

# V. Social Services & Public Health

## INTRODUCTION

Social services and public health go hand in hand. Today, more than ever, there is an increased emphasis on public health to improve our personal and community health and the overall quality of life. Health can mean many things to different people. It is the social, economic, behavior, and physical factors that determine one's overall health, and each is strongly influenced by the quality of one's community and its services. To improve the social and physical well-being of Woonsocket residents, the City must provide or connect people to comprehensive public health resources and wraparound social services that reach and support all residents, including its most vulnerable. Working closely with state and community partners, including the Woonsocket Health Equity Zone (HEZ) will be imperative to achieving positive public health outcomes.

Roads & Sidewalks	CIRCULATION
Recreation	PARKS & RECREATION
Stormwater Management	SERVICES & FACILITIES
Climate Resilience	NATURAL RESOURCES
Energy	ENERGY
Water & Wastewater Infrastructure	SERVICES & FACILITIES

This Element discusses the City's overall capacity to provide high quality social services and improve public health; discussion of other municipal services is found in other Elements of the Comprehensive Plan (see inset).

## Vision for Social Services & Public Health

*Over the next 20 years, Woonsocket will work to make sure everyone has the solid foundation of health and social services they need to live healthy, fulfilled lives and reach their individual potential.*

For greater detail on data and statistics related to social services and public health, see the Social Services & Public Health chapter of the Baseline Report of the Comprehensive Plan.

## SOCIAL SERVICES & PUBLIC HEALTH

Woonsocket knows that healthy communities lead to healthy people, improving our physical health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life. To create a healthy community in Woonsocket, it is important for the City to tackle social services public health issues head-on and make sure those most at-risk are getting the services and care they need. It is also important to address public health as a whole, looking into how our incomes, education, community connections, social relationships, and the places we live impact our overall health.

**The City cannot do this alone.** While part of this work will come from City Departments and programs, the rest will involve partnering with other service providers and resources and connecting them with residents in need.

### WHAT WE HEARD

Based on community surveys and other forms of public engagement, residents want the City to focus on:

- A centralized place to go to learn about all the various services available to them, whether related to health, housing, job training, etc.
- Addressing immediate needs related to food, shelter, and medical care.
- Addressing longer-term needs related to building the skills to find a better paying job to support yourself and/or your family.
- Addressing drug addiction and reducing drug overdoses.
- Reducing illegal drug sales.
- Providing harm reduction and other related treatment services to individuals with drug addictions.
- Addressing housing insecurity for people struggling to find homes and pay rent.
- The long-term implications of the COVID 19 pandemic.

*“...I want to see a HARM REDUCTION CENTER FOR DRUG USERS so we can reduce overdoses, violence from people getting high and fighting in the streets, and dying from fentanyl.” – Survey respondent*

*“We see more tents popping up in the wooded areas around the train tracks (which are also abandoned) and in corners of larger parking lots at night. The homeless need a place to go that is safe and clean. They need food pantries on the sidewalks like in Providence. They need drug treatment facilities (like those NYC safe heroin shoot up sites where medics help them use clean needles and stuff).” – Survey respondent*

Community members also raised concerns about services for individuals who are homeless during the public engagement process. For more information and actions related to homelessness, please see the Housing Element.

## CITY DEPARTMENTS & PROGRAMS

The City government manages social services through two departments: The Department of Human Services and the Division of Housing & Community Development within the Department of Planning & Development.

### *Human Services & the Senior Center (Aging Well, Inc.)*

The system of human service provision is tremendously complex. This array of programs and agencies, designed to meet the needs of today's family, is composed of Federal, State, and local governmental, private and religious service providers, with differing, and sometimes overlapping, locational jurisdictions and programs. It is difficult for a municipality, concerned about the adequacy of service provision for its residents, to understand which agency provides what type of services and for which groups. It is all the more difficult for a client in need to know where to go for assistance.

The Department of Human Services maintains an "open door" policy for all residents seeking assistance. Staff are trained to assist residents in both emergency and non-emergency situations, connecting them with resources from local agencies that provide relevant services. The Department also assists residents with a Displaced Resident Program for emergency, fire, and non-fire related displacements working in collaboration with the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency (RIEMA).



Keep it Moving Class (Aging Well, Inc.)

Woonsocket has a significant elderly and disabled population, partly driven by the concentration of Woonsocket Housing Authority elderly housing units. Future projections suggest that the elderly population will continue to increase. Senior citizens and the disabled thus make up a very significant service group, and plans must be made to enlarge current programs to meet their growing need. Aging Well, Inc., the Woonsocket Senior Center on Social Street, serves as a centralized site for the provision of services and programs. Specific programs include Adult Day Care, the Congregate Meal Program, Senior Wellness Programs and Activities, and Social Activities. As a facility, the building is heavily used and capital repairs and improvements need to be made on a yearly basis.

### *Housing & Community Development*

The Division of Housing & Community Development division is in charge of managing several federal funding sources that help the City achieve its social services goals: Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program, HOME Investments Partnership Program

(HOME), and Emergency Solutions Grant Program (ESG). Together, these make up a large portion of the social service-related funds available to Woonsocket. The City identifies the following needs for public services to address with these funds:

- Substance abuse prevention
- Domestic violence prevention
- Community policing
- Code enforcement
- Children’s mental and trauma health services
- Health and social services to seniors
- Health services to people with substance abuse issues and the disabled
- Literacy training
- Supportive services for special needs and homeless populations

## WOONSOCKET HEALTH EQUITY ZONE

Health Equity Zones (HEZ) are designed to achieve “health equity” – which means that everyone has a fair opportunity to be as healthy as they can be. Many people have different health outcomes based on where they live or the color of their skin. The mission of Woonsocket HEZ, which kicked off in 2015, is to work directly in neighborhoods with poorer health outcomes to eliminate preventable disparities in health.



Working with local residents and stakeholders, Woonsocket HEZ identified four (4) focus areas to address, summarized below.

### *Addiction Treatment & Prevention*

An increasingly pressing and difficult issue that Woonsocket and many of its surrounding communities have had to reckon with over the past decade is high rates of substance abuse and opioid use/disorders. Tackling addiction cannot be done by one group in Woonsocket. With meaningful collaboration from City departments, local nonprofits and organizations, neighboring cities and towns, and regional groups, there is hope for creating a better future for the Woonsocket community that is struggling with or directly affected by addiction. This is a long-term problem, often tied to mental health issues, that can have reverberating impacts on addicts and their families, especially children.

The Woonsocket HEZ’s Overdose Prevention and Recovery workgroup has focused on training people to administer naloxone (a drug that reverses opiate overdoses) and advocated for a community-space with peer recovery services (where people who have dealt with addiction themselves can help others struggling with addiction). Community feedback has offered differing views on the role of public safety officers as they interact with individuals struggling with addiction or engaged in illegal drug sales, and opinions remain divided about how best to handle this.



*Improving Teenage Health*

Woonsocket has a significantly higher rate of repeat pregnancies for those under 19 compared with the State. To address this and related teen health concerns, Woonsocket HEZ has created a Teen Health workgroup with a family planning educator, various organizations, and teens. Education efforts appear to be successful, with Woonsocket HEZ reporting an over 30% decline in teen births from 2015 to 2019.

*Reducing Child Maltreatment*

The Woonsocket HEZ's Child Maltreatment workgroup and the City are taking strides to address child well-being to ensure all children are safe from harm and live with families and in neighborhoods that help them thrive. This work is aligned with the Rhode Island Children Cabinet, a state government initiative designed to make sure that children, from pre-natal to pre-Kindergarten, and their parents, have access to quality health care and education.



Reducing Child Maltreatment (RI Department of Health)

*Access to Healthy Food*

To address food access concerns, Woonsocket HEZ has created a Food Access workgroup that consists of a resident advisor and local organizations. The workgroup has been advocating for new grocery stores to come into the City, helping maintain current farmers markets, hosting roundtables, and supporting local food businesses. For more on this topic, see the Access to Healthy Food section of this Element below.



Fresh food in Woonsocket (JG Woonsocket Meat Market)

## ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

To have a healthy and thriving community, everyone in Woonsocket needs to have access to fresh, nutritious food. Appropriate access to healthy food can reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some types of cancer. Barriers to food access are largely focused on availability, transportation options, price, income, and having the time, knowledge, and tools to prepare fresh and nutritious meals. Residents have commented on the lack of access to grocery stores within the local community and the abundance of fast food and other unhealthy options (a situation known as a “food swamp”). Residents noted that access to a car is necessary to get to a grocery store and that there are few walkable grocery options within City neighborhoods; this is especially problematic for lower-income and elderly residents who find it a challenge to easily access groceries.

### WHAT WE HEARD

Based on community surveys and other forms of public engagement, residents want the City to focus on:

- Increasing access to affordable, healthy, and fresh food options in Woonsocket.
- Attracting full-service grocery stores to Woonsocket, ideally at least one that is centrally located.
- Supporting existing farmers markets and pursuing opportunities to add vendors, dates, and locations.
- Establishing a network of community gardens to strengthen neighborhood food systems.
- Adding healthy food options at local schools.
- Expanding food access programs for vulnerable Woonsocket residents.

*“...We are a FOOD DESERT and people need access to healthy food. We deserve farmers markets and grocery stores.” – Survey respondent*

*“A cooperative or small grocery store in the center of the city that can be reached without the need for an automobile.” – Survey respondent*

### FOOD INSECURITY & ACCESSIBILITY

Food insecurity and accessibility is a challenge in Woonsocket. There are several current projects and programs working to alleviate hunger and increase access to healthy food in the City, including food distribution sites managed by several local organizations and churches, including the Community Care Alliance Food Pantry, St. James Episcopal Church, the Connecting for Children and Families Pantry, and Holy



Fresh fruits & vegetables (US CDC)

Trinity Church, to name just a few. Several sites, including the Senior Center, provide regular senior meals.

Nonprofits and other community programs that offer food, food education, community gardens, etc. can play a role in alleviating the negative impacts of food access, but economic initiatives can also help. Farmer's markets, food delivery services, and providing incentives for businesses that offer fresh and healthy foods (while limiting or taxing unhealthy foods) within food swamps and food deserts are just a few ways to increase access. For example, in 2020 the US EPA and USDA partnered with the City and NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley to develop a food access Community Action Plan for Woonsocket. This Plan identifies partners to help implement strategies related to growing food businesses in Woonsocket, improving coordination of the City's food ecosystem, and increasing access to grocery stores and fresh food.

**What is a Food Desert?** In brief, any geographic area where residents' access to affordable, healthy food options (especially fresh fruits and vegetables) is limited or not available at all due to the absence of grocery stores within convenient traveling distance.

**What is a Food Swamp?** Different from a food desert; in brief, any geographic area where the only food options available are not nutritious, "junk," or lack any significant nutritional value.

## GROCERY STORES

Residents' proximity to food outlets like supermarkets, convenience stores, and cultural markets varies drastically based on the neighborhood you live in and your mode of transportation. Access to healthy and affordable food should be something every resident has. Better distribution of grocery stores and supermarkets throughout the City's neighborhoods is vital. Right now, most supermarkets and grocery stores in the region are located outside City limits. While technically accessible on public transportation, getting to these stores on the bus is generally not fast or easy. Creating incentives for food outlets to open stores in neighborhoods throughout the City where access is limited today will help the City increase food security and boost economic activity. Access can also be improved by working with RIPTA to alter bus routes to provide better and more frequent access between neighborhoods and existing grocery stores and supermarkets. Further, the City can work with local grocery stores to encourage more and more affordable direct food delivery to people's homes.



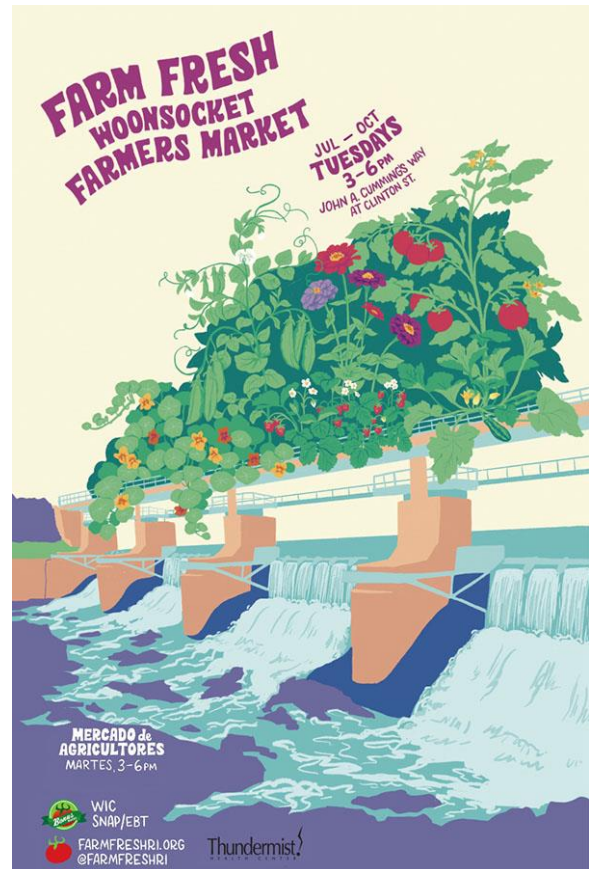
## FARMERS' MARKETS

The Woonsocket Farmer's Market gives local farmers and small vendors the opportunity to sell their fresh and locally grown products to Woonsocket residents at accessible prices. This is a great opportunity for residents to buy locally and have access to affordable and healthy food. Unfortunately, many residents are not fully aware of what the market has to offer. Increasing awareness through promotion and advertising in spaces where the Woonsocket community gathers can bring new shoppers to the market which helps the local vendors thrive. Currently, the market is open July through October every Tuesday from 3:00 – 6:00 PM at 450 Clinton Street (near Thundermist Health Center). The City should continue to partner with Farm Fresh Rhode Island and Thundermist in finding ways to expand the days and hours of operation, and ideally find a new location or locations for year-round vending.

Expanded farmers' markets can play a bigger role in providing residents with access to affordable and healthy food options. While the City works to recruit grocery stores to more neighborhoods, multiple farmer's markets can help fill a gap as well as a long-term need for fresh food access.

## COMMUNITY GARDENS

Woonsocket is home to several community gardens and many residents are avid home gardeners, growing a variety of vegetables, fruits, and herbs in their yards. For example, Riverzedge Arts operates a community garden that contains 21 plots free and open to the public. The Community Care Alliance operates the Grow Up Community Garden which has 40 raised beds available to the public. This is a great way for residents of all ages to learn how to grow and care for their own garden and even grow their own food. Increasing promotion of the gardens can lead to more awareness among the community that this great asset is available. Based on resident demand, the City should look into additional parcels in other neighborhoods that may accommodate community gardens, and can also connect residents with resources for growing fruits and vegetables in their own backyards or in planters, such as the University of Rhode Island's Master Gardener Program. These are all ways to increase food access and decrease food insecurity.



Woonsocket Farmers Market (Farm Fresh RI)



## GETTING IT DONE

GOAL V-1: Continue to invest in social services so that more people have the stability to live healthy and productive lives.

POLICY V-1.1: Maximize the contributions of the various human service providers and provide a coordinated response to clients' needs.

ACTION V-1.1.a: Facilitate regular coordination meetings or calls with human service providers across the region to track trends in clients' needs and to coordinate funding requests, programs, and services. Work to consolidate services where appropriate and possible and encourage collaboration among service providers.

ACTION V-1.1.b: Expand transportation, cultural enrichment, physical, and other activities at the Senior Center commensurate with demand.

POLICY V-1.2: Alleviate the confusion associated with the complex human services system by providing efficient direction and client referral.

ACTION V-1.2.a: Develop a clearinghouse of state and local social services and health resources clearly organized by the types of needs they address. Build this clearinghouse into the City's website, provide hard copies at key City facilities, and train City staff to assist residents navigate these resources in person, over the phone, and via email.

POLICY V-1.3: Enforce the rights of the disabled in all forms of service provision.

GOAL V-2: Provide and connect residents to basic public health services in order to meet community needs.

POLICY V-2.1: Continue supporting and increasing resources for Woonsocket HEZ to see more improvements in preventing opioid related deaths, teen health, food access, and child maltreatment in Woonsocket.

ACTION V-2.1.a: Maintain and seek to expand the operating hours of peer recovery services to support people struggling with addiction.

ACTION V-2.1.b: Continue to support health and sexuality education in the public school system.

ACTION V-2.1.c: Partner with the Rhode Island Children Cabinet to track indicators of child maltreatment in the City.

POLICY V-2.2: Establish a safe, substance abuse-free community and increase public education of safety procedures and drug awareness.

ACTION V-2.2.a: Utilize the services of the Blackstone Valley Prevention Coalition and the Woonsocket Prevention Coalition to implement substance abuse prevention and treatment strategies and campaigns.

ACTION V-2.2.b: Utilize the services of the Blackstone Valley Prevention Coalition and the Woonsocket Prevention Coalition to increase public awareness of services for prevention and treatment of substance abuse and of the dangers of substance abuse.

POLICY V-2.3: Prepare and plan for future epidemics or pandemics based off lessons learned from COVID-19.

GOAL V-3: Expand access to healthy foods, not only for public health, but for economic revitalization.

POLICY V-3.1: Actively work to implement the Community Action Plan for Woonsocket: Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance, and serve as a convener for identified action “leads” and “supporting cast.”

POLICY V-3.2: Work to increase the number of and access to full-service grocery stores within Woonsocket.

ACTION V.3.2.a: Incentivize grocery retailers to locate in Woonsocket neighborhoods currently experiencing food insecurity or in food deserts based on current food access data. Prepare a market analysis for grocery store sites to demonstrate demand to grocers. Provide incentives for larger scale mixed-use development to include grocery stores as part of their retail mix.

ACTION V.3.2.b: Work with RIPTA to analyze existing bus routes to look for ways to improve connections and increase frequency between food insecure neighborhoods and existing grocery stores.

ACTION V.3.2.c: Work with local grocery stores to encourage the expansion of home delivery of groceries. Consider offering incentives to provide free delivery in neighborhoods with limited fresh food access.

POLICY V-3.3: Work to decrease food insecurity in Woonsocket.

ACTION V.3.3.a: Continue to support and expand existing food programs like the Woonsocket Schools Free Lunch Program, WIC, Meals on Wheels, SNAP, local food pantries, and others. Serve as a connector between local grocery stores and these food programs, encouraging donations of food that can no longer be sold but is still safe and healthy for consumption.

POLICY V-3.4: Work to expand access to fresh and healthy foods in Woonsocket.

ACTION V.3.4.a: Expand the Woonsocket Farmers Market to increase days and hours of operation to make it more accessible for working families; work with Farm Fresh RI to find a location or locations for year-round vending and encourage more Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) “farm share” pick up locations at these markets and other accessible spots.

ACTION V.3.4.b: Increase public awareness of the farmers market through local community groups and leaders. Emphasize the multiple benefits that SNAP participants can redeem at local markets.

ACTION V.3.4.c: Analyze parcels in neighborhoods across the City that could accommodate additional community gardens for residents to grow their own food.

ACTION V.3.4.d: Prepare online and hard copy resource documents showing where in the City fresh food and produce can be purchased and where EBT cards are accepted – work with other City departments and local social service providers to distribute this information. Utilize resources from the RI Food Policy Council, such as the Rhode Island Food Access Map.

ACTION V.3.4.e: Work with existing organizations and programs to provide education to local residents on gardening, food storage, meal preparation, etc.



Mount St. Charles Garden (Rhode Island Catholic)



Grow Up Community Garden (Community Care Alliance)