

# TIOGA TELLS

*Inviting Communities to  
the Table*

Supported in partnership by the Rural Health Network of South Central New York, Tioga Opportunities, Inc. and Tioga County Public Health  
Prepared by AmeriCorps VISTA Member, Deanna Hutchison









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## Background & Objectives

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The idea for Tioga Tells arose from a widespread realization among community partners: data tells us about the status of our community for a specific snapshot in time, but it doesn't describe the process of how we got there through the voice of those who live, work, play and thrive in that community. The objectives identified by community partners listed on the following page were developed directly from the challenges in advocating for resources and services needed to address factors impacting quality of life for Tioga County residents. At its core, Tioga Tells is about inviting residents to the table to tell their own stories.

In partnership with Tioga Opportunities, Inc. and Tioga County Public Health, Rural Health Network SCNY kicked off the Tioga Tells project in August 2018 when Deanna Hutchison joined the team as an AmeriCorps VISTA member. Deanna was tasked with examining existing assessments and reports, identifying areas in need of further exploration, and developing approaches to obtain fresh insights that would serve as an opportunity for community input on factors influencing quality of life in Tioga County. This report is intended to communicate the results of the project findings in a way that can be used by residents and stakeholders alike, to improve the quality of life in Tioga County.

Recognizing a need for a resident-led assessment, a steering committee of people from a variety of backgrounds and sectors was developed to guide project efforts. Simply put, the objectives of the project were to:

- 1) Identify the strengths and challenges impacting the quality of life of Tioga County residents
- 2) Better understand how residents think about quality of life
- 3) Better understand how residents make choices about whether and how to maintain and/or improve their quality of life.

Over the past year, Tioga Tells has evolved into a project with heightened enthusiasm and numerous potential applications. By identifying quality of life factors relevant to Tioga County residents, stakeholders are presented with great opportunity and flexibility to apply this detailed understanding in community improvement. As the Executive Director of Tioga Opportunities, Maureen Abbott, states, "Feedback received from county residents throughout this process will act as a framework for developing strategies addressing quality of life issues and concerns. These strategies and recommendations will guide future planning and enhance overall quality of life in Tioga County for *all* residents." Jack Salo, Rural Health Network SCNY Executive Director, adds: "An assessment which focuses on quality of life provides residents with an opportunity to create a shared vision for the future. Quality of life implies a community where basic needs are met and all members of the community have a role in creating a positive future."

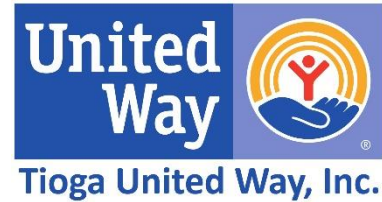
# Acknowledgements

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## PROJECT SPONSORS



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# Quick Facts

## **Section 2:**

**GEOGRAPHY & HISTORY**

**POPULATION COMPOSITION**

**EDUCATION**

**HEALTH**

**INCOME**

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

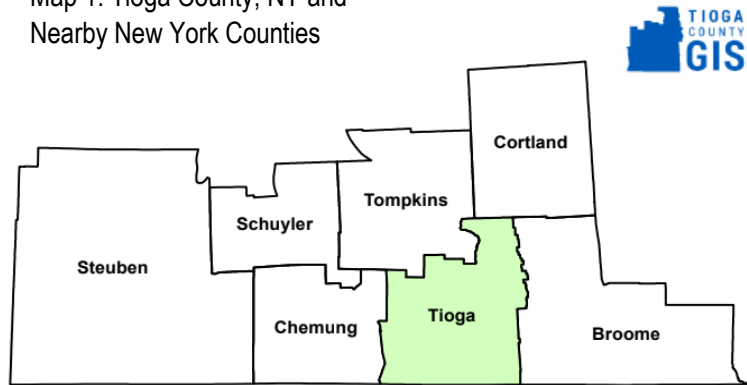


## Geography & History

Situated in the Southern Tier region of New York State, Tioga County is a predominantly rural area bordering the state of Pennsylvania and located adjacent to the following counties: Chemung (west), Tompkins (northwest), Cortland (north) and Broome (east).

Tioga County is often referred to as “the gateway to the Finger Lakes,” and derives its name from an American Indian word meaning “at the forks,” describing a meeting place.<sup>1</sup> Prominent geographic features of Tioga County include the Susquehanna River, two state parks, 113,182 acres of farmland, and a variety of outdoor parks and historic sites.

Map 1: Tioga County, NY and Nearby New York Counties



## Population Composition

Within Tioga County’s nine towns and six villages reside 51,125 individuals, the majority of whom are white (97%), have graduated high school or higher (90%), and live in single-unit structures (70%).<sup>2</sup> Nearly 10% of Tioga County residents are military veterans.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, 14% of residents have a form of disability.<sup>4</sup>

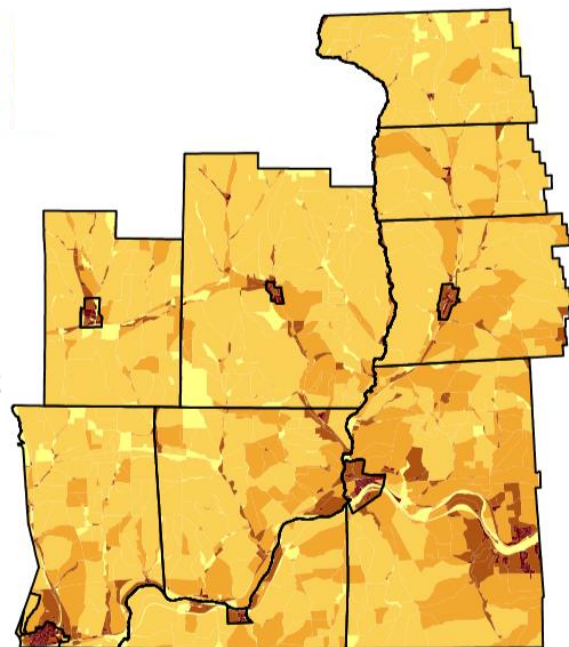
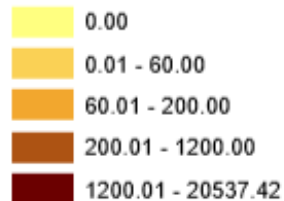
Map 2: Tioga County, NY  
Population Density by Census

### Legend

Municipalities

### Population Density by Census Block

#### Population per Square Mile



<sup>1</sup> Tioga County Historical Society.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census. *DP-1 Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics*.

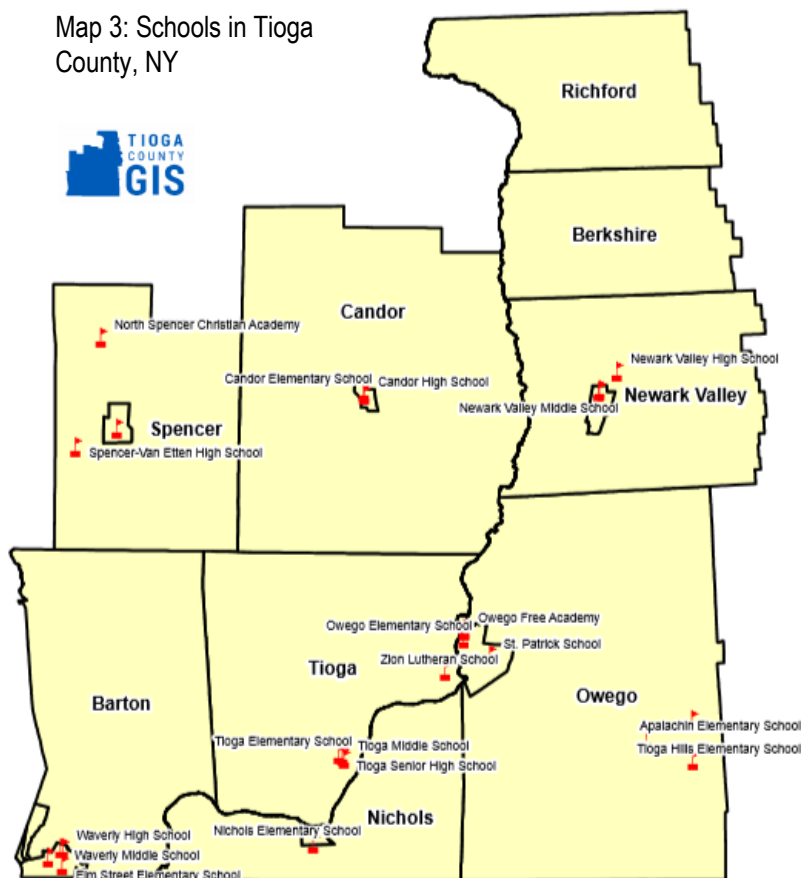
<sup>3</sup> Tioga County Veterans’ Service Agency.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. *S1703 Selected Characteristics of People at Specified Levels of Poverty in the Past 12 Months*.

## Education

While there are no higher education institutions in Tioga County, six public school districts and one parochial school are located within the county's borders. In 2018, the graduation rate among public high school students in Tioga County was 87%, compared to a statewide average of 80%.<sup>5</sup> Students with disabilities attending public schools in Tioga County graduated at a 63% rate in 2018. Economically disadvantaged students graduated at a rate of 80%, compared to a 93% rate for their non-economically disadvantaged counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

Map 3: Schools in Tioga County, NY



## Health

In July 2018, Tioga County was among 10 counties in the Appalachian Region identified as a “Bright Spot” by the Appalachian Regional Commission. Within the report, Tioga County was recognized for performing better than expected on a number of health outcome measures, given its characteristics and resources. These measures include infant mortality, stroke mortality, and heart disease mortality rates, all of which were at least 15% better than expected given the area’s socioeconomic and demographic characteristics.<sup>7</sup>

While there are no hospital systems located in Tioga County, there are ten primary care offices within the county borders. The rural nature of the county can pose a serious threat in emergency

<sup>5</sup> New York State Education Department, Graduation Rate Data. *Tioga County 4-Year Outcome as of June*. <https://data.nysed.gov/gradrate.php?year=2018&county=60>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission. *Exploring Bright Spots in Appalachian Health: Case Studies*. p. 98. <https://www.healthy-ky.org/res/images/resources/BrightSpotsCaseStudiesJuly2018.pdf>

medical situations, as the distance to the nearest trauma center is 35-55 minutes for much of the area.<sup>8</sup>

Children's health was designated as an area of special interest by the Tioga County 2019-2024 Community Health Assessment (CHA). Data indicates that Tioga County infants have lower rates of breastfeeding, higher blood lead levels, and poorer immunization rates relative to the New York State average.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the percentage of overweight or obese elementary students has risen by 14% since the 2008-2010 school years to 37% from 2014-2016. Other areas of concern identified by the 2019-2024 Tioga County CHA include high rates of youth alcohol and chewing tobacco use, as well as an aging housing stock.<sup>10</sup>

## Income

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The median household income in Tioga County is \$57,153, and 11% of residents are impoverished compared to 15% of New York State residents overall. The highest rate of poverty in Tioga County occurs within households headed by single women with children, estimated at 34.3%.<sup>11</sup>

Although Tioga County's poverty rate is not high relative to that of surrounding counties, 41% of families are considered asset-limited, income-constrained, employed, also known as ALICE. These households earn more than the federal poverty level, but less than the basic cost of living for the county. As of 2017, this cost was \$19,380 annually for a single person and \$56,965 for 2 adults and 2 small children.<sup>12</sup>

## Economic Development

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The top employers in Tioga County are Lockheed Martin (2,100 employees) and Tioga Downs Casino and Resort (700). In addition, over 1,300 workers are employed by the county's six public school districts.<sup>13</sup> According to the US Census Bureau's County Business Patterns data, the majority of jobs within Tioga County are categorized as retail trade, manufacturing, healthcare/social assistance, and food service positions.<sup>14</sup>

Tioga County led New York State with a GDP growth rate of 10.8% in 2015.<sup>15</sup> This growth has been sustained in recent years through successful economic development projects including the expansion of Tioga Downs Casino and Resort and the establishment of Crown Cork & Seal and FedEx facilities in the county.

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<sup>8</sup> Tioga County Public Health Department, Tioga County 2019-2024 Community Health Assessment. p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 55-58.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. *S1702 Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months of Families*.

<sup>12</sup> Tioga County NY Housing Study: December 2017. p. 15. <https://www.tiogacountyny.com/media/5819/tioga-county-housing-study-122817.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 County Business Patterns. *CB1600A11 Geography Area Series: County Business Patterns*.

<sup>15</sup> "Tioga County leads state in growth rate." *Morning Times*, December 28, 2018. [http://www.morning-times.com/news/article\\_83317ff5-6a14-5dde-bf78-5a94f59f1ff2.html](http://www.morning-times.com/news/article_83317ff5-6a14-5dde-bf78-5a94f59f1ff2.html)

Despite struggles in recent years, agriculture remains a strong part of the Tioga County economy. In 2017, the total market value of agricultural products sold in the county was \$40.9 million. While the total number of farms fell slightly from 536 farms in 2012 to 535 in 2017, the number of acres of farmland rose 4.9% to 113,182 over this period. The number of dairy farms in the county fell nearly 50% between 2007 and 2017, with 59 dairy farms remaining in 2017.<sup>16</sup>

The 2017 Tioga County Housing Study identified a growing financial burden on homeowners and renters in the county, with 21% of homeowners and 41% of renters spending more than 30% of annual income on housing costs. Other concerning economic development trends include an increase in the older population (65+ years of age) and a decline in the younger population (18-24 years of age); a shrinking workforce pool; and a need to replace the aging workforce.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017 Census of Agriculture. *Tioga County, NY Profile*. [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online\\_Resources/County\\_Profiles/New\\_York/cp36107.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/New_York/cp36107.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Tioga County NY Housing Study: December 2017. p. 13.

# Methods

## **Section 3: Methods**

QUALITY OF LIFE APPROACHES

COMMUNITY CAPITALS FRAMEWORK

THE TIOGA TELLS PROCESS

## Quality of Life Approaches

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A recent push to broaden the focus in measuring well-being beyond traditional health indicators has led to renewed interest in studying quality of life. As a multidimensional and subjective concept, quality of life has not only been studied from a healthcare perspective, but also from fields such as economic development and public policy. This wide-ranging interest has led to multiple definitions of quality of life. To some, quality of life is defined as health status, while others consider it to mean happiness, general well-being, or life satisfaction. The World Health Organization defines quality of life as “an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns.”<sup>18</sup> The tools used to measure quality of life differ based on the cultural context and demographic group being studied. Researchers often apply a common list of indicators, but a universal set has not been consistently adopted nor applied.

This study draws upon common definitions and sets of indicators from the World Health Organization and the New York State Department of Health to better understand the state of quality of life in Tioga County, New York. Holistic measurement tools, including surveys and discussion routes, were developed by combining these frameworks. As a result, residents provided detailed explanations of their experiences living in Tioga County.

## Community Capitals Framework

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While the primary objective of this study was to identify the strengths and challenges impacting the quality of life of Tioga County residents, some metrics were added to investigate the relationship between individual quality of life and the functioning of the wider community.

Since quality of life is largely shaped by the culture and value system in which people live, it is important to consider the environmental features that comprise a community. As a result, we adopted the WealthWorks framework to our study. The image on the following page describes the 8 forms of community capital that, according to the framework, constitute a region's current wealth.

While we often think of wealth in terms of financial resources, this model offers an alternative way to think about and measure the relationship between common sets of variables that impact quality of life. Specifically, by including the WealthWorks framework to our survey and applying it to the focus group results, we can better understand how the environmental features and culture in Tioga County can shape residents’ perceptions of quality of life.

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<sup>18</sup> “WHOQOL: Measuring Quality of Life.” World Health Organization.  
<https://www.who.int/healthinfo/survey/whoqol-qualityoflife/en/>

The capital	The definition
 <b data-bbox="354 296 516 329">Individual</b>	The existing stock of skills, understanding, physical health and mental wellness in a region's people.
 <b data-bbox="337 443 516 476">Intellectual</b>	The existing stock of knowledge, resourcefulness, creativity and innovation in a region's people, institutions, organizations and sectors.
 <b data-bbox="418 590 516 623">Social</b>	The existing stock of trust, relationships and networks in a region's population.
 <b data-bbox="386 737 516 770">Cultural</b>	The existing stock of traditions, customs, ways of doing, and world views in a region's population.
 <b data-bbox="396 877 516 911">Natural</b>	The existing stock of natural resources—for example, water, land, air, plants and animals—in a region's places.
 <b data-bbox="440 1024 516 1058">Built</b>	The existing stock of constructed infrastructure—for example, buildings, sewer systems, broadband, roads—in a region's places.
 <b data-bbox="386 1171 516 1205">Political</b>	The existing stock of goodwill, influence and power that people, organizations and institutions in the region can exercise in decision-making.
 <b data-bbox="370 1318 516 1352">Financial</b>	The existing stock of monetary resources available in the region for investment in the region.

*Aspen Research Institute: WealthWorks Framework*

Through this study, we have laid the groundwork to better associate factors impacting quality of life with these forms of community capital. Having this understanding will help to create a more inclusive community decision-making process, explore better systems to provide services and resources to community members, and develop more realistic planning and improvement strategies customized to fit Tioga County's needs.

# The Tioga Tells Process

## The Brief

In August 2018, the Project Lead gathered pre-existing reports to better understand the assets, challenges, and gaps in Tioga County literature.

**STEP 01**



## The Survey

In September 2018, a brief, one-page survey was created and distributed to those who live or work in Tioga County in order to gain a broad understanding of perceptions of quality of life in Tioga County. The survey yielded 315 responses.

**STEP 02**



## The Kickoff

On October 19th, 2019, thirty-six residents and stakeholders gathered to learn about the trends from the preliminary survey, and to brainstorm strengths and challenges impacting quality of life in Tioga County. Survey results and kickoff discussions were used to develop question routes for the focus group discussion phase of the project.

**STEP 03**



## The Discussions

From December 2018 to February 2019, partnerships and collaborative efforts among many organizations and stakeholders brought over one hundred residents to the table to discuss the details of quality of life.

**STEP 04**



## The Delivery

In the final months of the project, data from the discussions were analyzed, a final report and supplemental materials were created and distributed to stakeholders and residents, future recommendations were developed, and presentations were conducted in the county.

**STEP 05**



The image on the left illustrates the overview of the 2018 – 2019 Tioga Tells process. As a year-long assessment project, Tioga Tells unfolded in 3 distinct phases: the preliminary, primary, and concluding phases. The remainder of this report is outlined according to the work accomplished in each stage of the project.

The preliminary phase of the project included the brief, the survey, and the kickoff. These activities led us to develop the question routes for the primary phase of our study.

Focus group discussions were facilitated to obtain detailed information on quality of life factors and processes that could not be obtained through other data collection methods. The key strengths and challenges impacting quality of life were identified and recorded in the “Primary Data Collection” section of the report as subthemes of the project.

During the final phase of the project, data was compiled and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns between the strengths and challenges impacting quality of life and the wider community. This information is reported and discussed in the “Connecting the Dots” section as overarching themes of the Tioga Tells process. Future recommendations were developed based on the project findings, which will guide improvement strategies to increase education, better allocate resources in Tioga County, and improve quality of life. This information is included in the “Year 2 Goals and Objectives” section. Overall, the Tioga Tells process engaged 500 people who live and/or work in Tioga County. 85% of survey and focus group participants reside in Tioga County.



# Early Data Collection

## Section 4:

PRELIMINARY SURVEY & RESULTS

KICKOFF DISCUSSIONS & SUMMARY

## Preliminary Survey & Results

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We began exploring quality of life in Tioga County by distributing a preliminary survey. The design of the survey questionnaire was drawn from the World Health Organization and the Community Capitals framework. The purpose of the survey was to collect broad perspectives of individual and community life from a random sample of Tioga County residents and employees. As such, the questions were intentionally brief and broad. Survey questions were designed to capture respondents' perceptions of the quality of each type of community capital, as well as to determine the relative importance of the factors impacting quality of life.

The survey was administered both online and in-person. The online survey was originally distributed to Tioga County employees via email, and was later distributed across other platforms including personal networks, websites, and newsletters. The survey reached the LinkedIn and Facebook social media platforms, where multiple organizations and individuals helped to circulate the link to the questionnaire. Paper surveys were made available at partner agency sites, community based organizations, food pantries, libraries, and through church organizations.

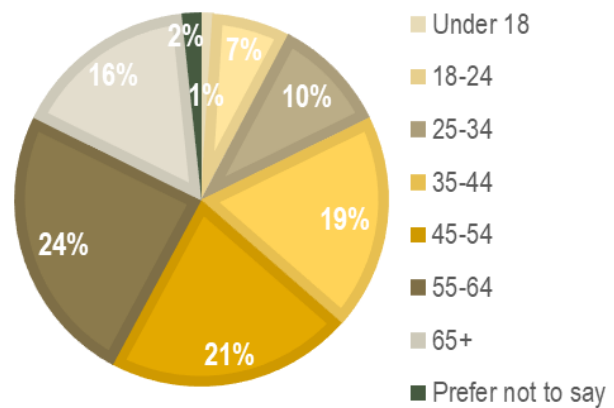
The survey yielded 315 responses from people who live and/or work in Tioga County, with a margin of error of +/- 6 percentage points. The results are displayed on the following pages.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

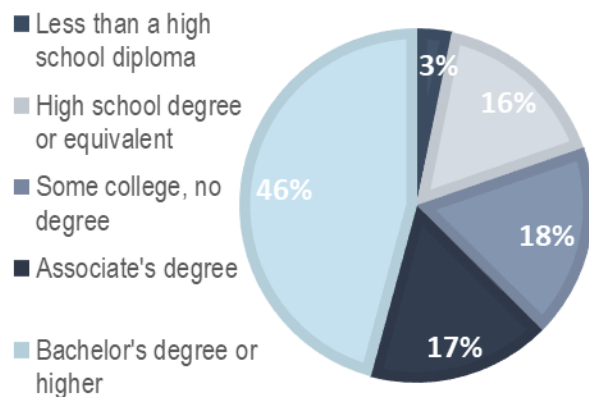
Analysis of the results reveals that out of the 315 total survey participants, 87% of respondents were Tioga County residents while 10% reside in Broome County and 3% in surrounding counties. The following graphics illustrate the percentage of Tioga County residents who took the survey broken down by municipality of residence, the reported age of respondents, the highest level of education completed by respondents, and respondents' reported total household income.

REPORTED PLACE OF RESIDENCE BY TIOGA COUNTY RESIDENTS	
Apalachin	3.94%
Barton	5.12%
Candor	8.66%
Newark Valley	6.69%
Nichols	7.87%
Owego	45.67%
Richford	2.76%
Spencer	3.15%
Tioga	8.27%
Waverly	7.87%

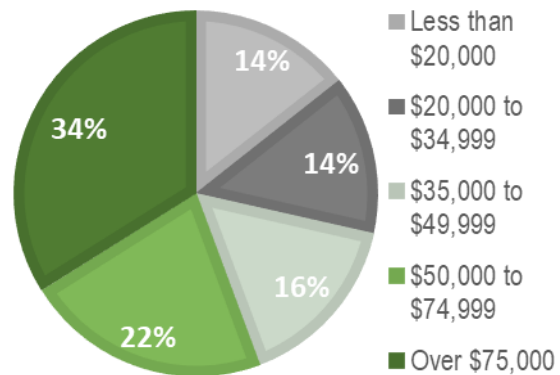
REPORTED AGE OF RESPONDENTS



HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION REPORTED BY RESPONDENTS



2017 TOTAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME REPORTED BY RESPONDENTS



An important consideration in any survey is whether the sample of participants is reflective of the total population being measured. After analyzing demographic data from the preliminary survey, we compared the percentage of respondents in each demographic category to the percentage of all Tioga County residents in those categories according to data from the US Census Bureau. This allowed us to determine which populations were oversampled and undersampled in the survey.

The results above reveal that well-educated residents were oversampled, as 46% of survey participants report having a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 25% of Tioga County residents as a whole<sup>19</sup>. This likely owes to the fact that the survey was initially distributed to Tioga County government employees, a large portion of which have earned at least a Bachelor's

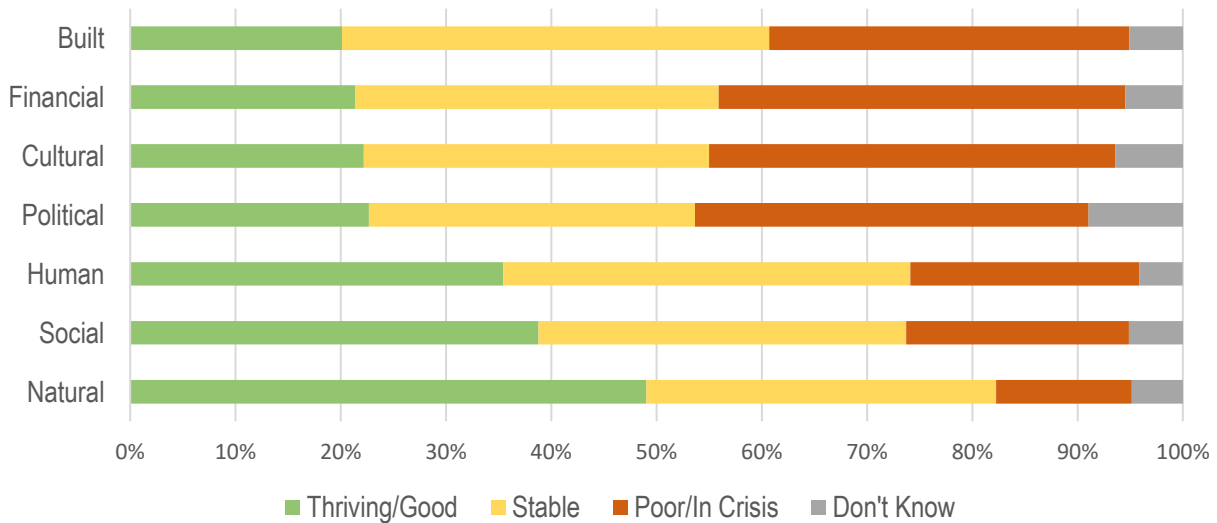
<sup>19</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. *S1501 Educational Attainment*.

degree. Despite this limitation, the survey drew a representative sample of county residents from every adult age group, educational level, and income level.

## QUALITY OF CAPITAL

The chart below illustrates respondents’ views when asked to consider the current quality of different forms of community capital in Tioga County. Participants were instructed to rate each form of capital as “thriving,” “good,” “stable,” “poor,” “in crisis,” or “don’t know.” In the graph below, the “thriving” and “good” categories were collapsed together, as have the “poor” and “in crisis” categories to better capture respondents’ overall positive and negative sentiment.

**PERCEIVED QUALITY OF CAPITAL IN TIOGA COUNTY BY RESPONDENTS**



**Built** – Buildings, sewer systems, broadband, roads

**Financial** – Monetary resources for investment

**Cultural** – Traditions, customs, ways of doing, world views

**Political** – Goodwill, influence, organizations, institutions

**Human** – Knowledge, Resourcefulness, Creativity

**Social** – Trust, relationships, networks

**Natural** – Water, air, land, plants, animals

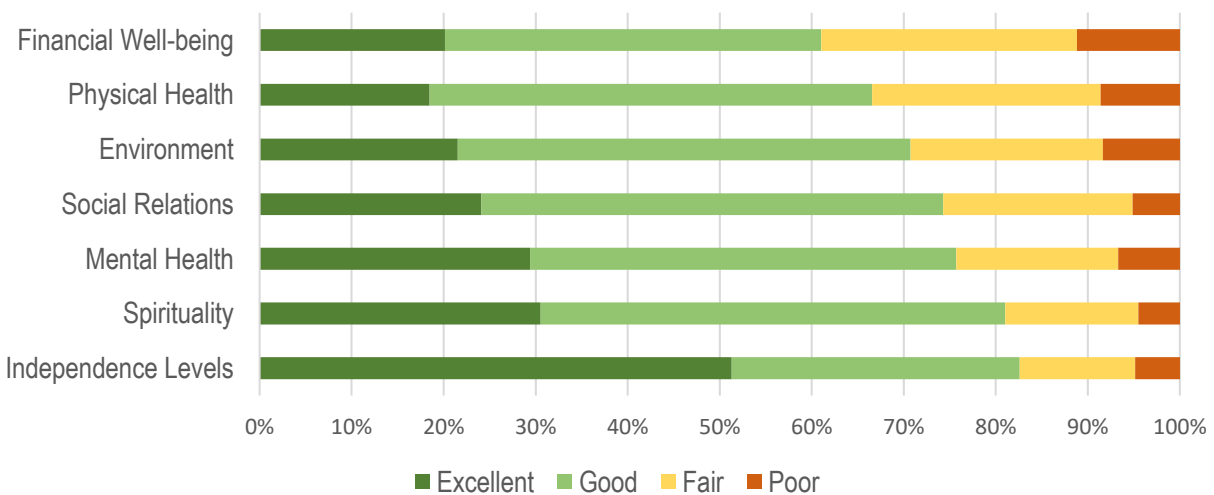
### Takeaways:

- Natural capital is viewed most positively, as 49% of respondents report a positive outlook on the quality of the county’s soil, air, and water resources.
- Residents have a generally positive view of social and human capital, with 74% reporting the quality of each to be positive or stable.
- Financial, political, and cultural capital are perceived most negatively, with over 38% of respondents reporting a negative outlook on each.

## QUALITY OF LIFE

The next graphic illustrates participants' responses when asked to rate their current quality of life as it relates to a number of factors. Respondents evaluated their well-being using a rating scale to capture the degree to which they felt positively or negatively about different areas of their lives.

PERCEIVED QUALITY OF LIFE IN TIOGA COUNTY BY RESPONDENTS



**Financial Well-being** – Employment, job security, local economy, material living condition

**Physical Health** – Energy and fatigue, pain and discomfort, sleep and rest

**Environment** – Safe/affordable housing, crime and safety, arts and culture, available resources

**Social Relations** – Relationships, social support, integration with local community

**Mental Health** – Self-esteem, personal growth, optimism/pessimism

**Spirituality** – Religion, personal beliefs

**Independence Levels** – Mobility, activities of daily living, aging in place

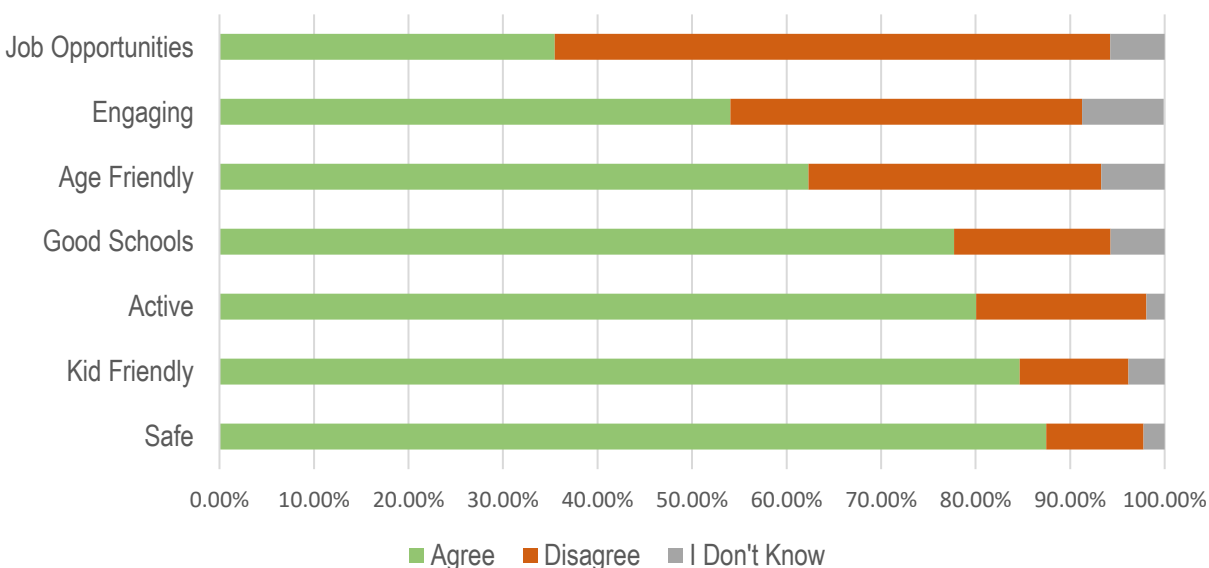
### Takeaways:

- Respondents view their independence levels and spirituality most positively, with over 80% of participants rating these factors as either “good” or “excellent.”
- Participants were most dissatisfied with their financial well-being, as nearly 30% of survey-takers report being in a “fair” or “poor” financial condition.

## CULTURAL VIEWS

The following chart displays respondents' views of the culture of Tioga County. Participants were asked whether they “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree” with each of the statements listed below the graph. The *strongly agree* and *agree* responses were collapsed into a new category, referred to as “agree” below, whereas the *disagree* and *strongly disagree* categories were collapsed into the new category “disagree.” The results of this analysis are shown below.

IEWS OF CULTURE IN TIOGA COUNTY BY RESPONDENTS



- Job Opportunities** – Tioga County has job opportunities
- Engaging** – Tioga County encourages participation among all residents
- Age Friendly** – Tioga County is a good place to age
- Good Schools** – Tioga County has good a good education system
- Active** – Tioga County offers community activities to participate in
- Kid Friendly** – Tioga County is a good place to raise children
- Safe** – Tioga County is a safe place to live

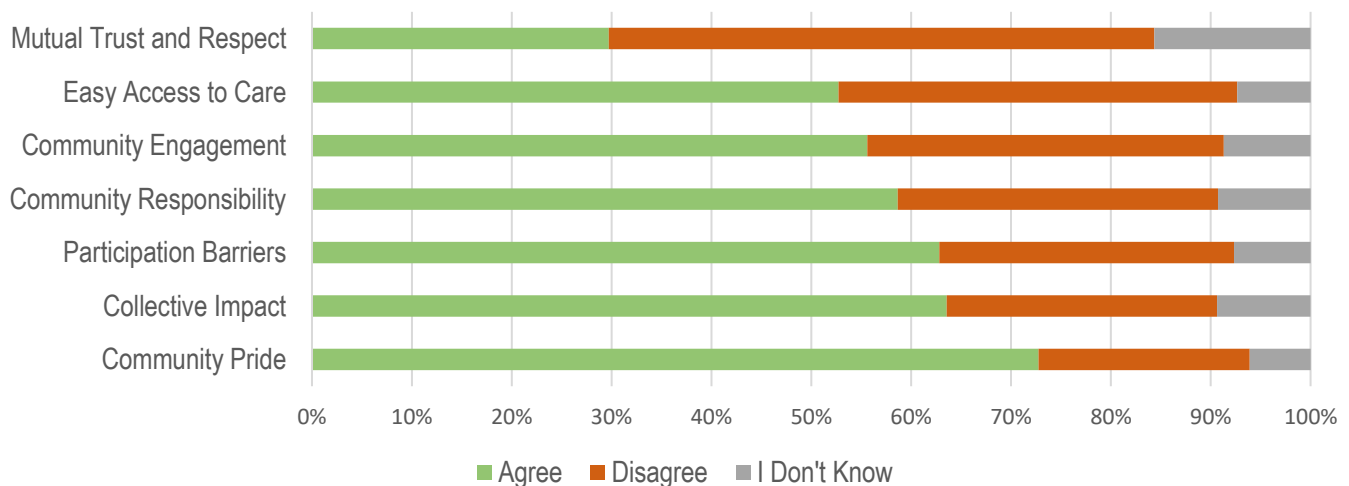
### Takeaways:

- Respondents overwhelmingly believe Tioga County to be a safe, active, and kid-friendly community with good schools. Over 70% of survey participants agreed with each of these characterizations. This suggests residents believe Tioga County to be a good place to raise a family.
- 59% of respondents believe that the county lacks sufficient job opportunities.

## COMMUNITY VIEWS

The ways in which respondents characterize community in Tioga County varies. The final survey graphic below illustrates these results. As with the previous chart, respondents were instructed to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statements. Responses were collapsed in the same ways as the previous chart, thus resulting in the “agree” or “disagree” categories.

IEWS OF COMMUNITY IN TIOGA COUNTY BY RESPONDENTS



**Mutual Trust and Respect** – Within Tioga County, there is mutual trust and respect between decision-makers and residents

**Easy Access to Care** – Within Tioga County, it is easy to find good health care

**Community Engagement** – Within Tioga County, there is a sense of engagement in the community

**Community Responsibility** – Within Tioga County, there is a sense of responsibility to the community

**Participation Barriers** – Within Tioga County, there are barriers to participating in activities

**Collective Impact** – Within Tioga County, residents believe that they can make a difference in their communities

**Community Pride** – Within Tioga County, there is a sense of pride in the community

### Takeaways:

- Over 60% of respondents believe there is a sense of community pride and an opportunity to make a difference in Tioga County.
- A majority of residents (53%) believe that there are barriers to participating in activities, as well as a lack of mutual trust and respect between decision-makers and residents (55%).

## Kickoff Discussion & Summary

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On October 19, 2018, thirty-six community residents and stakeholders from various backgrounds came together at the Tioga Tells Kickoff event to discuss quality of life in Tioga County. The event was organized using the World Cafe Method of hosting large group dialogue.

Attendees were assigned to tables randomly, each of which focused on the following topic areas: (1) education, (2) environment and \*social relationships, (3) health, including mental health, (4) income and employment, and (5) participation and motivation. This format encouraged members to spend fifteen minutes at each table with a trained facilitator who was tasked with prompting discussion related to their topic area(s). Participants were encouraged to consider the different strengths and challenges impacting their quality of life. When necessary, facilitators probed participants by using a list of prompts related to their topic area(s) to provoke greater discussion. As discussion about the positive and negative factors impacting residents occurred, facilitators recorded buzzwords and key phrases into either "strength" or "challenge" columns on flip chart paper.

Following these discussions, the records were analyzed to identify the extent to which buzzwords and key phrases were discussed. This method was repeated for records obtained from each topic area. A total of 520 buzzwords and key phrases were captured by facilitators, 282 of which were identified as challenges and 238 of which were strengths.

*\*Note: The facilitator at Table 2 was tasked with provoking discussion for two topic areas (i.e. environment and social relationships) whereas all other table facilitators hosted only one topic area. This limitation was due to an unexpected change in the number of available facilitators during the event.*



## STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Challenge and strength words were further investigated to identify trends among topic areas. The chart below highlights the most common challenges by topic area. In some instances, themes were identified as positively or negatively affecting more than one topic area. For example, the theme "disconnect and division" was a challenge mentioned as negatively impacting participation and motivation, social relationships, and education in Tioga County.

TOPIC AREA	CHALLENGE MOST FREQUENTLY ASSOCIATED WITH TOPIC AREA	CHALLENGE SOMEWHAT FREQUENTLY ASSOCIATED WITH TOPIC AREA
<b>Social Relationships</b>	Lack of awareness or communication of services, resources, or recreational activities within Tioga County; rurality – distance and location; disconnect and division; resistance to diversity or change; and lack of events, initiatives, or opportunities	Aging population and infrastructure; brain drain and burn out; stereotypes, beliefs, and stigma; transportation; inconvenience or lack of time to participate; lack of livable wage
<b>Participation and Motivation</b>	Lack of awareness or communication of services, resources, or recreational activities within Tioga County; brain drain and burn out; disconnect and division; transportation; inconvenience or lack of time to participate; cost of activities, goods, or services; and lack of events, initiatives, or opportunities.	Aging population and infrastructure; rurality – distance and location; tobacco and drug use; resistance to diversity and change; stereotypes, beliefs, and stigma; flooding and winter seasons; and lack of infrastructure, initiatives, or opportunities
<b>Environment</b>	Aging population and infrastructure; and flooding and winter seasons	Tobacco and drug use; and lack of livable wage
<b>Education</b>	Disconnect and division; resistance to diversity and change; and stereotypes, beliefs, and stigma	Rurality – distance and location; brain drain and burn out; transportation; and cost of activities, goods, or services
<b>Health</b>	Tobacco and drug use; stereotypes, belief, and stigma, flooding and winter seasons; and lack of services – home health aides, mental health providers, referrals	Lack of awareness or communication of services, resources, or recreational activities within Tioga County; aging population and infrastructure; brain drain and burn out; disconnect and division; and lack of livable wage
<b>Income and Employment</b>	Transportation; lack of livable wage; and lack of infrastructure, skills or jobs	Rurality – distance and location; brain drain and burn out; disconnect and division; and flooding and winter seasons

TOPIC AREA	STRENGTH MOST FREQUENTLY ASSOCIATED WITH TOPIC AREA	STRENGTH SOMEWHAT FREQUENTLY ASSOCIATED WITH TOPIC AREA
<b>Social Relationships</b>	Social support – neighborly, strong ties, sense of belonging; small size of community, businesses and close-knit character; sense of community pride, collaboration, resources and venues for activity	Volunteerism; services by community based organizations, churches, and providers; safety; food access and quality; and access to goods and services
<b>Participation and Motivation</b>	Technology, communication and facilities; social support – neighborly, strong ties, sense of belonging; self-reliant culture; sense of community pride, collaboration, resources and venues for activity; and affordability	Small size of community, businesses and close-knit character; services by community based organizations, churches, and providers; school staff and culture; programs and leadership opportunities; natural beauty and outdoor recreation; food access and quality; and access to goods and services
<b>Environment</b>	Agriculture and farms	Safety; and affordability
<b>Education</b>	Technology, communication, and facilities; school staff and culture; and programs and leadership opportunities	Social support – neighborly, strong ties, sense of belonging; small size of community, businesses and close-knit character; food access and quality; and sense of community pride, collaboration, resources and venues for activity
<b>Health</b>	Volunteerism; services by community based organizations, churches, and providers; safety; programs and leadership opportunities; food access and quality; and access to goods and services	Technology, communication and facilities; self-reliant culture; and agriculture and farms
<b>Income and Employment</b>	Small size of community, businesses and close-knit character; small size of community, businesses and close-knit character; resources; affordability; access to goods and services	Social support – neighborly, strong ties, sense of belonging; small size of community, businesses and close-knit character; services by community based organizations, churches, and providers; self-reliant culture; programs and leadership opportunities; agriculture and farms; and sense of community pride, collaboration, resources and venues for activity

# Primary Data Collection

## **Section 5:**

FOCUS GROUP APPROACH

KEY STRENGTHS

KEY CHALLENGES

DISCUSSION

## Focus Group Approach

Tioga Tells stakeholders determined that focus group research was necessary to look beyond pre-existing numerical data and deepen our understanding of quality of life. By obtaining a broader range of detailed information from residents and providing an opportunity to seek clarification of pre-existing data, this approach enhanced stakeholders’ understanding of residents’ experiences and emerging needs through guided facilitation and candid responses.

Focus group methods were also valuable in exploring trends in quality of life perceptions among groups of residents. This was particularly helpful in our quest to identify a holistic approach to study quality of life in Tioga County. Hearing from residents from different demographic backgrounds and municipalities enabled us to record emerging trends affecting all participants. Focus group participants included people with disabilities, people with low income, service providers, farmers, veterans, independent living seniors, assisted living seniors, and residents of any background. The following chart shows the population composition broken down by focus group. It is important to note that while not all focus group participants reported living in Tioga County, every participant did claim to live and/or work within the county.

FOCUS GROUP POPULATION	# OF PARTICIPANTS	PARTICIPANTS LIVING IN TIOGA COUNTY	
		#	%
Service Providers Employed in Tioga County	79	58	73.42%
People with Developmental Disabilities	14	12	85.71%
Farmers and Farm Workers	18	18	100%
Veterans	6	6	100%
People with Low Income	11	11	100%
Independent Living Seniors	9	9	100%
Assisted Living Seniors	7	7	100%
Residents of Any Background	5	4	80.00%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>149</b> people participated in a focus group discussion	<b>125</b> of all focus group participants are Tioga County residents	<b>83.89%</b> of all focus group participants are Tioga County residents

It should also be noted that some participants attending one focus group session also identified with other focus group sessions. For example, 75% of focus group participants who attended the veteran session also identified as having been a farmer or farm worker in their past. Some assisted living seniors were also people with low-income, some service providers were independent living seniors, and so on. The categorization of people by specific background demographics was intended primarily for focus group recruitment strategies. In recruiting by common background, participants were more likely to feel comfortable providing in-depth explanations. The following pages include findings in an effort to report similarities found across residents of all backgrounds and those serving Tioga County residents.

This section outlines the challenges and strengths affecting quality of life in Tioga County that were most commonly mentioned by focus group participants. The following section will address the association between these quality of life factors and the functioning of the wider community by discussing the overarching trends between survey, kickoff, and focus group data. Together, the themes and patterns provide a thorough understanding of the issues facing Tioga County residents and serve as a basis for action planning.

## Key Strengths

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### #4: COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Participants often referenced community organizations as playing a positive role in their quality of life. The frequent mentions of these agencies were perceived positively as members provided numerous examples of the ways in which organizations have offered support and stability in residents' lives. In these discussions, participants highlighted the fluctuating nature of quality of life over time. It became clear that residents perceive community organizations as responsive and caring support systems that provide help during transitions in life over time as their needs fluctuate.

One participant states, "Previously, I felt like I was on a sinking ship, but things are better now. Organizations are doing well to provide incentives to participate. They make an effort, which seems to open the others' eyes of what was lacking before. Schools, civic organizations, community action organizations – not just things to improve your life but fill your time." This view resonated with earlier accounts from participants, as well. Many associated factors like social activity and participation with community improvement efforts and see organizations as important hubs which foster this collaborative nature. Participants believe organizations have the capacity not only to offer resources to those



*"Previously, I felt like I was on a sinking ship, but things are better now.*

*Organizations are doing well to provide incentives to participate. They make an effort, which seems to open the others' eyes of what was lacking before.*

*Schools, civic organizations, community action organizations – not just things to improve your life, but things to fill your time."*

suffering from economic hardship or poor health, but also to provide incentives for community engagement. As a result, residents believe they can trust the work done by community agencies to care and provide for their communities.

Additionally, participants alluded to the role of organizations in providing the norms and trust that facilitates collaborative action. One participant mentioned: “If we want to protect quality of life, we need to focus on emerging trends. We need to have a structure.” Participants describe the role of organizations as educational, forward-thinking, and supportive: “Organizations that help people are making changes in attitudes.” Specifically, participants expressed appreciation of agencies’ recent efforts to alleviate transportation and housing barriers for residents with low income. Organizations highlighted by participants include churches, community based organizations, and service groups, such as the Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs.

In discussing the role of organizations in quality of life, participants noted that their condition in life is affected by both external and internal factors. However, participants emphasized that their health and social relations tend to depend on their financial stability and level of independence. In this way, community organizations in Tioga County help to provide foundational support that residents can depend on to age and raise families successfully.

### #3: SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Focus group participants positively described community traits such as friendliness, safety, history and "small town charm" as important benefits of living in Tioga County. Further discussions with participants reveal that these community traits have more important components including membership, influence, integration, and shared emotional connection.

The sense of community positively and frequently described by most participants is a type of community friendliness. Most participants describe the culture of Tioga County as a close-knit community “with rural or farm values.” The majority of participants believe Tioga County is friendly. One participant mentions, “It makes me feel good when strangers wave.” Others discuss Tioga County being rural and neighborly: “I don't know my neighbors, but I recognize cars and if I saw that car down the road in the ditch, I'm definitely going to stop because I know they live on the road.” This view was expressed most among residents of any background, as well as independent living seniors.

Focus group participants overwhelmingly perceive the county to be a safe place to live. One participant reflected on their experience in Tioga County by stating, “We’re a relatively low-crime



*“Part of why my wife wanted to move here was she would drive through...and she would notice it had a homey feel to it. Especially if something was going on. In that sense, it does feel very community minded and that was part of the appeal of coming here and that's why we decided to ultimately live [here] ourselves.”*

community. Drugs are a big time blight, but not compared to [areas outside Tioga County].” Another participant states, “If someone gets off the bus and they’re shady, we’ll know within an hour.” Other participants describe the safety of Tioga County in terms of mental health, by drawing on the aspect of natural beauty (see “Nature Appeal” below).

Participants also described Tioga County as having “lots of history.” In doing so, participants mentioned communities within the county as having been home to a number of historic figures and events, such as ties to the Underground Railroad and . Similarly, participants discussed the pride they feel about raising their families here over generations. This was highlighted most among dairy farmers. In doing so, participants associated comfort and familiarity with positively impacting quality of life.

Overall, participants felt that there are “pockets of charm” throughout the county that keep residents proud of where they live. One participant highlighted, “Part of why my wife wanted to move here was she would drive through Owego on her way to Ithaca, and she would notice it had a homey feel to it. Especially if something was going on, like Lights on the River. In that sense, it does feel very community-minded... That was part of the appeal of coming here and that's why we decided to ultimately live in Owego ourselves.”

## #2: LOCAL SCHOOLS

Participants from each focus group session spoke highly of the Tioga County school systems as providing good educational instruction, as well as fulfilling other social functions. In this way, participants attributed Tioga County school systems as effective and respected educational institutions, community centers, and additional support systems. Overall, participants identify school systems as being an important, positive contributor to quality of life, particularly when raising their families.

As one participant summarized, “School systems care.” Details provided by participants suggest the school systems fill a variety of social functions, including providing assistance to offset barriers faced by families with low income. For example, participants described transportation, free and reduced lunch, after school and summer recreation programs, and community gardens as not only easing families’ financial barriers, but also filling children’s time with positive activity.

Conversations also suggest school system staff are well-respected in that they offer additional support systems to students. When discussing a personal struggle faced in her family, one participant mentioned, “The school took her under their wings as teachers. I never want to leave a community like this. I never thought it existed.” Other factors like staff longevity and student to teacher ratios were perceived as positive contributors. Some participants referred to this view of schools ‘multiserving’ as a sort of “personalized” approach offered by school systems in Tioga County.



*“The school took her under their wings as teachers. I never want to leave a community like this. I never thought it existed.”*

Additional ways in which participants view school systems includes their contribution to the greater community. For example, some participants highlighted school districts as community centers with “tons of activity.” In this way, participants believe schools to be unique in their ability to “assemble residents from all backgrounds and age to celebrate and join a common cause.” The recent change to include agricultural education as part of the curriculum taught in Tioga County schools was also viewed positively. In this way, participants feel “It not only helps revives interest in Ag as a career,” but reinstates rural and farm values mentioned earlier by “providing an opportunity to stay connected with our roots.”

## #1: NATURE APPEAL

In each session, participants discussed the natural beauty of Tioga County as a substantial asset. Participants focused on the positive impact that natural features had on their health and social relations.

The varying geography and population density throughout the county was perceived positively in that residents have the “freedom” to choose whether and how to spend their leisure time. Participants described the opportunity to choose between spending time in nearby areas with larger populations and activity, or in more “remote areas in the hills.” One participant describes these options as “freedom of needs,” while others suggest the remoteness “suits them better.”

Focus group participants noted that the beautiful geography of the county, including hills, rivers, and parks cultivate a sense of mindfulness that promotes mental and spiritual well-being. One participant highlights the pervasive spiritual quality of Tioga County when she notes, “Tioga County offers a wholesome environment with plenty of nature escapes.” Other participants echo this sentiment by describing how “nature reinforces basic living” and provides residents with “peace of mind” and quietude. A veteran describes the role Tioga County has played in his quality of life: “Comfortable and familiar - The familiar surroundings are peaceful and help with my PTSD. Coming home was always the safe and comfortable place that I could visit before I went back to reality. I lived in some neat places, but also some hell holes while in the service. I’ve been back about 10 years now since retiring.” Through comments such as these, participants explain the connection between natural features and spirituality as a quality of life indicator.

Participants also focused attention on the variety of outdoor recreational activities they have enjoyed in Tioga County, such as biking, fishing, hiking and hunting. Some participants noted the affordable cost of property as an incentive to relocating to the area upon retirement, while others suggested the property encouraged them to own horses and ski.



*“Tioga County offers a wholesome environment with plenty of nature escapes.”*



## Key Challenges

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### #5: TRANSPORTATION BARRIER

Transportation was highlighted in focus group discussions as a barrier to improving quality of life. This theme was mentioned in all focus group sessions, but was most commonly discussed among people with disabilities, people with low income, assisted living seniors, independent living seniors, and veterans.

When discussing factors that impact quality of life, participants expressed some difficulty in traveling to medical appointments and food outlets, as well as accessing recreational activities and social services. Participants worried that a lack of transportation services exists in Tioga County, and that some residents are at a disadvantage when accessing these services.

One participant seeking services linked the conditions of the built environment and socioeconomic status in her view that “[an organization] is [just] outside of town and there are no sidewalks to get there. This is obstructive. There is no transportation for poor people.” Another participant stated: “There is no way to get food back from the pantries, so you can’t go get the food. These are the symptoms of broken systems.” Another participant highlighted a lack of resources by stating that “There’s not enough emphasis on transportation. If the parents can’t come from Waverly or Barton to come pick up their kids, we [the organization] don’t have the resources to bus them home.” Another participant drew upon geographic barriers by saying “Isolation is good and bad. Some people come out here because they want that rural feel and live in the middle of nowhere without many neighbors. In other ways, it’s bad because there’s no transportation and people who don’t drive or have a car are unable to get around. The isolation is huge for aging veterans and they need transportation. If you live in Richford or Berkshire, you’re unable to get to a larger population center, like Owego, where services are offered. It’s a pro and it’s a con.” These examples illustrate the conditions residents face when making decisions about when and how to pursue transportation options in Tioga County.

When the topic of transportation arose, participants often associated transportation challenges with the County’s public bus system closure in 2014. One participant stated, “One major issue is transportation. It all started when the state took over Medicaid. In the 90’s, Medicaid was paid by the county and the state. The State has changed now. That legislation went away, and when that went away, it became worse to get around.” In other cases, regulations about vehicle inspection and registration were also viewed as obstructive factors preventing or maintaining access to transportation.

Additionally, some participants claimed that a lack of transportation services negatively impacts residents’ social relations and activity. However, when participants noted that Tioga County



*“Transportation is a barrier. You can’t get to a lot of places at all. Even to doctor appointments or to the grocery store is really hard.”*

lacks public transportation, few mentioned options other than those funded through Medicaid. This may suggest that residents tend to rely on Medicaid-funded transportation services for medical appointments, but may be unaware of alternative transportation services available for non-medical purposes. Interestingly, when participants mentioned transportation as a barrier, they rarely provided personal examples of how transportation negatively impacted themselves. Rather, participants tended to explain how it impacts groups of people.

Overall, transportation was perceived as being an essential part of maintaining independence, promoting socialization, and maintaining health in Tioga County. Although many focus group residents perceive transportation barriers as a significant factor impacting their quality of life, many participants spoke on behalf of other groups of people to demonstrate this point.

#### #4: NOSTALGIA

A sense of nostalgia was expressed in all focus group sessions, excluding the session among people with disabilities. The groups most likely to express nostalgia were farmers and farmworkers, independent living seniors, veterans, assisted living seniors, and service providers. This theme was used to capture the frequency by which participants described a sentimental longing to return to a period in the past when asked to describe the culture of Tioga County.

Participants offered various explanations for their feelings of discontentment with current conditions. Specifically, participants viewed economic changes, technological advancements, changing views of work ethic, and trends in raising a family as factors that have negatively impacted the culture of Tioga County.

Most participants believed the lifestyles of the 1950's and 1960's to be superior to modern culture: "I would like to see the culture that existed 40-50 years ago, but it's not coming back because it's impacted by the greater world and what's going on in it." To many, farmers contributed greatly to the sense of community both economically and socially, but recent economic shifts have left farmers feeling less respected in the community and left behind economically.



*"I graduated high school with no money, lived on a farm, got a job at a factory, got married... IBM coming here was big. You could go in and move up. We had a pond, we could hunt. The '50s were a good time. Farming made good money, there were good churches and good schools. Of course, all that's changed now. We're victims of period of time. We are what we were then. We could progress then, but now it's tougher. Now, you have got to have a good starting point."*

The perceived effects of this wider economic shift were reflected in discussions by other groups as well. Participants described the 1950s and 1960s as a period of hard work and fair reward, where residents could earn enough money to get by and climb the social ladder, yet money was not viewed as a central component of their quality of life: “In my mind, wealth is if you want something, you have to work for it. A lot of people have things given to them. I was fortunate when I was younger, that my father had his own business and, when I would need money, he’d say ‘Let’s go paint a house.’ A lot of people nowadays don’t have that option.” Another participant reflected, “For me, I never thought about the money part. I grew up on a dairy farm – we earned a living out of the earth. We didn’t really base what we had on where we stood monetarily, it was all about family, taking care of family, and making what we could...For me, money has never been an issue. It’s about whether I was happy with where I was in life.” Participants often defended this view by claiming “it’s about work ethic.”

Conversations about this view of work ethic were highlighted across focus group sessions as participants discussed different ways of learning. One participant stated, “We are doing what has to be done, but you don’t learn that in school. We learn by being do-ers.” This viewpoint reflects a larger trend of learning as a component of culture in Tioga County which, participants feel, is changing. In this way, participants lament the decline of “learn by doing” approach, by which new skills are developed through direct experiences outside of an academic setting. Participants mostly resent the current trend of “learning then doing,” through which students learn skills in an academic setting before applying them directly. Participants lamented the importance of academic credentials in the modern economy and the declining payoff from self-taught skills. For example, one participant mentioned: “Same thing with mechanics. You got these guys who went to school for diesel mechanic who study this stuff, who, in reality, can’t do it. I do it for them.” These participants suggest that it’s more effective to learn by doing, but not as profitable as the alternative.

However, conversations with other participants suggest the lack of reward is due to the larger shifts in the economy, rather than personal work ethic styles. For example, participants who received college degrees spoke that the return on investment is not as great as it’s made out to be: “I hear about these loan forgiveness programs, but they don’t seem to be real. They aren’t practical. In the same amount of time they ask me to make payments to be eligible for forgiveness, I would have already paid off the loan. It’s not worth it.” In this way, even participants following the learn-then-do model are struggling in the modern economy. Other participants reflected on the changes in culture by noting the lack of emphasis on County history. Many participants noted the history of Tioga County as home to many successful political and military figures, but felt saddened that this history is not circulated more often in the schools for younger generations to learn about.

Feelings of nostalgia were often preceded by discussions about the state of culture in Tioga County, of which many had difficulty describing. For example, one participant stated: “Tioga County is not known for anything – not now. It would be nice to have a Tioga County brand.” This was reflected by another participant who noted “I’m not sure why I like it [Tioga County].” Another participant described culture in Tioga by saying that “Towns are important, but the

County is amorphous,” which also reflects the lack of clear structure or focus in describing the county-wide culture.

Overall, participants’ responses suggest Tioga County is in a transitory period, where most feel nostalgic about the past, concerned about the present, and unsure about the future. At one point, Tioga County was perceived to be known for its agricultural roots and products, but participants feel farming is being left behind and underappreciated in favor of development. Another common perspective suggests residents feel that they are working hard but can’t get ahead while others not working as hard can get forms of public assistance. An example of this is the lamented differences in work ethic between generations. To many, the future state of Tioga County culture is unclear. Some participants give ideas about what future might be like by referencing the recent influx of Amish populations in Berkshire, Candor, and the southside of Owego as positive: “Overall, the Amish are positive. They use land that would otherwise go to waste.” Another participant states that “the Amish are industrious. They bring a work ethic that is refreshing.” Other participants suggest that, by diversifying agricultural markets to include products by the Amish as well as those from “niche farming,” Tioga County could retain its agricultural roots while also providing goods for a more specialized economy.

It is important to note that these changes are not unique to Tioga County, but reflect wider changes across the Rust Belt of the United States. Perspectives from these focus group participants also highlight underlying economic trends in conditions reflected by the ALICE population, recognized by the United Way of New York State as “those who are above the federal poverty level but below a sustainable wage.”

### #3: LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Participants from each focus group session emphasized the role social support plays in forming their perceptions of quality of life. In this way, social support refers to the reciprocal exchange of a variety of social behaviors. Participants overwhelmingly perceived social support in Tioga County as lacking, but further investigation reveals that the type of lacking support described by participants varied by focus group. Emotional, instrumental, and informational support in Tioga County were described as negatively impacting their quality of life.

Views of empathy, trust and caring, also referred to as emotional support, were discussed most among people with disabilities, assisted living seniors, and farmers.

Participants from the disabilities focus group described a lack of emotional support in terms of their future aspirations to rent an apartment, retain a job, or accomplish other milestones. One participant reflected on his experience at a job interview by stating, “People don’t take you seriously... It can be frustrating. They don’t want to work with people like me. They are not



*“It can be a hopeless feeling to... not be able to get the help you need. I hear grumblings of civil unrest. This affects mental health.”*

polite.” Other participants echoed this sentiment when describing experiences with landlords and students at school.

Similarly, assisted living seniors described feeling a lack of dignity from caretakers and program coordinators, and wanting “equal treatment regardless of what [our] level of health is.” A participant reflected on an instance with family by saying “Family can be an influence. They won’t let me fold laundry. They treat me like a child...They don’t always let me do things I can actually do, which is hurtful. It makes me feel badly.” Farmers discussed a similar feeling of discouragement when they reflected on experiences with non-farming populations and people in positions of authority. Many revealed a desire to be heard when they speak: “Farmers are tired of not being heard. It’s a challenge to ensure leaders the value of farmers. No one wants to help us. We need support, respect. Do our voices even matter?” Participants also mentioned an association between social relations and mental health by stating, “We need mental health programs that will support relationships. Family counseling, marriage counseling, family to children counseling.” Others wanted non-farming populations to empathize with the emotional realities that come along with farming, such as “when our animals get sick and pass. It’s not just money we’re losing, but it’s sad. Not many people understand that farming is just as emotional as it is a business.”

Focus group participants were mostly unsatisfied with the instrumental support offered by Tioga County agencies. Participants with low income, independent living seniors, and members of the farmer focus group felt unconvinced that the practical assistance offered by Tioga County met their needs. For example, people with low income discussed the gaps of service in childcare, independent living seniors discussed the need for increased assistance with grant writing, and farmers requested more help in navigating the legal system when disputes with neighbors occurred.

When participants from each focus group explained their perspectives, the majority called on their leaders for more informational support, including advice and information. As one member inquired, “They should call us together to share a message. Are they aware, or do they just close their eyes?”

The perceived lack of social support is significant in that forms of support are important indicators of social capital. Social capital is seen as a resource, individual or communal, accessed through various forms of social networks. Social support is a key component of quality of life, and participants suggest that a shortage can lead to compromised strength in decision-making and relationships between groups of people. One participant concludes, “It can be a hopeless feeling to not be able to get the help you need. I hear grumblings of civil unrest. This affects mental health.”

## #2: TRAVELING OUT OF TIOGA

Participants' indication of opportunities and engagement within Tioga County were often muffled by the frequency with which respondents mentioned leaving Tioga County. Findings suggest the rate by which participants obtain services, resources, and recreational activities within Tioga County is not as great as those obtained in surrounding counties. This was perceived both positively and negatively, but most participants expressed concern about the challenges this presents to retain young professionals and to keep aging seniors active.



*“There’s not much to do here. We need to travel outside of the area to do interesting things.”*

Although festivals and outdoor recreation were seen as positive opportunities to enjoy within Tioga County, many participants echoed the sentiment, “I wish there was more.” This view of boredom was captured in one participant’s account as he stated, “There’s not much to do here. We need to travel outside of the area to do interesting things.” One participant compared experiences living outside Tioga County to her experience living in Tioga County as “two different worlds,” where “life outside Tioga County is faster and full of creativity, but not much in Tioga County has changed over time.”

Another participant suggests that Tioga County offers “opportunities for everyone” by pleasing more conservative residents with opportunities to hunt, and more progressive residents with opportunities to visit the opera and restaurants in surrounding counties. In this way, the location of Tioga County is viewed as a positive draw, yet concerns of some residents’ limited means to transportation was highlighted by others. A senior living on a fixed income stated, “Fifty dollars a month? That’s not enough money to do things outside of [this town].” Another participant mentioned that her normal mode of transportation does not extend to the weekend, which leads to isolation and difficulty staying active. Others highlighted this perceived dynamic between transportation, income, and activities when she said, “We need more [summer] activities for kids, transportation to get them there, and scholarships to help them pay for it.” These discussions among participants suggest that residents with lower income have more difficulty finding age-friendly and affordable activities within Tioga County.

The notion of Tioga County as a bedroom community was frequently mentioned among focus group participants. Some participants mentioned they travel far distances to work, saying, “Most people are driving 30-40 minutes to get to a decent paying job.” Another participant associated the decline in manufacturing positions as a contributing factor by saying “As the manufacturing dissipated, the area became more rural, so people leave to go where the jobs are. Now, jobs are coming back, but the population is still shrinking.”


Concern over population trends was also cited often. Specifically, many focus group participants stated their concerns over the emigration of young skilled residents, also referred to as ‘brain drain.’ A variety of dialogue was expressed, including “...retaining young professionals is an issue. We still lose more people here than we should to [surrounding] areas.” Others mention reasons may including higher income potential and greater social activities elsewhere.

Overall, these conversations about leaving Tioga County for services, resources, and recreational activities highlights common perspectives on age, levels of independence, and income and employment as factors impacting residents' quality of life.

## #1: DISCONNECT & DIVISION

When discussing social support in Tioga County, participants drew upon experiences interacting with others as a key factor which negatively affects their quality of life. The result of such interactions describes a complex disconnect and division within Tioga County. This challenge was perceived among most participants, regardless of demographic background.

As participants described a disconnect and division, they overwhelmingly described one that exists between residents and decision-makers. For example, a dominant view was the perception that the working poor are not in control of their standard of living, but rather, that policies managed by local leaders favor others with greater socioeconomic status: "They get rid of the riff raff and low-income people and keep the people they care most about. That's what I'm talking about when I say quality of life is like walking on eggshells." Participants perceive that some of the problems they face are beyond their reach, citing a "lack of control," sometimes to "downstate people." As one participant summarized, "Happiness is influenced or diminished by forces beyond my control." This vulnerable state participants describe living in can sometimes be explained by "living paycheck to paycheck," where the working poor feel they "can't get any help. It's like being in a hamster wheel."



*"Happiness is influenced or diminished by forces beyond my control."*

Ultimately, this overarching theme of a disconnect highlights participants' expectation of leaders to provide aid to those striving but unable to make ends meet, commonly referred to as the ALICE population. One participant states, "We need to have the will, collectively, to get something done." In this way, residents expect elected officials to advocate on their behalf. However, the overall perception is that leaders are nonresponsive to participants' call for help; Participants expect leaders to act on their behalf, but don't think they do. As a result, participants are left feeling invisible. One participant expresses, "There's help for people who are really down low. The people that have enough money are fine. But the people in the middle are ignored." Another shares "The people that make the rules and have the power ... focus on who they deem is important – the people with money."

Throughout these conversations, participants link financial well-being and social support to their perceptions of trust. One participant clearly outlines this in his statement: "Because of taxes and constraints, very few people have the power to make change. There is no way to ever win the battle between the elected officials and the populace." Participants described this disappointment of interaction as a contributing factor to the lack of mutual trust and respect between residents and decision-makers: "Political divisions. We're weary of people with the ability to make decisions that affect our lives. A lot of mistrust."

Not only is a disconnect perceived between residents and decision-makers, but also between groups of residents. For example, one participant describes Tioga County as “Closed. You're either a part of it, or you're not. If you're a doctor or work for Lockheed or something, you're more likely to be welcomed.” In this way, a perception among participants exists that “Tioga County has not shared it’s prosperity.” This perception of a division between residents occurred often as participants compared themselves to other groups of residents: “Most people live a good life here, but I don't think I have. I see a lot of economic prejudices and corruption, a lack of oversight and accountability.” A distinction between because some groups of residents have a closer proximity to political power or financial capital, also known as the in-crowd: “There are things you don't know a lot about going on. Good 'ole boys - you need to know someone or have money to get anything.”

## Discussion

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### BRIDGING & BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

By applying the WealthWorks framework from earlier, the link between individuals’ quality of life and the functioning of the wider community is made clearer. At first glance, this collection of data seemed to paint a contradictory picture of social capital in Tioga County. Specifically, we saw that most survey respondents perceived social capital to be positive, but when probed in the remainder of the survey and during focus group discussions, participants perceived some components of social capital as positive, while others as negative.

For example, most focus group participants described a sense of community within Tioga County, yet most also felt a disconnect and division. Upon further investigation, we found that participants tended to describe these elements of social capital in two differing ways: among people with similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics in their immediate network, or between people with different traits outside their immediate network.<sup>20</sup> These two forms of social capital are also known as bonding and bridging social capital, respectively.

**Social Capital:  
the existing  
stock of trust,  
relationships,  
and networks  
in a region’s  
population**

This is significant in that the ways in which participants describe positive quality of life factors in Tioga County indicate strong levels of bonding social capital exist, whereas the negative quality of life factors suggest weak levels of bridging social capital. Recall the following focus group strengths and challenges:

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<sup>20</sup> Tristan Claridge, “What is Bonding Social Capital?” *Social Capital Research*.  
<https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/what-is-bonding-social-capital/>



<b>Focus Group Strength Identified by Participants</b>	<b>Form of Social Capital Highlighted by Strength</b>
Community Organizations	High Bonding
Sense of Community	High Bonding
Local Schools	High Bridging
<b>Focus Group Challenge Identified by Participants</b>	<b>Form of Social Capital Highlighted by Challenge</b>
Lack of Support	Low Bridging
Traveling Out of Tioga	Low Bridging
Disconnect & Division	Low Bridging

As the chart depicts, factors associated with high bonding include community organizations and a sense of community. For example, participants describe community organizations in Tioga County as fostering the social norms and trust between individuals facing similar socioeconomic hardships or health conditions. Similarly, the sense of community was most often described in terms of membership in a particular group within the larger community of the county. This was highlighted in discussions with farmers and veterans, who tend to “take care of their own.” The lack of integration between social groups was highlighted in discussions about the culture of the county and respondents’ views of cultural capital in the preliminary survey. However, residents seek to “develop a Tioga County brand” that unifies all residents. Community organizations and the sense of community present within the county promote bonding social capital among groups with similar backgrounds and characteristics.

In contrast, factors associated with low bridging capital are lack of support, traveling out of Tioga, and disconnect and division. In these discussions, participants highlight the need for additional resources or services, as well as trust and reciprocity among people outside of their immediate networks. Participants perceive this to be the difference between “getting by” (bonding) and “getting ahead” (bridging).

Research from a variety of scholars reports the strong association between social capital and mental as well as physical health.<sup>21</sup> Specifically, the strength and diversity from which individuals develop ties with others can impact outcomes such as mortality rates, as well as behaviors including leisure-time physical activity.<sup>22</sup> From this assessment, we can begin to understand the impact bonding and bridging social capital have on residents’ perception of quality of life in Tioga County. By understanding these relationships, we can better understand their connections to the overall functioning of Tioga County and learn what actions to take to improve them.

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<sup>21</sup> Sara Ferlander. “The Importance of Different Forms of Social Capital for Health.” *Acta Sociologica* 50 (2007).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

# Conclusion

## **Section 6:**

### **TIOGA TELLS YEAR 2 OBJECTIVES**

## Tioga Tells Year 2 Objectives

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Tioga Tells was founded on the premise that residents' perspectives should be a central element of action planning to improve quality of life in Tioga County. As a result, they would identify gaps in services or resource allocation and/or other forms of support that stakeholders could work to address in the coming years. As a result of this product, Tioga County residents can work with stakeholders to customize realistic action planning and improvement strategies while addressing the challenges identified in this report and creating a plan that uses the identified strengths to do so. The following section lists four primary objectives to accomplish during the 2019 – 2020 period. These objectives are grounded in the results produced by this assessment, and are broad goals. As such, these goals intend to allow municipalities the flexibility to adapt approaches unique to their communities.

**OBJECTIVE #1: Retain and increase engagement of the Steering Committee members and community members**

**OBJECTIVE #2: Increase opportunities for Tioga County residents to learn about services, resources, and/or recreational activities available within Tioga County**

**OBJECTIVE #3: Increase opportunities for community members to play a role in municipal policy and decision-making efforts**

**OBJECTIVE #4: Promote activities that expand upon the strengths identified in the 2018-2019 Tioga Tells Quality of Life Assessment**

The Tioga Tells Steering Committee has agreed to remain a supporting agent in the transition of goals and responsibilities from Year 1 (2018 – 2019) to Year 2 (2019 – 2020). While the Rural Health Network of South Central New York was the leading agency during Year 1, project members have identified Tioga Opportunities, Inc. as the appropriate host site for Year 2. Community residents and stakeholders are encouraged to stay connected to project efforts. As a method of project sustainability, we have developed an open-data website where Tioga Tells information will be stored and ongoing communication may be had. For more information, please visit <https://tiogatells-tiogacountyny.hub.arcgis.com/>

# Appendices

## **Section 7:**

**A - PRELIMINARY SURVEY  
QUESTIONNAIRE**

**B - SURVEY COMPARISON TO ACS  
DATA**

**C - FOCUS GROUP QUESTION ROUTE**

**D - SOURCES**

## A. PRELIMINARY SURVEY

The survey questionnaire contained the following set of questions.

<b>(1) Please rate the current quality of the following in Tioga County:</b>	<b>Thriving</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Stable</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>In Crisis</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>
Built Capital <i>(Consider: Safe housing, public facilities, communication systems)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Natural Capital <i>(Consider: Soil, air, water)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cultural Capital <i>(Consider: Diversity, cultural celebrations, language barriers)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Human Capital <i>(Consider: Leadership development, education systems, healthcare)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Political Capital <i>(Consider: Venues for community input, trust between officials and members)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Capital <i>(Consider: Civic involvement, relationships, volunteerism)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Financial Capital <i>(Consider: Investments into community, affordable goods and services)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>(2) Please rate your current quality of life in the following areas:</b>			<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Poor</b>
Physical Health <i>(Consider: Energy and fatigue, pain and discomfort, sleep and rest)</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Relations <i>(Consider: Relationships, social support, integration with local community)</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mental Health <i>(Consider: Self-esteem, personal growth, optimism/pessimism)</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Level of Independence <i>(Consider: Mobility, activities of daily living, aging in place)</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Environment <i>(Consider: Safe/affordable housing, crime and safety, arts and culture, available resources)</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spirituality <i>(Consider: Religion, personal beliefs)</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Financial Well-being <i>(Consider: Employment, job security, local economy, material living condition)</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Fill in the Blanks:</b>						
<b>(3) I live in _____ County. (4) I work in _____ County. (5) I live in _____ town or village. (6) I was born in _____ (year).</b>						
<b>(7) To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</b>			<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly</b>	<b>Don't</b>
<b>Tioga County:</b>			<b>Agree</b>		<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Know</b>
... offers community activities to participate in.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... encourages participation among all residents.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... is a good place to raise children.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... is a good place to age.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... is a safe place to live.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... has job opportunities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... has a good education system.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Within Tioga County:</b>						
... there are barriers to participating in activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... it is easy to find good health care.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... residents believe that they can make the community a better place to live.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... there is mutual trust and respect between residents and decision-makers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... there is a sense of responsibility to the community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... there is a sense of engagement in the community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... there is a sense of pride in the community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(8) What is your highest level of education completed?	(9) What was your total household income last year?
<input type="checkbox"/> Less than high school diploma	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than \$20,000
<input type="checkbox"/> High school degree or equivalent	<input type="checkbox"/> \$20,000 to \$34,999
<input type="checkbox"/> Some college, no degree	<input type="checkbox"/> \$35,000 to \$49,999
<input type="checkbox"/> Associate's degree	<input type="checkbox"/> \$50,000 to \$74,999
<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's degree or higher	<input type="checkbox"/> Over \$75,000

## B. SURVEY COMPARISON DATA TO ACS DATA

The following charts compare the demographic results of the preliminary survey with demographic information provided by the American Community Survey. The analysis of this data was helpful in determining the extent to which participants were over- and undersampled in the survey based on an understanding of their demographic background from an alternative source.

<b>POPULATION</b>			
<b>Town</b>	<b>ACS %</b>	<b>Survey %</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Apalachin	2.21%	3.94%	1.73%
Barton	8.63%	5.12%	3.51%
Candor	10.38%	8.66%	1.72%
Newark Valley	7.72%	6.69%	1.03%
Nichols	4.94%	7.87%	2.93%
Owego	38.89%	45.67%	6.78%
Richford	2.29%	2.76%	0.47%
Spencer	6.17%	3.15%	3.02%
Tioga	9.53%	8.27%	1.26%
Waverly	8.69%	7.87%	0.82%

<b>AGE</b>			
<b>Age Range</b>	<b>ACS %</b>	<b>Survey %</b>	<b>Difference</b>
18-24	8.0%	7.0%	1.0%
25-34	10.3%	10.0%	0.3%
35-44	12.4%	19.0%	6.6%
45-54	17.7%	21.0%	3.3%
55-64	13.2%	24.0%	10.8%
65+	15.6%	16.0%	0.4%
No response	0.0%	2.0%	2.0%

<b>EDUCATION</b>			
<b>Education Level</b>	<b>ACS %</b>	<b>Survey %</b>	<b>Difference</b>
< HS	8.0%	3.0%	5.0%
HS Diploma	27.7%	16.0%	11.7%
Some College/Associates	23.7%	35.0%	11.3%
Bachelor's +	24.7%	46.0%	21.3%

<b>INCOME</b>			
<b>Income Level</b>	<b>ACS %</b>	<b>Survey %</b>	<b>Difference</b>
< \$20,000	15.3%	14.0%	1.3%
\$20,000-\$34,999	17.3%	14.0%	3.3%
\$35,000-\$49,999	11.2%	16.0%	4.8%
\$50,000-\$74,999	18.6%	22.0%	3.4%
\$75,000+	37.6%	34.0%	3.6%

## C. FOCUS GROUP QUESTION ROUTE

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The focus group discussions were guided using the following set of questions:

1. To get us started, please go around the room and briefly tell us your first name, where you live, and how long you've lived in Tioga County for.
2. Thinking back, can you describe what led you to live in Tioga County?
3. Has your experience lined up with what you expected to be true of living in Tioga County? Were there any surprises for you? Good surprises? Bad surprises?
4. As I explained, we're really interested in learning more about what factors contribute to quality of life, or how quality of life is produced. One way to get into this discussion is to ask: *How would you describe quality of life?* Here are 3 index cards. Please write a word or phrase on each card that describes quality of life. Then, we'll sort them out and get a sense of all the different views. The word you write can be anything that comes to mind. It doesn't have to make perfect sense, just whatever comes to mind. What was the first thing you thought of when I said quality of life? Is there something that enhances your quality of life? Anything that prohibits you, or anyone you know, from achieving good quality of life?
5. We're also interested to know how different residents see the culture of Tioga County. Let's use index cards again. Please take 3 cards and write a word or phrase on it that, in your experience, describes the culture of Tioga County.
6. In general, do you think that Tioga County encourages a strong sense of community? Are there communities within the County that do a better or worse job than others? How big of a difference does the culture of Tioga County make in your day-to-day lives? In how you approach quality of life?
7. Do you think that there is mutual trust and respect between decision-makers and residents? How big of a difference do you think your input makes at the local level? Are there enough opportunities for community input and engagement? Do you think this plays a role in quality of life? How so?
8. Here is a definition of quality of life. Can you relate to this statement? Is this definition of quality of life happening for you? In what ways? Why, or why not?



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