impact report

African Americans in Dane County:
## The Impact of History in Everyday Realities

United Way of Dane County's Call for Research

As United Way of Dane County (UWDC) seeks to understand the needs of our African American population in Dane County, the Self Reliance and Independence Community Solution Team conducted focus groups within this important community looking at three demographics:

Group 1:   African Americans from the general population (age 18 – 64)
Group 2:   African Americans with enduring disabilities and seniors (age 65 and over)
Group 3:   Caregivers of African Americans with enduring disabilities and frail seniors

A total of 38 individuals participated in the African American Focus Groups conducted by United Way of Dane County in Spring 2005. The results and conclusions in this report are representative of those participants.

African American Population in Dane County as Compared to General Population, US Census Data
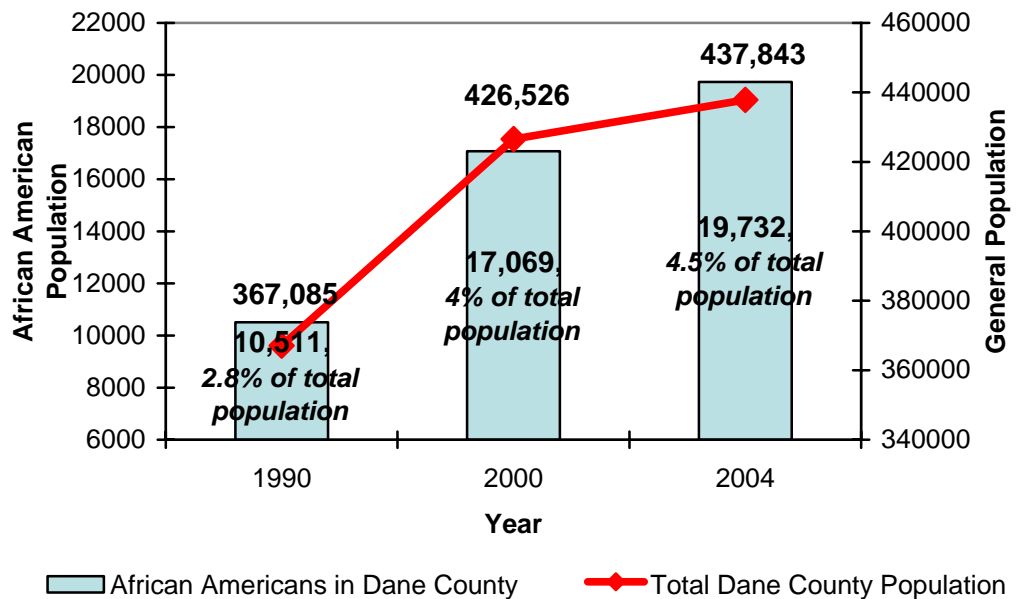
We are issuing 4 Impact Reports focusing on Latinos, Native Americans, Southeast Asians and this report on African Americans. These reports will be used internally by UWDC Vision Council and Community Solution Teams and distributed to agencies to better help our community serve these minority populations.

Staff contact: Heather Hazelwood
2059 Atwood Avenue, Madison, WI 53704
(608) 246-4350, FAX (608) 246-4349
www.unitedwaydanecounty.org

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of Dane County

Conclusions

All three demographic groups were asked questions regarding:
- Greatest needs
- Barriers to using services in Dane County
- Conducting outreach and recruiting volunteers in the African American community

This report will cover overall conclusions followed by detailed responses from the each demographic group.

The focus group participants spoke of many challenges and concerns. While their comments varied greatly between demographic groups (which will be addressed in the following pages), a few common themes emerged, including:
- The need for increased resources for transportation accessible and affordable for low-income, elderly, and disabled people
- Opportunities for agencies to decrease barriers by employing cultural competent and respectful staff who understand not only the needs of the African American community but also the impact history continues to have in their lives
- Conducting outreach by coming to the African American community (particularly at churches and housing complexes)

Greatest Needs for the African American Population

General Population
The greatest need felt by the participants of this group was **employment opportunities offering a living wage**. Several of the participants were struggling due to their minimum wage jobs. They often faced choices between paying rent and buying medicine or between getting fuel for their vehicle or putting food on the dinner table.

The group also commented on the importance of agencies who conduct outreach to the African American community needing to also focus on employing African American staff people.

The group also felt a need for **more flexible guidelines for participation in agency services and programs**. It was noted that many agencies had complex eligibility criteria, and considered them restrictive, time-consuming, and humiliating to apply for.

Other needs expressed by the group were dental care, adult education, affordable daycare, and obtaining credit from lending institutions.

Seniors and People with Disabilities
This group stated that their greatest need was **transportation**. Public transportation was not a feasible option and once they became unable to drive, they often could not make trips beyond their homes/housing complex. Transportation challenges were further complicated by limited mobility and wheelchairs. Potential options, including a van service and taxi cabs, were too expensive and participants felt their medical care suffered due to this challenge.

They also expressed great concerns about **neighborhood security**. Many participants were residents in a senior housing project and were worried about strangers in the building, doors left ajar, and burglaries. Further, they said that although they felt safe being out in the neighborhood during the day, the same as not true in the evening.

"I see some of us leaving the doors open and we get all kinds of people walking through the halls here. Some of these strangers pretend they are the cleaning staff or making deliveries. We have got to keep our doors closed," stated one senior participant.

Other needs expressed this group were health and dental care, obtaining legal services, and adult education.

Caregivers
This group had needs that were very distinct from the needs of those they cared for. The greatest need they felt was for an **advocate** to help them navigate through the social services system.

Very related to their need for advocates, the caregivers also expressed a large need for **respite and community connections**. Many participants expressed concerns about burnout, maintaining the rhythm of care, isolation, and living a healthy lifestyle.

Barriers to Using Services in Dane County

General Population
The biggest barrier felt by participants in this group was **transportation**. For women with small children, trying to get to agency appointments tended to be an exercise in frustration. Public transportation was not a workable solution for them and other options, like taxi cabs, were not affordable.

They also cited **uneven service provision** by agency staff (even those of African American descent) as a notable barrier. The participants felt they were often treated differently than other non-African American service recipients because of things like lack of eye contact and tone of voice on the part of the agency staff. Additionally, they stated that some white staff at agencies were not skilled in working with African Americans who spoke differently than whites.

"I am just being me and the white staff doesn't seem to understand what I am saying," said one participant.

Additional barriers mentioned by this group included basic service gaps and/or lack of advertising about available services, restrictive hours of operation at agencies, long waiting lists, financial resources, and childcare.

"My boss does not want me taking off time to deal with a social service agency. I try to explain that if I can get my family in better shape, I will be a better worker, but he is not listening to that," stated a participant.

Seniors and People with Disabilities
The participants of this group also named **transportation** as their greatest barrier, naming some of the same frustrations they expressed when noting it as their greatest need.

Another significant barrier for these participants is the amount of **paperwork required to apply for services**. The senior participants admitted that these processes often confused them and made them reluctant to apply for services.

This group also mentioned that the **negative attitudes and behaviors of staff toward African Americans seniors** was a barrier to them using services.

One participant stated, *"I get treated as if I am some child or dummy. I am old, not stupid."*

Caregivers
Almost all of the caregivers participating in this group felt that they lacked **sufficient knowledge of the services for the elderly and disabled in Dane County**. Participants expressed a need for a directory of services with complete information on available programs and eligibility criteria.

"I didn't know what to bring to the first meeting to keep the process rolling and … it would help if a directory actually told you what paperwork to bring with you," said one participant.

The caregivers also expressed frustration barriers caused by **complicated and seemingly unorganized health care system for the elderly** and **negative stereotypes of African Americans, further complicated by negative stereotypes of seniors**.

Furthermore, they felt barriers caused by the lack of advocates, social isolation, financial constraints, and exhaustion.

Conducting Outreach and Recruiting Volunteers in the African American Community

General Population
Participants in this group felt that **working through their churches** was the best method to both conduct outreach and recruit volunteers. However, they cautioned that outreach workers must be honest about waiting lists for services and expectations of volunteers.

"I didn't think I could find a spare minute in my life. But then our pastor approached me about helping a church member with food preparation. I never cooked for my children; we seemed to be always eating on the run… When the pastor called me to help, how could I refuse? The Lord never gives me more than I can handle," said one caregiver.

Other methods mentioned included working through community members and advertising with the African American media.

Seniors and People with Disabilities
The most effective way to reach this population mentioned was to **make visits to senior housing complexes**.

Furthermore, participants in this group felt that agencies trying to do outreach and recruit volunteers needed to know how to **treat African Americans with respect** and **understand the history of our county and the power struggle that continues to this day.**

One participant stated, "*So many of the middle-aged African Americans are struggling with raising a family, caring for their elderly relatives, and working more than 40 hours a week. So when you want an African American to volunteer, you have to take into account that these people are overworked as it is."*

Caregivers
Most of the participants in the Caregiver group felt that the **agencies that serve African Americans need to connect better with each other** (such as the agencies that serve the general African American population and the agencies that serve seniors).

Another method this group mentioned was by **opening the lines of communication between agencies and community leaders**. They felt this would not only help their community know about agency services and recruit volunteers, but would also allow the agencies to better understand the community's existing informal services and build support for them.

African Americans in Dane County by Age, US Census 2000

461
1,695
4,052
10,861
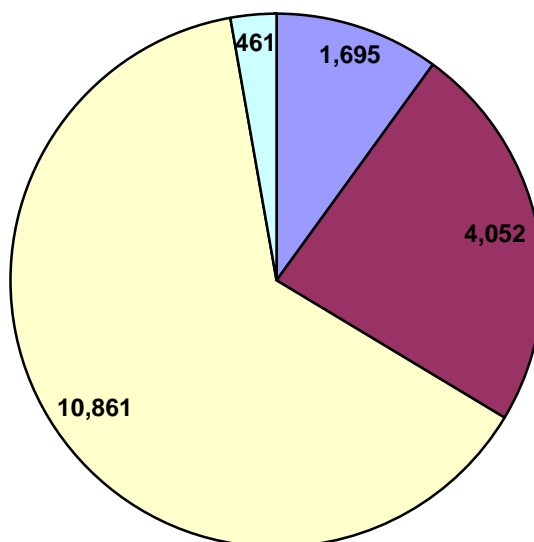
☐ Under Age 5 ☐ Age 5 - 17 ☐ Age 18 - 64 ☐ Age 65+

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