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Amherst County 2023 Situation Analysis Report

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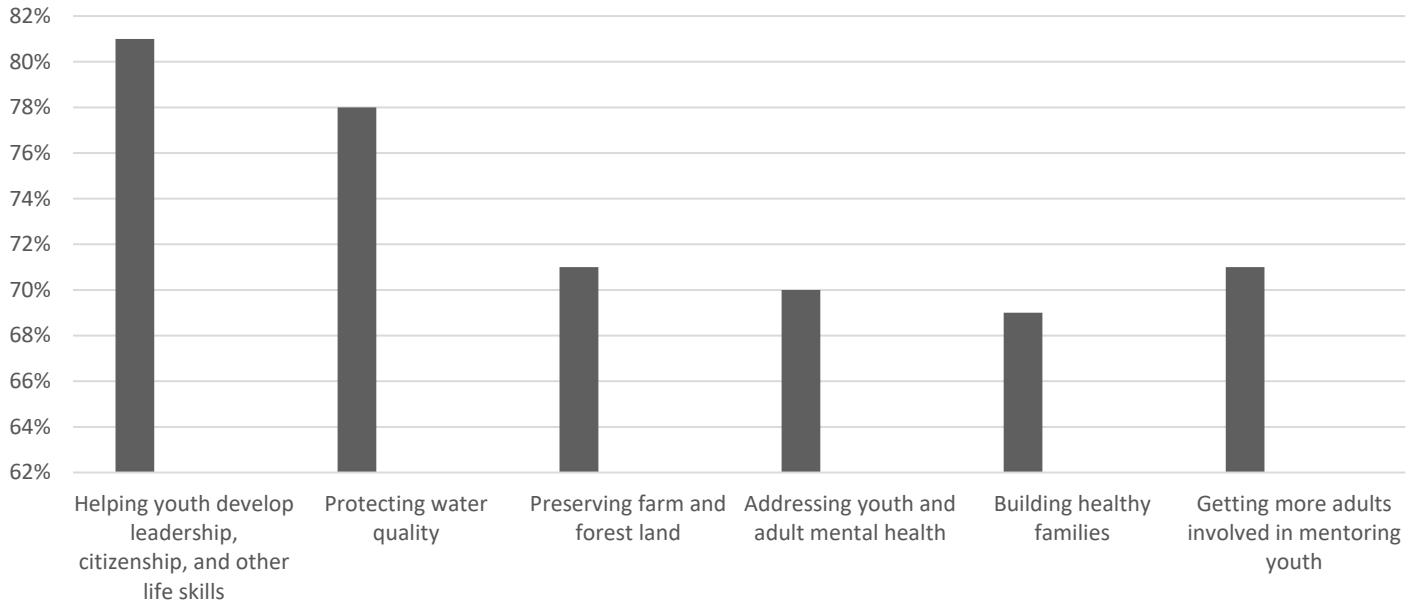
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AMHERST

Perfect Slice of Virginia

Top Six Issues for Amherst County in 2023 According to Percent of Respondents indicating it was a high priority need



Introduction

The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Amherst County Unit conducted a comprehensive situation analysis during the calendar year of 2023. The unit coordinator of the Amherst County Office led the situation analysis process. The staff assisted with developing the Amherst County Unit Profile as well as gathering community and resident perspectives on issues in the county through a survey. Data and information from the survey and recently completed area needs assessments were analyzed and recurring themes were identified leading to the creation of the priority issues.

The Amherst Extension Unit met during regularly scheduled staff meetings to discuss the situation analysis. It was decided that we would use the provided Qualtrics survey and then follow up with focus group discussions. Using available resources from VCE, Amherst County, and state/federal sites, the unit profile was developed. Focus groups were identified, and surveys were distributed throughout the community. Our focus groups included our Amherst County Agriculture Committee, Amherst County Department Heads, adult volunteers, and data from teen participant surveys who were participating in a research grant. Findings from the surveys and focus groups were discussed by the staff and top priority issues were identified.

Unit Profile

Amherst County is located in the Piedmont region and near the center of the Commonwealth of Virginia in the United States. The county is part of the Lynchburg, VA Metropolitan Statistical Area, and its county seat is also named Amherst. The largest university in Amherst County is Sweet Briar College.

Amherst County was formed in 1761, from part of southwestern Albemarle County. The original county seat had been in Cabelsville, now Colleen, in what would later become Nelson County. The county was named for Lord Amherst, known as the "Conqueror of Canada", who commanded the British forces that successfully secured Canada from the French during the Seven Years War. Jeffery Amherst had previously been named as Governor of Virginia, although he never came to this colony.

In 2021, Amherst County, VA had a population of 31,381 people with a median age of 43.9. 52% of the population is female while 48% of the population is male. The population density is 67.3 people per a square mile. The population is 74.25% White Alone, 17.91% Black or African American Alone, 3.13% Two or More Races, 2.59% Hispanic, 0.7% Asian, 0.8% American Indian, 0.06% Native Hawaiian or Pacifica Islander. 99.3% of residents living in Amherst County are US Citizens.

As of 2021, the federal poverty line for a family of four is \$26,500. Amherst County currently has a poverty rate of 13.4%, with a median income, per household, of \$60,876. 17% of children live in poverty, while 9% of senior citizens live in poverty.

The median property value in Amherst County is \$153,300 which is 0.66 times smaller than the national average of \$229,700, but the homeownership rate is 76.9% which is higher than the national average of 63.9%.

The Amherst County Public School system consists of one high school, two middle schools, six elementary schools and one alternative school. The on-time graduation rate for the school system is 93.2% and all schools are fully accredited. The dropout rate is 4.5%.

26% of families in Amherst County are single parent households, while 71.3% of all families have all or both parents in the labor force. 88.3% of pregnant women receive prenatal care. There were 34 teen pregnancies reported in 2021 for females ages 13-19. There were 57 cases of founded child abuse.

The major employers in Amherst County are the Amherst County School Board, Sweet Briar College, and Glad Manufacturing. The current unemployment rate for Amherst County is 3.7%.

According to the state community health rankings, Amherst County is ranked 64th out of 133 counties. Centra's Lynchburg Area Community Health Needs Assessment reported the top five health needs for Lynchburg and the surrounding areas including Amherst County as poverty, access to health care, mental health concerns, issues impacting children and their families (child care/child abuse) access to healthy food, and aging/eldercare.

Community and Resident Perspectives

To assess resident perspectives, our unit utilized two formal strategies. However, our unit also strives to informally assess the needs of our community with constant engaged conversations.

1. Community survey. This survey was widely distributed throughout Amherst County. In addition to the links posted on our VCE social media pages, it was also available on the Amherst County website and Facebook page. We emailed links to our office-maintained distribution lists that included Beef Producers, 4-H parents, Amherst Agriculture Committee, and Amherst County Department Heads. A QR code was also available at the Amherst County Fair and respondents were able to spin the wheel for a prize once the survey was completed.
2. Review of recent area needs assessments including Centra Health's 2021-2024 Health Needs Assessment and Bridge2Health's Adult and Teen CBPAR (Community Based Participatory Action Research) results.

Responses indicated that Amherst County had similar priority issues as our state results with emphasis in the areas of Environmental Health and Safety and Building Healthy Communities. Identified issues included helping youth develop leadership, citizenship and life skills, protecting water quality, preserving farm and forest land, adult involvement in mentoring youth, adult and youth mental health concerns, and building healthy families. VCE is equipped to offer expertise in addressing these complex interdisciplinary issues that span across programming areas.

Community Issues

Unit faculty and staff met during the Community Resident and Perspective phase. Surveys and recent needs assessments were reviewed and it was determined that the top issues were linked and could be grouped into three priority issues.

Table 1. Top Issues Selected by Respondents based on a series of choices

| Issue | Rank |
|---|------|
| Helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills | 1 |
| Protecting water quality | 2 |
| Preserving farm and forest land | 3 |
| Ensuring safe food handling practices to prevent foodborne illness | 4 |
| Getting more adults involved in mentoring youth | 5 |
| Building healthy families | 6 |
| Addressing youth and adult mental health | 7 |
| Addressing poverty | 8 |
| Strengthening local food systems | 9 |
| Assisting farmers and forest landowners in production and profitability | 10 |
| Strengthening dependent care | 11 |
| Promoting scientific literacy | 12 |

Top three priority issues

Priority Issue #1

Opportunities for youth to access positive experiences to develop leadership, citizenship, and life skills

Priority Issue #2

Improve land management and profitability

Priority Issue #3

Building healthier families

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Priority Issue #1: Opportunities for youth to access positive experiences to develop leadership, citizenship, and life skills

The Amherst County office has been without a 4-H Youth Development agent since August of 2022. Programming has continued in the schools bringing STEM linked learning opportunities through the part-time 4-H technician in 4th grades. In November of 2023, the full time 4-H Youth Development agent position was filled and in-school programming for 5th graders was added back into the programming plan. In the interim, the four 4-H Clubs: The Blue Ridge Caballeros Horse Club, the Livestock Club, the Shooting Club, and the Teen Leadership club maintained their enrollment and were led continually by engaged adult volunteers. Additional in-school programming is being scheduled for the two middle schools and the high school that focuses on workplace readiness and life skills. In-school programming is also being planned to address character education and citizenship. In the spring of 2022, the Amherst County office was awarded a \$1.2 million-dollar five-year multi-state CYFAR USDA grant to address mental health concerns through intergenerational programming. Bridge2Health uses adult and teen participants to create mentor opportunities and for all participants to improve leadership and life skills.

Priority Issue #2: Improve land management and profitability

The Amherst County office is currently offering pasture management classes, pesticide education, field visits, home visits, and collaborating with numerous local agencies. All of these work towards the goal of addressing water quality through proper understanding of the issue at hand and providing a comprehensive solution that not only address the immediate need, usually pesticides, but educates the landowner how the situation got to where it is at the point of visit. The office works directly with direct market producers to increase their production and profitability which also helps strengthen the local food system since the producer can be profitable and operate their local food business. These visits also address safe food handling both on the farm, during transport, and at the time of sale. Preservation of farm and forest land is being indirectly addressed through farm/land profitability visits, profitable land reduces the desire to sell the land for development. The office can collaborate with local partners to offer farm transition workshops and alternative production use workshops to help increase profitability.

Priority Issue #3: Building healthier families

The Amherst County office will continue to address the issue of building healthier families through the Bridge2Health grant program and with collaborative programming that brings education on the issues of poverty, family financial management, and parenting education. In early 2024, the agents will be trained through the Rosalyn Carter Institute to offer Dealing with Dementia programs to clients who are caring for dependent adults. The office will continue to offer home food preservation classes which can often be a source of foodborne illness by teaching participants researched based methods and recipes for food preservation. A diabetes education class will also be offered through the office for Amherst County residents who are identified diabetics or pre-diabetics. The office will continue to publish timely information ahead of concerning weather events for food safety and emergency supplies to help residents be prepared. 4-H is working to partner with other local youth development organizations (IRON Lives) to reach not only youth, but their families to develop a broader network of resources to benefit the community.

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2024

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