



THE VOICES OF SINGLE MOMS

***A REPRESENTATIVE SUMMARY OF SINGLE
MOM EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL SERVICES
IN THE HOLLAND/ZEELAND AREA***

PRESENTED AUGUST 1, 2024

BY MOVEMENT WEST MICHIGAN

ZEELAND, MI

***THIS PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE IN PART BY A
GRANT FROM THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF
THE HOLLAND AND ZEELAND AREA***



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University's Institute for Quantitative Social Science has identified six domains of human flourishing: happiness and life satisfaction; mental and physical health; meaning and purpose; character and virtue; close social relationships; financial and material stability. These six domains of flourishing are interconnected. Family, work, religious community, community supports, and education all provide pathways to flourishing.



Movement West Michigan asks, "What if we worked together so that all families in our community can flourish?" In this project, we set out to center the voice of one particular type of family within our community: those led by "single moms." Perhaps unsurprisingly, like the domains and paths of human flourishing identified by Harvard, the challenges, barriers, and needs of this particular demographic within our community are multifaceted, complex, and interconnected.

How do we help our community be a place where every family can flourish? It takes all of us – social service agencies, businesses, churches, philanthropists, nonprofit organizations, and more – working together to listen, to change, and to welcome *together*. We hope that this report helps us do precisely that.



Rev. Kory Plockmeyer
Executive Director



PROJECT INTRODUCTION

Background

The experiences of single mothers in Holland and Zeeland, Michigan, present a unique and multifaceted portrait of resilience, determination, and community interdependence. Upon receiving a grant from The Community Foundation of Holland/Zeeland in fall 2023, Movement West Michigan embarked on a collaborative journey to discover ways local churches, non-profits & social service agencies can better serve single moms in our community.

Purpose of the Report

This report aims to summarize the challenges and triumphs faced by these women as they navigate the complexities of single parenthood. We encourage local churches, non-profits, and social service agencies to utilize this information to inspire improvements to their programs, resources, and support services for single moms.

Scope of the Report

The following information summarizes feedback received at nine 1-hour single mom focus groups in Holland/Zeeland area between March - June 2024. While local partner agencies offered space and recruitment assistance, each focus group was facilitated by Movement West Michigan. One group was hosted in Spanish and eight were in English. Each mom was compensated for her time with a free meal, free childcare, and a \$40 visa gift card. We celebrate the courage and vulnerability of these women who chose to use their voices to advocate for change.



FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

3

2

church partners

7

agency partners

51

single mom participants



FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

4

LOCATION OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

2.0% - 49460

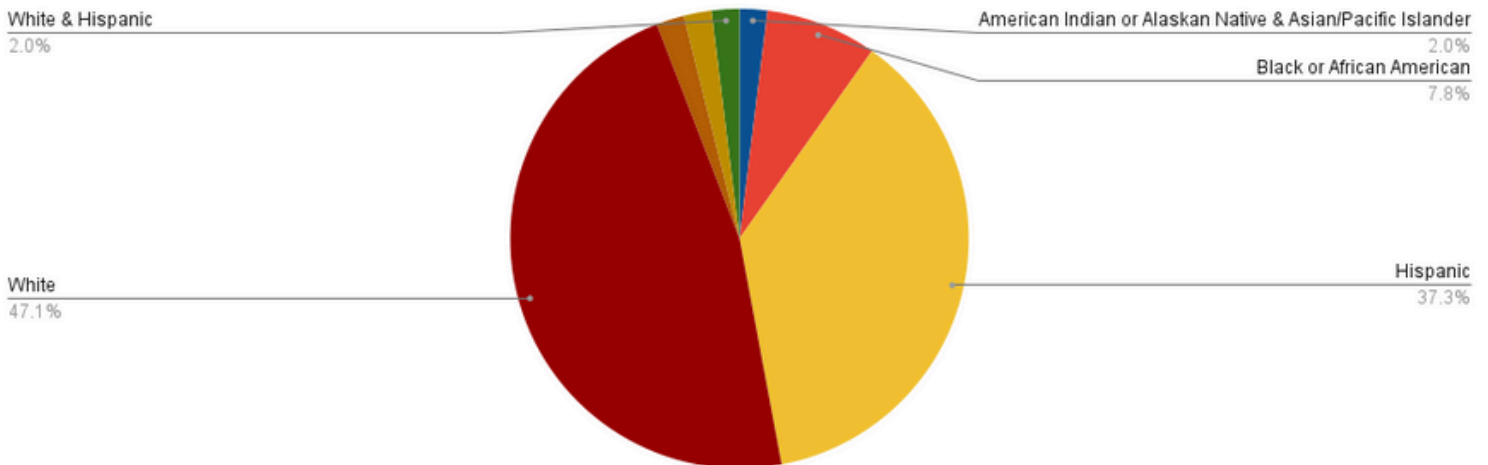
2.0% - 49417

14.0% - 49464

38.0% - 49424

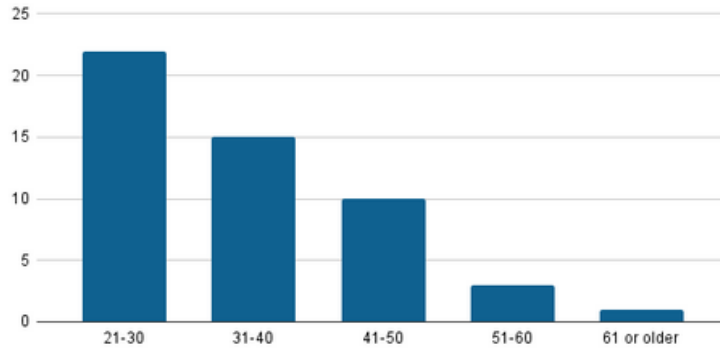
44.0% - 49423

ETHNICITY OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS



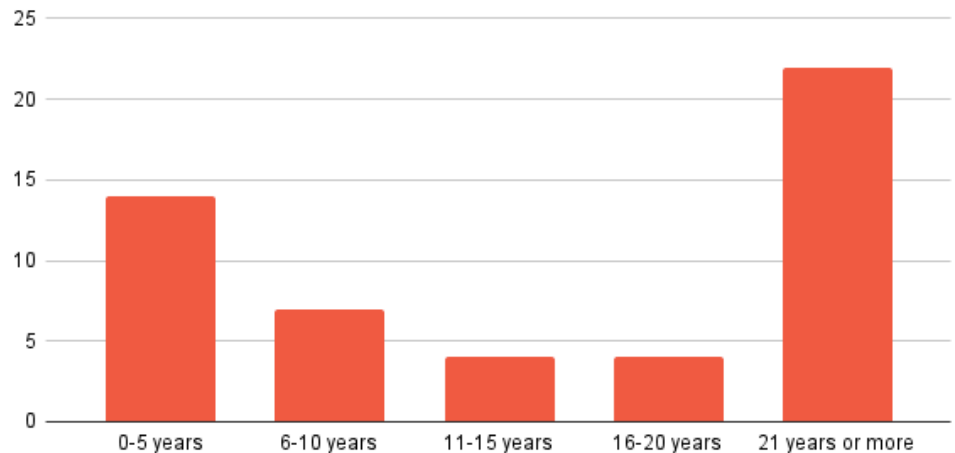
FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

5



AGE OF FOCUS
GROUP
PARTICIPANTS

HOW LONG HAVE
YOU LIVED IN THE
HOLLAND/ZEELAND
AREA?



88% * 1-3 KIDS *

HOW MANY KIDS?

12% * 4-6 KIDS *



WHO WELCOMES WELL?

6

Single mom participants were asked to identify where they have had positive experiences of genuine welcome at local non-profits, churches, and agencies.

ORGANIZATIONS MENTIONED ONCE:

- Alpha Women's Center (GR)
- Awana
- Beechwood Church: Playzone
- BLVD – Breakfast with Babies
- Calvary on 8th
- Care Closets
- Christ Memorial Church
- Christian Brothers Auto
- City on a Hill
- DeVos Children's Hospital (GR)
- DHHS – case workers
- Eagles Wings Church
- Early On
- Ecobuns
- Family Church
- Fostering Faith
- Girls & Boys Club
- Harrington's Closet
- Harvest Stand Ministries
- Heights of Hope
- Hope College
- La casa de Mi Padre
- Lakeshore CDS
- Little Kingdom Warriors
- Maternal Infant Health Program
- MomsBloom
- MOPS at Beechwood
- My House Ministry
- New Groningen Elementary (ZPS)
- On Point
- OOTL
- Pathways to Better Health
- Planned Parenthood
- Reach for Recovery
- Solar & Associates
- The Foundation Church
- The Point Church – Bright Moms
- Upward Bound Ministries
- Venema Services
- Victory Point
- West Elementary (HPS)
- WIC
- Woodside Elementary (WOPS)
- Zeeland Adult Education

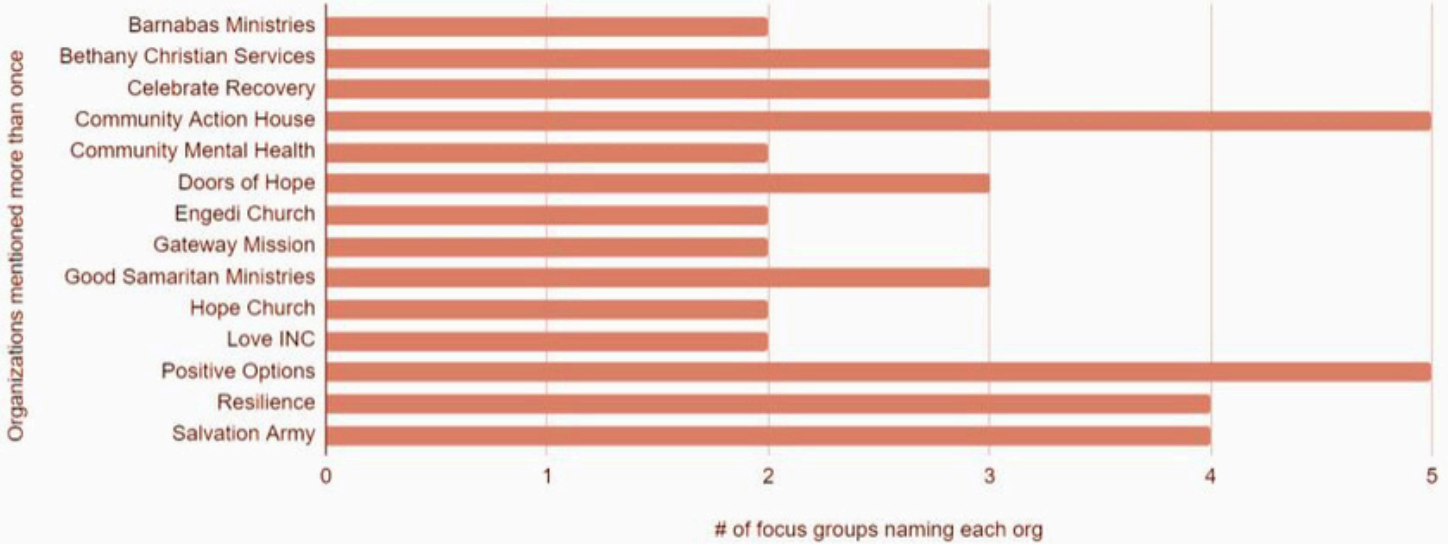


WHO WELCOMES WELL?

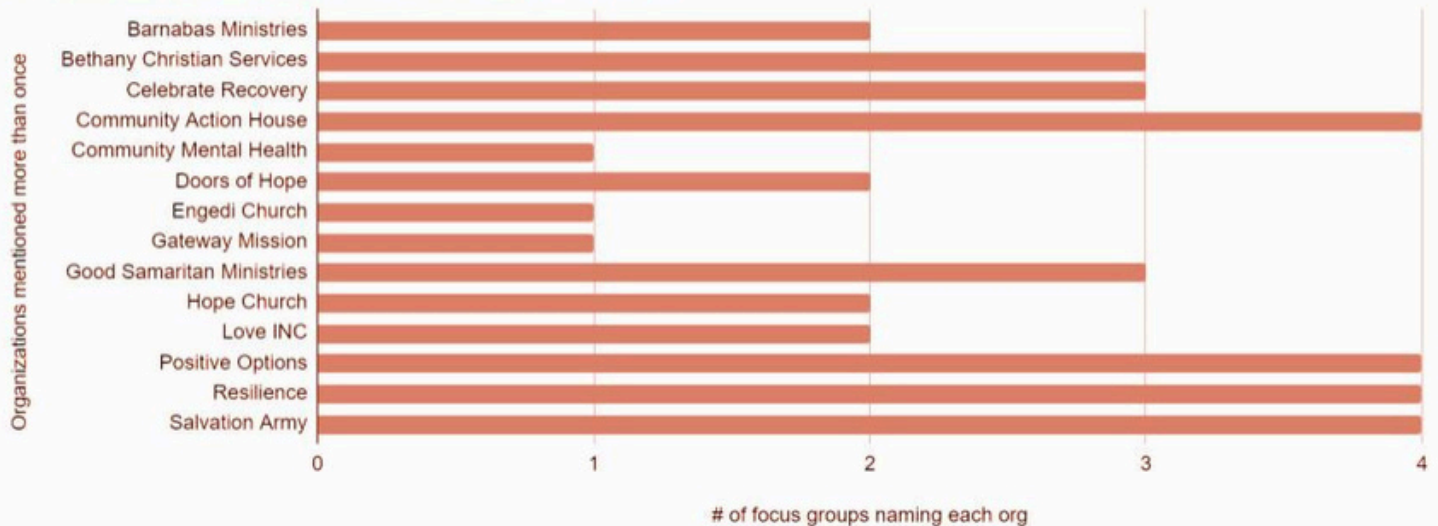
7

Single mom participants were asked to identify where they have had positive experiences of genuine welcome at local non-profits, churches, and agencies. The charts below outline the frequency in which organizations were mentioned during our focus groups.

1. Who welcomes well?



2. Who welcomes well? (controlling for host)



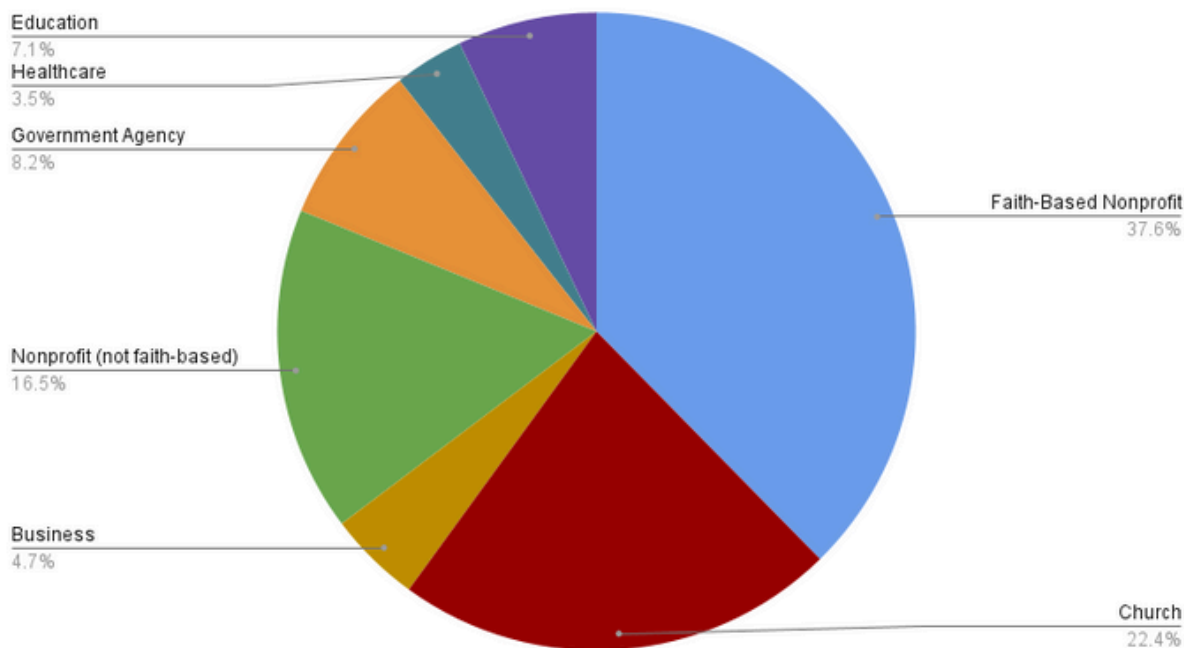
WHO WELCOMES WELL?

8



Single mom participants were asked to identify where they have had positive experiences of genuine welcome at local non-profits, churches, and agencies. The chart below categorizes the organizations mentioned by type (ie: education, non-profit, church, etc.).

Who Welcomes Well? (Types of Organizations)

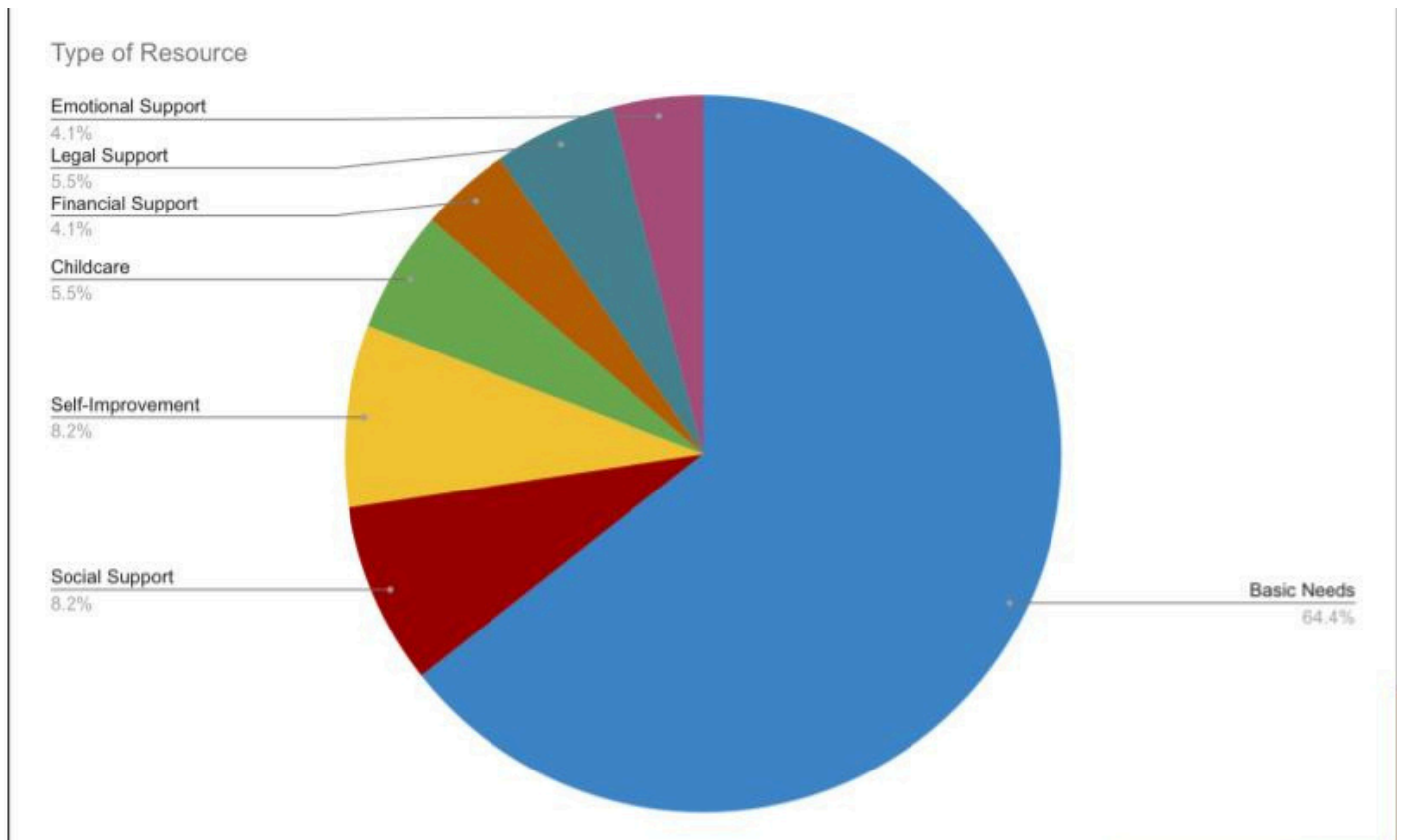


LOCAL RESOURCES

What resources exist in our community to support you as a single mother?

Single mom participants were asked to identify local resources that have been particularly helpful in the Holland/Zeeland area. The following general categories arose as most significant.

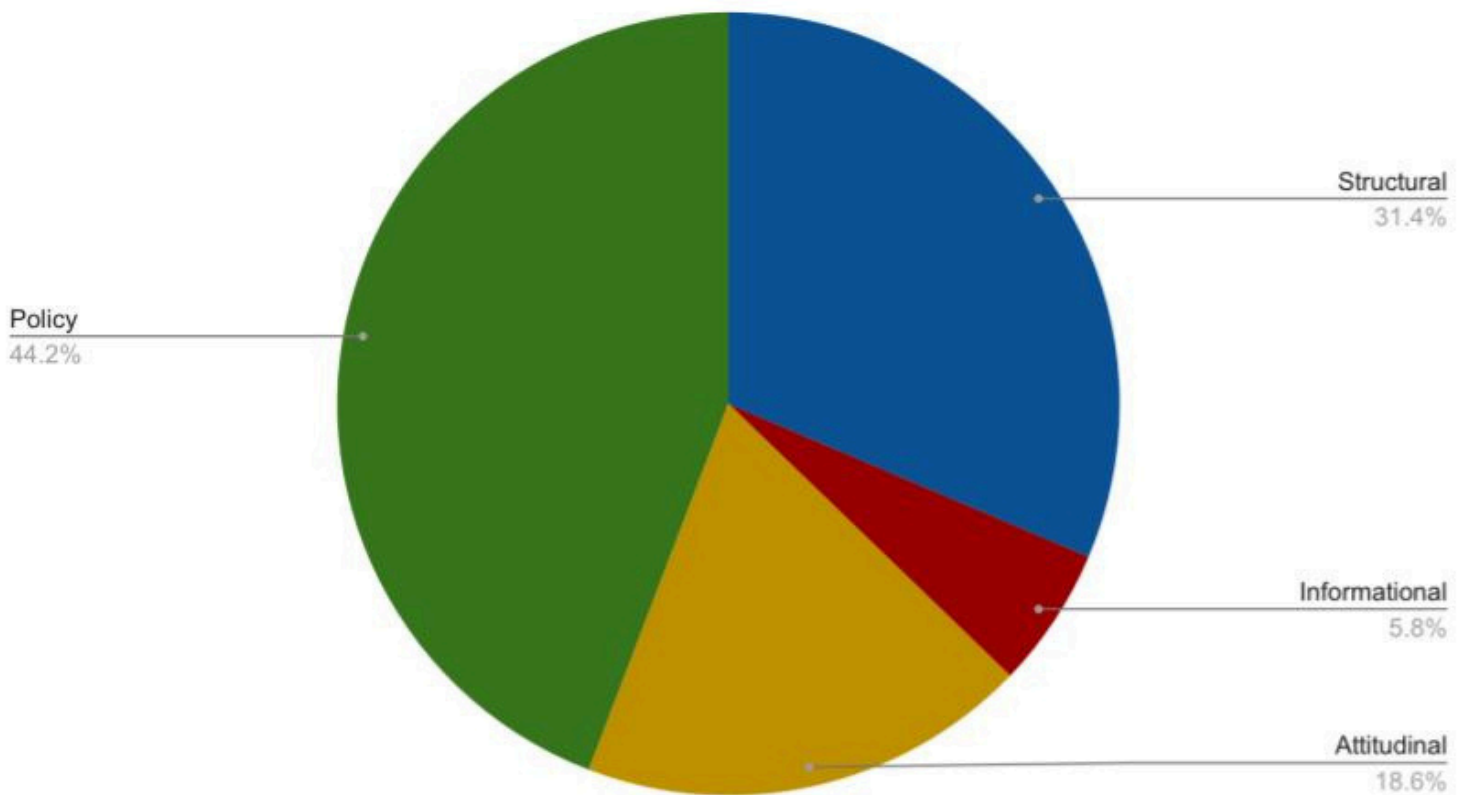
- *Affordable housing*
- *Budgeting classes*
- *Catholic Charities in GR and Muskegon*
- *Cell phone bill assistance*
- *Christmas gifts*
- *Clothes/toys*
- *Diapers*
- *diapers/wipes*
- *Food access*
- *Food pantries*
- *Parenting classes*
- *Rent assistance*
- *Utility assistance and payment plans*



LOCAL BARRIERS

What barriers are there in our community that add challenges to your life as a single mother?

Single mom participants were asked to identify significant barriers and struggles with social service agencies in the Holland/Zeeland area. The following charts summarize what was shared, from the broad level to more specific concerns.



Examples for each category:

- **Structural:** affordable housing, inflation, childcare costs, transportation, limited work hours, etc.
- **Policy:** language access, childcare restrictions, waitlists, welfare gap, resource navigation, advocacy, etc.
- **Informational:** awareness of resources, communication, etc.
- **Attitudinal:** unfair judgements, lack of community, fear, stigma, desperation, etc.

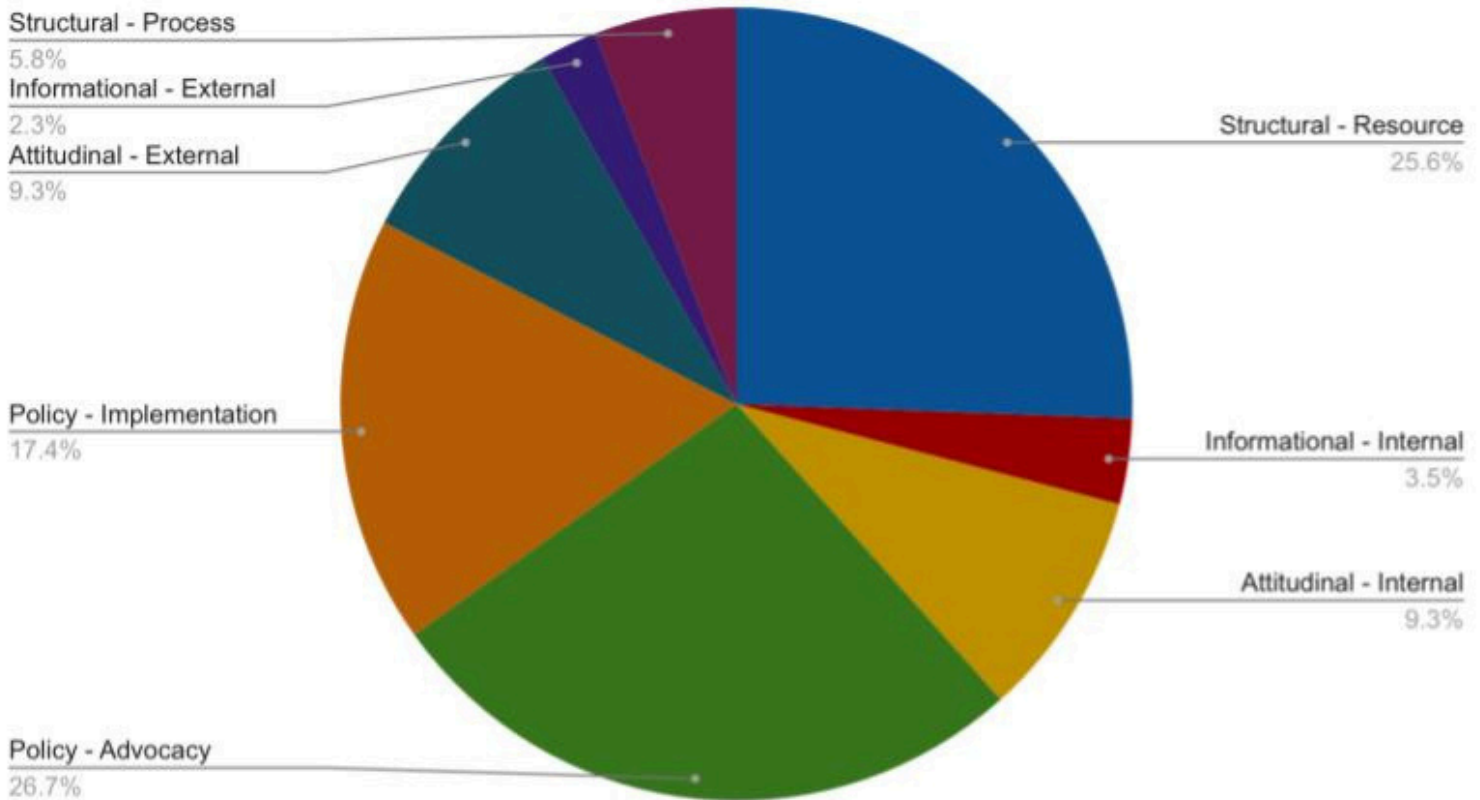


LOCAL BARRIERS

What barriers are there in our community that add challenges to your life as a single mother?

Single mom participants were asked to identify significant barriers and struggles with social service agencies in the Holland/Zeeland area. See below for a summary of subcategory barriers mentioned during our focus groups.

Type of Barrier - Subcategory by Percentage



Examples for each category:

- **Structural/Resource:** lack of safe community in trailer park neighborhoods
- **Structural/Process:** limited local business hours for working moms
- **Policy/Advocacy:** divorce legal fees, loss of benefits due to slight raise
- **Policy/Implementation:** limited sick days, long wait lists, overwhelming paperwork
- **Informational/External:** poor communication about existing resources
- **Informational/Internal:** knowledge about budgeting and financial support
- **Attitudinal/External:** feeling shunned and abandoned by community
- **Attitudinal/Internal:** mom guilt, feeling shame, not wanting to ask for help



LOCAL BARRIERS

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What barriers are there in our community that add challenges to your life as a single mother?

Single mom participants were asked to identify significant barriers and struggles with social service agencies in the Holland/Zeeland area. See below for specific concerns mentioned during our focus group sessions.

Attitudinal

- Because of cost, many women stay in unhealthy marriages because being a single mom is too hard
- Church Parenting classes are often a space where single moms feel shunned and judged
- Can feel shamed because of the negative situation with the culture of a family
- Desperation for money leads to unhealthy relationships
- Fear of losing a child if a mom asks for help
- Feeling shame when asking for help
- Feeling shunned by the church after a divorce
- Judgment about single moms/parenting
- Lack of community for single moms who need to "put their kids first"
- Mom guilt leads to not wanting to ask for help (pride)
- Schools need to trust single moms when schools start to doubt a diagnosis and delay services for IEP kids
- It's challenging to open up to share certain information and situations you are going through
- Sometimes resources exist, but you feel like you were knocked out and blinded because of the difficult situation you are going through
- Sometimes you can count on people but then something happens and you feel like you are alone and you aren't offering anything back in return. When you are alone and going through hard situations then everyone leaves you alone.
- Stigma of being a single mom
- Where do moms go who go from a 2 parent lifestyle to one parent? It's difficult to maintain a joy and care for kids. Ex-husbands tend to not carry the brunt of the childcare and can still afford the lifestyle they once had. Moms can't.

Informational

- Awareness about resources beyond Google
- Budgeting knowledge and financial support
- Lack of awareness about additional resources for those on free & reduced lunch
- Lack of awareness/poor communication about resources
- Lack of communication about resources & follow through on help



Structural

- Affordable housing
- Car availability when car is in repair shop - rental or mileage help
- Childcare - cost & availability
- Expense of completing and understanding divorce paperwork
- Increased car insurance and car purchasing prices
- Inflation costs
- Lack of access to quality, affordable counseling
- Lack of community and safe people in the trailer park neighborhoods
- Lack of mental health support for single moms
- Lack of moms groups in the weekends and evenings
- Lack of transportation access
- Limited access to car & furnace repairs with DHHS
- Limited business hours for banks, ect that don't allow working moms to access them without taking time off from work.
- Limited hours for food pantries & food pick-up (ie: during school day or as kids are needing to be picked up)
- Limited work hours (1st shift only) due to child care and transportation barriers
- Limited work hours due to kid care and needs
- No support for autistic kids before 3YO, schools often blame autism for behaviors
- Not enough male mentor support, especially for sons
- Phone service shut down and no wifi
- Recovery support: need accountability for relapse support
- Rent support to offer more affordable housing
- Rent inflation
- Slower wifi through free government programs



LOCAL BARRIERS

What barriers are there in our community that add challenges to your life as a single mother?

Single mom participants were asked to identify significant barriers and struggles with social service agencies in the Holland/Zeeland area. See below for specific concerns mentioned during our focus group sessions.

Policy

- Bullying support needed -- need to believe the story and take action
- Calling to resource and receiving a English speaker at first and then being hung up on due to not having someone to translate
- Childcare restrictions for school staff (especially for kids with special needs)
- Childcare-restrictions/waitlists
- Childcare, advocacy & support for kids with autism
- CMH delays with paperwork and evaluations
- CMH rigorous policies about subsidized checks, etc.
- Delayed appointments
- Delayed benefits for FMLA (must work for an employer for 1 year to be eligible)
- DHHS delays in paperwork for childcare and school transportation
- DHS policies -- lump household income even though living in a temporary housing situation
- Eviction & felony on record = hard to find housing or jobs
- Flood of information at the hospital after birth
- Friend of the Court -- confusing website for filing online, charge to fill out docs to get fee waiver later
- Income increase = decrease in benefits
- Lack of advocacy support and resource navigation
- Landlord monopolies that lead to few options for rent after receiving an eviction notice
- Language barrier when you speak Spanish. Everything is in English (ie: flyers/information or only English speaking staff)
- Leaving bad marriages is really hard, legal fees make it harder
- Limitations to daycare supplement (can't be used at in-home daycares)
- Limited sick days, even when you have to take off work to help sick kids
- Long waiting lists for DHS child care, doctors who take Medicaid
- Lost benefits due to increase in salary
- Maternity leave restrictions from FMLA
- Not being able to work due to not having the legal status
- Not having resources if you make more of income (they don't look at how much you are spending on other things)
- Paperwork and forms to fill out often feel overwhelming
- Penalties for making more money (ie: losing housing, childcare, etc.)
- Referral requirements for support
- Resilience was not helpful for helping get out of an abusive marriage.
- Rigid childcare schedule for daycare pick up and drop off
- The loss of food stamps when kids in the household start working and your household income increases
- Uncomfortable process for food distribution
- Wait lists for mentors
- Waitlist at daycares. One mom applied while she was pregnant and she was not approved until her second child was born. She witnessed where moms would just drop off their kids and then would just go back home and sleep.
- Waitlists for therapy (ABA) at CMH
- Way to sue Title 8 vouchers for housing: why preference for those who are disabled over single moms?
- When someone doesn't have the legal status to be in this country.

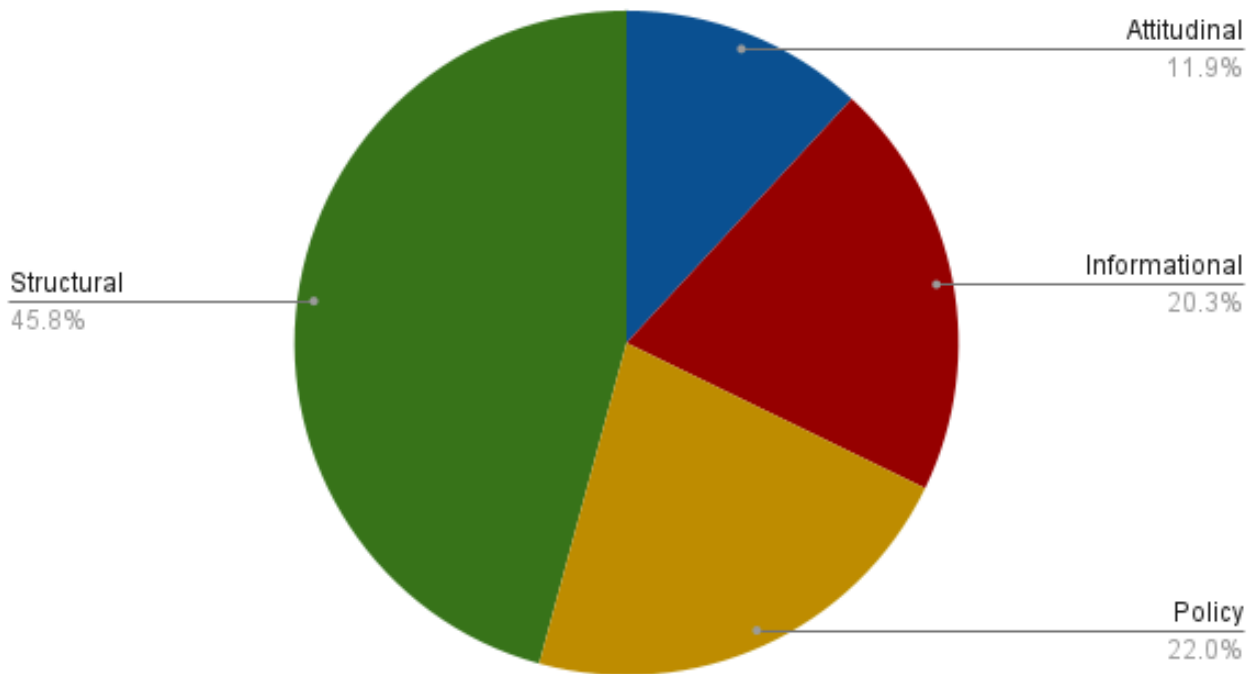
HOW CAN... THE COMMUNITY HELP?

14

How can community partners, such as nonprofits and churches, best support you?

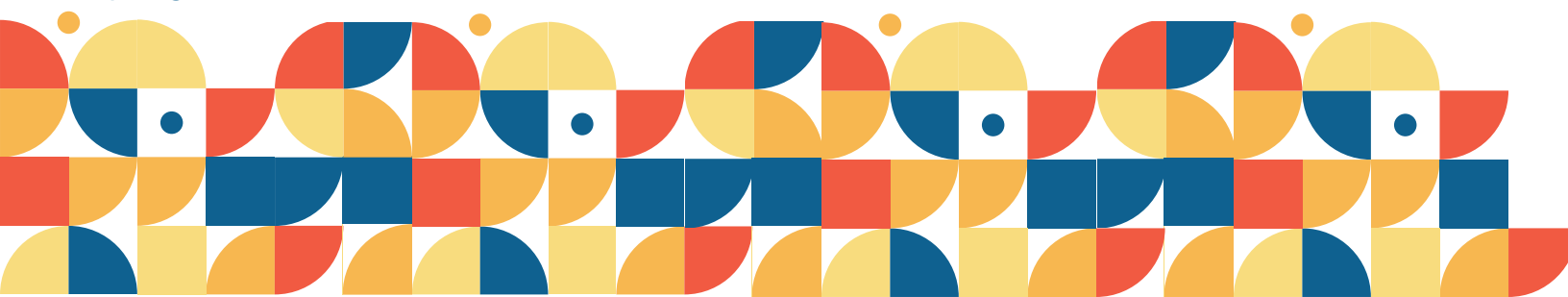
Single mom participants were asked to brainstorm ways local social service agencies could improve their services for single moms. This chart summarizes the types of suggestions we received by the same categories used for the barrier conversation.

Suggestions to Address Each Barrier Type by Percentage



Examples for each category:

- **Structural:** transportation, diversify hours of moms groups, car repairs, etc.
- **Policy:** accountability on case worker response time, gradual independence from benefits, flexible day care hours, etc.
- **Informational:** resource guide for single moms, parenting classes, home repairs, etc.
- **Attitudinal:** empathy for single mom situation, more latinx case workers, no judgement



HOW CAN... THE COMMUNITY HELP?

15

How can community partners, such as nonprofits and churches, best support you?

Single mom participants were asked to brainstorm ways local social service agencies could improve their services for single moms. This list summarizes the suggestions we received during the focus groups.

Attitudinal

- Being understanding about single mom limits
- Don't blame the child/parents, need to work together to solve the issue
- Have more latinos/as helps the hispanics feel more comfortable because of the same culture (no racism intended)
- Have people in positions that have been in those situations and can step in the people's shoes and have been there
- Help everyone no matter what and regardless of race
- Don't judge moms who leave unhealthy marriages. Help them adjust to this new life.
- Things are often centered around 2 parent families. Often feel like a third wheel and left out.

Informational

- Create a resource guide for single moms (raise awareness)
- Educating the community and staff about the single mom experience
- Education about special needs and more therapy opportunities at schools
- Empower moms to contribute to solutions
- Help finding respite providers in the area (offer an updated list of options that are non-family members)
- Home Repair support and classes
- Home repair training and support with maintenance
- More advocates beyond Gateway Mission program for resource navigation in the community
- Offer an updated resource list (to avoid calling multiple agencies and waiting on hold, etc.)
- Offer breakfast with toddlers to continue to provide diapers/wipes, etc.
- Training on mental health issues, how to work with kids who struggle
- Updated lists of landlords who accept housing vouchers

Structural

- Affordable childcare (ie: at a gym?)
- Assistance with older special needs children
- Better programs for before and after school care.
- Car repairs & advice
- Churches could offer more gas cards or transportation?
- Continuing educational support (technology help)
- Diversify the hours of mom groups
- Give help to those that really need the help
- Have more people that speak Spanish
- Home & Yard maintenance
- Mental health support with at-home options
- More car seat safety certification opportunities with case workers
- More case workers at DHHS and CMH
- More free therapy classes
- Offer an advocate who can help navigate car expenses (insurance, repairs, purchase, etc.)
- Offer childcare or kid friendly events. Even school events often necessitate childcare and can be quite costly. Offer scholarships even for things like school skating parties.
- Offer legal support for housing evictions and foreclosures
- Offer more grants for buying a home (ie: resources and low-barrier help)
- Parent support partners at CMH
- Parenting classes to help life as a mom
- Post-partum support
- Provide dental & optical insurance/quality care for moms
- Self-care classes
- Share more job opportunities for 1st shift
- Transportation after school
- Work Transportation

Policy

- Accountability on case worker response time
- More DBT skills (dialectical behavior training for all, needed to help calm kids)
- Flexibility for the income guidelines for single moms
- Flexible day care help
- Forgiveness for felony issues on record
- Friend of COurt: need to fix website or help guide clients through it
- Give people the help that they need regardless of the legal status
- Gradual independence from benefits after salary increases
- Better investigation form to qualify people for resources
- Move payments away from Christmas (ie: Camp Geneva signs ups are in January)
- Offer the Children's Mobile Crisis line on the weekends
- The court system often wants kids to live balanced lives between two parents, but the experience is very different for time with moms vs. dads.
- Single moms need the same kind of assistance that the elderly get.



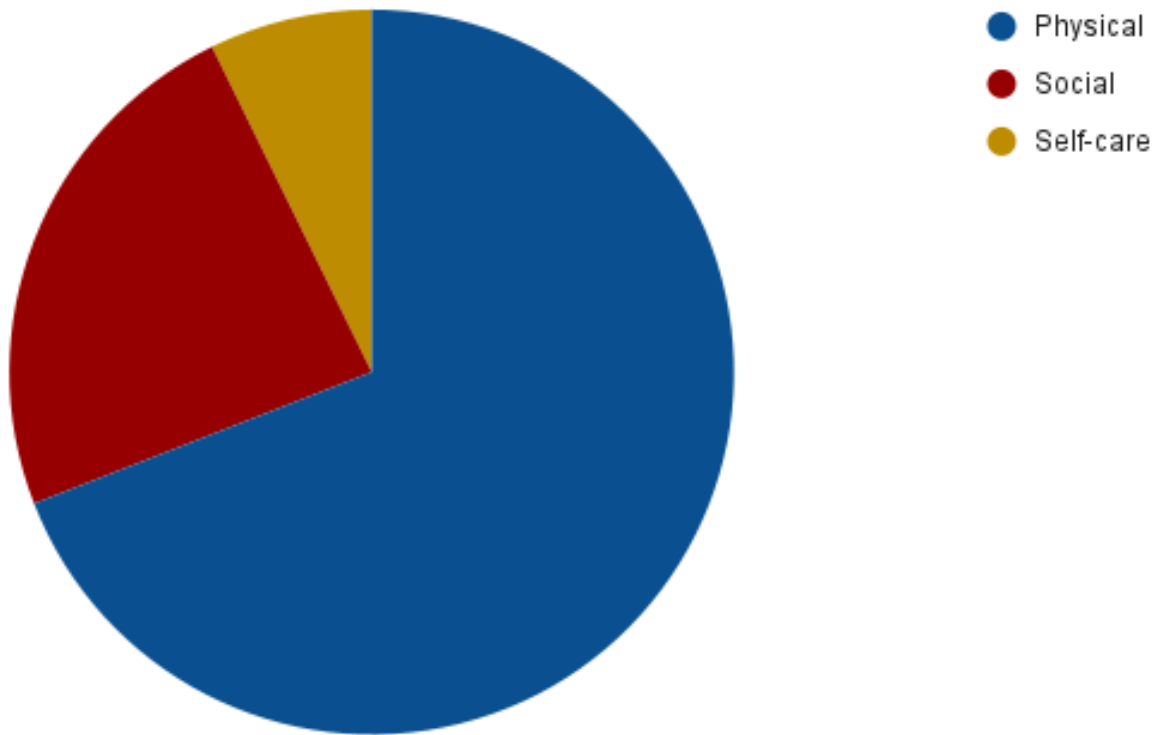
IF YOU HAD A MAGIC WAND...?

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If you had a magic wand, what would our community be like for you as a single mother?

Single mom participants were invited to “dream big” and share one possible change they would like to see in the Holland/Zeeland area to improve the experiences of single moms. The chart below summarizes what we heard into physical, social, and self-care dreams.

Theme: Physical vs Social vs Self-Care



Examples for each category:

- **Physical:** free childcare, more bus routes, free maid service, flexible work hours, etc.
- **Social:** more male mentors for kids, meal exchange for moms, equality for all, etc.
- **Self-care:** free vacations, free massages, spaces to get together and vent, etc.



IF YOU HAD A MAGIC WAND...?

17

If you had a magic wand, what would our community be like for you as a single mother? Single mom participants were invited to “dream big” and share one possible change they would like to see in the Holland/Zeeland area to improve the experiences of single moms. This list summarizes what we heard during the focus groups.

- 
- Free childcare
 - 211 for single mom resource support
 - Accountability for child support
 - Affordable to be a single-parent household.
 - Employees who are understanding of single moms and give extra sick days and flexible hours.
 - Flexible employment that works around school schedules and understands sick kids
 - Free car inspections
 - Free gas & waterline checks
 - Free maid service
 - Free tuition for single moms at college
 - Fresh produce for single moms on Mother's Day from the Farmer's Market
 - Give a legalization process to those who are undocumented in the country
 - Give access to those who are undocumented to be able to work
 - Give drivers license to those who can't drive (the undocumented)
 - Have more resources in Zeeland
 - Help with cars (payment, mechanical help, insurance)
 - If single moms could just have normal lives...normal cars, normal houses, normal work and things were not so extra hard for them.
 - Medical insurance to those who don't have a social security
 - Money growing on trees!
 - More bus routes and more frequent schedules
 - More free gas cards available for single moms
 - More grants / financial support for single moms
 - More sick days for single moms
 - Open access to childcare assistance (DHHS)
 - Open WIC for all parents
 - People with felonies could leave the country?
 - Provide a resource hub for single moms
 - Rental assistance for single moms = more affordable housing
 - Resource hub for single parents and parents in general
 - Resources just for single moms, or single moms get priority.
 - Sign language interpreters with the Holland Police Department (ie: including an ipad for virtual interpretation in the squad car?)
 - Simple life. Fewer options for unnecessary things that cost too much (like streaming services vs. cable).
 - Single Mom Taxi/Bus – for school and work, with kids
 - Someone shared that undocumented people pay taxes in the country and get taxes taken out of their paychecks but when it comes to receiving the benefits they aren't allowed to take advantage of medical benefits along with other benefits.
 - That all would get a car when graduate from Gateway Mission
 - To not feel guilty about not spending quality time with my kids because I'm working, caring for the house, caring for them. My ex gets to be the fun parent because when my kids are with them, he doesn't do anything but focus on them.
 - Transportation (to navigate school & work different hours)
 - Website for help for single moms
 - Educate on self-advocacy and resources (ie: “how to survive as a single mom”)
 - Free massages and chiropractors
 - Free vacations!
 - Have a center of people who just listen that you can vent to and complain to
 - 24/7 childcare center (similar to what is in Kalamazoo)
 - More male mentor support for boys
 - Need more positive male influences (ie: at businesses, churches & schools)
 - A community that genuinely cares, and doesn't just help to make themselves feel better
 - Empower churches to be safety net when moms are trapped in the system of social support
 - Help each other
 - Kindness
 - Meals for moms – moms care for other single moms?
 - More community support – relationships without an agenda
 - Not be judgemental...we are asking for help and that takes humility. Give with humility too.=
 - Single mom apartment complex – more affordable community
 - Single parent connection/gatherings, need to find new friends who get it and not just married couples
 - That all would be treated equally
- 

KEY QUOTES

The following quotes are rough summaries of statements shared by single moms during our focus group sessions regarding their experiences with barriers to flourishing.



- "Because of cost, many women stay in unhealthy marriages because being a single mom is too hard."
- "Calling to a resource and receiving an English speaker at first and then being hung up on due to not having someone to translate [into Spanish]."
- "[I] fear losing my kid if I ask for help."
- "Limited business hours for banks, etc. [is a barrier] that doesn't allow working moms to access them without taking time off from work."
- "Paperwork and forms to fill out often feel overwhelming."
- "Sometimes the resources are there but you feel like you were knocked out and are blinded because of the such difficult situation you are going through."
- "Waitlist at daycares [are a barrier]. [One mom] had to apply while she was pregnant and she was not approved until her second child was born. She witnessed where moms would just drop off moms who would just go back home and sleep."
- "Sometimes you can count on people but then something happens and then you feel like you are alone and that you aren't offering something back in return. When you are alone and going through hard situations then everyone leaves you alone."
- "[There is a] lack of community for single moms - knowing that [we] need to put kids first."
- "Penalties for making more money (ie: losing housing, childcare, etc.) [is a barrier]."
- "Where do moms go who go from a 2 parent lifestyle, to one parent? [It's] difficult to maintain a joy and care for kids. Ex-husbands tend to not carry the brunt of the childcare and can still afford the lifestyle they once had. Moms can't."



FINDINGS

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After reviewing the feedback and insights from our nine focus groups, we offer the following summary of and recommendations for local agencies serving single moms:

***"A COMMUNITY THAT
GENUINELY CARES, AND
DOESN'T JUST HELP TO
MAKE THEMSELVES FEEL
BETTER"
-A SINGLE MOM'S "MAGIC
WAND" DREAM***

Key Findings

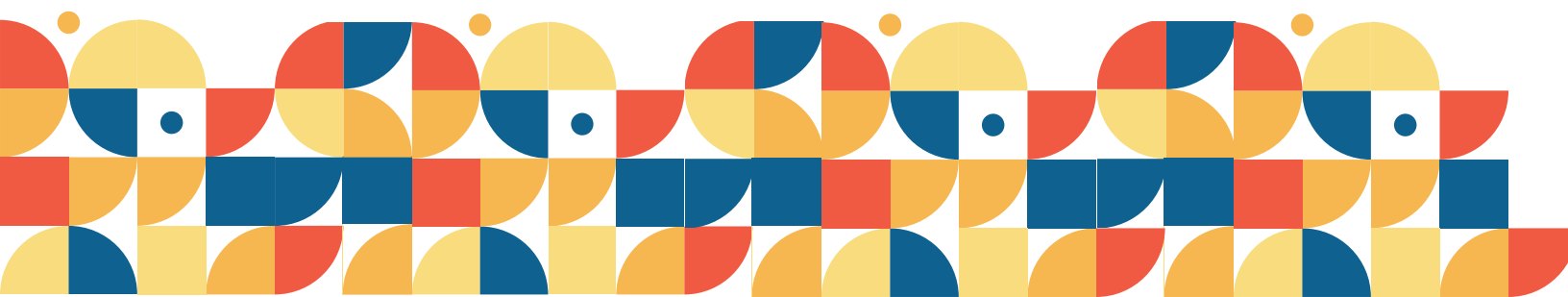
- Most single moms knew of physical resources available in our community (ie: food, school supplies, clothing, etc.)
- Accessibility to resources due to waitlists, inconvenient hours, limited childcare, lack of transportation, or fear of judgement are some of the most significant barriers for single moms in our community.
- Moms are looking for understanding and flexibility as they navigate single parenthood.

Unexpected Insights

- Several single moms noted the need for more training, education, and support for their children who have learning or cognitive disabilities.
- A few moms are interested in peer support and spaces where moms themselves can be empowered to contribute (ie: a meal train for each other, etc.)

Opportunities for Growth

While Holland/Zeeland are resource-rich, accessibility to resources can be a significant barrier. Adjusting policies around transportation, language, referral requirements, etc. could make a significant difference for local single moms who are seeking support.



CONCLUSION

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The experiences of single mothers in Holland and Zeeland, Michigan, underscore the critical importance of building robust community support systems and raising awareness of existing resources. This report reveals that single mothers often face significant economic, social, and emotional challenges, yet their resilience and determination are evident. Local social service agencies play a pivotal role in providing much-needed assistance, ranging from financial aid to emotional support and childcare services. However, there is a pressing need for greater peer support and awareness to ensure these mothers can access the full spectrum of available resources. Strengthening these support networks not only enhances the quality of life for single mothers and their children but also fosters a more inclusive and supportive community overall.

Next steps

| # | Recommendations | Priority |
|---|--|----------|
| 1 | Build more single mom support groups that meet at diverse times to accommodate various work schedules | HIGH |
| 2 | Keep case workers accountable for timely responses, hire more staff to keep waitlists manageable. | MEDIUM |
| 3 | Create opportunities for case workers and staff to learn about single mom experiences to foster empathy, build cultural competence, and reduce stigma assumptions. | LOW |



THANK YOU

We are so grateful for all who serve single moms in our community. We are especially grateful for all the partner churches, non-profits and agencies who helped host our focus groups this fall. Thank you to all childcare providers and staff members who made the focus groups accessible for single moms. We hope this summary report is a relevant tool as agencies strategically consider ways to improve local services for single moms.



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