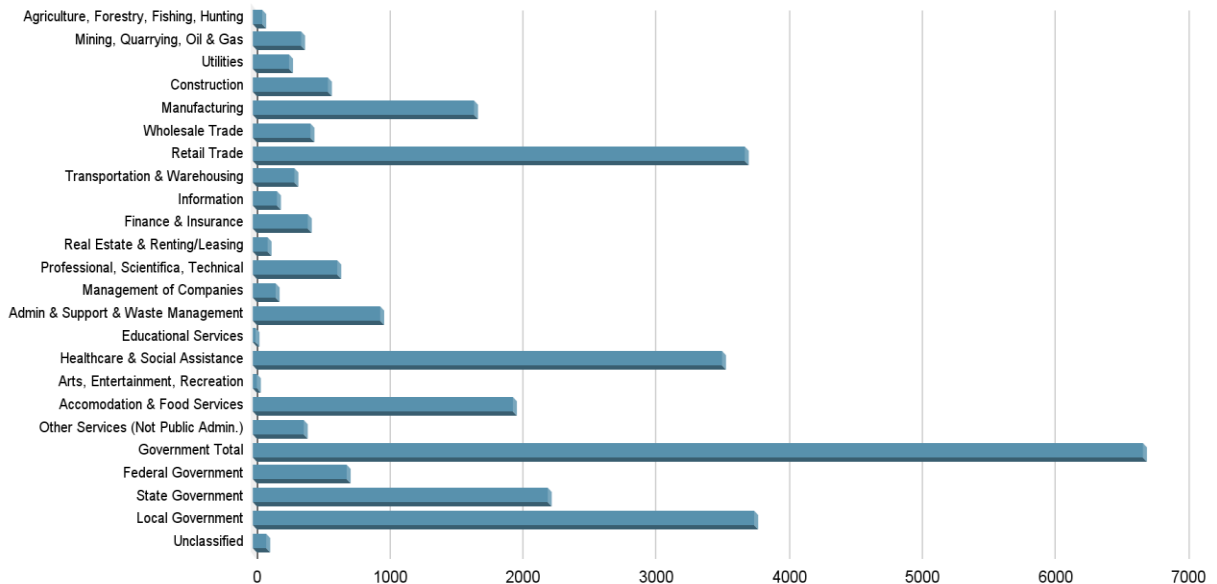
Annual Wages by Industry

Chart 3: Industry Employment in AppCAA's Service Area

Employment by Industry 2023

Wage and industry trends continue to follow a trajectory, moving away from industry and toward service sectors. Healthcare continues to be a major employer in the area along with retail trade. The loss of coal jobs continues to affect the region as the transition to newer technologies and their associated careers has been slow to develop.

Housing Characteristics

Table 3: Age and Availability of Housing Stock[4]

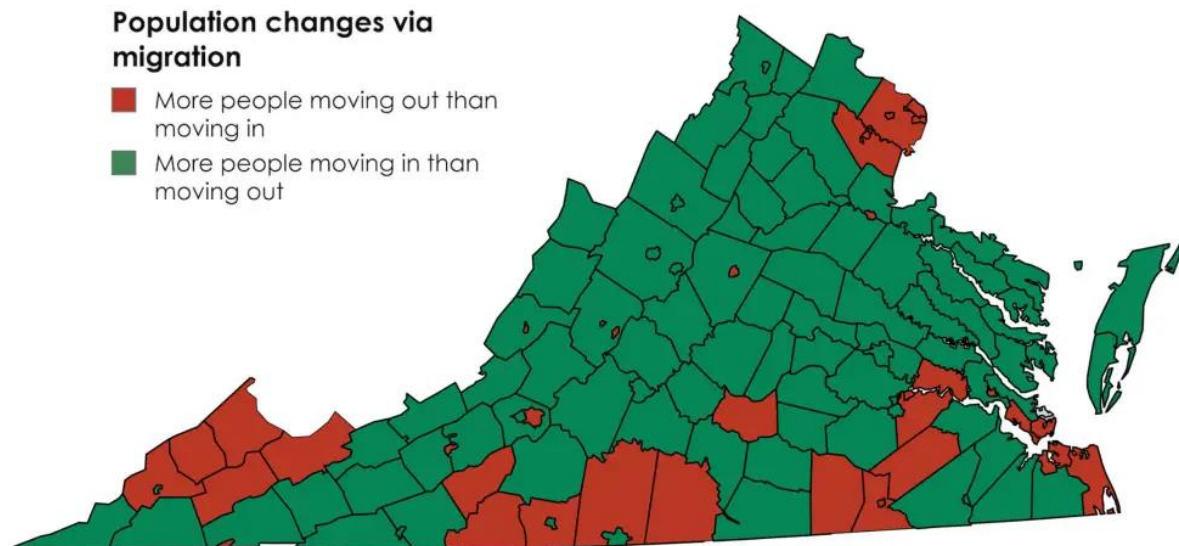| Report Area	Total Housing Units	Median Year Built	Median Age (from 2022)	Vacant Housing Units
Report Location	41,187	No data	No data	6,812
Lee County, VA	10,835	1977	45	1,768
Scott County, VA	11,765	1977	45	2,511
Wise County, VA	16,723	1977	45	2,277
Norton	1,864	1974	47	256
Virginia	3,618,247	1982	40	
United States	136,384,292	1977	41	

Across the report area, the housing stock has remained constant, or slightly declined in number, since the 2022 Community Needs Assessment. The production of new housing has slowed since the mid-2000s and in rural areas older homes are more prevalent along with their associated maintenance costs, and health and safety issues. Presently, the housing stock is not keeping up with inward migration, resulting in crowded living conditions and/or unsafe dwellings. The Census found that in 2022 there were a number of unoccupied units; however, the condition of the vacant units is not known.

Migration
Virginia and most states in the South have experienced an influx of outsiders moving from cities to rural areas. The AppCAA service area is also witnessing this change which strains existing resources and could possibly generate more demand for AppCAA services as prices rise and housing becomes less affordable.

Chart 4: Migration to Southwest Virginia

Population changes via migration

■ More people moving out than moving in

■ More people moving in than moving out

Post-pandemic population shifts are disproportionately affecting Appalachia, with the region enduring a 2.9 percent increase in residents since 2010[5] (roughly an additional 745,000 people moving into Appalachia). Largely retired, working remotely, or seeking lower cost of living areas, individuals moving to Appalachia have generated unexpected strain on infrastructure, driven up housing prices, and contributed to further ecological degradation as forests are being cut to make room for new development.

The counties of Lee, Scott, Wise, and the city of Norton are experiencing these growing pains to some degree. The *2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates* found that 2.7 percent of individuals who moved to Virginia from out of state chose Lee County, 1.7 percent to Scott County, 2.5 percent to Wise County, 0.7 percent to Norton. (For perspective, 1.0 percent of people who moved to Buchanan County from out-of-state in 2022.) While Lee County lost population for more than a decade, now the county has more people moving in than leaving or dying. These shifts in population have an impact on AppCAA's work as the needs of clients change, more pressure is put on existing housing, and demand for senior and early childhood services grows.

Rental Housing and Costs

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5 Appalachian Regional Commission. (2023). "The Appalachian Region: A Data Overview from the 2017-2021 American Community Survey. 'Chartbook'."

Across AppCAA's service area, roughly a quarter of residents are renting (Scott: 21.5 percent; Lee 27.8 percent; Wise 29.7 percent; and Norton 47 percent). The 2022 American Community Survey 5-year estimates found average rents for Scott County was $621; Lee County $651; Wise County $750; and Norton $613. With the average wage in the LENOWISCO planning district of $41,457[6] (or roughly $3454 monthly gross income) rent comprises 18 percent of costs for the average household, meaning rental housing is still "affordable" in the service area.

Childcare

Prior to 2020 and the COVID pandemic, childcare services were overburdened in Southwest Virginia. Over the past four years, the situation has gotten worse–childcare centers have closed, and parents are struggling to balance work schedules and childcare. According to Virginia's Department of Social Services, each target county needs childcare, with limited capacity in the licensed childcare facilities available in each area. For example, Lee County has one all day daycare center, three Head Start Centers for ages 3-5 and five afterschool programs. Scott County has nine Head Start Centers ages 3-5 and two Early Head Start Centers (birth-3 years) and Wise County has two full day daycare centers and five Head Start Centers. Norton has one afterschool program and two Head Start Centers and two Early Head Start Centers.

Capacity at childcare centers is limited, with many parents hoping to use the service being put on wait lists. Although some vouchers are available to offset the cost of childcare, there is simply not enough availability to meet demand. The impact of this lack of childcare not only affects working families who must take care of children rather than earn wages but also affects child development and early socialization.

Aging in Place/Senior Citizens

Secondary data and KII indicate that as an individual grows older in AppCAA's service area, they are more likely to fall into poverty. Higher prescription drug costs, greater tax burdens, growing utility costs, and overall inflation put financial pressures on seniors living on limited incomes. Southwest Virginia is experiencing fewer multi-generational homes and lessening filial support, resulting in older individuals needing outside assistance. Survey reports find that roughly five percent of AppCAA clients are retired with growing numbers of older individuals outside of the workforce. In addition to support to complete activities of daily living for older residents, activities should be planned to decrease isolation and improve individual connections to the community.
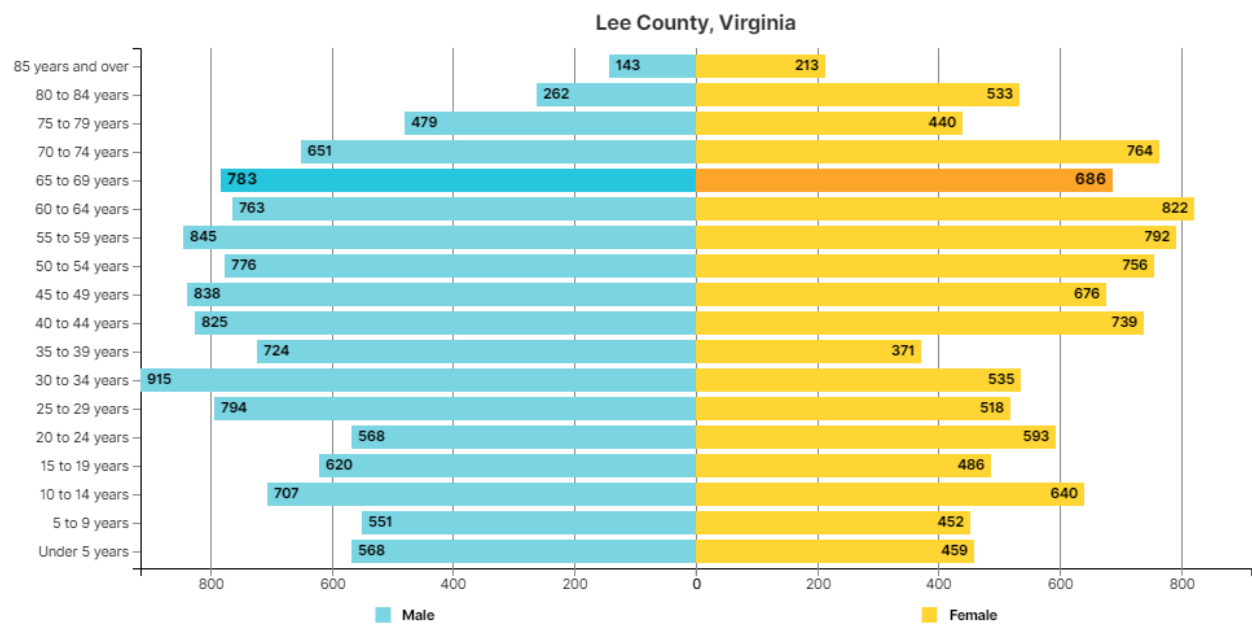
Transportation

Community Needs Assessments over the past six years have noted the need for more transportation options in the service area. Southwest Virginia's topography and remote nature of its communities make comprehensive transportation solutions expensive and unsustainable. Presently, MEOC MET-go for Norton and Wise provides low-cost or no-cost rides on demand between the town of Wise and the City of Norton using an app. These services have been expanded from Big Stone to Appalachia through Department of Transportation funds. This expansion filled a great demand; however, service gaps remain.

Lee County

Encompassing 435.4 square miles, Lee County is situated in the most southwestern part of Virginia; it borders both the Tennessee and Kentucky state lines and is the 39th largest county in Virginia. Lee County has the highest poverty rates in AppCAA's service area; in 2022, 26 percent of the population lived below the poverty line[7]. The 2021 American Community Survey found that 12 percent of Lee County residents receive SSI payments and 29 percent on food stamps or other federal assistance[8].

Chart 5: Lee County Population Overview[9]

Population Pyramid: Population by Age and Sex in Lee County, Virginia

Lee County, Virginia

Age Group	Male	Female
85 years and over	143	213
80 to 84 years	262	533
75 to 79 years	479	440
70 to 74 years	651	764
65 to 69 years	783	686
60 to 64 years	763	822
55 to 59 years	845	792
50 to 54 years	776	756
45 to 49 years	838	676
40 to 44 years	825	739
35 to 39 years	724	371
30 to 34 years	915	535
25 to 29 years	794	518
20 to 24 years	568	593
15 to 19 years	620	486
10 to 14 years	707	640
5 to 9 years	551	452
Under 5 years	568	459

Male   Female

Margin of Error
S0101 | 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables

7 *Ibid.*
8
9 US Census Bureau (2021). *American Community Survey Five Year Estimates.*

Table 4: Lee County Racial Demographics[10]

Service Area	White Total	Black Total	American Indian Total	Asian Total	Native Hawaiian Total	Hispanic/ Latino	Mixed Race Total
Lee County, VA	20,531	885	71	39	0	476	566
Virginia	5,058,363	1,607,581	40,007	615,436	7,156	908,749	705,707
United States	204,277,273	41,104,200	3,272,135	19,886,049	689,966	62,100,000	33,848,943

Chart 6: Lee County Racial Demographics

2+ Races
2.5%
Latino
2.1%
Black
4.0%
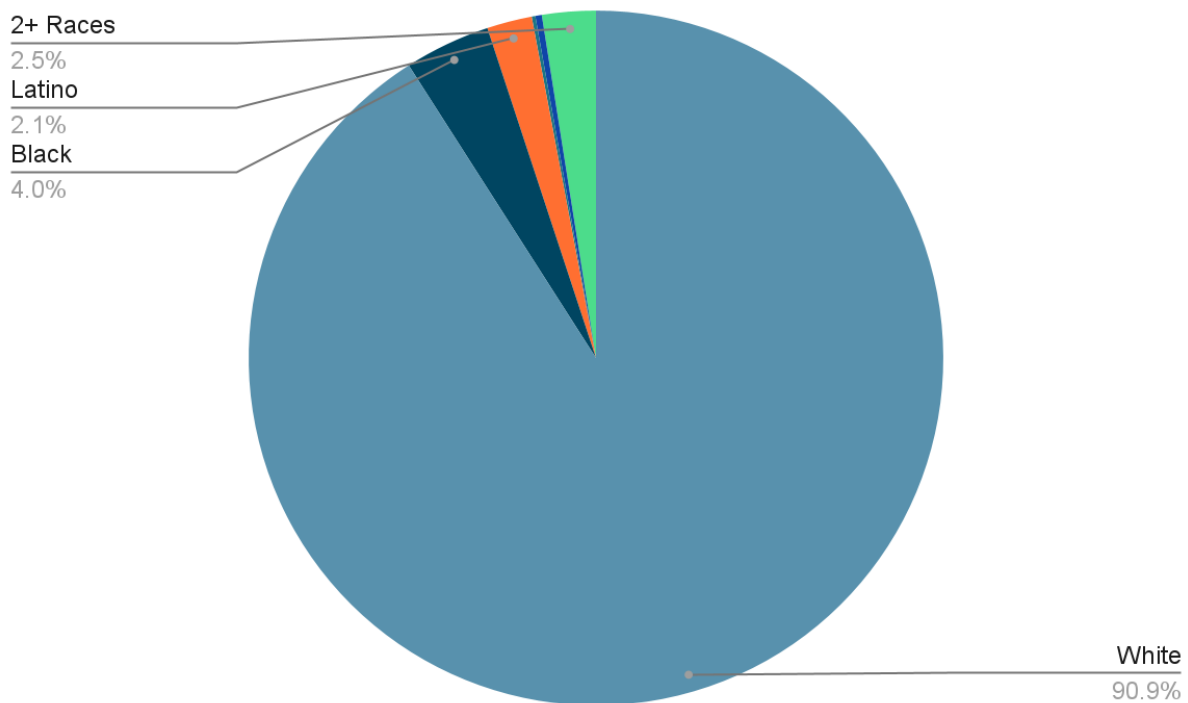
White
90.9%

Despite the appearance of a low level of diversity, the percentage of non-white residents of Lee County has grown slightly–a remarkable demographic shift for the region. Further migration to rural areas is expected, accelerating the growth of ethnic minority groups in places like Lee County.

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10 US Census Bureau. (2021). *2020 Decennial Census*.

Lee County AppCAA Program Participants

Analyzing participant information from 2022-2023 gathered via AppCAA's electronic CMS, the following characteristics of Lee County residents were found:

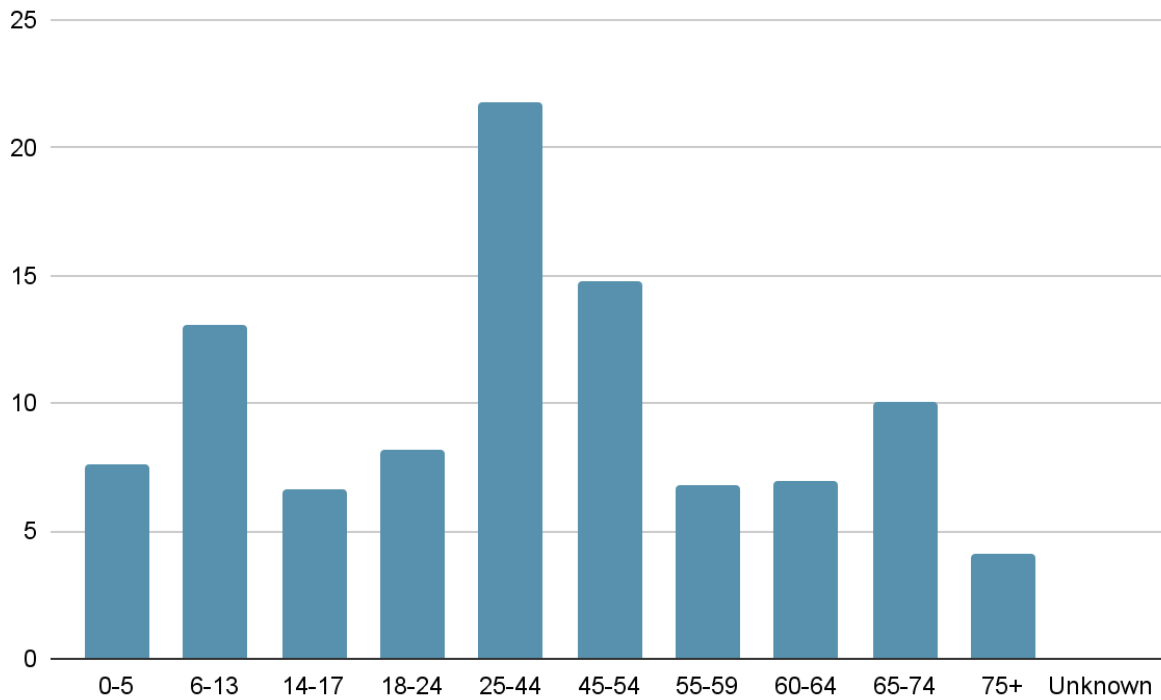Chart 7: AppCAA Program Participation Lee County

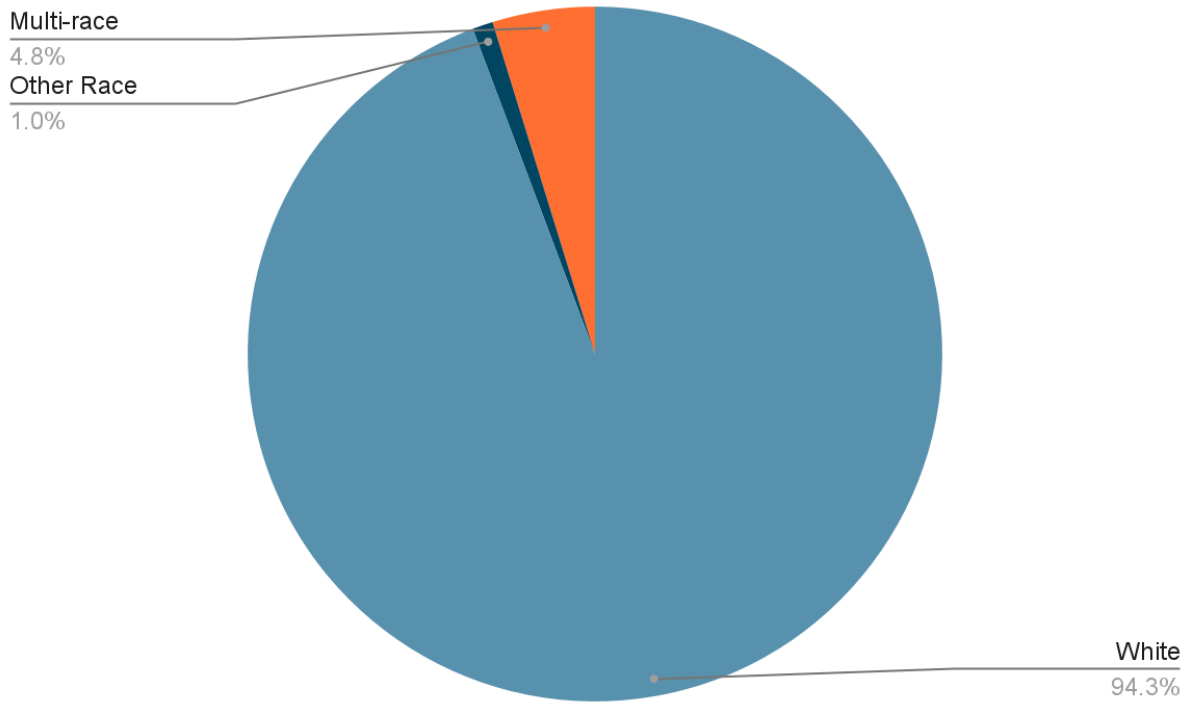Chart 8: Race of AppCAA Program Participants Lee County
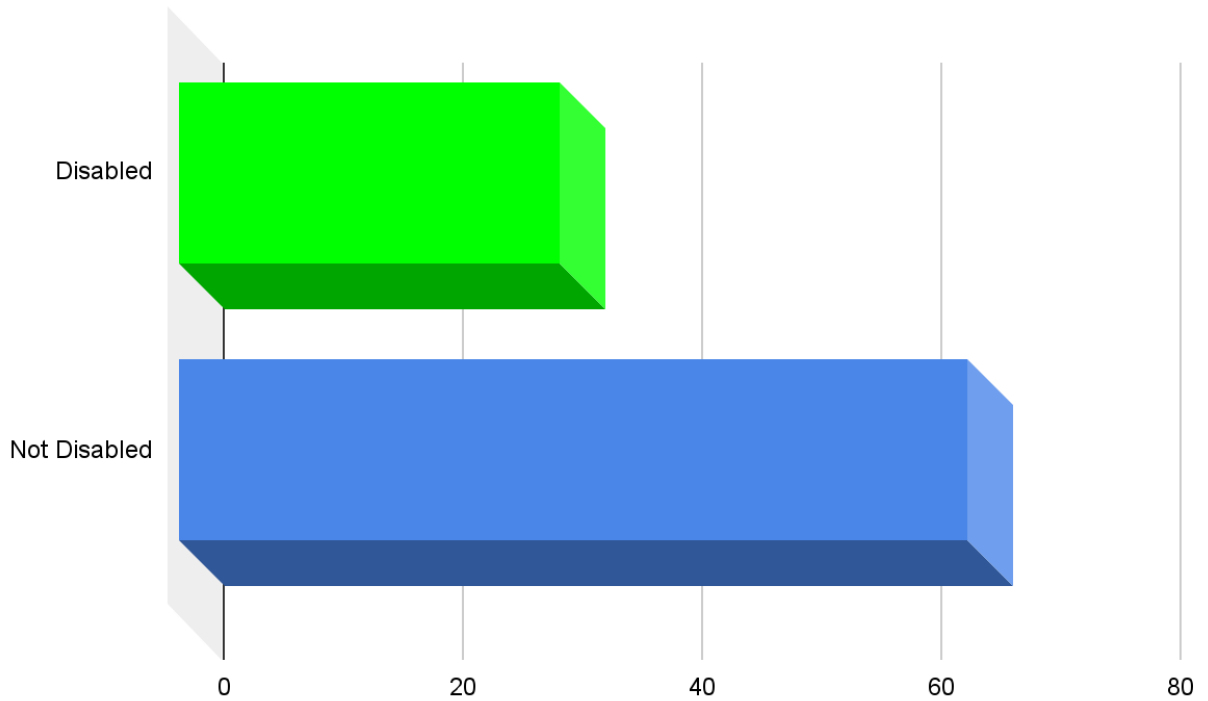
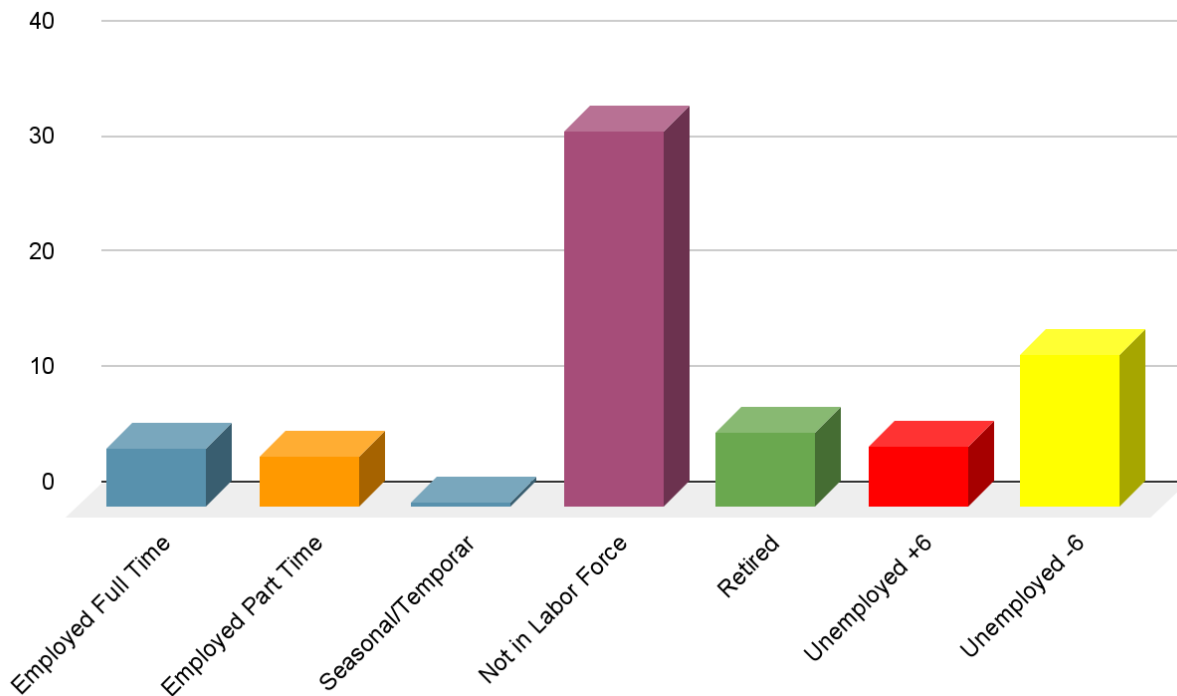Chart 9: Lee County AppCAA Participants Lee County

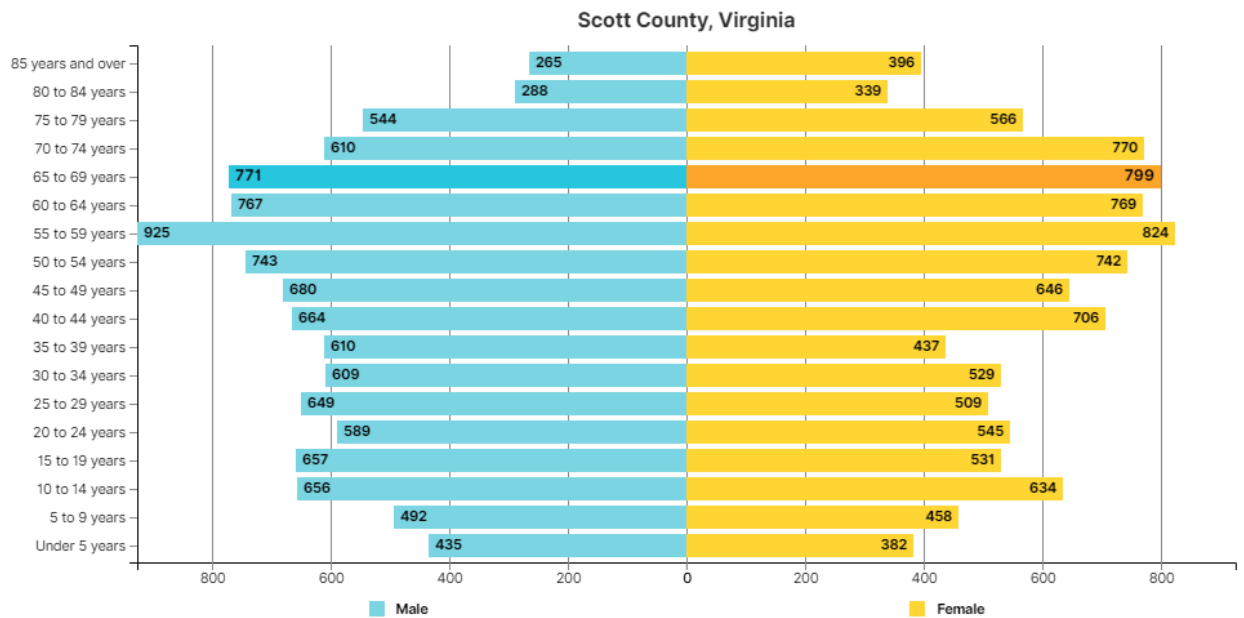Chart 10: Employment Status AppCAA Program Participants Lee County

Scott County

Scott County is an area in the southwestern part of the state located on the Virginia/Tennessee border and covering 539 square miles. A peri-urban center, Scott County offers greater opportunities for employment and social resources compared to the other counties that AppCAA serves. However, Scott County still experiences challenges when compared to the averages across the Commonwealth of Virginia. In 2022, Scott County's percentage of people living in poverty was 17 percent, with 20 percent living in poverty under 18 years and 17 percent of Scott County residents over age 65 living in poverty[11].

Table 5: Scott County Population Overview[12]

11 US Census Bureau (2022). *Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates.*
12 U.S. Census Bureau (2022). *Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates.*

Population Pyramid: Population by Age and Sex in Scott County, Virginia

Scott County, Virginia

Age	Male	Female
85 years and over	265	396
80 to 84 years	288	339
75 to 79 years	544	566
70 to 74 years	610	770
65 to 69 years	771	799
60 to 64 years	767	769
55 to 59 years	925	824
50 to 54 years	743	742
45 to 49 years	680	646
40 to 44 years	664	706
35 to 39 years	610	437
30 to 34 years	609	529
25 to 29 years	649	509
20 to 24 years	589	545
15 to 19 years	657	531
10 to 14 years	656	634
5 to 9 years	492	458
Under 5 years	435	382

Margin of Error
S0101 | *2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables*

Table 6: Scott County Race Demographics[13]

| Service Area	White Total	Black Total	American Indian Total	Asian Total	Native Hawaiian Total	Hispanic/ Latino	Mixed Race Total
Scott County, VA	20,528	134	31	28	4	255	699
Virginia	5,058,363	1,607,581	40,007	615,436	7,156	908,749	705,707
United States	204,277,273	41,104,200	3,272,135	19,886,049	689,966	62,100,000	33,848,943

Chart 11: Racial Demographics Scott County

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13 US Census Bureau. (2021). *2020 Decennial Census*

2+ Races
3.2%

White
95.0%
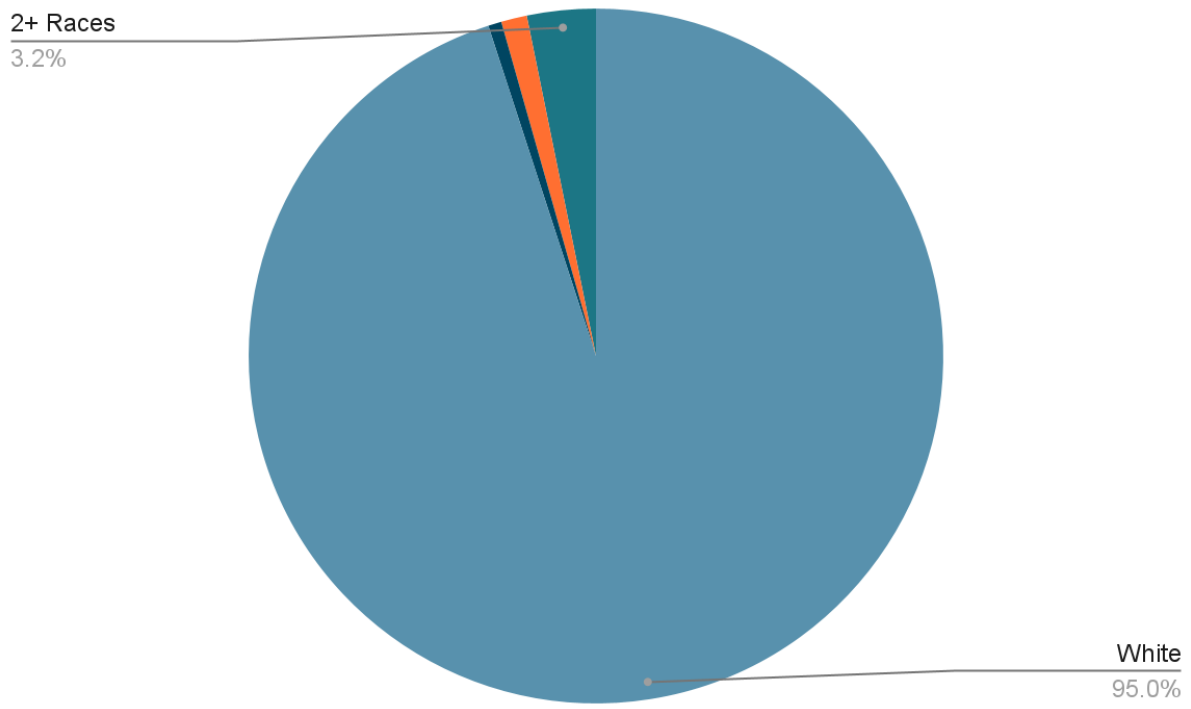
Chart 12: Scott County Age Program Participation
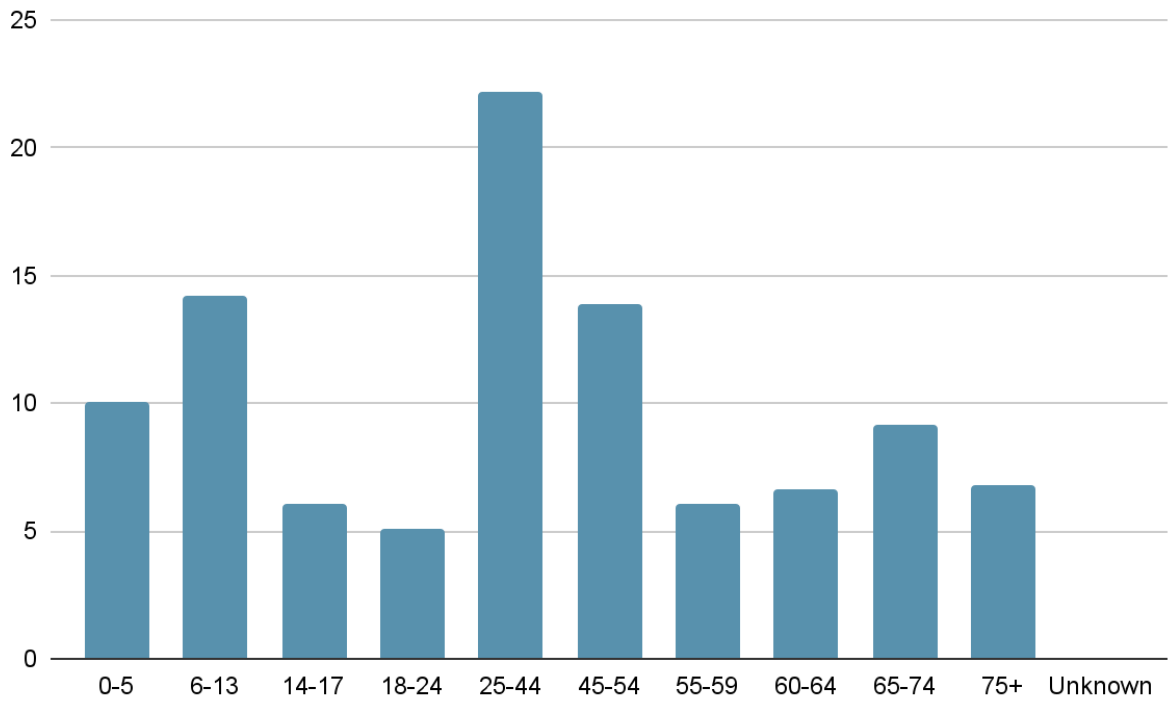
Chart 13: Race of AppCAA Program Participants Scott County

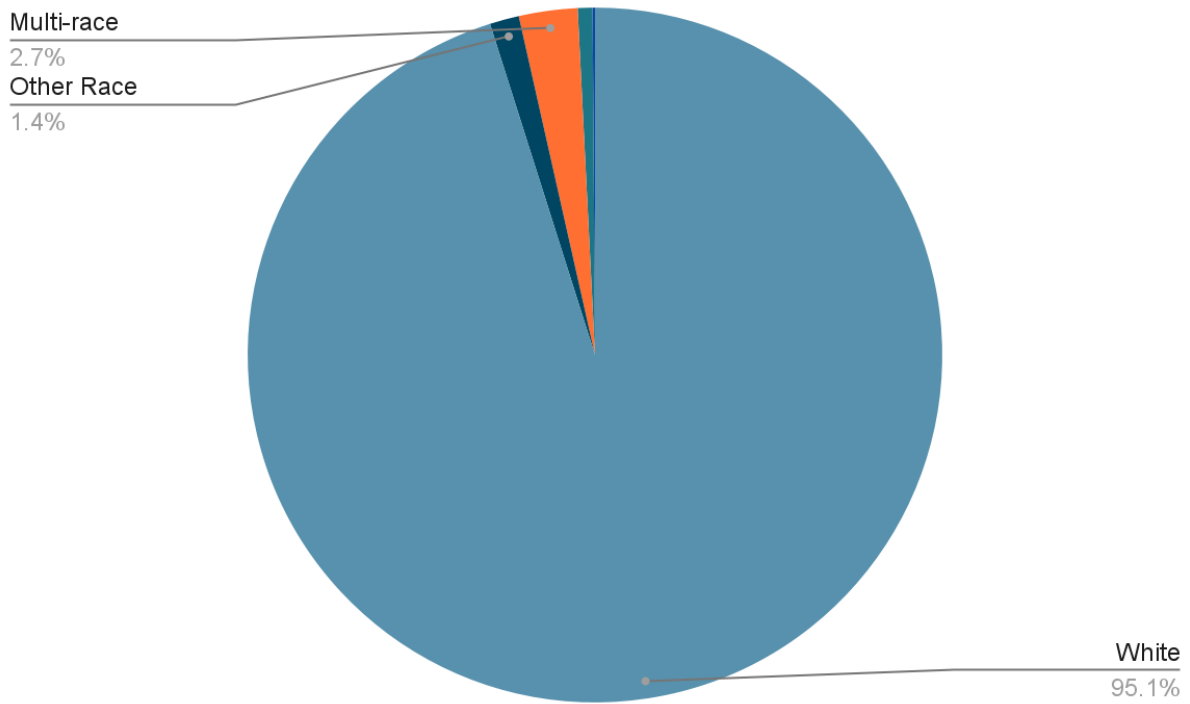Multi-race
2.7%
Other Race
1.4%

White
95.1%

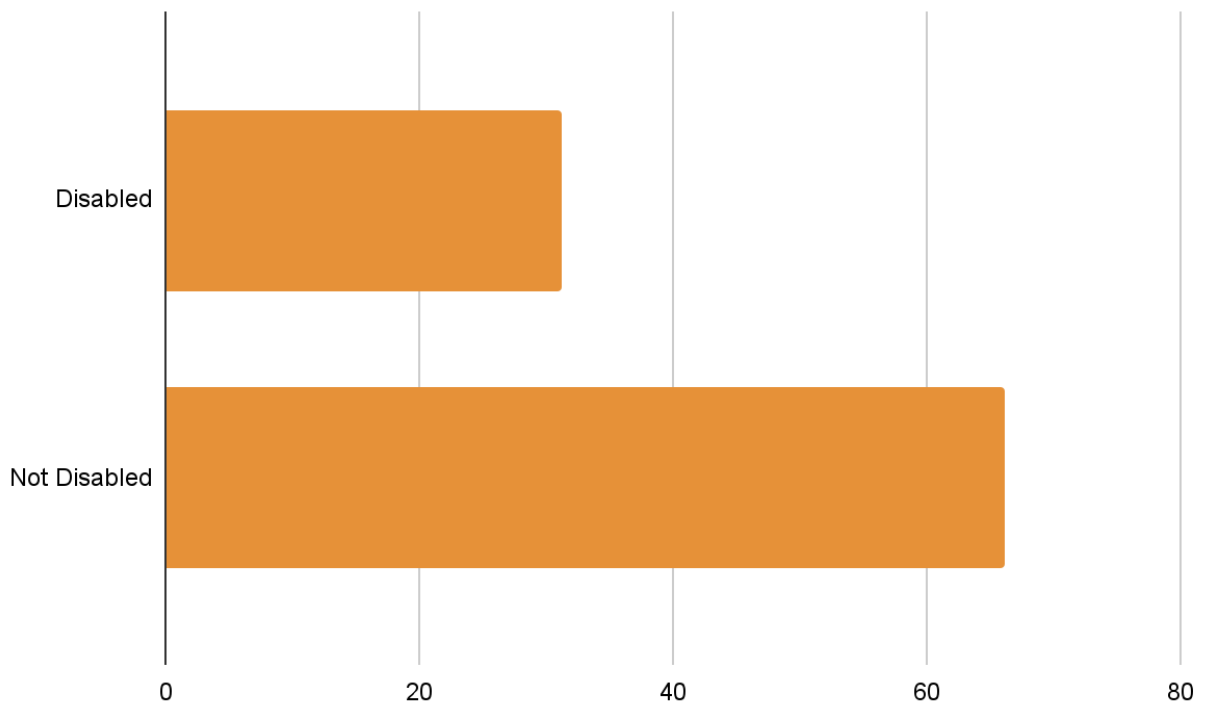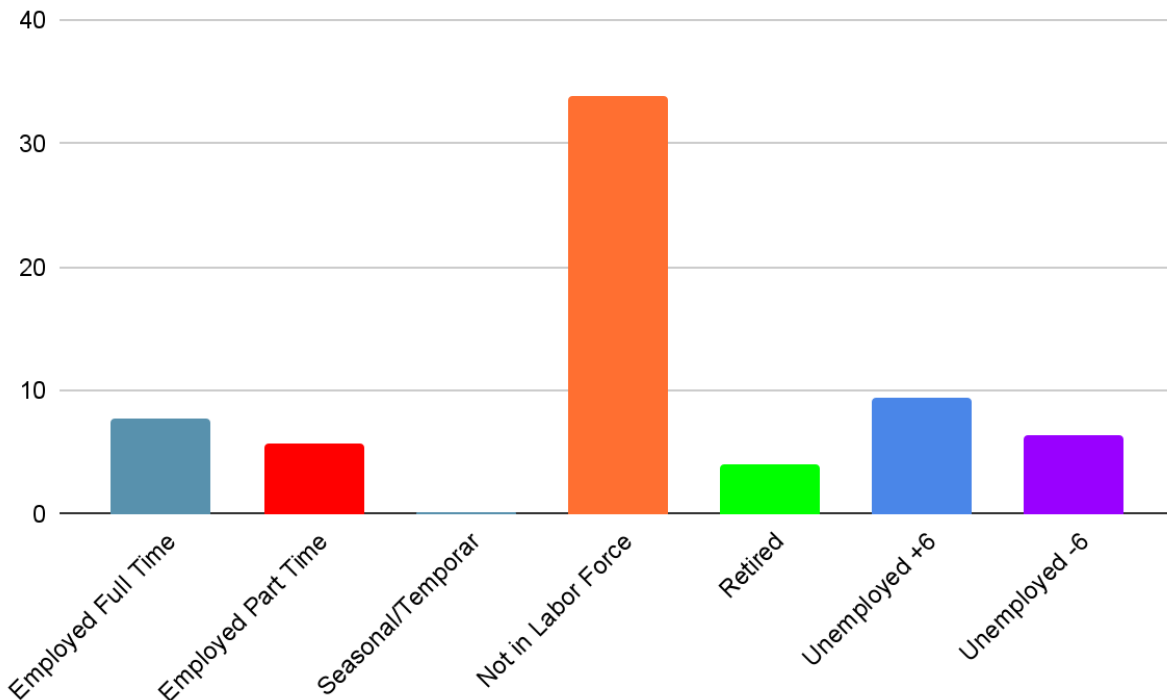Chart 14: Disability Status Scott Program Participants

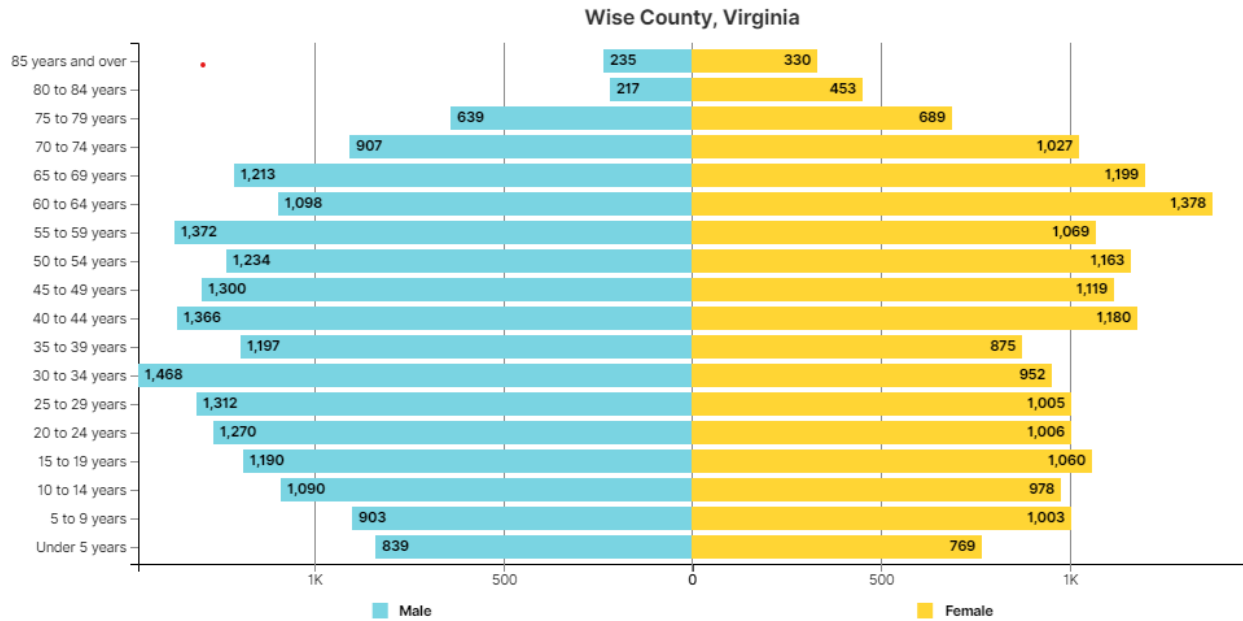Chart 15: Employment Status AppCAA Participants Scott County

Wise County

Wise County is an area in the southwestern region of Virginia that borders the state line of Kentucky and covers 405 square miles. This county is the most populated of AppCAA's service area and the only county with a four-year college in the City of Wise. Wise County has seen poverty in recent years increase with the decline in the coal industry. Poverty in Wise County in 2022 stood at 20 percent--more than twice the rate for the state. The median household income in Wise County is $47,541, compared to $85,873 for the Commonwealth.

Chart 16: Wise County Population Overview[14]

Population Pyramid: Population by Age and Sex in Wise County, Virginia

Wise County, Virginia

Age Group	Male	Female
85 years and over	235	330
80 to 84 years	217	453
75 to 79 years	639	689
70 to 74 years	907	1,027
65 to 69 years	1,213	1,199
60 to 64 years	1,098	1,378
55 to 59 years	1,372	1,069
50 to 54 years	1,234	1,163
45 to 49 years	1,300	1,119
40 to 44 years	1,366	1,180
35 to 39 years	1,197	875
30 to 34 years	1,468	952
25 to 29 years	1,312	1,005
20 to 24 years	1,270	1,006
15 to 19 years	1,190	1,060
10 to 14 years	1,090	978
5 to 9 years	903	1,003
Under 5 years	839	769

Male ▇ Female ▇

Margin of Error
S0101 | 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables

Table 7: Wise County Race Demographics

Report Area	White Total	Black Total	American Indian Total	Asian Total	Native Hawaiian Total	Hispanic/ Latino	Mixed Race Total
Wise County, VA	32,789	1,802	55	153	11	452	1,139
Virginia	5,058,363	1,607,581	40,007	615,436	7,156	908,749	705,707
United States	204,277,273	41,104,200	3,272,135	19,886,049	689,966	62,100,000	33,848,943

Chart 17: Racial Demographics Wise County
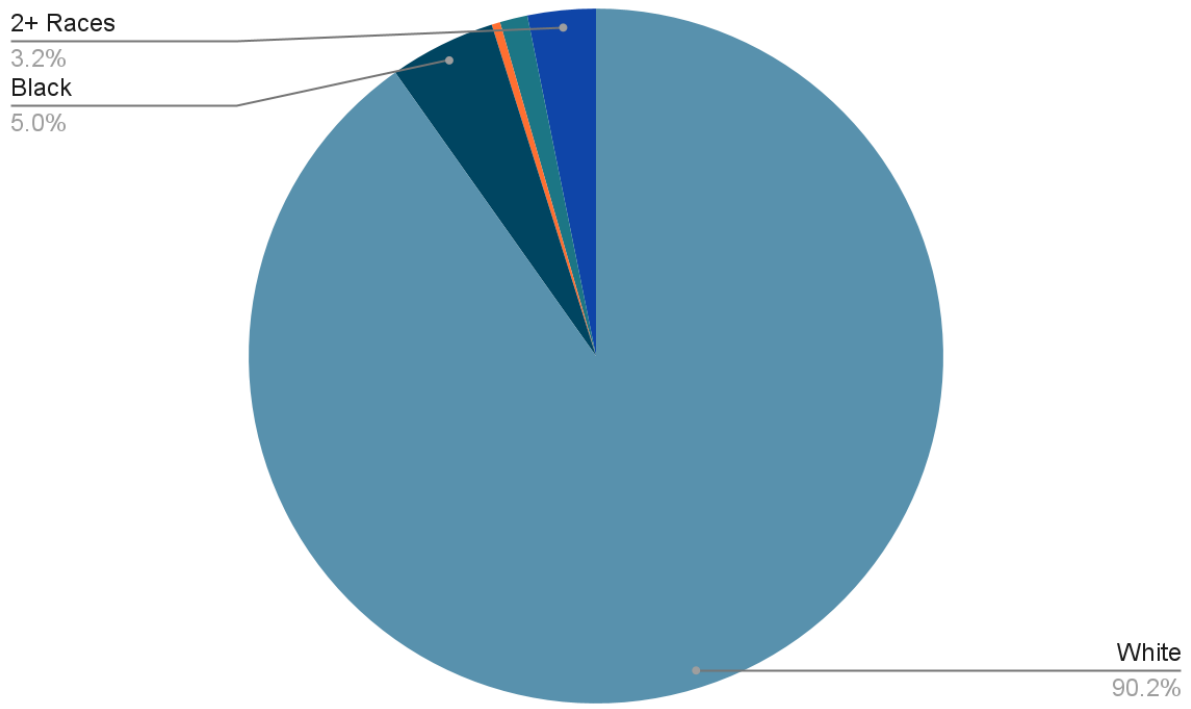
2+ Races
3.2%

Black
5.0%

White
90.2%

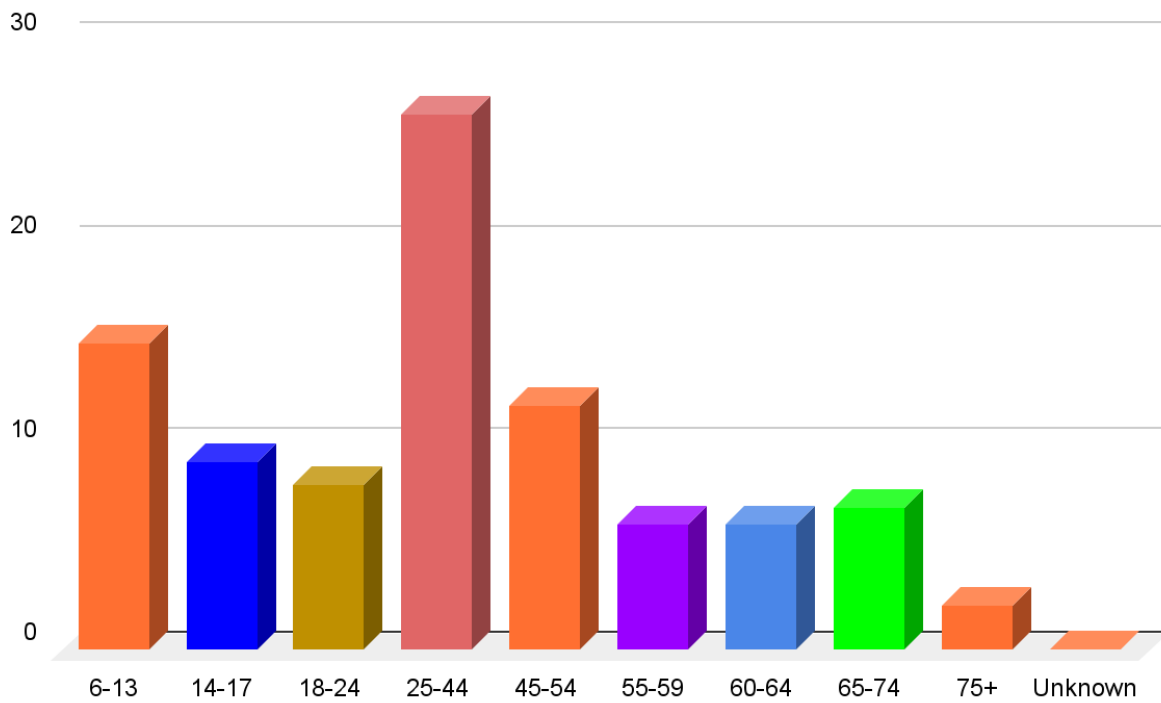Chart 18: Wise County AppCAA Program Participation by Age

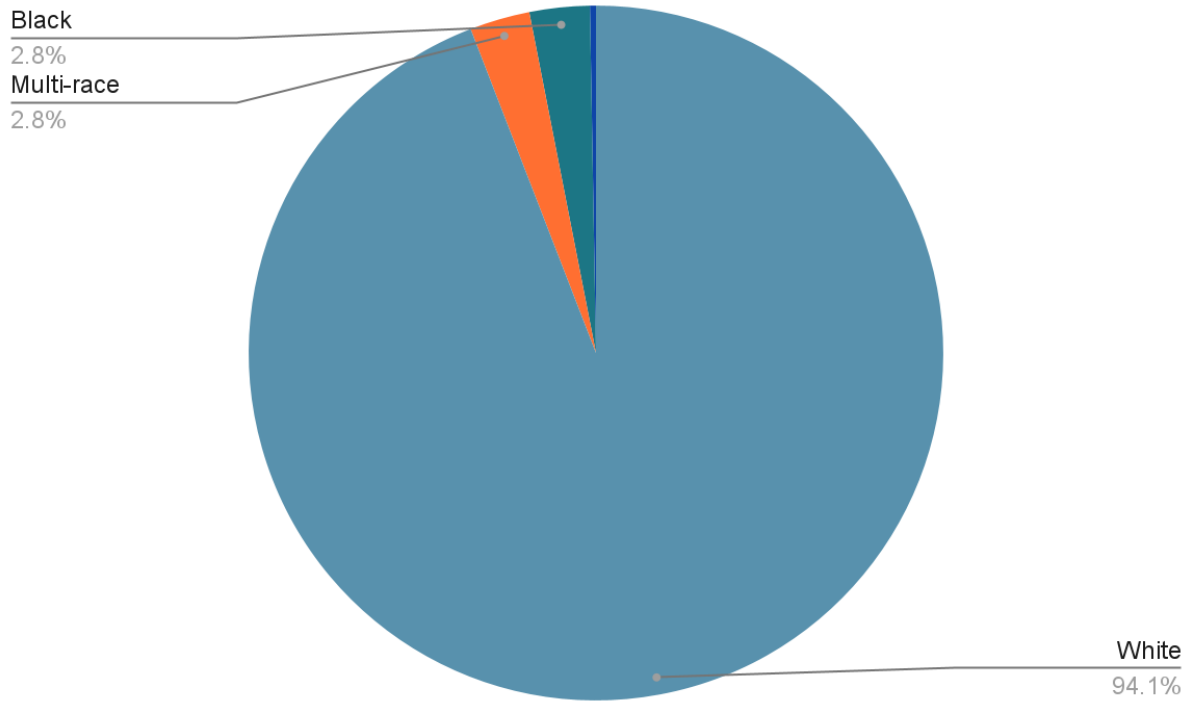Chart 19: Race of AppCAA Program Participants Wise

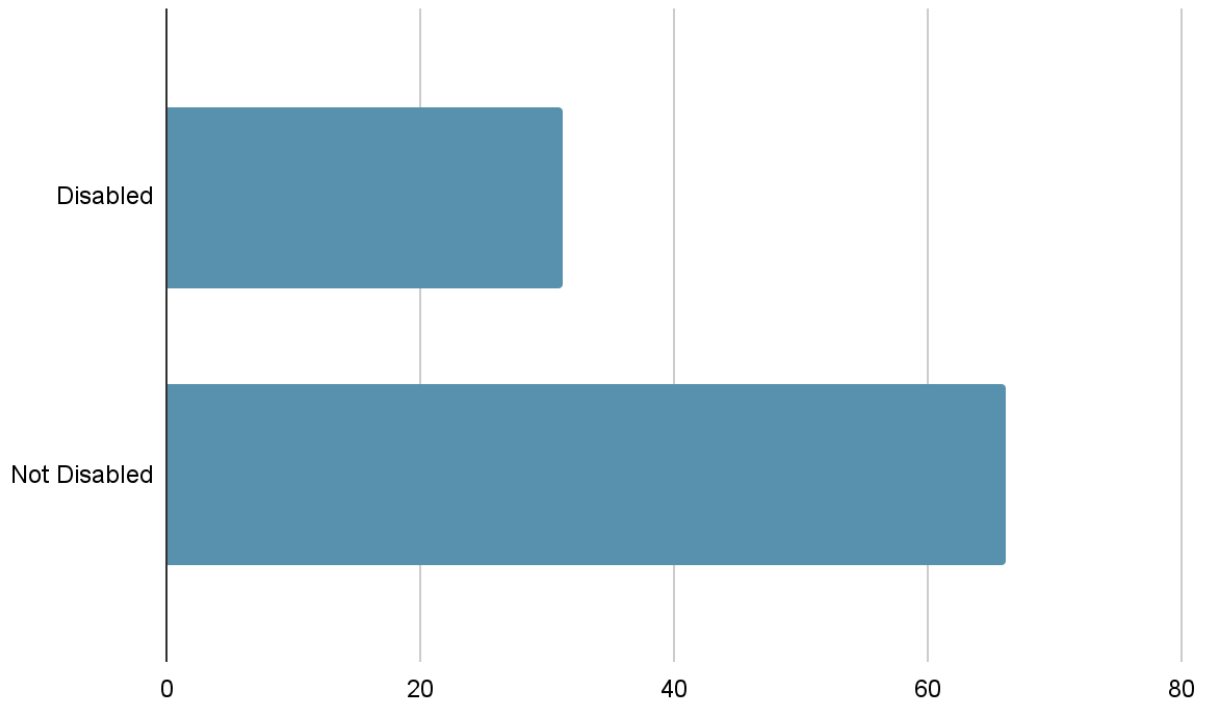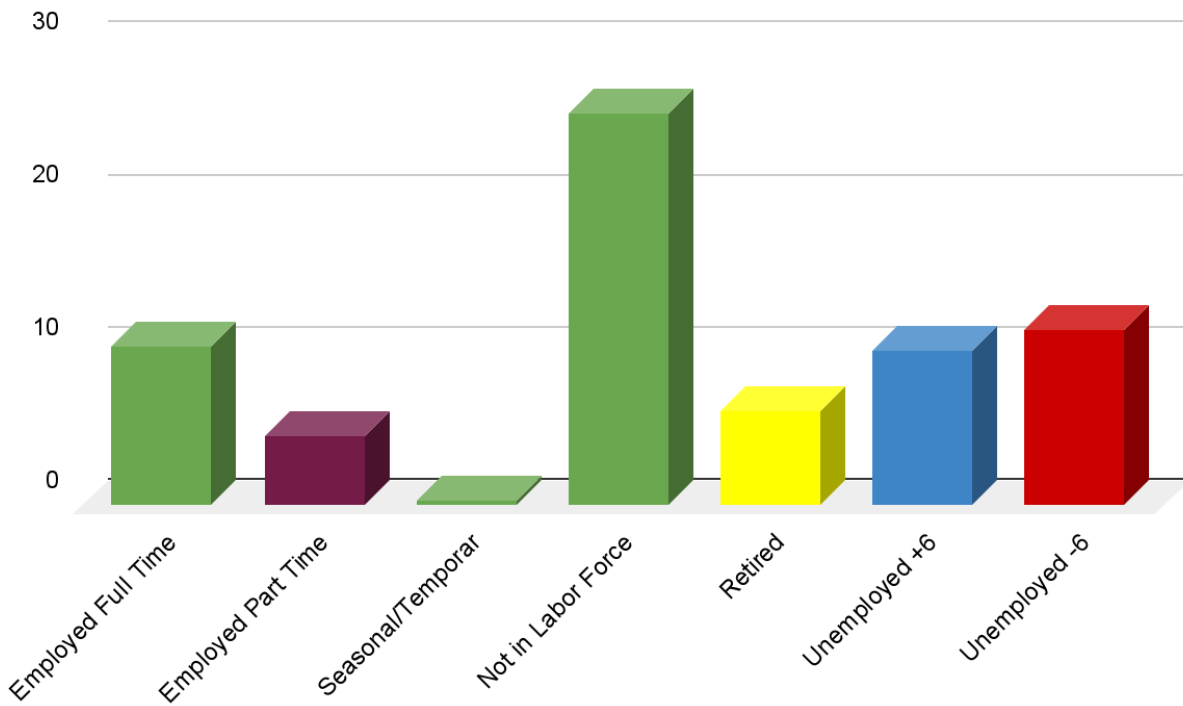Chart 20: Disability Status AppCAA Program Participants Wise

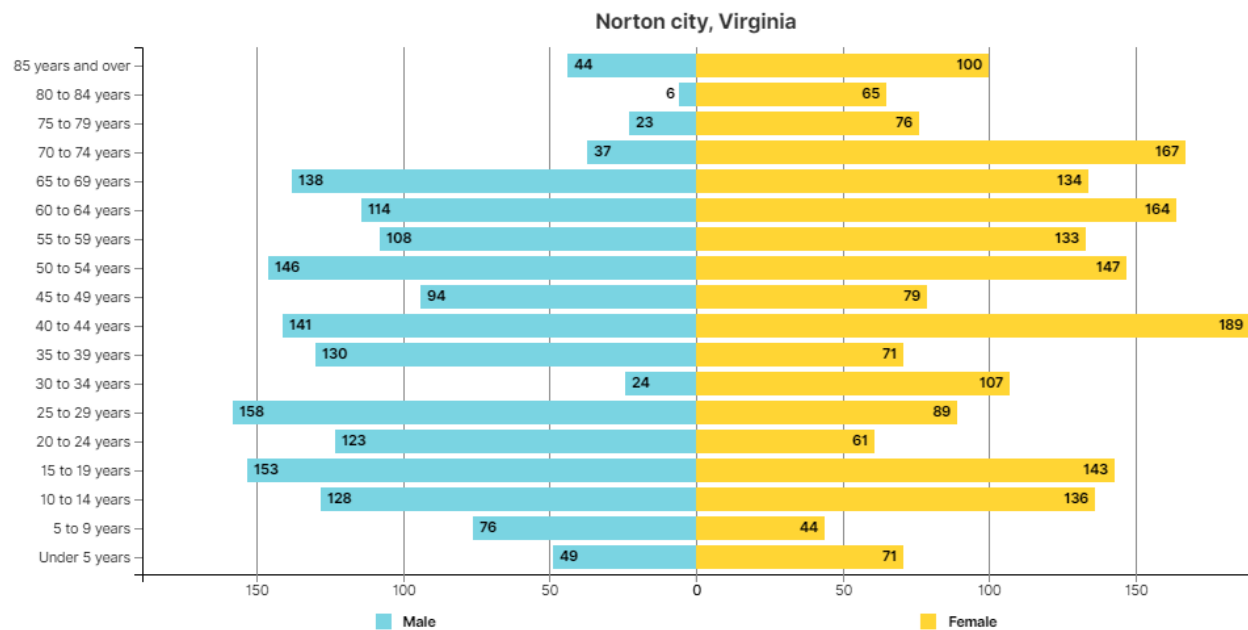Chart 21: Employment Status of AppCAA Participants Wise County

Norton City

Norton is a city of approximately 3,711 individuals in the Western part of the state, situated in Wise County. In 2022, 28.2 percent of Norton's residents earned an income below the poverty level, compared to 10.6 percent for the Commonwealth as a whole. Poverty in Norton particularly affects the young, with 62 percent of Norton's children under five years living below the poverty level. Similar to other target areas, poverty in Norton frequently occurs concurrently with a disability. Eighty-seven percent of residents living below the poverty level are renters[15]. (Note that there are fewer graphs for Norton City due to unavailability of data.)

Chart 22: Population Breakdown Norton City

Population Pyramid: Population by Age and Sex in Norton city, Virginia

Norton city, Virginia

Age Group	Male	Female
85 years and over	44	100
80 to 84 years	6	65
75 to 79 years	23	76
70 to 74 years	37	167
65 to 69 years	138	134
60 to 64 years	114	164
55 to 59 years	108	133
50 to 54 years	146	147
45 to 49 years	94	79
40 to 44 years	141	189
35 to 39 years	130	71
30 to 34 years	24	107
25 to 29 years	158	89
20 to 24 years	123	61
15 to 19 years	153	143
10 to 14 years	128	136
5 to 9 years	76	44
Under 5 years	49	71

Male   Female

Margin of Error
S0101 | 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables

Table 10: Norton Race Demographics

Report Area	White Total	Black Total	American Indian Total	Asian Total	Native Hawaiian Total	Hispanic/ Latino	Mixed Race Total
Norton, VA	3,223	180	8	27	1	81	191

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15 American Community Survey. (2022), *Five Year Poverty Estimates.*

Virginia	5,058,363	1,607,581	40,007	615,436	7,156	908,749	705,707
United States	204,277,273	41,104,200	3,272,135	19,886,049	689,966	62,100,000	33,848,943

AppCAA Services

CHORE Program (Scott Co.): Chore is designed to assist elderly and disabled people to remain in their own homes by providing light housekeeping services, errand running, and even meal preparation on occasion. Clients served by Chore service are accepted based on need and require a referral from a medical doctor. Currently, this program operates in Scott County. Funding for this program is provided by Community Services Block Grant (CSBG).

Emergency Services Program (Utilities): Residents who have received a shut-off notice from the electric or water company are sometimes eligible for one-time help paying the bill to avoid interruption of these services.

Christmas Cart delivers age-appropriate gifts for children who otherwise may not receive a Christmas present. With close to 550 children benefiting each year, AppCAA relies on volunteers to implement the program.

Imagination Library provides books on a monthly basis ages 0-5. Roughly 450 children participate in the program through AppCAA.

Indoor Plumbing Rehabilitation: This provides installations and renovations of indoor plumbing to homes that do not have indoor plumbing or have inoperable indoor plumbing. Residents of Scott, Dickenson, Lee, Wise Counties and the City of Norton are eligible for this service. Indoor Plumbing Rehabilitation is a loan-based program.

New Eyes for the Needy: New Eyes for the Needy buys new prescription glasses for children and adults in financial need.

Weatherization (Scott, Lee, Wise, Dickenson Counties and City of Norton): The Weatherization program is designed to reduce the cost of heating and cooling homes in order to make them more energy efficient. This program helps families to save money and makes homes safer for habitation during extreme hot or cold weather.

Weatherization Deferral: To repair homes and bring them up to weatherization standards.

Diaper Distribution Pilot Program: Provides free diapers for up to two years for qualifying families in the AppCAA service area. The program leverages wrap-around, whole-family services.

Whole Family Program: Support services for working families with children. Aims to provide support through stages of life and holistically address poverty issues.

Summer Meals Program (Scott County): Children aged 18 and under can eat free of charge during the months of June and July. Several school sites and locations participate in Scott.

Financial Coaching and Empowerment: This provides classes as well as one-on-one coaching on understanding and building credit, money management, saving and other financial topics.

HUD Certified housing counseling, including pre-purchase, rental, fair housing, home maintenance, financial counseling for homeowners, and workshops for pre-purchase, financial literacy, Predatory Lending and Fraud, fair housing and rental rights. AppCAA is able to facilitate first-time homebuyers workshop education.

Rural Development 502 Direct certified loan packaging, as well as SPARC home mortgage incentive programs.

Financial Workshops Budgeting and life skills, including: financial management and savings.
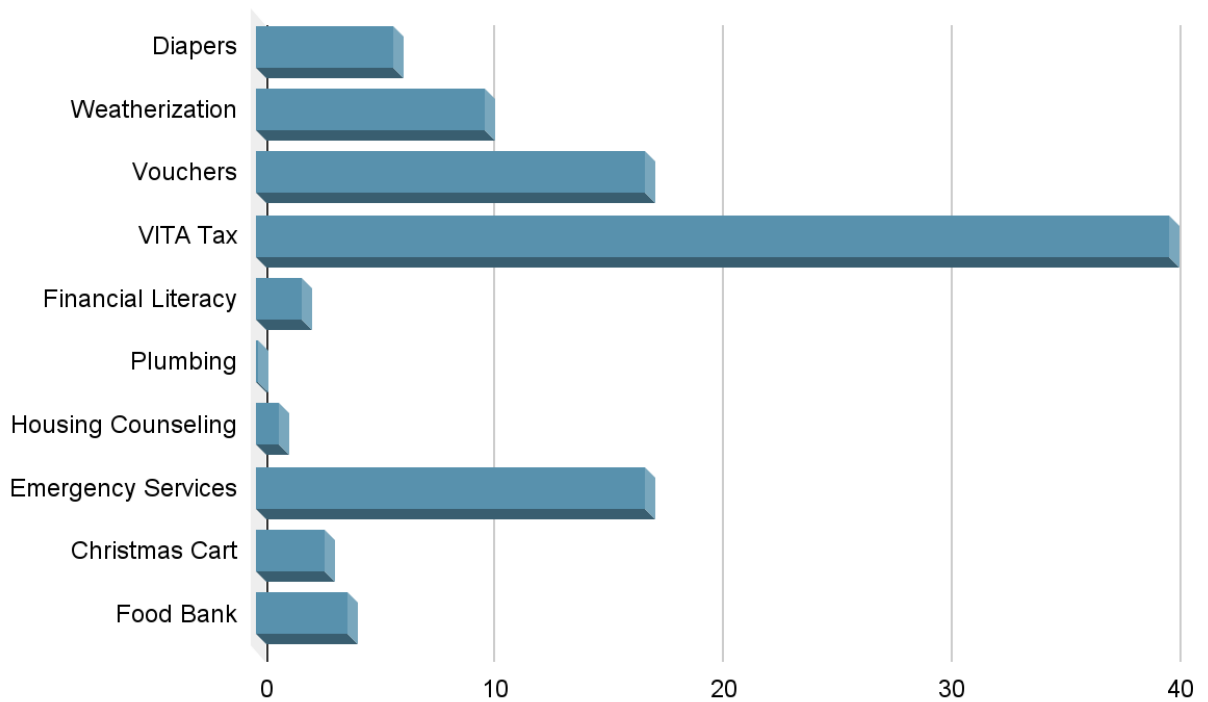
Tax Preparation: AppCAA Tax Preparation Services provides free tax preparation to help people in Southwest Virginia and surrounding areas access the Earned Income Tax Credit. Tax preparation is offered year-round.

RSVP Volunteers: Service opportunities are available for older volunteers and to assist with diaper distributions and food banks.

Findings of Surveys

Survey responses were captured for all AppCAA program participants to understand their needs, demographic characteristics, and greater trends within their communities.

Chart 23: 2022-2023 AppCAA Program Participation

In 2022-2023, a majority of AppCAA clients took part in the VITA tax preparation program. Participation in VITA does not require strict poverty guidelines like other AppCAA programs. Since VITA is a one-time service for a client, the process of enrolling and serving a client is much more streamlined than other programs resulting in more participation. Emergency services and vouchers continued to be a major focus of AppCAA's interventions during the assessment period; however, the Agency is transitioning away from one-off assistance to a comprehensive, whole family approach.

Chart 24: AppCAA's Ability to Meet Client Needs
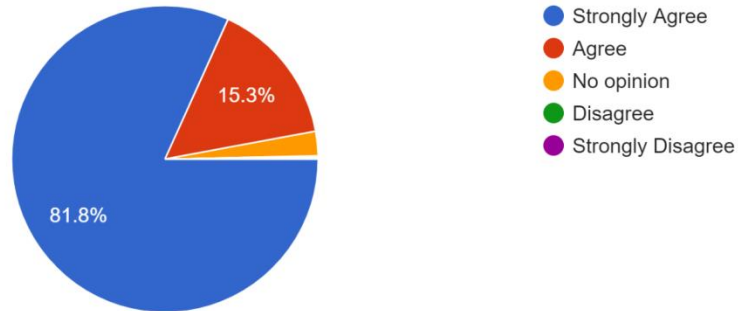
AppCAA was able to meet your needs.
581 responses

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- No opinion
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

15.3%

81.8%

Chart 25: Information about Additional Services

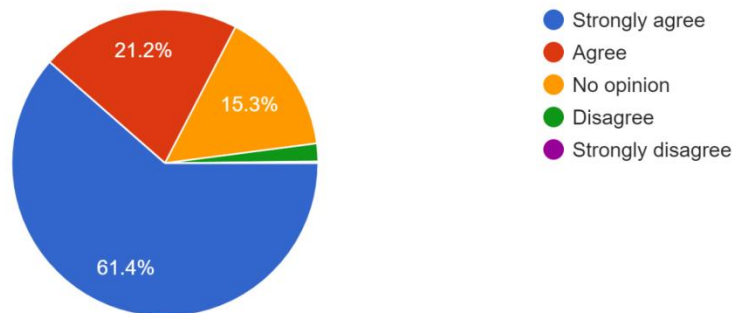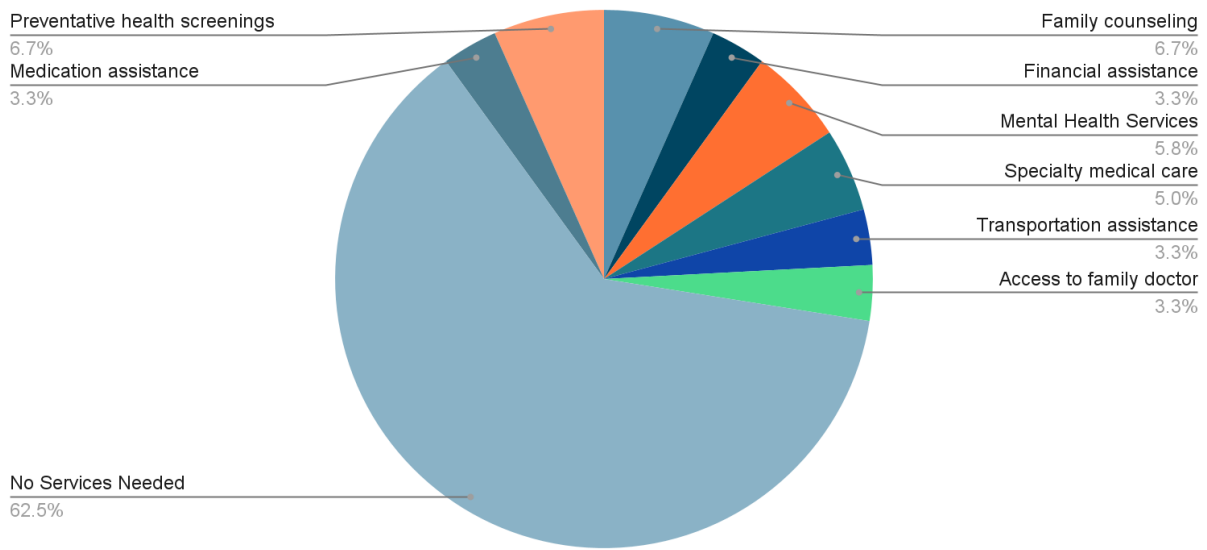I learned about AppCAA's other services that can help me out.
581 responses

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- No opinion
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

21.2%

15.3%

61.4%

Chart 26: Additional Social Needs Reported by Respondents

Chart labels:
- Preventative health screenings 6.7%
- Medication assistance 3.3%
- Family counseling 6.7%
- Financial assistance 3.3%
- Mental Health Services 5.8%
- Specialty medical care 5.0%
- Transportation assistance 3.3%
- Access to family doctor 3.3%
- No Services Needed 62.5%

Clients were asked what additional services they need but that are not available to them. Although AppCAA does not offer these services, awareness of the need helps provide referrals and to develop a responsive "Resource Guide" where clients can quickly find help. The majority of those responding "no services needed" were tax preparation clients, a program with broader eligibility than others which attracts clients who have fewer social needs.

Community Needs Survey Respondents

The survey with questions on community and personal needs received 1,078 responses (representing 15 percent of AppCAA's annual average number of clients).

Chart 27: Respondents by Service Area
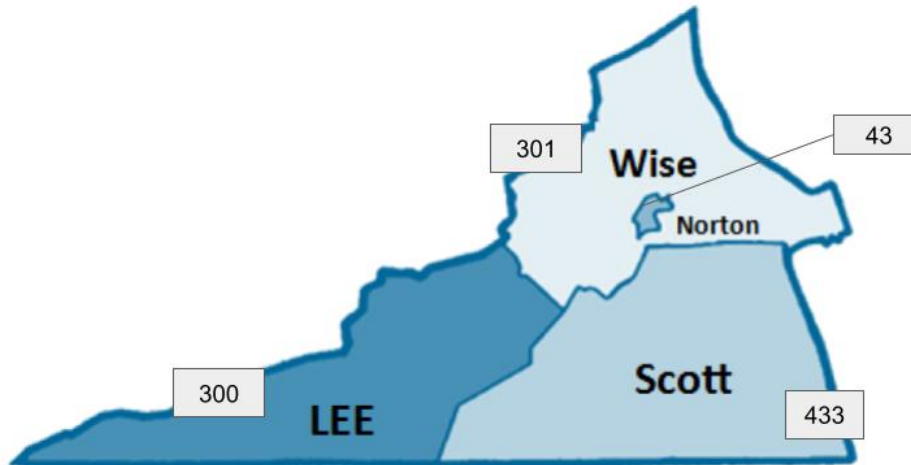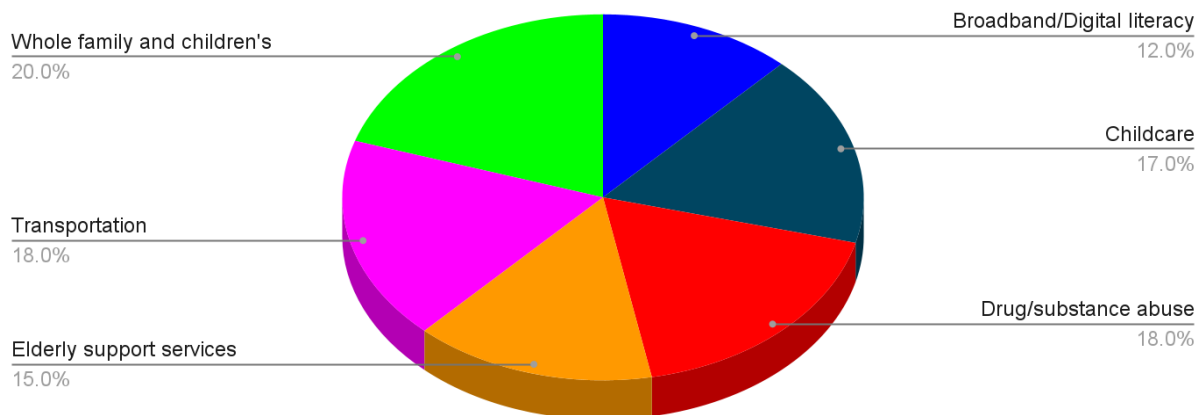
Survey Respondents by Area

Chart 28: Responses to: "In which area does your community need the most assistance?"

Community Needs

- Whole family and children's — 20.0%
- Transportation — 18.0%
- Elderly support services — 15.0%
- Broadband/Digital literacy — 12.0%
- Childcare — 17.0%
- Drug/substance abuse — 18.0%

Survey responses on community needs track with information generated from the FGD. While main categories of need broke down almost evenly, these responses indicate a perceived drop in substance abuse and increasing need for digital literacy services. Issues like childcare and transportation remain critical needs within the service area while growing demand for holistic, family-based services.

Chart 29: Responses to: "What need do you or your household personally have right now?"

Household Needs
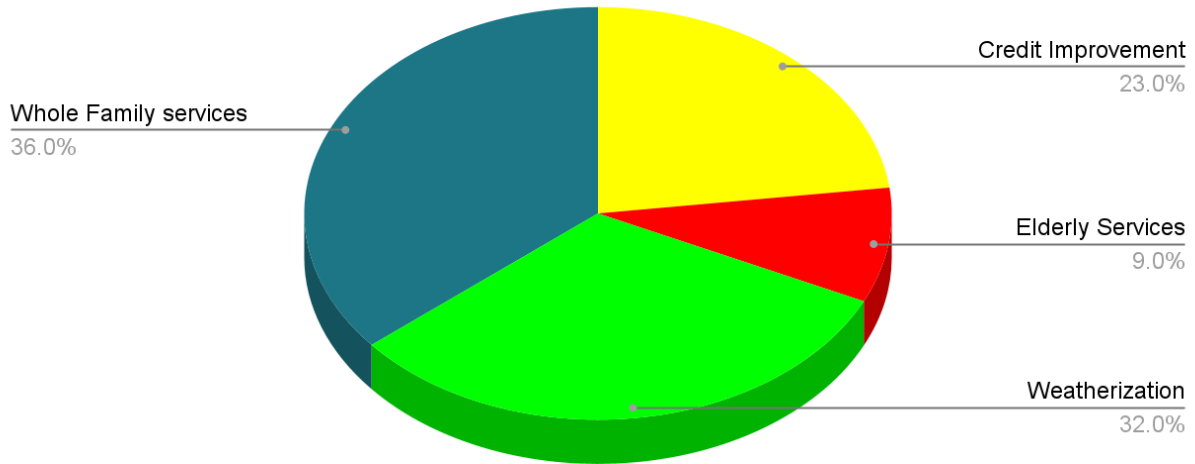
When asked about their household, immediate needs, most respondents voiced a need for whole family services, weatherization, and credit improvement. In speaking with the focus group, they felt that these responses are due to the worsening housing situation in the service area. Families are struggling to maintain their housing or achieve the credit score necessary to receive a loan or to rent a dwelling. The Whole Family Approach is seen as a way to knit back family and household resilience and jointly move towards stability and prosperity.

Chart 30: Responses to: "Do you rely on community assistance?"

Assistance Frequency

- Yearly 20.0%
- Almost never 40.0%
- Not at all 20.0%
- Monthly 20.0%
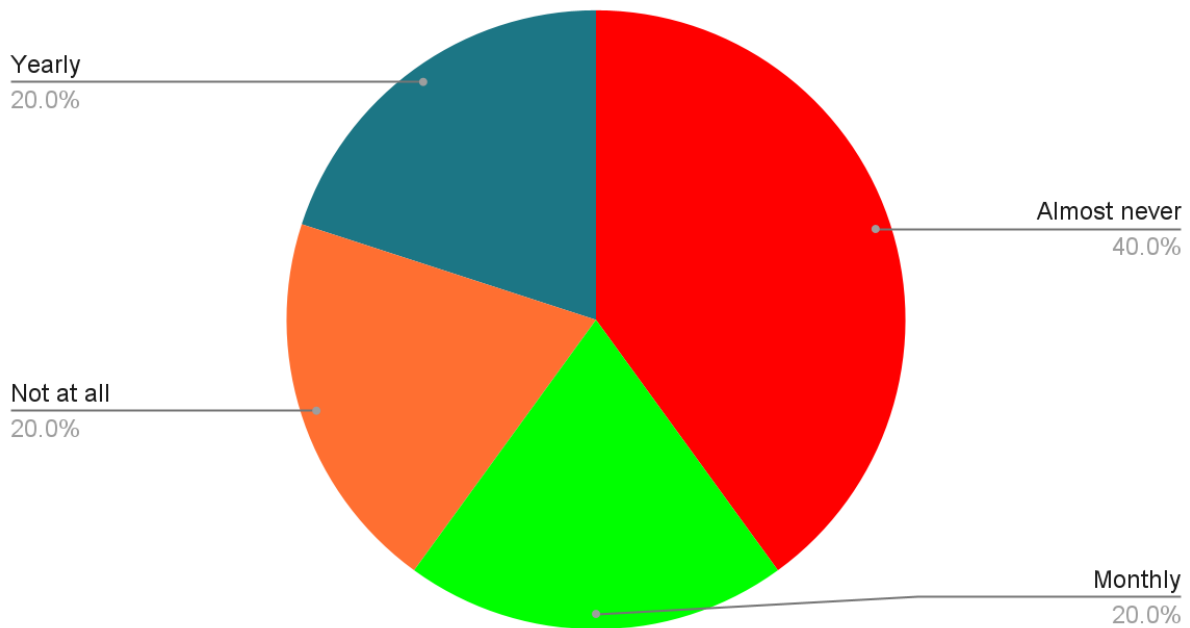
AppCAA recently began asking clients how often they receive assistance to track frequency of need and provide a proxy indicator of how people are generally coping in the service area (i.e. if people are seeking out services more frequently, there are likely some external factors [e.g. inflation] causing the uptick. Having these data helps AppCAA staff know when demand for services will grow and how to prepare and respond.

Chart 31: Responses to: What social problem do you think has grown the most in the past few years?

Priority Needs

Child Care
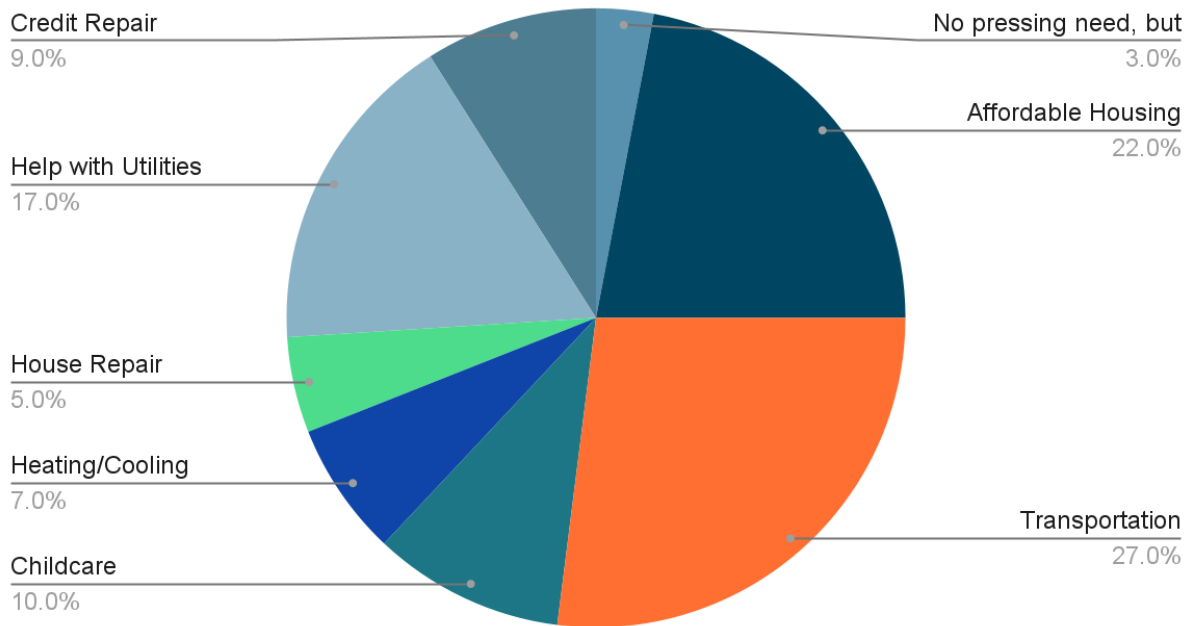11.9%

Drug/Alcohol use
35.6%
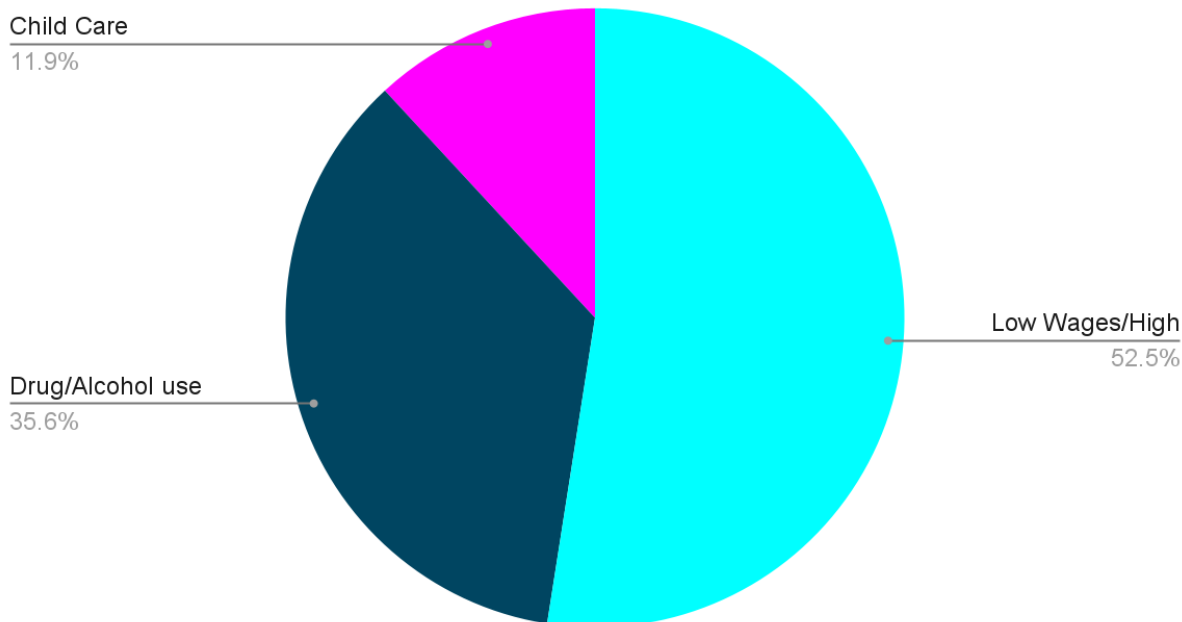
Low Wages/High
52.5%

The greatest priority right now for the communities in AppCAA's service area are low wages and high inflation–salaries are not keeping up with the cost of living and families' budgets are stretched. A focus group participant remarked about the "high cost of food and gas that seems to double overnight" causing more knock-on inflation for costs of services.

The inclusion of drugs and alcohol on this list of priorities seems at odds with earlier reports of drug abuse decreasing; however, further investigation has uncovered the reason for this answer is the decriminalization of marijuana in Virginia. Respondents have noticed storefront marijuana dispensaries opening throughout the service area and expressed concerns about young children being exposed to these substances. While "hard" drugs like opioids and methamphetamine seem to be lessening as a community issue, they are being replaced by marijuana which is perceived as being safer than other illicit substances.

Chart 32: Responses to: What are some needs your family has that are not being met by services that are available right now?

Unmet Family Needs

Credit Repair 9.0%

No pressing need, but 3.0%

Affordable Housing 22.0%

Help with Utilities 17.0%

House Repair 5.0%

Heating/Cooling 7.0%

Childcare 10.0%

Transportation 27.0%

Unmet family needs reported by program participants aligns with trends for community needs, with transportation being an issue. Frequently, AppCAA is asked if car repair or gas vouchers are available and not having access to transportation can prevent a person from working, seeking out healthcare, or being able to get essentials for their households.

Broadband Survey

A survey was conducted among program participants to determine their needs when it comes to high speed internet and associated devices and infrastructure. Across the service area, 147 individuals responded to the survey with representation from each county.

Chart 33: Reported Broadband Needs

What can be done to help you access the internet more?

Getting a computer or tablet
12.7%

Need infrastructure for high speed
7.3%

Vouchers to help pay for internet
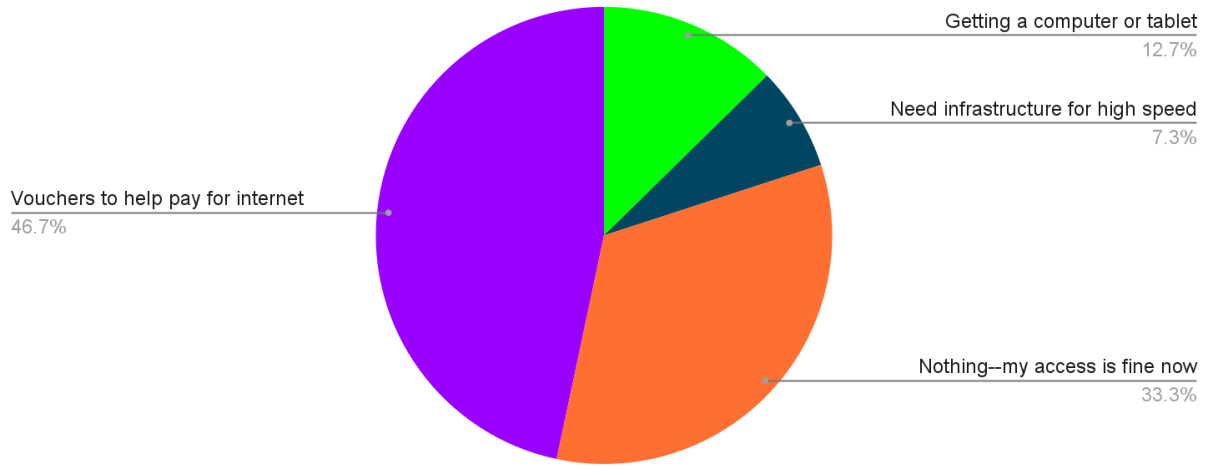46.7%

Nothing--my access is fine now
33.3%

Chart 34: End of ACP Subsidies

Will the end of the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) change my ability of afford internet service?
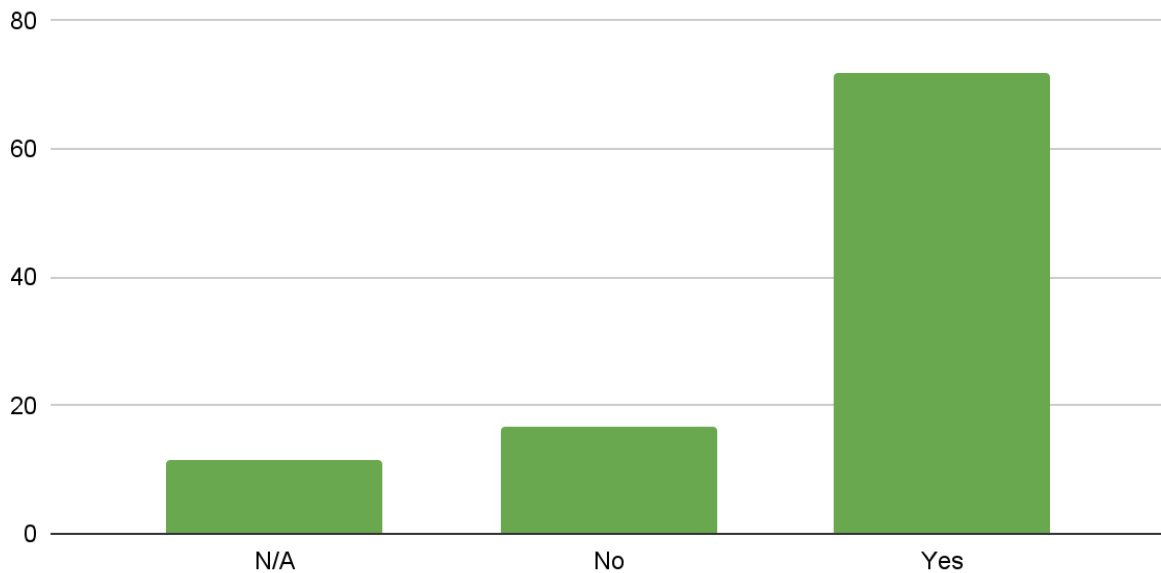

Chart 35: Internet Usage
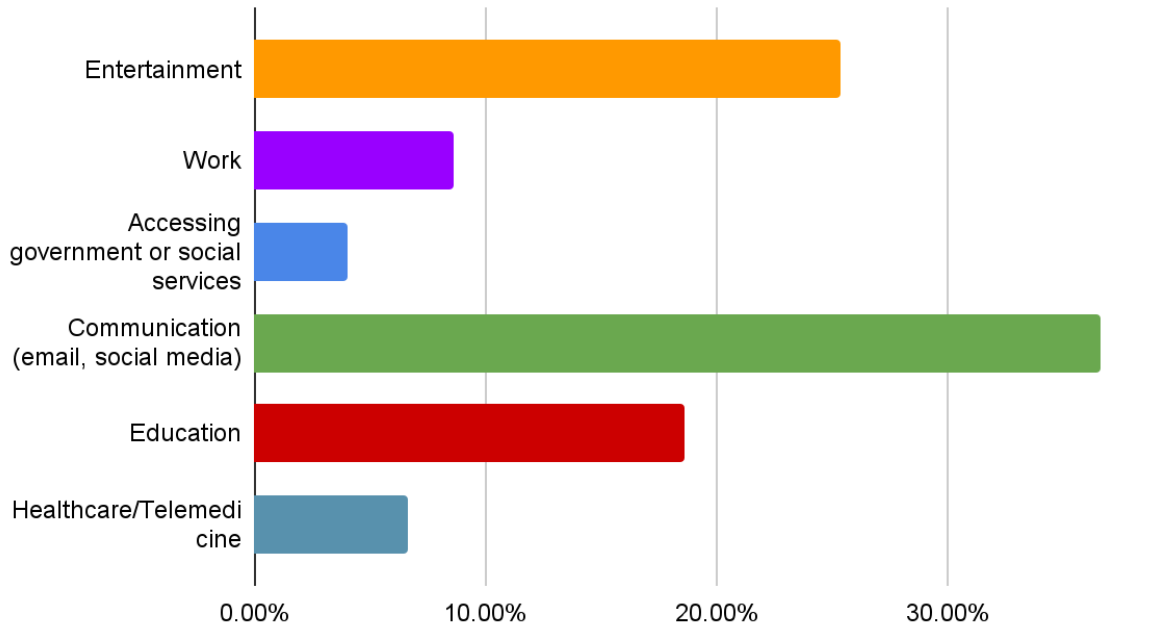
What is the main reason you use the internet?

Chart 36: Reported High Speed Internet Availability

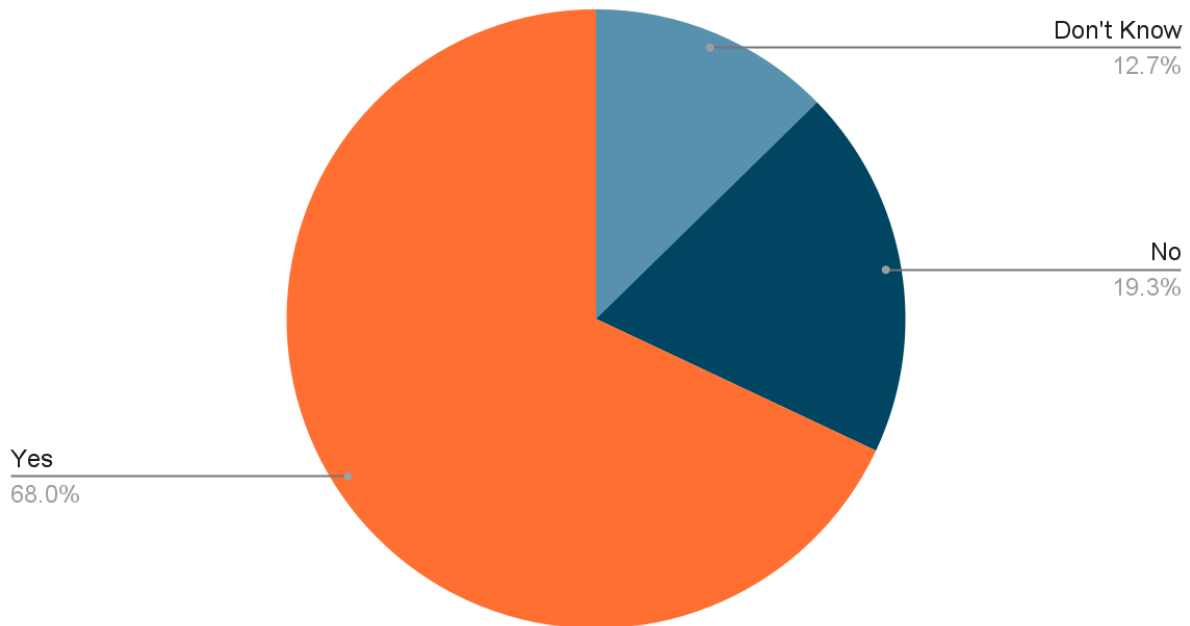## Do you have high-speed broadband internet at home?
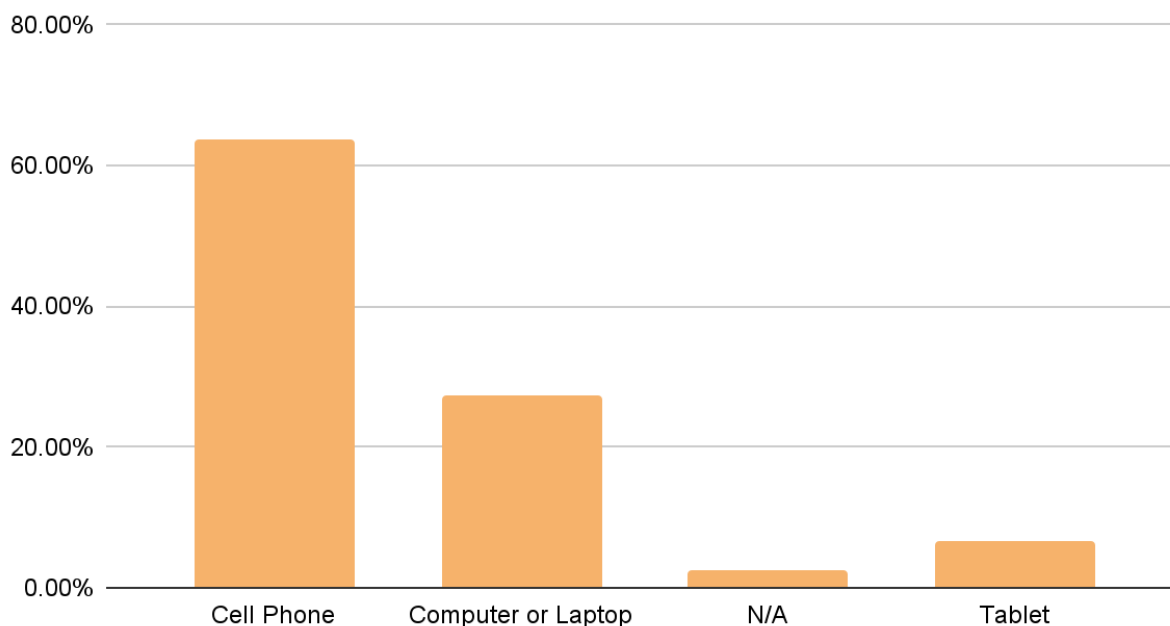

Chart 37: Devices Used for Internet Access

What device do you use to access the internet?

Focus Group Discussion

The Focus Group Discussion was held on December 12, 2023, in person with 20 individuals. Respondents in the Focus Group represented the different areas where AppCAA implements projects. The focus group went over each problem identified as a priority in the last Community Needs Assessment to characterize its current impact on the area.

1) In the last Community Needs assessment, issues like drug abuse, healthcare, affordable housing and transportation were top priorities. Is this still true?
- Hard drug use seems to have lessened, with fewer observed overdoses and use of drugs like Fentanyl. The decriminalization of marijuana has softened the demand for harder drugs; however, the schedule of marijuana may change at the federal level resulting in unpredictable outcomes.
- Healthcare availability and quality are poor and have not improved. Healthcare facilities are usually remote, and cost is prohibitive. Residents continue to report a high amount of medical debt.
- Affordable housing was a priority in past Community Assessments; however, it has gained greater urgency due to rapid rent inflation and static (or declining) housing unit availability.
- A FGD Respondent stated: "Wages have pretty much remained the same while inflation has made all goods and services more pricey." Working families are having a hard time making ends meet, especially with limited/expensive childcare and transportation options.

2) What other problems have arisen in the past few years that need more attention?

Transportation, childcare, and eldercare were areas brought up in earlier Community Needs Assessments; however, their urgency and demand have grown recently.

- Transportation needs have increased recently as the costs for new/used vehicles have reached a high point and as public transportation options remain limited. As mentioned in other parts of this Assessment, MEOC is expanding its bus routes and offering on-demand rides for a limited period. Lack of transportation particularly affects those persons with disabilities (PWD) and the elderly who more frequently need transportation assistance for medical appointments. An additional group affected by the lack of public transportation/low-cost private transportation options are the working poor. The rugged and remote nature of the service area along with the clustering of manufacturing, retail and service jobs in towns means that employees frequently have to travel to their jobs sites (e.g. the 2022 Census reported commute times for: Lee County of 27 minutes; Norton of 17 minutes; Scott County of 30 minutes; and Wise County of 22 minutes). With typically both parents having to commute to work, the maintenance and fuel for vehicles–as well as their purchase price–is becoming harder for working families to sustain.
- Childcare has been a community need in the AppCAA service area for years, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, when some of the few childcare providers closed. The Focus Group discussed the barriers to open and operating childcare centers (i.e. state regulations are very stringent and hard and expensive to meet for certification). The group talked about the impact this has on working parents and how families are trying to cope with the situation. The focus group reported that "childcare costs make working not a viable option for families." The licensing and start-up cost barriers prevent new childcare centers from being opened.
- Eldercare/Aging in place is becoming a bigger issue for the service area. In the past, family members would help support their older relatives and assist them to age in place but now that responsibility is shifting to outside assistance. As nursing facilities remain expensive with limited availability, new ideas are needed to assist these older individuals.

3) Where should AppCAA be focusing its attention now to meet community needs?

- Affordable housing is an area where there is growing need. AppCAA should continue its weatherization program and expand where possible to help keep homes safe and energy efficient. The group suggested exploring ways to create affordable housing (which may be outside of the scope of AppCAA).
- Assistance to older people to help them age in place is important and AppCAA should look at ways to get the community and churches involved to help provide transportation and visitation to older citizens.

- Credit repair and financial literacy programs that AppCAA has been implementing is yielding results with clients improving their credit standing and savings. Combined with the Whole Family Approach, improving economic prospects and goal setting for families is elevating the wellbeing of everyone in the household and increasing their resiliency.

Analysis and Discussion

The results of the Community Needs Assessment align with trends seen in the greater Southwest Virginia region: prices are rising, housing is getting less attainable, and families are needing more support. Challenges facing the service area's communities can partially be addressed by AppCAA's activities, but clients will have to take a proactive approach to accessing additional services. Over the past few years, AppCAA has been transitioning its model of assistance away from one-time goods/services to holistic support. However, county participant demographic and employment statuses indicate that the majority of AppCAA clients are not in the workforce or actively seeking employment and are between the ages of 25-44. Working through the Whole Family Approach will gradually change the profile of the clients from out of the workforce to the working poor.

For the first time, this Assessment includes primary data collected on high-speed internet connectivity. The Commonwealth of Virginia has made broadband internet access a priority for the state and has invested millions of dollars in setting up infrastructure. Most survey recipients access the internet via mobile phone and use the internet for communication/social media. While some respondents were unsure, a majority of respondents have high speed internet at home. As AppCAA works more on broadband access, vouchers for internet service and digital literacy are the greatest barrier to connectivity in the service area.

Community needs for AppCAA's focus:
- Extend and deepen work of Whole Family Approach to increase stability and prosperity of families with children.
- Explore new ways to increase housing affordability while maintaining weatherization activities.
- Continuing diaper distribution, which provides much needed support for working families. Clients who take part report this program is a "tremendous help" for their household finances.
- Expand outreach to community to build support for volunteer initiatives to help older citizens (e.g. churches or community groups);
- Consider how to provide internet service vouchers for when ACP ends and purchase or lending devices for families to access high speed internet for work or school.
- Increase the number of clients in housing counseling and financial literacy programs to improve their credit, housing, and work opportunities; and
- Continue to provide referrals and link community members to necessary services.

Conclusion

This Community Needs Assessment reaffirmed the strategy and work of AppCAA. While community needs have shifted slightly, there remains demand for affordable housing, credit repair, childcare and eldercare, internet connectivity, and limited emergency support. As AppCAA has adapted the Whole Family Approach, the profile of clients is changing to center more on the working poor and less on issues like drug abuse. If Virginia hopes to continue its momentum on broadband adoption, measures must be taken to provide vouchers and devices for connectivity. Moving forward, AppCAA, its Board and stakeholders will use the data generated through this exercise to develop new, and add on to existing, activities to meet the needs of the changing population of Southwest Virginia.