

STORYWISE

On April 20-22, 2018, an 11-person community panel met at The Work Station in The Plains to study over 200 stories – mostly written texts and StoryCorps audio recordings – created this past winter by Athens County residents aged 12 to 65+. The stories are about *what makes it hard for people in Athens County to live healthy, happy and safe lives*. Many of the storytellers also shared their thoughts on ways in which the challenges they had highlighted could be overcome.

After three days of discussions, the members of the community panel formulated lists of the main contextual insights they had gleaned from the stories, as well as related priority recommendations for action. The following is a summary of those insights and recommended actions.

1. **“What new insights did you gain regarding *the way life is for people* – especially the most vulnerable among us – in Athens County?”**

- “So many people grew up with no support system or anyone to talk with. They were exposed to drug abuse and criminal behavior at an early age. Isolation in our communities is a real issue.”
- There is a certain “invisibility of issues such as homelessness, sex trafficking/abuse, food insecurity ... because it looks different here, so people assume it’s not here.”
- There is a “lack of awareness of resources and of ways to access needed services.”
- There is sometimes an unhelpful spirit of competition between entities who serve people experiencing hardship. “Service agencies in Athens County are not collaborating as much as they should be.”

Insights pertaining directly to addiction & recovery and/or incarceration & reentry:

- “Addiction is impacting all issues facing Athens County – poverty, homelessness, abuse, etc., and there are just not enough resources.”
- “A lot of the stories contained the elements of service as an important part of recovery.”
- “The lack of resources for people completing jail/prison time is a bigger deal than we had thought.”
- “The ‘convicted felon’ question on all applications – not just government jobs – prevents a lot of deserving people from getting interviews.”
- “A lot of prisoners have nowhere to go after incarceration.”

2. “Based on the insights you have gained here, what actions do you feel should be taken to make it easier for community members to live healthy, happy and safe lives?”

- “There should be more positive programming in schools, such as giving youth opportunities to speak out and be heard, helping them develop problem-solving skills....”
- “Present to officials (mayors, senators, representatives...) on what issues such as sex abuse/trafficking, homelessness or food insecurity look like in our region and how prevalent these issues actually are.”
- Conduct events “in all rural communities ... to educate the community about what services are available.”
- “Vote for and support continued funding for government agencies such as the Work Station.”
- We need “more resources in outlying communities: libraries, schools,” and community centers.
- There is a need for more coordination and cooperation between services. “Agencies should find ways to work together. Less competition. Find ways to support each other’s strengths while prioritizing clients. More meetings where agencies come together like the [Reentry] Task Force.”

Recommendations pertaining directly to addiction & recovery and/or incarceration & reentry:

- There is a “need for more mentoring by people who have been through these issues and who have the respect of their peers.” “Educate people more on the use of peer support.” More buddy-system work would be useful.
- We need “support groups that meet regularly in good locations.” ... “Safe havens, opportunities to participate in fun events.”
- “More housing options and awareness of these options should be available to released prisoners as a way to reduce recidivism.”
- “Take the ‘convicted felon’ question off of all job applications.”
- There should be “mandated rehabilitation prior to prolonged incarceration.”
- “Rehab instead of incarceration.”
- “There is a need for more recovery resources that are available when the person needs them.”
- There is a “need for local detox centers and inpatient treatment centers for at least 120 days.”
- “More local detox facilities. Access to longer treatment.”

Compassion and understanding for those around us who are struggling.