

Exploring Strategic Opportunities for Improving Health in the Lehigh Valley

Key Informant Interviews: 2018

THE DOROTHY RIDER POOL
HEALTH CARE TRUST



THE RIDER-POOL
FOUNDATION

Summary

Following the forty-year strong vision of Leonard Parker Pool, the Trustees of The Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust and leadership of Lehigh Valley Health Network continue to seek strategies to improve the health of citizens of our region. Adding to substantial demographic, epidemiologic, and clinical data already available, a “community profile” of current dynamics was initiated through a key informant study in the Fall of 2017 to garner valuable insight that can shape and inform The Pool Trust and The Rider-Pool Foundation’s proactive grant making in the coming years.

In the following pages, the narrative of this study outlines four emergent themes of Sense of Optimism, Intricacies of Growth, Future Leadership, and Our Future. Within the category of the future, an insightful look forward at broad health concerns are explored while noting the three major current health concerns of obesity, mental health, and substance abuse. This study is made public to offer information to other entities seeking solutions to our region’s overall health condition and to expand the necessary conversations that can lead to meaningful, measurable solutions to related issues in our community.

Quality of Health, Quality of Life

Introduction

The Rider-Pool Foundation's intent is to serve as a means to improve the quality of life in the community, to build on the community's strengths and add to its vitality, and to increase the capacity of the community to serve the needs of all its citizens. The Trustees of The Foundation have carried forth Dorothy Rider Pool's wishes and are particularly sensitive to her interests in education, disadvantaged children, and the development of future leadership in our society. Since the Pools resided in Allentown, Pennsylvania, the particular geographic interest of The Foundation lies within the Lehigh Valley area of Pennsylvania.

The Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust (Pool Trust) was established in 1975 by the will of Leonard Parker Pool. The mission of The Trust is to enable Allentown and Sacred Heart Hospital Center (ASHHC), now Lehigh Valley Health Network (LVHN), to be a superior regional hospital and improve the health of the citizens of the region.

In 1975, The Pool Trustees were provided an initial \$15 million and a tremendous responsibility. Forty-three years later, the Trust has made \$144 million in grants and has an asset value of approximately \$84 million. Lehigh Valley Health Network is, by all standards, a superior regional hospital. Much of the vision set forth by Mr. Pool has been realized. Yet, we have been reminded, Mr. Pool could be pleased but never entirely satisfied.

The Trust is scheduled to expire in 2025. The Pool Trustees and the leadership of Lehigh Valley Health

Network are considering strategies that will continue to advance their work to improve the health of the citizens of the Lehigh Valley. In addition to substantial demographic, epidemiologic, and clinical data already available to LVHN and the Pool Trust, a "community profile" of current dynamics in the region might provide insight beyond hard data sources. This process could also gauge dynamics that could either help or hinder a broad health strategy, and begin an engagement process with community leadership to seek common ground.

A "Social Reconnaissance" was conducted in 2012 for similar purposes. While this was not an empirical research study, the yield of valuable information from 2012 did constructively help to shape and inform The Pool Trust and The Rider-Pool Foundation agendas over the past five years. For example, The Rider-Pool Collective Impact Fellowship, a proactive grant making process, and participation in an international funder transparency and openness learning lab were all designed based on learning from our 2012 Social Reconnaissance findings. Reference to the 2012 work will be made in this document.

Given this background, the Trustees agreed that an important ingredient for making decisions that directly affect the citizens of the Lehigh Valley was to ask key civic leaders about their vision and concerns for the Valley. This report provides useful information to those interested in the health of the Lehigh Valley and holds a mirror to those community leaders who generously shared their opinions.

A Community Snapshot

Methodology: Key Informant Interviews

In the Fall of 2017, Pool Trust engaged Elsbeth G. Haymon, a skilled interviewer and not-for-profit leader with strong working knowledge of the Lehigh Valley, to be a consultant for the project. The objective was to interview approximately 35 Lehigh Valley residents who were identified as influential opinion leaders on civic matters. A non-exhaustive initial list of names of titular and reputational community leaders across the region was assembled. Names were informally solicited, and individuals selected were generally and publicly agreed to have knowledge and awareness of Lehigh Valley public affairs. It was understood from the outset that this qualitative process would not capture all the important “movers and shakers,” but would be diverse and thorough enough to uncover a variety of viewpoints.

This key informant interview process, while not intended to be undertaken as a formal research study, would follow a generally accepted qualitative methodological approach. Many of those interviewed would recognize the process as similar to a feasibility for a capital campaign or major fundraising effort. This qualitative endeavor was a long and thorough process executed over many months.

Letters were sent to all those identified in the process and follow-up phone calls were made to schedule the interviews. Every person on the list had an opportunity to make his or her opinion known. There were some that did not respond to both phone calls and emails and therefore were not interviewed. All those who were interviewed were offered the opportunity to identify individuals they thought would be beneficial to the effort. In the end, individual and group sessions were held with more than 47 people.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one at the time and location of the interviewee’s choice. Interviews were scheduled for an hour, but almost always ran close to two hours. The questions asked were very general and open-ended, intended to be

conversation starters. For example: What about the Lehigh Valley makes you proud to live here? What are you not so proud of? What are the biggest health issues here? What would a healthy community look like? All participants were assured that their quotes would not be attributed to them unless they were contacted and consented.

Notes from the individual sessions were transcribed by Ms. Haymon after the interviews concluded. A thematic review of the transcribed notes was completed and issues such as top health concerns were ascertained. The top health issues in the Lehigh Valley were those that were mentioned the most times throughout the entire process.

Clear themes voiced by these key informants were readily identified. The following report is a summary of their responses. The consultant reported the participants’ words and attempted to convey their thoughts, without making any assumptions or conclusions. This is simply one snapshot by 47 people of their perception of life and health in the Lehigh Valley. It was not undertaken as a quantitative research study and therefore would not produce results that would specifically be tested for statistical significance. It was also not intended to be a public opinion poll, where a survey or questionnaire would be administered to a statistically significant number of people.

The information contained here is, therefore, representative of the people interviewed, and not necessarily agreed to by representatives of The Pool Trust. It is one summary piece that provides common themes and issues these leaders feel are relevant in the Lehigh Valley today. It is also a highlight of the passion and love people feel toward their community, their concerns about the area and, finally, what they identify as strategies to help make the Lehigh Valley even better in the future.

Observations and Outcomes:

What We Learned

Through these interviews and our analysis of the stories and observations, we have defined four major themes of feedback for consideration. Each of these themes for consideration is summarized in the sections following.

Sense of Optimism

Intricacies of Growth

Future Leadership

Our Future

Theme I: Sense of Optimism

There is an overriding sense of optimism in the Lehigh Valley that was not present five years ago. One person referred to the change in the past years as “stunning.” Much of this has to do with the incredible amount of development that has taken place in downtown Allentown, although it is not limited to that city. Many people also commented on the growth and sense of community in Bethlehem and Easton.

“The Lehigh Valley is on the cusp of greatness.”

with other work done by The Pool Trust and The Rider-Pool Foundation.

Many interviewees talked about knowing how truly

fortunate they are and understanding that their lives are vastly different from many people who live in the Lehigh Valley. One interviewee, when asked what quality of life meant, responded that he has the “luxury of options” – the ability to get up in the morning and make decisions about his life, rather than take only what is available. Among those interviewed, there is a broad recognition of this gap and many expressed a real desire to work to make the community better for everyone. As a result of their own renewed sense of optimism, they are more willing to take on the difficult issues and work collectively to improve the quality of life for everyone, essentially asking the question: “How do we make sure that everyone benefits from the growth we are seeing?”

On the other hand, others felt that there is a failure to see how truly desperate so many people’s lives are and how deeply poverty is entrenched. That entrenchment creates a sense of hopelessness that is multigenerational and some are concerned that there is a lack of investment on the part of the community to make sure there are equitable outcomes for all.

Some of the indicators of optimism that were cited are:

- Strong educational systems – kindergarten through college, including community colleges and vocational/technical schools
- Wonderful park systems and green space
- Thriving cultural life
- Proximity to New York City and Philadelphia
- Size of the community: big enough to have a great lifestyle but small enough that you get to know each other

Additionally, there is resurging pride in and love for the Lehigh Valley that is evident in how people are talking about the Valley and their relationships with each other. Many interviewees talked about how the Valley is working together in a way that was not present in the recent past – business, non-profit and grassroots community leaders are coming together to tackle relevant community issues in a broader way. They say that the community feels more inclusive and more vibrant and are hopeful that people are better integrated with the needs of the less fortunate residents. One interviewee remarked that because of the relatively small size of the Lehigh Valley, the issues are identifiable and not insurmountable.

Having said that, there is also a clear recognition on the part of the people interviewed that there is a definite division between the “haves” and the “have nots.” This division was confirmed in a roundtable conversation that was held as part of this study with 12 non-profit leaders; it has also been substantiated

Some of the issues of concern that were cited include:

- Homelessness
- Public education overall, Allentown School District in particular
- Unhealthy, insufficient and uninhabitable housing stock, particularly in the cities
- Crime, gangs, and violence in the cities
- Lack of good paying jobs and concern that people are not being trained for the jobs that will be available in the future
- Lack of access to nutritious food, knowledge about nutrition and, generally, knowledge of self-care for people who live in poverty

There was also a good deal of discussion around racism in the community – how there are serious racial tensions and how people are not talking about it. People of color, women, and the LGBTQ community often struggle to find a place – to feel socially connected. Interviewees remarked there are “not a lot

of people who look like me in the skin that I am in,” or that they struggle to be “seen” as a real person. Some are concerned that there is a failure of the community to see diversity as a strength, yet others were saying that influx of immigrants into the Lehigh Valley creates a healthier environment.

Theme II: *Intricacies of Growth*

Virtually everyone who was interviewed agreed that future growth and the management of that growth is critical to maintaining quality of life in the Lehigh Valley. However, there was much debate over exactly what that means. People feel that parochialism prevents the community from working together to plan growth. This was evidenced in comments about the large number of municipalities, the government framework in the Valley, and how we are unable or unwilling to work together. One participant asked if we have the overall political will to manage growing pains in a smart, meaningful, and thoughtful way. Another said that the Lehigh Valley needs to present itself as one entity – otherwise it is too easy for Harrisburg or Washington to divide us when we are doing it to ourselves.

Regarding transportation, the most frequent discussion point was around the large number of warehouse distribution centers and how they are affecting our quality of life. It was broadly felt that these centers are very hard on the infrastructure, create huge traffic problems, do not provide many or quality jobs and their headquarters are not contributing to the community the way other employers do. There is also a lot of concern about municipal zoning and how our green space is disappearing because of the proliferation of these distribution centers.

“As we grow, we have to grow wisely.”

There were also comments about rail service to other major cities. There is an internal (to the Valley) dispute between those who believe we should have rail service and those who don’t. Those who are for a passenger railway system feel that it would add to our quality of life, help to grow the community, and bring fresh diversity to the Valley. Those against a passenger railway expressed the fear that we would become a “bedroom community” and lose the sense of identity that we currently have.

Several interviewees expressed belief that, if managed well, most of our growth will take place in the cities. They believe that development of our cities – redeveloping areas that are already developed – are ways for the Valley to participate in growth without decimating open space and also maintaining reasonable traffic and commutes. One person said that our cities will “grow up, rather than out,” meaning taller buildings instead of using up open space. As another person said, “It seems that we are coping with an identity crisis in that we want lots of growth, but don’t want traffic, we want great restaurants and top-notch employers, but we don’t want anything to change.”

Another interviewee said, “We need to ask the residents of the community what kind of community they want it to be.”

Theme III: Future Leadership

One of the questions we asked the participants was to name the leaders in the community: If they were heading an initiative to tackle a particularly challenging issue, who would they want on their team?

“It’s inspirational to see the efforts people are making.”

and women at the base, which is very encouraging. We also see the consolidation of white males still dominant at the top of the pyramid.

Comparisons to past surveys can be illuminating. The table below illustrates several interesting observations.

	2012	2017
Number of interviews	84	47
Names mentioned	58	115
Names mentioned more than once	8	29
Names mentioned multiple times	0 more than three times	20 more than three times (75% of whom are white male)

Only 12 out of the 115 names mentioned this year (10%) were identified as key leaders only 5 years ago.

This exciting information indicates a change in the height and width of the community power pyramid. We are seeing younger people, more people of color,

The need for new, young, and diverse leadership was mentioned by many of the participants. These respondents believe the issue is that this group is not enabled and encouraged to move into leadership positions; that those positions are still largely held by white males who are not quite ready to move out of the way.

Interviewees also talked about how the culture of women in leadership is very similar to men in that you need to be part of certain groups to be included and mentored. If you are not part of those groups, it is very difficult to move forward, since you are not included or seen as “one of us.”

This information triggers these questions:

- Is this only happening here in the Lehigh Valley, or is this dynamic change in leadership occurring elsewhere as well?
- Are we the only ones capturing this information?
- What do we do as a community to encourage, enable, and mentor women, people of color, and younger people to step into leadership roles?

Theme IV: Our Future

Several themes emerged when we asked the question “What does the Lehigh Valley look like in 2050?” Not surprisingly, healthcare was at the top of the list, as well as education, jobs, the economy, and the impact of the sunset of the Pool Trust. When describing our future, most commentary focused on the challenges and issues we will need to address.

When asked, “What do you think are the three biggest health issues in the Lehigh Valley today?” the most frequently cited ones were **obesity and its related issues, mental health** and **substance abuse**. Others talked about healthcare in a broader sense.

The biggest question was around who our healthcare providers would be. It is believed that hospital takeovers will change healthcare and that there may be only a few hospital systems in Pennsylvania in 10 years. Local healthcare systems will be a memory, having been incorporated into much larger healthcare systems headquartered elsewhere. Frustration about the competition between Lehigh Valley Hospital Network and St. Luke’s University Health Network – their inability to work together and the constant building of new hospitals – was also noted. Participants also talked about their concerns about the cost of healthcare and how the current rate of increase is not sustainable.

An important theme that emerged is wellness -- namely getting people to understand and take more responsibility for their own health. For those with a high quality of life, there was frustration that they are not taking more responsibility for their own self-care. For people who live in poverty, the concern is that they don’t have access to the knowledge or the resources to take more responsibility. One participant commented that this effort is normally the work of a public health system but in the absence of that, perhaps the Pool Trust could serve in that role.

Someone else said, “We, as a community, are great at healthcare but not as great at public health.”

There is also an emerging concern about the “Silver Tsunami” that is coming at us rapidly... the elderly population. Interviewees felt that we, as a community, are not properly prepared to care for the elderly and all of the facets involved with that: healthcare, housing, in-home care, and support for caregivers.

“The health of an overall community is only as good as it’s least healthy segment.”

Public education is also a concern for the future, particularly, but not exclusively, the state of the Allentown School District. Comments about the inability of our cities to be truly successful unless we figure out how to improve the school districts were numerous. One interviewee commented, “There needs to be a fundamental structural change in the way school districts are funded or cities will be hollowed out because public education will continue to decline.” On a positive note, Building 21 was frequently cited as an example of an excellent model with 600 students involved in a hands-on approach and a competency-based model. The desire to replicate this program is evident.

Another theme that was widely discussed was employment and the economy. The desire for the Lehigh Valley to continue diversifying its economy, including the ability to compete for knowledge economy-based jobs, was mentioned many times. There is optimism about this. One interviewee believes that we are poised to become “the next Pittsburgh, a formerly blue collar industrial region that has transformed itself around meds and eds and quality urban life and opportunity.” However, we need to make sure that we are training employees for the jobs of the future, such as the solar energy sector, in addition to jobs that currently exist.

Finally, there was much discussion about the impact of The Pool Trust and how the 2025 sunset of The Trust will change the community. The collective impact work that The Trust has done was specifically mentioned several times and people are concerned about who will carry on that work. One person put it this way when talking about collective impact: “We need everyone rowing in the same direction at the same time.” Several interviewees also said that the community does not understand the impact that The Pool Trust has had: “They need to be more public about their initiatives and results.”

The Conversation Continues

Conclusion and Invitation to an Ongoing Conversation

The intent of this effort was to add some commentary to existing hard data such as demographic, epidemiologic, and clinical sources of information; and also to get a snapshot of community perceptions that would either help or hinder a strategic effort focused on measurable and sustained health improvement. We believe the report has accomplished that intent.

To paraphrase Peter Block: *What is the story this community tells itself... and at what cost?*

The Lehigh Valley has for generations been steadfast in its stoic adherence to tradition, proudly reluctant to change. These are qualities that held the region in good stead for two centuries! Yet, the story told in this report is one of deliberate and expedited change, in leadership, in perception of the future, and in a desire and excitement for growth unlike the past 40 years. This change is likely to continue and to accelerate.

The report also highlights the general nagging concern that the energy, enthusiasm, and progress may not be reaching the entire community, that residents in neighborhoods adjacent to exponential progress may not be included in the conversation. This is seen as an impediment to progress and to improved health.

How can The Pool Trust and The Rider-Pool Foundation help facilitate that expanded conversation? This is likely a dynamic for the Trustees to consider in the next phase of work. Thank you to all the Lehigh Valley leaders who so generously gave their thoughtful time, attention, and care to our inquiries.

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This study was conducted by The Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust and The Rider-Pool Foundation to begin an engagement process for a broad health strategy for the Lehigh Valley. Information contained herein is not intended as a public opinion poll and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of representatives of The Pool Trust or The Rider-Pool Foundation.