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Dickenson County 2023 Situation Analysis Report



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Introduction

The Dickenson County Unit of Virginia Cooperative Extension conducted a comprehensive situation analysis during the fall of 2023. The process followed the guidelines, procedures and training provided by Virginia Cooperative Extension personnel from Virginia Tech. The Dickenson ELC opted to conduct a community survey. The survey developed by VCE was made available to citizens, civic groups, youth groups and printed copies supplied at area business establishments. The process involved the development of a Dickenson County Unit Profile, as well as gathering resident perspectives on issues concerning the county. Information was analyzed by the ELC and priority issues were identified.

Unit Profile

Dickenson County is a rural county located in far Southwest Virginia with less than 50 people living per square mile. Neighboring counties include Wise to the West, Buchanan to the East, Russell to the South and Letcher County, Kentucky to the North. Dickenson County encompasses 335 square miles of mostly mountainous terrain with Clintwood serving as the County seat. According to the 2023 census, Dickenson County had a population of 13,787. A 2017 census population estimate of 14,782 reflected a 6.73% decrease in population.

Population numbers have fluctuated in Dickenson County in the past based on periods of boom or bust associated with coal and natural gas production. The 2023 census showed a population of 13,787 for a 21.45% reduction in population from the 1990 population of 17,552. The youth population of Dickenson County has followed the same general trend of the overall population within the county during this time period.

The racial composition of Dickenson County is 98.10% White with the remaining 1.90% being represented by Black, Hispanic, Latino, American Indian and Asian populations.

The median age of Dickenson County residents has risen slightly from 43.6 in 2013 to 45.3 in 2021.

The gap continues to widen as the state income per capita continues to out-distance Dickenson County. Unable to close that gap, the county continues to suffer with a failing economy. The median household income in 2021 was \$33,905 which is 58.12% less than \$80,963 for the state of Virginia. Persons below poverty level in Dickenson County in 2021 was 21.2% compared to 11.6% for the U.S. The unemployment average was 4.2% for the county in 2023. In 2023, the largest percentage of jobs in Dickenson County were in local government (27%) and natural resources (22%).

The adult obesity level in Dickenson County of 37% ranks higher than the state average of 32% and the national average of 32% respectively. High teen birth rates of 30 per 1000 teens age 15-19 compared to 15 in Virginia and 19 nationally. Dickenson County residents have very limited access to primary care physicians with one doctor per 4,690 people, compared to the state of Virginia having one doctor per 1,320, and the U.S. of one doctor per 1,310. A large percentage of children (18%) in Dickenson County are living in a single parent household as compared to the state with 24% and the U.S. average of 25%.

The Dickenson County School System is fully dedicated to meeting the educational needs of all students to the maximum extent possible. Educational attainment - 79.97% of Dickenson residents age 25 years and over are high school graduates or higher, compared to 91.38% statewide and 89.36% nationally. On average, 21.49% of Dickenson County students pursue some type of post-secondary education. The Career Center has experienced a decline in enrollment in recent years. Within the school system there is greater emphasis being put on attending college and less on developing employable skills while in high school. Those students obtaining these skills can often find well-paying jobs right out of high school.

Dickenson County agriculture consists of small scale, part-time producers who have other employment or are retired. The 2012 census reported 147 farms with 15,048 acres. The 2017 census reported 128 farms with 11,169 acres. The average farm size has decreased from 102 acres to 87 acres at the same time farm numbers have decreased. The average farm income declined from \$5,314 in 2012 to \$4,378 in the 2017 census. One of the

largest changes in agriculture would be the increase in the number of sheep in Dickenson County in recent years. The 2004 census revealed no sheep as compared to 2017 with 474 being reported. The other top enterprises in the county consist of beef cattle, forage crops, goats, horses, and vegetable gardening activities. Additional horticultural crops on a limited scale consist of apples, and some vegetable production that is marketed locally.

Community and Resident Perspectives

The Dickenson County Extension staff and ELC met concerning the Situation Analysis process. It was decided to conduct a key informant survey to identify Dickenson's major strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. Staff and ELC developed a comprehensive citizen survey, which was completed by 98 residents regarding issues around agriculture, health, education, land use, youth, and the local economy. The survey respondents included community leaders, government leaders, school officials, soil and water conservation boards, and extension advisory boards.

The Dickenson County Extension Office collects information from citizens constantly about the community needs. These are in the form of daily contacts with clientele about issues that are affecting them personally and the community as a whole. These issues were brought to the ELC along with the results from the community survey to determine the focus of future extension programming for Dickenson County.

The following issues were identified as the 4 major priorities in the situation analysis process from community survey, face to face contacts and the ELC as a focus group.

1. Health Concerns
2. Youth Concerns
3. Agricultural Issues
4. Need of an FCS Agent

These priorities are described in the following section.

Priority Issues

Issue 1: Health Concerns

Description: Based on the 2023 survey analysis, Dickenson County citizens perceive issues concerning mental health, substance abuse, and overall quality of life should be health concerns focused on by VCE. These health concerns span all age groups and all socioeconomic statuses.

VCE's Role in Addressing these issues: To address these concerns, VCE will partner and/or work with local entities, such as health care organizations, schools, libraries, food pantries, grocery stores, and farmers markets. VCE also creates partnerships with coalitions and prevention alliances to be supportive, informed, active members of the community in which they serve. FCS SNAP-Ed programs offer nutrition education for all ages, physical activity education, and community-based policy, system, and environmental changes to promote health. 4-H's Health Rocks! curricula focuses on "reducing youth smoking and tobacco use, helping youth build life and decision-making skills, and helping youth understand the consequences of tobacco, alcohol, and drug use." ANR provides programs for safe food production, farming, and pesticides. One of VCE's goals is to promote a healthy lifestyle.

Issue 2: Youth Concerns

Description: Dickenson County residents recognize youth development is critical to both the short-term and long-term future and prosperity of the community. Youth need safe and developmentally appropriate activities to promote health and well-being. Living in a rural and isolated county, it is important for youth to experience

opportunities that are readily available to youth in more urban areas of the state. As the population ages, it is also vital to develop a sense of community involvement, volunteerism, and leadership among the youth.

VCE's Role in Addressing this Issue: VCE is uniquely positioned to address the youth concerns with 4-H Youth Development, Family & Consumer Sciences, and Agricultural and Natural Resource agents. We also partner with stakeholders, schools, and local agencies to address the needs of the youth. Agents provide in-school, after-school, summer, and interest driven programming. A special focus is placed on delivering the Teen Cuisine and Health Rocks! Curricula to the participants in the Wolfpack After the Bell (after-school) program and 9th grade health classes. Life skills are developed through project work, Reality Store/Kids Market Place, camps, career fairs, field trips such as 4-H Day at the Capitol, community service, and volunteer opportunities.

The lack of specialized healthcare access is especially challenging for the families of children that may be on the Autism spectrum. They do not know where to turn for the help they need and the resources that are available are in such high demand that people get turned away or are put on a wait list that is exceedingly long. This gap could be addressed with a partnership between the local schools, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and the Virginia Tech Autism Center to bring the Mobile Autism Clinic (MAC) to help children get the services they need. The Dickenson County Extension Office is pursuing grant opportunities to help support the families of children with Autism spectrum disorder.

VCE works closely with the Dickenson County Community Partners for Prevention Coalition to support efforts to provide safe and sober, family-oriented activities to promote social connectedness, and deter substance abuse. Benefits to the community include the Safe & Sober After-Prom Party, the Christmas Angels Program, farmer's market, and countless other community events to promote a healthy lifestyle and combat the opioid crisis.

Issue 3: Agricultural Issues

Description: Dickenson County contains 128 farms with 11,169 acres of farmland with \$560,000 dollars of farm products sold. The average market value of \$4,378 of products is sold per farm. Dickenson County agriculture consists of small scale, part-time producers who have other employment or are retired. The top issues identified to focus educational efforts on are animal health, livestock production practices, protecting water quality, ensuring safe, high-quality food supply, agriculture sustainability, value added marketing and profitability.

VCE's Role in Addressing this Issue: Dickenson County does not have a practicing veterinarian located within the county. VCE will emphasize educational programs on animal health care, vaccinations, internal and external parasites and overall animal health issues associated with beef, sheep, goats and horse production. Dickenson County does not have a livestock market. Extension staff can and will continue to explore various value-added marketing opportunities. The Coalfield Beef Cattle and Land Use Association participates in the Virginia Quality Assured beef marketing program in order to receive premium prices over graded feeder calf sales. The Coalfield Sheep Association is participating in group marketing in order to improve profits and save on transportation. The Coalfield Sheep Association also conducts a breeding animal replacement sale at the Coalfield Agricultural Center. VCE assists producers in making the necessary improvements to their livestock in order for them to participate in these value-added sales. The Coalfield Agricultural Center has been constructed using various funding sources to help with value-added marketing and Extension educational programs. VCE will conduct educational programs focusing on soil fertility, forage varieties, management programs, hay production, pasture management, weed and brush control for livestock production. VCE currently provides educational meetings designed to provide good cultural practices, varieties and pesticide recommendations and uses, for fruit and vegetable producers of Dickenson County.

Issue 4: Dickenson County FCS

Description: The Dickenson County position is currently vacant.

VCE's Role in addressing this Issue: The Dickenson County VCE office will work closely with local government, district office and State VCE offices to pursue and obtain funding for an FCS position in Dickenson County.

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