



2022 Wells County

Community Needs Assessment



**THE WELLS COUNTY
FOUNDATION, INC.**

INTRODUCTION

The Wells County Foundation is pleased to present this 2022 Wells County Needs Assessment. This community needs assessment is designed to identify issues which will be important for everyone who lives or works in our community. This assessment focuses on the capabilities of the community, including its citizens, agencies, and organizations.

The Community Foundation embarked on this project to help guide its grantmaking and scholarship programs. In addition, this report can also serve as a common reference for governments, nonprofits and other organizations that seek to improve the quality of life in Wells County.

A critical goal of the Community Foundation, local funders, and philanthropists is to provide meaningful grantmaking that is impactful in Wells County. The Community Foundation hopes that all residents of Wells County will benefit from this report and partner with the Foundation in addressing these issues.

The Wells County Foundation is a vehicle for people of all means to make a lasting difference in Wells County. The central purpose of the Foundation is to serve the needs and philanthropic aims of donors who wish to better Wells County, now and in the future. We hope this report helps us to achieve those goals.

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What We Found

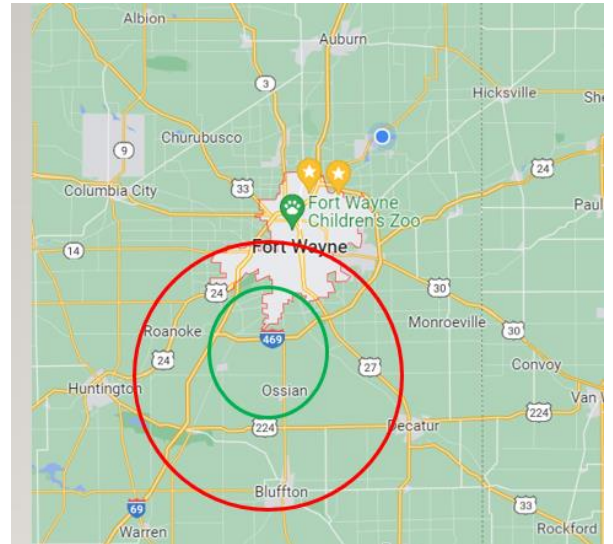
People who live in Wells County love Wells County. They feel a genuine sense of pride regarding what the community has to offer. We heard consistent praise of the quality of the schools, the extensive network of parks and recreational areas, and a thriving and growing list of arts and cultural opportunities.

Yet Wells County also has other assets which make the community a great place to live and work. In a world where business connections are critically important, several of our participants highlighted easy access to Fort Wayne International Airport as a unique feature which could draw new residents to the County. Businesses which are dependent on convenient air travel would find Wells County an ideal location.

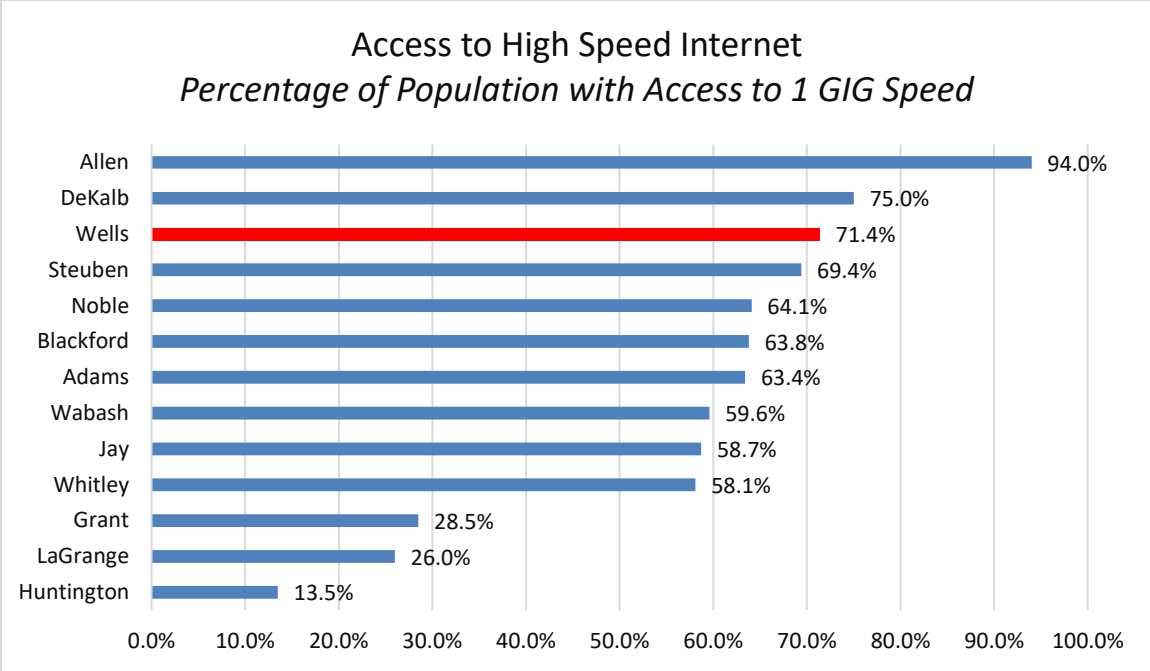
Another important part of any business in today's economy is the availability of high-speed internet access. Once again, Wells County stands out for the quality of internet service offered.

The quality of an internet connection is measured by the speed at which data is both downloaded and uploaded. Speeds of one gigabyte or higher are considered to be the "gold standard" for internet connections, as they can facilitate a wide variety of business, educational and personal uses.

When comparing access to internet speeds of one gigabyte or more, Wells County ranks near the top of the list for Northeast Indiana. As more work activity is leaving the office environment and employees have the opportunity to work from home, this will make Wells County an attractive destination community.



Travel Time to Fort Wayne International Airport. Green circle is 10 minutes; Red circle is 20 minutes



Population Growth and Community Success

While defining and measuring “success” for a community can be challenging, one commonly used indicator is population growth. Communities that are growing often have a mix of attractive assets which compel people to want to move to those communities. Population growth also means that more qualified workers will be available to fill job openings.

Wells County is part of the eleven-county region of northeast Indiana which has adopted a strategic goal to grow the population to one million by 2031¹. “We have a vision of becoming a region of one million people”, the Regional Partnership has stated, “by developing the quality of life needed to attract top talent and expand our business landscape.”

But using population growth as a measure of success has its limitations. Just because a community is growing doesn’t mean that those who live there experience a high quality of life. Indeed, there are many examples of communities where population growth was not matched by those amenities which make life enjoyable and productive: Strong local government, arts and cultural activities, and parks and recreational assets, to name just a few. Successful communities have the ability to provide local amenities even as their population increases.

Population growth is just one indicator of a successful community – but it is a starting point for our community needs assessment. If community success, then,

¹ The population of northeast Indiana in 2015 was 789,015.

is measured by population growth, how is Wells County faring in recent years?

The United States Census Bureau showed a population in Wells County of 28,197 in 2021.

Cities and towns within Wells County include:

<u>Place</u>	<u>Population</u>
Bluffton	10,318
Ossian	3,271
Zanesville	488
Markle	454
Uniondale	272
Poneto	173
Vera Cruz	69

Census data also indicate that Wells County is 95.7% white, with 3.3% of the population identifying as Hispanic or Latino, and 1.0% Black or African American. The population of Wells County contains 11,994 housing units – an average of 2.46 persons per household. 77.4% of homes in Wells County are owner-occupied.

While growth is in the low single digits, Wells County experienced an increase in population in each decennial census for the last 40 years. Since 1980, the population of Wells County has grown by 2,741 residents, or 10.8%.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Growth</u>
1980	25,401	
1990	25,984	2.3%
2000	27,600	6.2%
2010	27,636	.01%
2020	28,142	1.8%

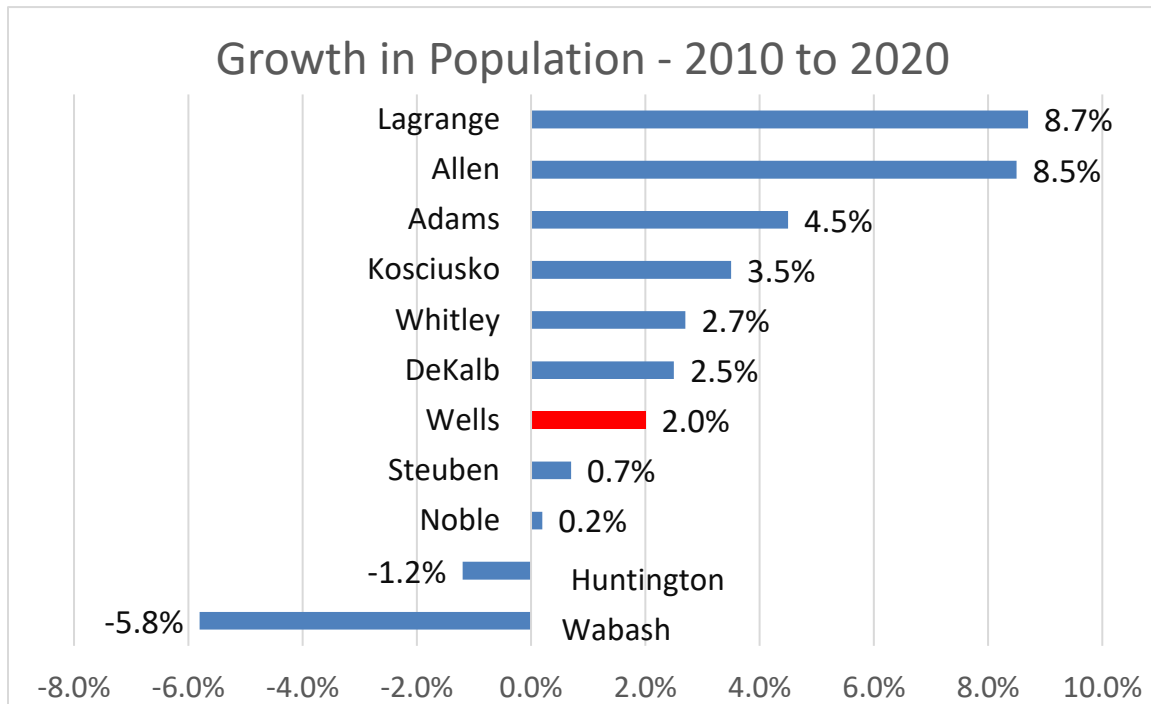
Though this represents a positive growth rate each decade (a fact that many counties in Indiana cannot claim), these growth rates are not as strong as state and national data. By contrast, over this same time period the population of the State of Indiana has grown by 22% while the United States population has grown by 46%.

The population growth in Wells County places it in the middle of growth rates for the eleven-county area of northeast Indiana. But two of the fastest growing counties in northeast Indiana require additional explanation. LaGrange and Adams Counties have significant Amish populations. Traditionally, this population has grown at a much faster rate than the non-Amish (or “English”) population.²

² Estimates put the Amish population growth rate at about 3.76 percent per year, more than five times the growth rate for the U.S. population as a whole.

In addition, Allen, as the urban center of the region, has experienced a growth of 8.5% in the last decade.

Wells County is placed in the middle tier of counties, with growth rates in the low single digits. Four counties experienced growth less than 1% or even negative in the last decade.



While population growth is an easy-to-obtain measure of community success, it is only one of many indices that can be used to measure the quality of life in a community. Another way to approach community success is to identify important issues and determine how successful the community is in dealing with those issues.

It is that approach that we are trying to achieve in this report. Based on extensive community discussions, we have identified four areas that will be critical to the future of Wells County. Those areas are:

- Workforce Development
- Child Care and Early Childhood Education
- Substance Use Disorder
- Affordable and Available Housing

This report will dig deeper into each of these areas, and also suggest ways that the Wells County Foundation can help deal with each issue.

Critical Area: Workforce Development

A strong and diverse workforce is the backbone of any local economy. The availability of skills enhancement programs enables workers to fill higher-wage jobs and, by doing so, boost economic prosperity both for their families and for the community.

Many communities face shortages of trained workers. Finding skilled workers is perhaps the most important barrier to growth for many companies – growth that could boost the local economy.

A survey³ conducted by Wells County Economic Development asked employers about the challenges they face when seeking to fill open positions. When asked, “What is the number one issue for your business?”, the most common response – given by 37% of respondents – was **lack of available candidates; there are more positions open than people applying.**

Even when candidates apply, there is a mismatch between the skills needed and the skills of the applicants. Of the survey respondents, 32% said that **the quality of candidates does not match the needs of the business.**

Data on educational attainment in Wells County indicates that the community is well positioned to take full advantage of workforce development programs. Wells County has a higher percentage of residents with a high school diploma than the average for the State of Indiana. While 89.3% of Indiana residents have a high school diploma, for Wells County the figure is 92.3%. But for those with a bachelor’s degree, the percentage in Wells County (18.7%) is lower than the state of Indiana (27.2%).

The fact is, however, that many highly skilled (and high paying) manufacturing jobs don’t require a bachelor’s degree. Adults who wish to upgrade their skills can earn a certification in areas such as welding, machining and robotics without holding a bachelor’s degree.

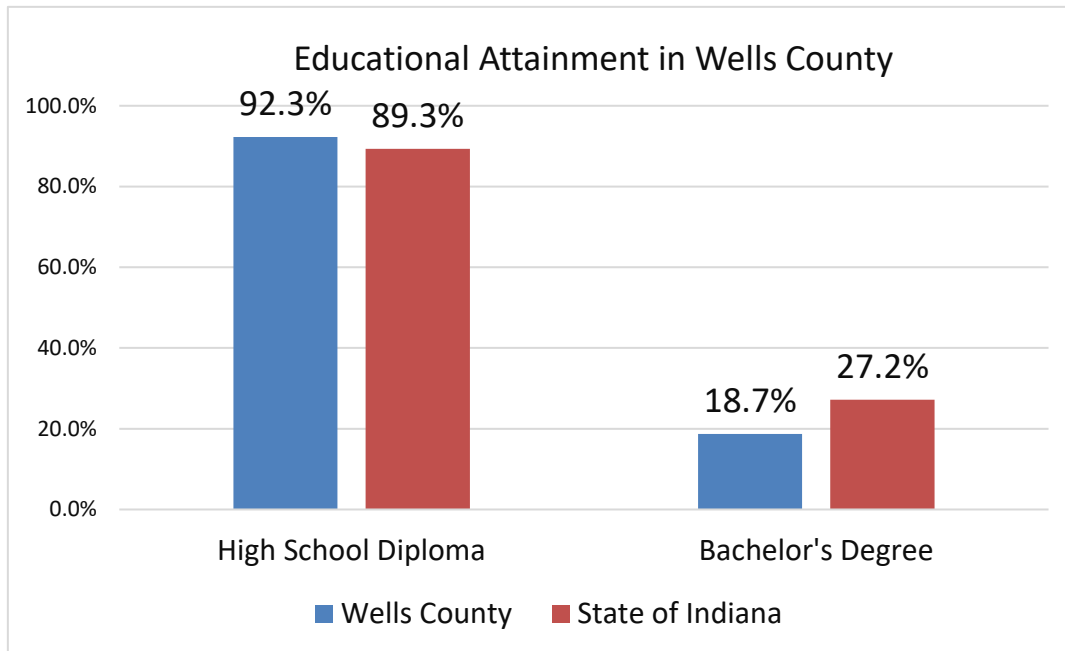
Our community discussions focused on two primary areas related to workforce development. The first involved **adult workforce training**, thereby increasing the number of post-high school adults who achieve high value certifications in targeted workforce areas.

A related focus of workforce development will be to enhance **future talent pipeline**. In this area, schools and the community collaborate to provide apprenticeships, mentoring programs and other engaging learning opportunities prior to when the student graduates from high school.

³ Online survey conducted by Wells County Economic Development, April 2022. The survey had 77 respondents.

Our discussions with community leaders indicate that there is a recognition that the three public school districts⁴ do a good job of providing training, certifications and internships for students prior to high school graduation.

The opportunities are not as strong, however, for returning adults who wish to upgrade their skills. One important issue for returning adults is that many of the training programs offered are located outside of Wells County and the travel required may reduce participation rates.



Ivy Tech, for example, offers classes in high-demand areas such as fabrication technology, welding and machining. But the closest Ivy Tech facilities are in Fort Wayne (30 miles away) or Marion (35 miles). Portland, Indiana has the John Jay Center for Learning – but that is a 45-minute drive from Bluffton.

Of course, some of this training could be offered remotely – meaning that returning adults would not need to travel to an out-of-county facility. But for important “hands on” training, a facility located in Wells County could increase participation rates.

⁴ The three public school districts are Bluffton-Harrison MSD, Northern Wells Community Schools, and Southern Wells Community Schools.

Potential Community Foundation Strategies

Based on what we learned in conversations with community leaders regarding workforce development, several strategies could be considered:

Support programs which identify and publicize those workforce skills which are in high demand by manufacturing firms in Wells County. The Wells County Economic Development organization would be the logical partner to both collect this information and share the data found with the community.

Help connect youth with education and training programs that relate directly to existing and burgeoning industry sectors. A critical piece of the rural workforce puzzle is ensuring that the limited educational programs available in rural settings match the skill and labor needs of the community. It is important that programs create clear career pathways from school to employment. Funding career technical education (CTE) can be supported through the three public school districts.

Provide scholarships for adults who wish to upgrade their skills and increase their income. Community foundations have the ability to award scholarships for those seeking to upgrade their skills. While we typically think of scholarships as financial support for high school seniors going on to college, scholarships could be awarded to returning adults wishing to take advantage of training programs in high demand areas.

Work with educational providers to offer certification programs in Wells County. Groups such as Ivy Tech or the John Jay Center for Learning may be willing to offer classes within Wells County – if it would make financial sense for them to do so. The Community Foundation could consider making a grant to entities such as these to encourage them to offer classes onsite in Wells County – thereby eliminating long travel times for students.

Critical Area: Child Care and Early Childhood Education

The early years of life are critical to the development of a child. In Wells County, we want to ensure that each child receives the developmental supports they need to grow into healthy adults. Access to affordable, quality Early Care and Education (ECE) also makes it possible for adult care givers to work, improve their standard of living, and fill local employers' talent needs.

Children receive a wide variety of benefits from a strong system of early education. These benefits include:

- *Expanding Brain Capacity* - From birth to age 5, a child's brain develops more than at any other time in life, and early brain development has a lasting impact on a child's ability to learn and succeed in school and life.
- *Developing Social and Emotional Skills* - Socializing with people other than family is an important part of childhood education.
- *Understanding the Process of Learning* - If children aren't exposed to a positive learning experience, they can lose their natural enthusiasm. Early childhood education professionals know how foster learning through play in a fun and exciting way. Once children figure out that learning can be exciting and rewarding, they can accept the challenges that the process brings and enjoy being active learners.
- *Improving Concentration* - Young children have short attention spans. Early childhood education programs give them the opportunity to discover new environments, experiences, and connections while working on their ability to focus.

Communities benefit if they develop strong systems of Early Care and Education. Besides being highly beneficial for children and their parents, quality ECE can lead to higher incomes, higher labor rate participation, better health and a lower crime rate⁵.

Early Childhood Education in Wells County

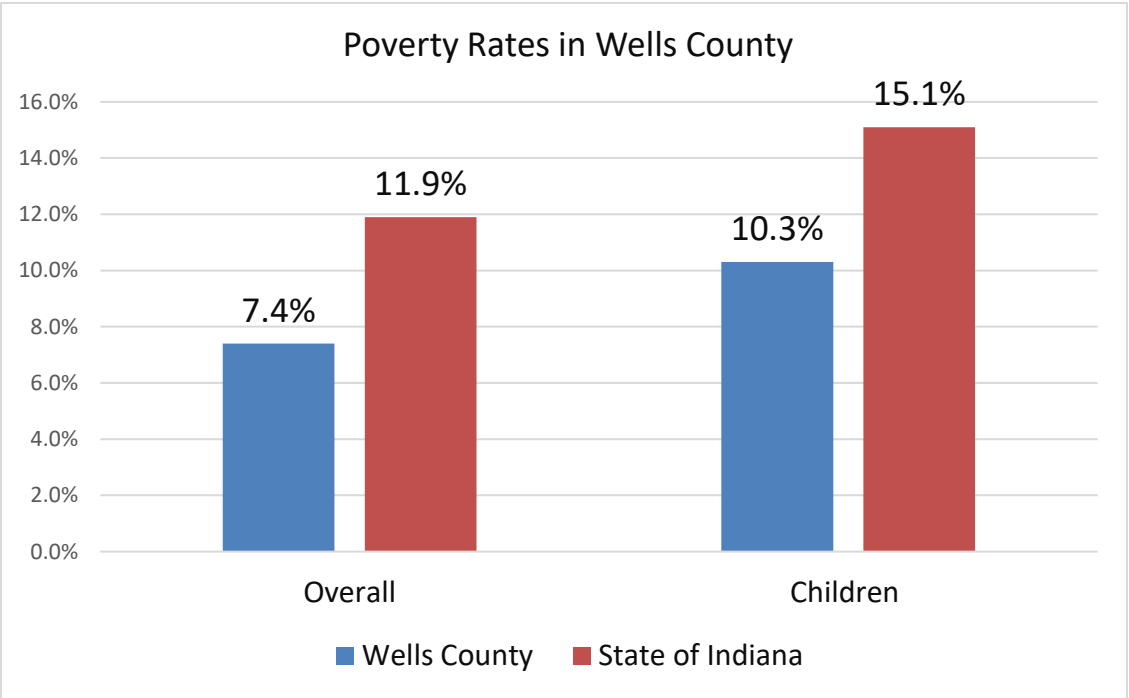
Wells County has nearly 7,000 children under the age of 18. Of these, just over 10% live in a household with income levels below the poverty line (though this is significantly less than the statewide average poverty rate for children of 15.1%).

⁵ Perhaps the most well-known study in this area is the High/Scope Perry preschool project, a 22-year study which concluded that young children who did not participate in a quality early education program were five times more likely to become chronic lawbreakers as adults.

Number of Children – Wells County	
Age Group	Number
Ages 0-4	1,752
Ages 5-9	1,976
Ages 10-14	1,966
Ages 15-17	1,172
<i>Total Under Age 18</i>	<i>6,866</i>

But the economics of childcare present a challenge. It costs an average of nearly \$6,000 per year for high-quality early education for one child with infant and toddler care being even more expensive. This presents a budgeting challenge for most families – but the problem is particularly acute for a family in poverty.

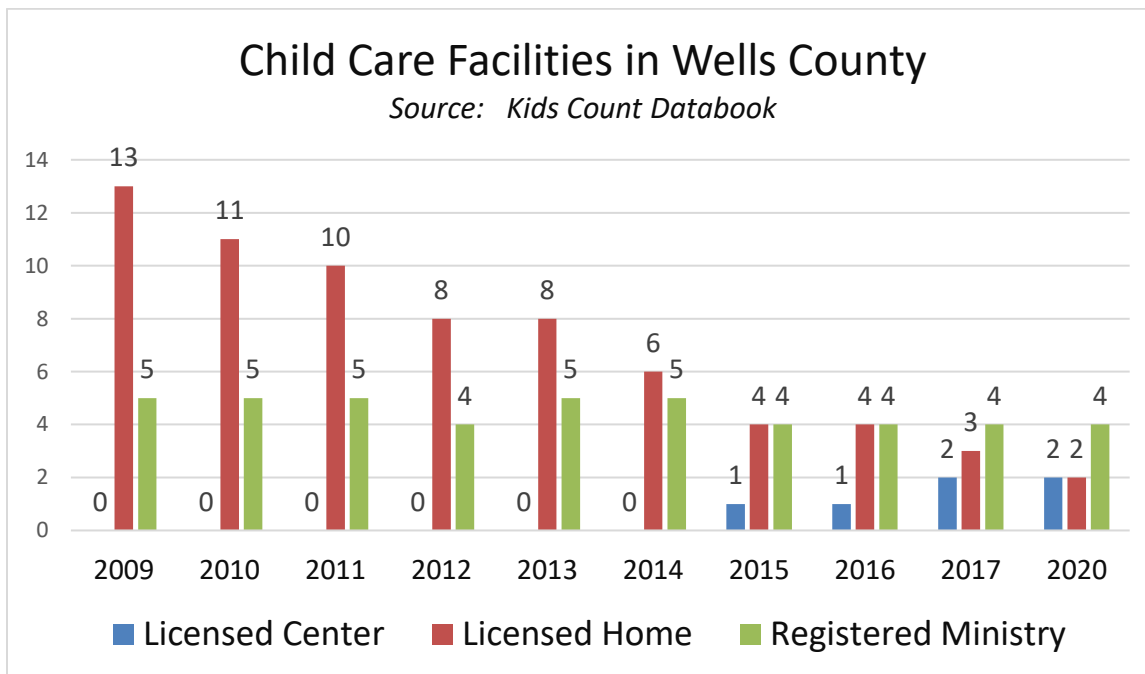
Eligible childcare facilities in the State of Indiana are classified as one of three different categories: a licensed childcare center, a licensed childcare home, and an unregistered childcare ministry.



A **Licensed Child Care Center** is a program in a nonresidential building where at least one child receives childcare from a provider; a **Licensed Child Care Home** is a program in a residential structure in which at least six (6) children (not including the children for whom the provider is a parent) at any time receive childcare from a provider.

The third category is **Unlicensed Registered Child Care Ministry**. These are childcare programs operated by a church or religious ministry that is a religious organization exempt from federal income taxation under Section 501 of the Internal Revenue Code.

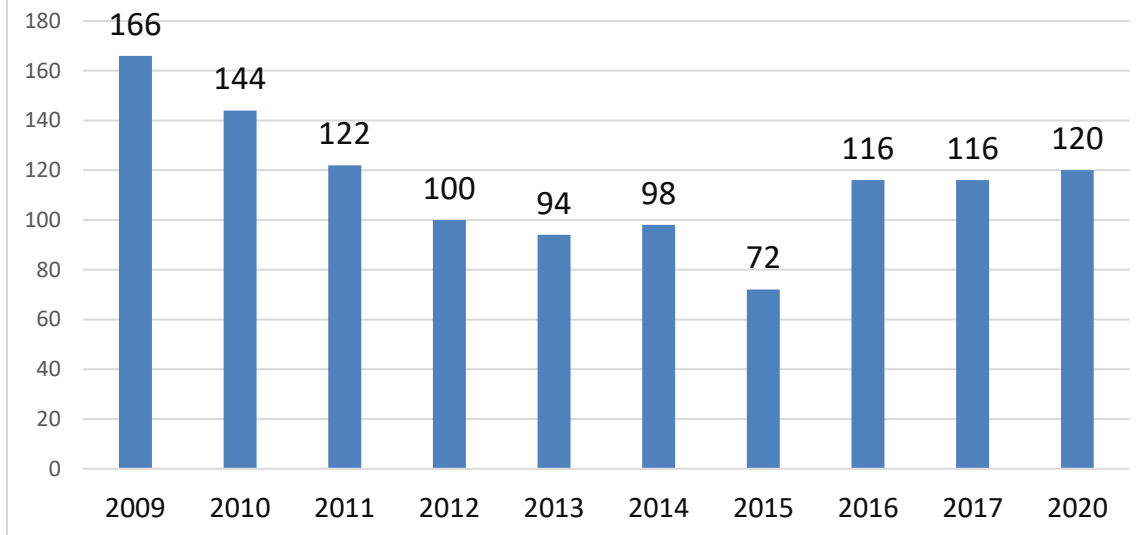
Data over the last decade shows a general decrease in the number of childcare facilities and the overall capacity in Wells County. In 2009 the County had 13 licensed day care homes; by 2020, that number had fallen to 2. There were 5 registered ministries in 2009; that number dropped to 4. The only area of growth was for licensed childcare centers, from none in 2009 to two in 2020.



The data shows a similar pattern for the capacity of childcare facilities. In 2009 Wells County had 166 available slots for children at either a center, a home or a registered ministry. That number fell by more than half to 72 in 2015. Since that time, the capacity has risen to 120 – a significant jump, but still less than the capacity in 2009.

Capacity of Child Care Facilities - Wells County

Source: Kids Count Databook



The most significant federal program for early childhood education is **Head Start**. Head Start is a federal program that promotes the school readiness of children under five from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social and emotional development. Importantly, Head Start tries to emphasize the role of parents as their child's first and most important teacher.

Wells County Head Start is operated by Community and Family Services and is located in the Bluffton-Harrison Elementary School.⁶

Another important childcare provider in Wells County is the Wells County Early Learning Center, located the Caylor-Nickel Foundation Family YMCA building. The YMCA Early Learning Center (ELC) partners with parents to provide a safe and nurturing learning environment that promotes a child's emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development.

In order to improve the quality of child care programs, states across the nation are using Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, such as the one here in Indiana, Paths to QUALITY Rating and Improvement Systems assess the quality of care within a program, work to improve that quality level, and give families an easy to recognize symbol that makes the difficult decision of choosing child care easier.

⁶ Another federal program in this area is Early Head Start, which serves infants, toddlers and pregnant women and their families who have incomes below the federal poverty level. Currently, Early Head Start programming is not offered in Wells County.

The four PTQ levels are:

- **Level One:** Health and safety needs of children met
- **Level Two:** Environment supports children's learning
- **Level Three:** Planned curriculum guides child development and school readiness
- **Level Four:** National accreditation (the highest indicator of quality) is achieved

According to the Indiana Family and Social Services (FSSA) website, the following centers, homes and ministries are available in or near Wells County. The Paths to Quality level is also shown. (Note: Registered ministries are exempt from the PTQ ratings system.)

<u>Name</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>PTQ Level</u>	<u>Type</u>
Wells County Early Learning Center	Bluffton	3	Center
Muddy Feet Early Learning Center	Markle	3	Home
Bluffton Head Start	Bluffton	3	Center
First Presbyterian Church	Bluffton	N/A	Ministry
New Life Christian School	Bluffton	N/A	Ministry
Ring Around the Rosy Daycare	Bluffton	2	Home
Bluffton-Harrison Elementary School	Bluffton	3	Center
Learning Tree Academy	Ossian	N/A	Ministry
Children's Corner Day Care	Ossian	N/A	Ministry

Potential Community Foundation Strategies

Given the critical importance of childcare and early childhood education for both childhood growth and for economic development, the Community Foundation has a wide range of options to promote this area.

For facilities operated by charities or churches, the Foundation could **provide grants** for operating support or for, say, the construction of new playground equipment at the site. This financial support could be for an existing facility, or for a new startup.

The Foundation could also provide **scholarships** for children to attend an early childhood education program. These scholarships must be awarded based on non-discriminatory criteria (such as family income).

Beyond financial support, the Foundation could use its community leadership skills to help **convene stakeholders to discuss the issue** and keep in touch with current news regarding childcare and early childhood education.

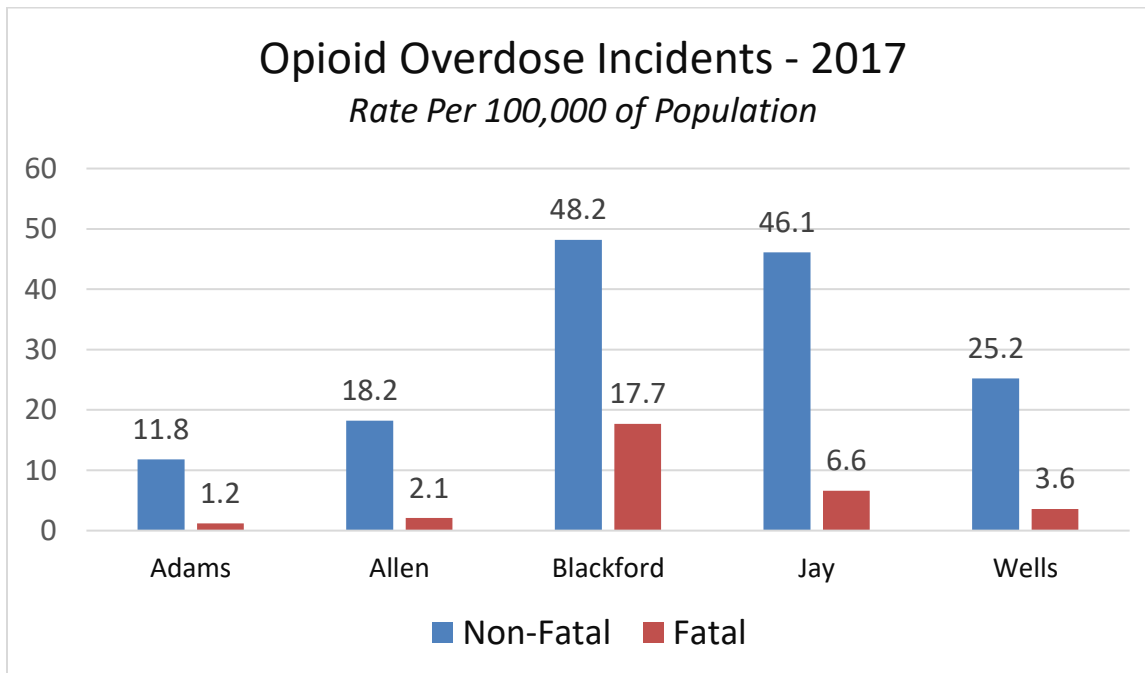
Critical Area: Substance Use Disorder

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a behavioral health disorder that affects millions in the United States, involving heavy use of alcohol and/or drugs. It is an issue that has grown in prevalence in recent years with rising rates of fatalities from opioids.

The United States has struggled for years with the problem of drug addiction and related drug overdose deaths. Early data suggest that the pandemic has only exacerbated the problem. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, drug-overdose deaths in 2021 topped 100,000 for the first time in history. More than 107,000 people in the U.S. died from drug overdoses last year, a 15% increase from 2020. The U.S. has recorded more than one million overdose deaths since 2000, and more than half of those came in the past seven years.⁷

Much of the increase can be traced to fentanyl, a powerful synthetic drug. At the same time, there are a rising number of fatalities linked to methamphetamines and cocaine.

Wells County has not been immune from the problems of substance use disorder. When scaled to reflect drug overdoses per 100,000 of population, the rate in Wells County is less than Blackford and Jay Counties, but higher than Allen and Adams.



⁷ Drug-Overdose Deaths Reached a Record in 2021, Fueled by Fentanyl, Wall Street Journal, May 11, 2022

Our research uncovered two groups which are working to address substance abuse issues in Wells County, Citizens Against Drug Abuse (CADA) and Wells Resources for Providers and People (WRAPP).

Citizens Against Drug Abuse (CADA) was established in Wells County in 1988. The mission of CADA is to investigate alcohol, tobacco, and other drug problems in our community; coordinate efforts to reduce these problems; and examine funding of programs designed to achieve this goal.

The CADA coalition serves as the Local Coordinating Council for Wells County and has been granted tax-exempt status. The coalition is governed by state statute to distribute drug/alcohol interdiction fees collected by the local courts to help fund programming to address substance use issues in Wells County.

In order to develop a strategy to tackle substance use disorder in Wells County, CADA must submit an annual Comprehensive Community Plan to Indiana Criminal Justice Institute (ICJI). That report found that **there is a high incidence of substance use disorder in the County and that Wells County offers limited treatment and recovery services.**

Some of the data noted supporting the problem is as follows:

- 12.3% of random student drug testing in the county high schools (2020-21 school year) came back positive for drug use
- 177 (16.3%) of all adult arrests were for DUI in 2021; 317 (29.1%) of all adult arrests were drugs.
- 295 clients received services for chemical dependency in Wells County in 2021
 - 118 at Park Center
 - 45 at Bowen Center
 - 132 at Renovate Counseling services

Yet the report also found reason for hope, noting that programs for youth education on the dangers of substance use are available in the County. In addition, the report noted that the options for treatment and support are slowly increasing in the County.

Another group – Wells Resources Available for People and Providers (WRAPP) began as a collaboration with United Way in 2012 to find a way to coordinate services and identify gaps in services. Monthly WRAPP meetings began in 2013 with the purpose of connecting the non-profit community. Meetings provide an opportunity to discuss common issues and share resources on a variety of topics, including mental health and substance use.

Potential Community Foundation Strategies

The Community Foundation has the advantage of the availability of the Comprehensive Community Plan created for Wells County through the Indiana Commission to Combat Drug Abuse. One clear strategy for the Wells County Foundation would be to help develop the programs recommended in this report which are designed achieve the strategic goals in the plan.

Recommended strategies could include:

- In the area of substance use disorder among youth, support programs that seek to **improve and increase community attachment and recognition for the youth population** as a means to increase protective factors against substance use.
- Increase the **availability of substance use disorder treatment and recovery services** in Wells County.
- Support options to **remove barriers to treatment and support services**, including cost of services and transportation needs.
- Encourage and support **community education efforts** regarding substance use to increase awareness of the dangers, promote available resources and reduce the stigma associated with receiving treatment.
- Support **harm reduction** programs.
- Support **law enforcement** and the **judicial system**.
- Support **programming targeted to middle school students throughout the county**.

Critical Area: Housing

Our discussions with community leaders generated numerous comments regarding the need for additional housing in Wells County. While the lack of affordable housing for lower income families was seen as a critical need, there is a lack of available housing at all income levels.

A recent study⁸ highlighted the issues faced regarding housing in Wells County.

- The **housing stock in Wells County is aging**, as 30% of homes in the County were built in 1939 or earlier.
- **Home values are lower** in Wells County than in the Metro⁹ area or the rest of the state
- **Rents are low** – impeding new multi-family development
- **Rate of home ownership is high**, but declining
- **Lack of land and infrastructure** is a perceived impediment to new housing development

This lack of housing has been reaffirmed with separate reports. For example, in a survey conducted in April of 2022, employers noted that two of the most significant hurdles to growth in Wells County were the lack of affordable housing and the lack of available housing for any income level.¹⁰

The supply and demand for housing are determined by a number of factors. Interest rates, household income, and average monthly rentals all influence the price of existing homes and the development of new homes.

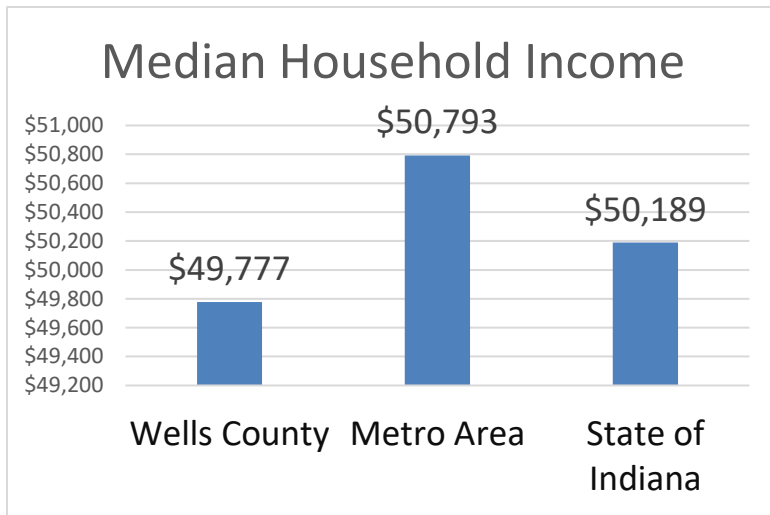
Likely the most significant factor explaining the lack of new housing is the slow population growth in the County. As noted earlier in this report, population growth in Wells County lags behind state and national growth rates. The housing study notes that from 2010-16 Wells County averaged just 45 new residents a year, versus 2,400 per year in the Metro area. This means that much of the new housing is driven by households in transition, not new residents.

In Wells County, aggregate data appears to suggest that households in the County have fewer financial resources to pay for housing than in other areas. Median Household Income is lower in Wells County than for either the Metro

⁸ *Wells County Housing Assessment and Growth Strategy*, Development Concepts, Incorporated, September 2017.

⁹ The Fort Wayne MSA Metro Area includes Allen, Wells, and Whitley counties.

¹⁰ Survey conducted by Wells County Economic Development in April of 2022. There were 77 employers who responded to the survey.

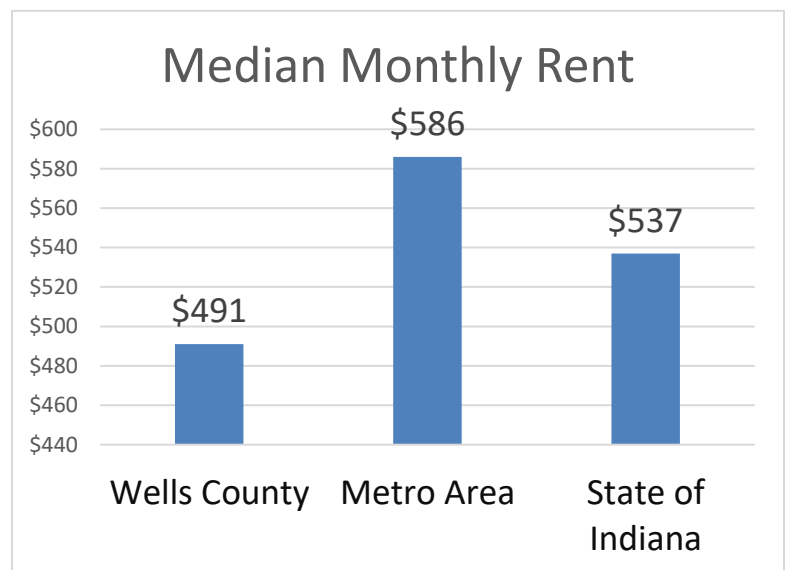


Area or the State of Indiana. Average monthly rents show a similar pattern. While the average monthly rent was \$537 in the State of Indiana and \$586 in the Metro Area, the average monthly rent in Wells County was just \$491 – 16% below the Metro average.

While these differences seem relatively small, in the highly competitive area of new housing construction these

disparities can be significant. In northeast Indiana a residential home builder would have the choice of building a new home just about anywhere in the 11-county region. Assuming the costs of construction are similar throughout northeast Indiana, that builder could sell or rent that new home for a significantly higher price in, say, Cedar Creek Township in Allen County than in Bluffton.

While it is likely true that the costs of building materials are relatively constant throughout northeast Indiana, one important cost component may vary significantly – the cost of land. Acquiring a parcel of land would be significantly cheaper near Bluffton than it would be near Fort Wayne.



This suggests a strategy that could lead to more new housing for Wells County. If parcels of buildable land can be made available – along with utility and sewer infrastructure – that could be enough to entice a builder to place their new housing development in Wells County.

The Report suggested a two-prong approach to increase the available of housing in Wells County.

First, it was recommended that the County develop a **land use policy** that would clearly define those areas targeted for growth, as well as those areas that would remain rural.¹¹ At present, much of the growth in housing is occurring on land that is currently used for agricultural purposes. A land use policy would define sections of the county targeted for potential new housing developments.

One advantage of identifying growth areas would be the ability to extend supporting infrastructure to those targeted areas. Sewer, water, gas and electricity could be established in those areas, thereby reducing the cost of building new homes.

The report also recommended implementing **supportive community programming** to encourage growth. This programming could address issues such as workforce development, business expansion, and investment in community assets such as parks and bike paths.

One obvious community program that could warrant support from the community foundation is an effort underway to promote travel and tourism within Wells County. In a 2019 report¹², it was suggested that Wells County be more aggressive in touting the assets it has to offer. The report pointed out that more intentional efforts at publicizing the quality of life in Wells County could lead not only to more visitors but to more permanent residents, as well.

Among the recommendations in that report were:

- **Create a tourism authority**, which would be responsible for tourism and recreation development
- **Make it easy to find information about Wells County**, using both online and print strategies
- **Continue downtown development in Bluffton**, in part by encouraging the development of restaurants and craft beer outlets
- **Reinvigorate the Farmer's Market**, perhaps by housing it in a permanent structure
- **Upgrade signage**, both within the county and outside the county, to make it easier to find important community assets; and
- **Invest in recreation along the Wabash River**, which is a major natural asset and could attract interest if more designated landing sites were available.

¹¹ 85% of land in Wells County is used for agriculture.

¹²Webster, Craig, Ph.D. and Alexis Palmer, *From Bland to a Brand: Wells County and its Tourism and Leisure Potential*, July 11, 2019

Potential Community Foundation Strategies

The Wells County Foundation can support housing strategies in a number of ways.

In the area of **housing for low-income families**, the Foundation could provide financial support to charities – such as Habitat for Humanity – who develop housing targeted to needy families. Some charities also have programs which refurbish older housing and make those homes available to lower income households.

Charities which provide **transitional housing** could also be given grants. Transitional housing could be for the homeless, community reentry for those who have been incarcerated, or those who are victims of domestic violence.

Even in the category of those who don't qualify as "needy", the community foundation could provide financial support. One part of the IRS definition of "charitable" is a category which includes "relieving the burden of government". If, for example, a local unit of government (County, city or town) embarked on a project to **develop a parcel of land targeted towards new housing development**, the Foundation could provide financial support to make the project a success. (You could, if you wish, target your financial support for a playground or walking trail within the development.)

Support the tourism and marketing efforts currently underway designed to promote Wells County as a good place to visit and live.

Finally, the Foundation could include as part of leadership activities **convening groups of key stakeholders** to identify and address issues that are impeding the growth of available housing. In addition, once supporting community programming is identified, the Foundation can **provide financial support to important community projects** designed to attract new residents to Wells County.

Partner Organizations

As the Wells County Foundation seeks to maximize their effectiveness in improving the quality of life for everyone in Wells County, there are a number of organizations which could be strong partners in helping to address the issues outlined in this report. Some of these organizations are noted below.

Bluffton Parks Department

The Bluffton Parks & Recreation Department maintains, develops, and manages parks located within the corporation limits of the City of Bluffton. The goal of the Parks Department -- to create welcoming parks and recreation services for all -- aligns closely with the goals of the Community Foundation.

The Park Maintenance staff is responsible for trails, parks, a swimming pool, 2-splash pads, the city gym & weight room, baseball and softball diamonds, tennis and pickleball courts, outdoor pavilions, an indoor event room, and a boxing facility. The Department is overseen by the Park Board, which is responsible for land acquisition, park development, programming, and park management.

In September of 2021, the Parks Department approved a five-year master plan. Many of the elements of the Plan could be considered for support from the Community Foundation. For example, plans are underway to expand Poka-bache bike trail which will connect Pokagon State Park in Angola to Oubache State Park in Bluffton -- a distance of 81 miles. The project will certainly be popular when completed and will likely have the effect of bringing a significant number of visitors to Wells County.

Bluffton NOW

Bluffton NOW (New, Old, Wonderful) is a nonprofit organization committed to renovating and revitalizing downtown Bluffton by creating a unique place to gather and increasing interest in shopping locally. The group also manages a Farmer's Market and Artisan's Market.

Community and Family Services

Community and Family Services offers a number of services directly related to issues raised in this report, including Head Start, Section 8 Housing, the Indiana Emergency Rental Assistance program, the Rapid Rehousing & Homeless Prevention (RRHP) program, and the Weatherization Assistance Program which provides energy conservation measures to reduce the utility bills of low-income residents.

Creative Arts Council

The Creative Arts Council of Wells County is a nonprofit organization seeking to provide quality arts programming to Wells County and the surrounding area. Their mission is to encourage, present and promote the arts for the benefit of the community. Their programming includes the Ballentine Gallery, Wells Community Theater, School of Ballet and other events and classes.

United Way of Wells County

United Way began as a Community Chest and then became United Fund of Wells County in 1966. In 2020, they raised \$230,000 in gifts and disbursed \$73,000 to their partner agencies.

The United Way would be the logical partner to participate in the community leadership and convening items noted in this report.

Wells County Economic Development

Wells County Economic Development is the organization with primary responsibility for economic development in the county. They are a non-profit organization with a mission of coordinating community-wide efforts to facilitate economic growth by focusing on the retention and attraction of jobs and fostering entrepreneurship.

WCED has also supported the creation of research and reports on various issues, some of which have been cited in this report.

Appendix I: Research Reports Cited

Bluffton Parks and Recreation Board; *Five Year Master Plan 2022-2026*; Prepared by Brandy Feichter, Superintendent; September 30, 2021

Bluffton High School - School Improvement Plan, 2021-22

Indiana Commission to Combat Drug Abuse, *Wells County Comprehensive Community Plan*, Citizens Against Drug Abuse, 2020.

Wells County Housing Assessment and Growth Strategy, Development Concepts, Incorporated, September 2017.

Webster, Craig, Ph.D. and Alexis Palmer, *From Bland to a Brand: Wells County and its Tourism and Leisure Potential*, July 11, 2019

Appendix II: How We Gathered our Data

The process for developing the 2022 Wells County Needs Assessment included a variety of sources to identify the most compelling needs in the community. Our method of gathering information consisted of the following:

- Luncheons held at the offices of the Community Foundation where identified issues were raised and discussed. 56 different volunteers attended at least one of these luncheons.
- Interviews with key leaders in Wells County
- A review of important research documents for the County. The citations for those research studies are included in Appendix I of this report.