



**OPERATION THRESHOLD**

# Operation Threshold

## 2022 Community Assessment



*Adopted by the Operation Threshold Board of Directors on July 21, 2019*

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## **Introduction**

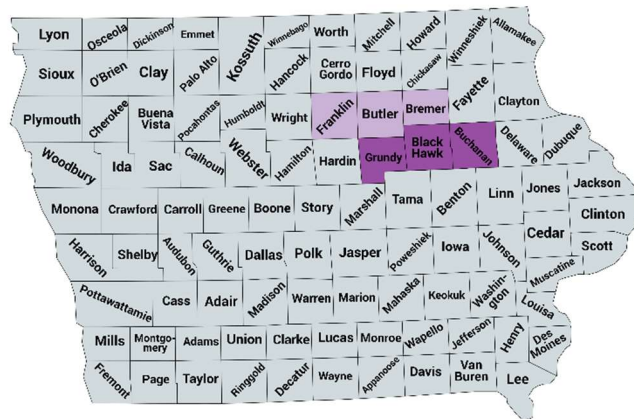
Operation Threshold completed this Community Assessment to provide an examination of the individuals, families and living conditions existing within the community. The assessment used a variety of data including U.S. Census data, Community Action Partnership data, as well as data from the 2020 Client Needs Assessment, 2022 Customer Satisfaction survey, and the 2017 Community Stakeholder Needs Assessment.

Operation Threshold partnered with the Iowa Department of Human Rights – Division of Community Action Agencies (DCAA), the Iowa Community Action Association (ICAA) and Iowa’s other Community Action Agencies to conduct both the client needs assessment, customer satisfaction survey and community stakeholder needs assessment. The purpose of the assessments was to collect information about the needs of community action agency clients and the community needs perceived by other community stakeholders.

The information gathered from all data sources and presented in this Community Assessment will be used for planning, developing and delivering agency programs, services, and activities to the low-income people that reside in our service area.

### **a. Service Area**

Operation Threshold’s core service area consists of Black Hawk, Buchanan, and Grundy Counties. The majority of services provided by the agency occurs within these three counties. There are some exceptions to this. The agency’s Special Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and WIC’s Breastfeeding Peer Counseling program is also offered in Bremer County. In addition, the agency’s home based parent education program, Parents as Teachers, also provides home visitation services to families in Bremer, Butler and Franklin counties. And, lastly, Operation Threshold’s Weatherization Program also serves Butler and Franklin Counties.



The service area is mainly rural, with a population of 164,501. The largest city, and major employment center, is Waterloo, with many households in the area working within the Waterloo/Cedar Falls metropolitan area. In regards to race, the largest percentage of the population in the service area is White, however there is a significant minority population, with Black Hawk County having the largest percentage of Black/African-American persons in the State. The area has also experienced a large influx of Asian refugees from Burma in the past 10 years as well.

The median income is just over \$58,000, significantly lower than the average income for the State as a whole. Relatedly, in the service area there is a larger percentage of persons living in poverty (11.2%), children living in poverty (13.2%), and children under the age of five living in poverty (20.4%) when compared to the State as a whole.

**Basic Demographic Data**

	<b>Service Area</b>	<b>State</b>
Total Population	164,501	3,046,357
Population by Age		
Aged 0-4	6.4%	6.3%
Aged 5-17	16.2%	17.1%
Aged 18-64	61.1%	60.3%
Aged 65+	16.4%	16.3%
Population by Race		
White	85.9%	89.1%
Black	7.7%	3.7%
Asian	2.2%	2.5%
Native American/Alaska Native	0.3%	0.3%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.1%
Some Other Race	0.9%	1.3%
Multiple Races	2.7%	3.0%
Population by Ethnicity		
Hispanic	3.9%	6.2%
Non-Hispanic	96.1%	93.8%
Median Household Income		
Black Hawk County	\$56,091.00	\$62,362.00
Buchanan County	\$66,852.00	
Grundy County	\$71,837.00	
Percent Living in Poverty		
	13.6%	11.11%
Percent of Children Living in Poverty		
	16.1%	13.3%

*US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2016-20*

**b. Community Strengths**

Within Operation Threshold’s service area, providers engage in many strategic partnerships to provide support for the area’s low-income individuals and families. Operation Threshold many times leads partnership efforts in the agency’s service area. In addition, all of Operation Threshold’s program and community development activities feature collaboration. Our case management and home visitation programming focuses on a holistic approach to addressing families in crisis. Case managers/home visitors/parent educators work to provide assistance and/or referrals intended to address multiple issues and help ensure families receive support/assistance focused on providing opportunities for enhanced self-sufficiency, with the goal of helping families avoid future crises. Wherever possible, our

programming also utilizes research and/or evidence based curricula, ensuring our clients are receiving the best possible support. In addition to our central office in Waterloo, our programming is also provided at two county offices located in Independence and Grundy Center. Agency services and capacity continue to grow in all service areas, with a strong base of resources in place from which to build capacity for reducing poverty.

### **c. Summary of Major Unmet Needs**

Major unmet needs have been divided into three categories: Customer Needs, Community Needs, and Customer Satisfaction. Major unmet customer needs focused on meeting basic needs, including housing, transportation and child care as well as the need for education and support for parents. Major unmet community needs focused on living wage jobs living wage jobs with benefits, transportation, child care, and child literacy. Finally, major customer satisfaction needs focused on the need to improve front line customer service.

### **d. COVID-19 Pandemic and Implications**

State and local health authorities responded to the outbreak by placing restrictions on travel, business and recreation that have had a number of impacts on the community. This unprecedented public health crisis had a significant impact on the community, and a number of short-, intermediate- and longer-term impacts are expected.

The urgent needs of our clients required maximum flexibility in order to allocate resources to meet local challenges. The immediate impacts of COVID-19 were felt across all sectors of our communities, with some impacts remaining on-going as the pandemic continues to impact our area. Some of the greatest impacts have been and continue to be in the areas of:

- **Health:** Individuals over the age of 65 and/or those in a congregate setting were found to be at particular risk for severe health implications. In addition community health resources were stretched thin and there was a need to develop new and increased ways to provide behavioral health resources.
- **Education:** Many public schools closed for an extended period of time and/or offered only distance learning for students. Many parents faced challenges related to finding child care and providing assistance to children who were distance learning.
- **Employment:** Initially the unemployment rate surged as many business temporarily closed or significantly reduced staff. Persons in the health care field were at increased risk of exposure to COVID-19. Persons in the service, retail and gig economies faced sudden, and unexpected unemployment, with many not being familiar with the community resources available to them.
- **Human Services Provision:** Some service providers had to curtail services, potentially leaving gaps in services. Many service providers worked hard to continue to provide services, however they were required to make significant adaptations that necessitated additional resources.
- **Community Resources:** Due to COVID-19 there was a decrease in the number of available resources (access to groups, commercial services), scarcity of some resources (emergency supplies) and/or needs for resources that had not previously been required in the community. The pandemic also created a more urgent need for coordination and collaboration of resources among the public sector, the public health sector, first responders, educators, the for-profit business community, the faith community, human services providers and many others.

## Approach

This Community Needs Assessment Executive Summary is the culmination of a comprehensive examination of the needs in our community. The Key Findings and community resources identified in the Executive Summary are drawn from the following sources, included in the appendix to this report.

- Attachment A: Community Action Partnership Assessment Report
- Attachment B: Iowa Community Action Agencies Community Stakeholders Report
- Attachment C: Iowa Community Action Agencies Community Client Satisfaction Report
- Attachment D: Unity Point/Allen Hospital Community Health Assessment
- Attachment E: United Way 2018 ALICE Report for Iowa
- Attachment F: OT COVID-19 Survey Results
- Attachment G: OT Satisfaction Survey Results

## Key Findings: Customer Needs

The Community Needs Assessment revealed several customer needs. Customer needs include the needs of individuals, families and children living in poverty within the service area.

- 1. Customer Need #1: Families cannot meet their basic needs.**
  - a. Conditions:** Individuals and families in the service area do not have enough income to meet their basic needs. This is evident when examining U.S. Census data, Operation Threshold's Client Needs Assessment and the United Way's ALICE report.
  - b. Causes:** The unemployment rate in the service area is slightly higher than that for the State as a whole, although both are extremely low. According to Iowa Workforce Development, the May 2022 unemployment rate for the service area was 2.4% (compared to 2.2% for the State). While this is good news for many, it is not the same for all. In May 2022, the unemployment rate for Black/African-Americans in the service area was 18.6%. Finally, according to the website Living Wage Calculator, the 2022 living wage for a single parent with one child is \$32.77 per hour, yet according to Iowa Workforce Development, the average hourly wage in the service area is just \$18.00 per hour. Finally, 69% of persons completing the Client Needs Assessment stated that they were in need of help finding a job, or a better job, and 46% stated they were in need of basic need items such as personal care items, utility assistance, basic furniture, appliances, clothing/shoes, etc.
  - c. Community Resources:** There are a variety of community agencies who are able to assist individuals and families meet their basic needs. Each county has a "county relief" office that is able to assist families with rent, utilities or other basic needs. In addition other community agencies such as Eastside Ministerial Alliance, Jesse Cosby Center, Friends of the Family, etc. and local churches are able to provide limited assistance as well. Even so, the need outpaces the resources available.
- 2. Customer Need #2: Families need reliable and affordable transportation.**
  - a. Conditions:** Individuals and families in the service area do not have access to reliable and/or affordable transportation. U.S. Census data and the 2020 Client Needs Assessment both noted that access to transportation remains a significant need for families, mainly finding the funds necessary to purchase a car or pay for car repairs.
  - b. Causes:** According to the U.S. Census, 90.4% of workers in the service area use cars/trucks as their means of getting to work. In addition, the average commute time for

persons in the service area is approximately 20 minutes. As much of the service area is rural, reliable transportation is necessary not just for employment, but for all aspects of life, including accessing food, medical care, child care, etc. The Unity Point/Allen Hospital Community Health Assessment lists transportation among their “Top 10 Community Social Factors” impacting community health, noting: “public transportation offers limited options, but rural communities have no services, and even urban centers like Waterloo and Cedar Falls offer public transportation only on weekdays”.

- c. **Community Resources:** There are limited resources in the service area for individuals and families in need of assistance with transportation needs. There currently are no car dealerships and/or car maintenance businesses with programs to assist with the purchase or maintenance of a vehicle. In addition, there are very few community programs able to provide a bus pass to those in need. Operation Threshold has one program that can provide this assistance, the Pocket Change program, which was developed to specifically assist with employment/education related issues needs such as car repairs and bus passes. Even so, funding is limited and the needs are much greater than the funding available. One example of a Pocket Change assistance is: Pocket Change funds were used to assist a client who was in need of car insurance in order to obtain employment. The job she was applying for required her to have car insurance and, due to her financial situation, she had been unable to afford it. Pocket Change was able to assist her with obtaining car insurance and she was able to get the job she was seeking. Once she was employed, she was financially able to maintain her car insurance payments.

### 3. Customer Need #3: Families need safe, decent, affordable housing.

- a. **Conditions:** As identified in both U.S. Census and Client Needs Assessment data, affordable housing remains a significant need for our clients and many remain interested in increasing home energy efficiency and purchasing their own homes.
- b. **Causes:** A full 46% of clients completing the Client Needs Assessment stated that they were in need of help finding affordable housing that fit their family’s needs. In addition, 31% stated they need help with rent payments and 21% stated they need help with rental deposits. In addition, according to the US Census, among households earning less than \$20,000 a year, 88% are paying over 30% of their income toward housing expenses and 70% are paying over 50% of their income toward housing expenses (30% is determined to be the point at which housing is not affordable). This has increased by 11% in the past three years alone. Housing in the service area also tends to be older and often in need up upgrades and/or repairs in order to be safe. According to the U.S. Census, 56.8% of the housing units in the service area are over 50 years old. Older housing tends to be more affordable to lower income families, and many live in older units in need of serious repairs.
- c. **Community Resources:** There are some resources available in the community to help alleviate housing costs for low-income individuals and families. For renters, Waterloo, Cedar Falls, and Evansdale have their own Housing Authorities that administer Section 8 housing programs, distributing vouchers to help eligible households pay their rent. Households in the remainder of the service area are eligible for the Section 8 program operated by the Iowa Northland Regional Housing Authority. Each county has a small amount of funding to provide minimal rental assistance for households in crisis. Other crisis assistance funds, such as Embrace Iowa, can also be used to address crisis housing needs. Other local community agencies providing rental assistance include Eastside

Ministerial Alliance, Jesse Cosby Center, Friends of the Family (specifically for victims of domestic abuse and/or sexual assault), Community Housing Initiatives, Salvation Army and HACAP (specifically for veterans and homeless families). Operation Threshold also offers rental assistance through the Tenant Based Rental Assistance (TBRA) program. This program has two iterations, the first provides one-time assistance to help individuals and families become housed, paying the full security deposit; and in the other instance, Operation Threshold also pays 70% of the first month's rent.. The City of Waterloo offers a single-family housing rehabilitation program and an emergency repair program to help low-income homeowners maintain their homes. The City of Cedar Falls offers a program to help with rent or mortgage assistance to income-eligible households. At times the smaller cities in the service area also offer similar programming by applying to the Iowa Economic Development Authority. The Iowa Northland Regional Housing Council also offers an emergency repair program for homeowners in the small towns and rural areas. Finally, Operation Threshold has received funding from the City of Waterloo and the Waterloo Housing Trust Fund to operate a Weatherization-Plus program. Through this program repairs of up to \$10,000 can be made to homes to make them eligible for Weatherization services. For example, a household may meet the income requirements and be prioritized for the Weatherization program, however if the house has a leaking roof, the program will not be able to assist the family. With Weatherization-Plus funds, the roof can be repaired, making the home eligible for Weatherization assistance.

**4. Customer Need #4: Families need access to quality parent education and support programming.**

- a. Conditions:** Low-income and at-risk families often face a number of barriers to becoming successful parents. Families need broad ranging family support programming that can provide parent education using a holistic framework that also helps identify and address family barriers to self-sufficiency.
- b. Causes:** There are many potential causes that may indicate the need for parent education and support. Two of these are poverty and lack of education, which are both isolating, and can put parents at risk of reinforcing poor parenting skills. According to the U.S. Census, the 2020 poverty rate for the service area was 11.2%, higher than the rate for the state (10.2%). The poverty rate is even higher for Latino families (23.8%) and non-white families, specifically Black/African-American families (31.0%), Native American/Alaska Native families (17.1%), Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander families (31.9%), and Multiple Race families (18.5%). Lack of education can also indicate a need for parent education and support. In the service area 8.2% of adults had no high school diploma, compared to 8.3% for the state as a whole. Again, this was significantly higher for Latino adults (28.7%) and non-white families, specifically Black/African-American families (17.0%), Native American/Alaska Native families (22.1%), Asian families (21.0%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander families (29.0%), and Other Race families (39.0%). In addition, of those completing the Client Needs Assessment, 55% of stated they were in need of parent and family support with “learning how to discipline my children more effectively”, “learning how to help my children cope with stress, depression, or emotional issues” (45.3%) and “learning how to set goals and plan for my family” (48.4%). In addition, 34% stated they needed help dealing with stress, depression, or anxiety. Unfortunately, the pandemic has exacerbated many of the issues that were impacting families prior to 2021. Many preschools closed during the pandemic, and



there is now a shortage of affordable preschool options for parents. Now, more than ever, there are children in need of strong child development activities in the home, as well as programming able to identify and address developmental delays. Finally, the pandemic served to exacerbate parents' feelings of isolation and anxiety as well as other mental health issues. Parent support programming is also able to provide referrals and support to families dealing with these issues.

- c. **Community Resources:** Operation Threshold provides a number of programs aimed at addressing parenting needs, including two home visitation programs (Parents as Teachers and the MIECHV program) as well as a group parent education program (Nest). The Nest program offers parent education classes in Black Hawk and Grundy counties, providing parents not only with education but also with the opportunity to develop informal social supports with the other parents. There are also a number of programs offered by other community agencies attempting to address barriers faced by low-income, at-risk families. These include Early Head Start, Head Start, HOPES, PASS (a YWCA program), and Young Parents Together.

**5. Customer Need #5: Families need quality, affordable child care.**

**Conditions:** Families struggle to find quality, affordable child care for their children. Not only is there a need for additional child care centers, there is a need to make child care more affordable for families. The UnityPoint Community Health Needs Assessment noted that the "Black Hawk County Child Care Coalition, which has identified child care as an absolute health, social and employment priority for the entire region. Affordable child care is particularly critical for families struggling to get out of poverty and for single parent families."

- a. **Causes:** According to Child Care Resource & Referral, in 2021 there are 12,280 children under the age of five in the Operation Threshold service area and there are 323 child care centers (not including family child care homes, generally with five or fewer children). This means there is, on average, one child care center for every 38 children. However, this information is pre-pandemic. During the pandemic many preschool/child care centers closed at least temporarily. Many did not re-open. This is especially true for family care homes. In addition to availability of child care slots in the area, the average family with an infant is paying between 9% - 13% of their weekly income toward child care expenses. This is higher than what is considered affordable, which is just 7% of weekly income. Finally, when surveyed, 34% of Operation Threshold clients stated that they needed help finding affordable child care and 31% stated they needed help with child care costs.
- b. **Community Resources:** There are few resources available in the community to help alleviate child care costs for low-income individuals and families. There are subsidies and scholarships available through the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services for some parents, as well as some classroom subsidies available through the Iowa Department of Education. Locally some funders also subsidize classrooms or fund scholarships for families. Finally, families with income below the Federal Poverty Level or on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) may qualify for Early Head Start or Head Start center-based services, which provides developmentally appropriate care for eligible families.

- 6. Customer Need #6: Families continue to have increased needs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic**
- a. Conditions:** As the pandemic continues to ravage the country, many of our families continue to face unexpected financial and emotional consequences of the pandemic.
  - b. Causes:** Since early 2021 the COVID-19 pandemic has brought illness and death to many families. In addition, many, if not most, of our clients have been impacted by the societal and economic impacts of the pandemic, including increased unemployment, increased financial crises, increased isolation, and increased stress and anxiety.
  - c. Community Resources:** There are a variety of community agencies providers who are able to assist individuals and families and help them meet their COVID-19 related needs. The narrative above lists the community resources for basic needs, transportation, housing, parent support and child care. Many of these community resources also serve as resources to meet COVID-19 needs. Other community resources include UnityPoint Health system, MercyOne health system, People’s Community Health Center, Black Hawk-Grundy Mental Health, and a wide range of support groups and mental health advocacy services offered by these agencies.

**Key Findings: Community Needs:** The Community Needs Assessment also revealed community needs. Community needs are needs that have an impact on the entire neighborhood or community.

- 1. Community Need #1: Community lacks living wage jobs.**
- a. Conditions:** According to the website Living Wage Calculator, the 2022 living wage for single parent with one child is \$32.77 per hour, yet according to Iowa Workforce Development, the average hourly wage in the service area is just \$22.84 per hour. Finally, 42% of persons completing the Client Needs Assessment stated that they were in need of permanent, full-time employment that would support a family.
  - b. Causes:** Throughout the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century residents of Waterloo and its surrounding counties relied mainly on agriculture and manufacturing for wages. Beginning in the 1980’s manufacturing began being shipped overseas to cheaper labor markets. This resulted in the closing of many large and small manufacturing businesses. This resulted in not only the loss of those jobs, but also the loss of jobs in related businesses. In addition, improvements made in agriculture resulted in record crop production. At the same time crop exports fell. Many small farmers were deeply in debt and banks foreclosed, forcing many small farmers out of business. During the 1990’s and 2000’s the economy has struggled to rebound, but many of the jobs created have been in the service industry, most of which do not offer employees a living wage. Finally, the Client Needs Assessment found that 79% of households have experienced no change in income or a decrease in income in the past 12 months.
  - c. Community Resources:** Iowa Workforce Development provides many employment services for residents in the area. The University of Northern Iowa and Hawkeye Community College also provide employment related services for their graduates. In addition, Hawkeye Community College and the University of Northern Iowa’s Center for Urban Education offer job training classes to assist those who may be unemployed after a business closing. Economic development activities undertaken by Grow Cedar Valley and the cities of Waterloo and Cedar Falls have attracted a number of businesses to the area and they continue to work toward future business expansion and/or development.

**2. Community Need #2: Community lacks quality, affordable child care options for families.**

- a. **Conditions:** Operation Threshold's service area lacks quality and affordable child care options.
- b. **Causes:** According to Child Care Resource & Referral there are 12,280 children under the age of five in the Operation Threshold service area and there are 323 child care centers (not including family child care homes, generally with five or fewer children). This means there is, on average, one child care center for every 38 children. In addition, the average weekly child care center rate across Iowa for infants is \$200. Average weekly fees for toddlers from 2 to 3 are \$140. Average weekly fees for children 3 to 4 are \$135. While child care is a large expense for many families, child care workers themselves are often underpaid. Child care centers are caught in a tight position. They need to keep costs low enough that they can keep their centers full, but they also need to attract skilled employees and provide continued training and education for those employees. This makes it hard for child care centers to make a profit and, as a result, hard to encourage new centers to open.
- c. **Community Resources:** Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) is an important community actor in the area of child care. CCR&R provides training for both in-home and center based child care providers, and serves as a source of knowledge and support for those interested in opening a new child care center or home. Black Hawk County Child Care Coalition is also a valuable resource. The Child Care Coalition is a group including representatives from child care funders, CCR&R, Hawkeye Community College, the University of Northern Iowa, and other for-profit businesses who are working to increase the availability of affordable, quality child care in the Cedar Valley. Tri-County Child and Family Development Council provides preschool and child care through its Early Head Start and Head Start. In addition, the Black Hawk County Early Childhood Iowa agency, Cedar Valley's Promise, has an early childhood task team that meets monthly and includes representatives from area child care centers and child/family service providers. This task team works together to support child care needs and to ensure community child care resources are spent in a responsible fashion.

**3. Community Need #3: High school graduation rates, especially for the City of Waterloo, are a problem for the community.**

- a. **Conditions:** Too many Waterloo children are not completing high school.
- b. **Causes:** Dropping out of high school can carry serious ramifications that can impact the remainder of a child's life. Dropouts tend to earn less than high school graduates, are more likely to be incarcerated, and have a shorter life expectancy. Research has shown that grade level reading is an important indicator for successfully graduating high school. Counties in the area with the highest 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading proficiency rates also have the highest graduation rates. The 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading proficiency rates for Waterloo students are significantly lower than those of the surrounding area.
- c. **Community Resources:** The community has been working to increase resources available to address this need. The collaborative, Cedar Valley Readers, offers summer learning academies designed specifically for K-3 students in need of additional reading help and works with other community organizations and programs to promote early childhood literacy. The Black Hawk County Health Department also offers a 1<sup>st</sup> Five program that works with area pediatrician's offices to help identify resources and make referrals for parents whose children have been diagnosed with possible developmental or cognitive delays.

**Key Findings: Customer Satisfaction:** As part of the Community Needs Assessment we also collected and analyzed customer satisfaction data. Customer satisfaction data was also collected from WIC participants, Parents as Teachers and Partners for Healthy Families (now renamed Parents as Teachers) participants and on our website via survey monkey.

**1. Overview of Customer Satisfaction**

Overall, based on a variety of survey methods, clients and community stakeholders report being very satisfied with our agency and customer service. In the 2020 Client Needs Assessment, 95% of customers reported they were helped in a timely manner, they were treated with respect, they received the information/services they needed, and staff were friendly and helpful. Among the program surveys distributed through WIC, Parents As Teachers, and Partners for Healthy Families, 83% of customers were very satisfied with the services they received and 92% would recommend the program to a friend.