

Neighborhood Centers



Objective

The objective of this audit was to determine if Neighborhood Centers are effectively meeting the needs of low- and moderate-income residents.

Background

Austin Public Health's Neighborhood Services division operates six Neighborhood Centers. Neighborhood Centers provide a variety of social services to help low- and moderate-income residents achieve maximum self-sufficiency and quality of health, economic, and social well-being. Neighborhood Center services include:

- basic services, such as food assistance and free transportation passes;
- health services, such as cholesterol and high blood pressure screenings; and
- case management services in the form of employment support and rent or utility payment assistance.

In fiscal year 2016, 55,886 residents were served through basic services, 6,147 residents received health services, and 373 individuals were enrolled in case management services.

What We Found

Residents who visit Neighborhood Centers are generally satisfied with services received. However, due to a number of constraints, Neighborhood Centers may not be providing services to all residents who need them.

Neighborhood Centers may not be within walking distance for a majority of low- and moderate-income residents (See Appendix)

- Current Neighborhood Centers are accessible via public transportation, however most are not located where the majority of low- and moderate-income residents live, making them beyond walking distance for most residents who might need Neighborhood Center services.
- An analysis of household data in Travis County shows that less than 5% of households with an annual income less than \$50,000 live within walking distance of a Neighborhood Center.^{1,2}
- In addition, the service areas of Rosewood-Zaragosa, Blackland, and East Austin Neighborhood Centers overlap resulting in 2,676 residents living within walking distance of two or more Neighborhood Centers.

Funding is not sufficient

- CSBG money is used to fund 16 of the 35 Neighborhood Centers staff positions and administrative costs, and the remainder is allocated to direct service through rent and utility assistance, gift cards, and bus passes.
- For the past three years, approximately \$100,000 was allocated to rent and utility assistance, but management stated that the amount of funding available for this program will decrease over \$60,000 in 2018 due to an \$11,000 reduction in CSBG funding and increases in personnel costs paid for using grant funding.
- Neighborhood Center staff currently oversee 17 food distribution events at 9 different locations each month. They have been unable to expand to new locations due to limited staff.

¹ A 3-person household earns an income of \$20,160 at 100% and \$40,320 at 200% of 2016 Federal Poverty Income Level. Households with an income less than \$50,000 were chosen to represent the population of residents who may be eligible for services.

² A 2011 study by the University of Michigan found that the average walking trip distance is 0.7 miles. We conducted a network analysis using Austin streets, due to instances where sidewalks do not connect.

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What We Found, Continued

- Technology improvements, such as an online application with a secure upload portal, have been deferred due to lack of available funding.

Eligible residents may not be aware of services available to them

- Austin Public Health has a coordinated department-wide effort to promote their programs at community events, but Neighborhood Centers have not developed a formal outreach plan to increase eligible residents' awareness of their services.
- Currently, to increase awareness of Neighborhood Center programs, outreach is done by Neighborhood Center staff during their day-to-day duties. Through an analysis of customer data for the first six months of 2017, we identified 17 zip codes in Travis County that do not have any residents accessing Neighborhood Center locations and services.
- Staff expressed concerns that increased outreach and the subsequent demand on Neighborhood Center services could potentially overwhelm available funding and staff. However, efforts can be made to spread the word about services offered by Neighborhood Centers that can support increased demand, such as food assistance, nursing services, and other basic social services.

Opportunities to improve service delivery

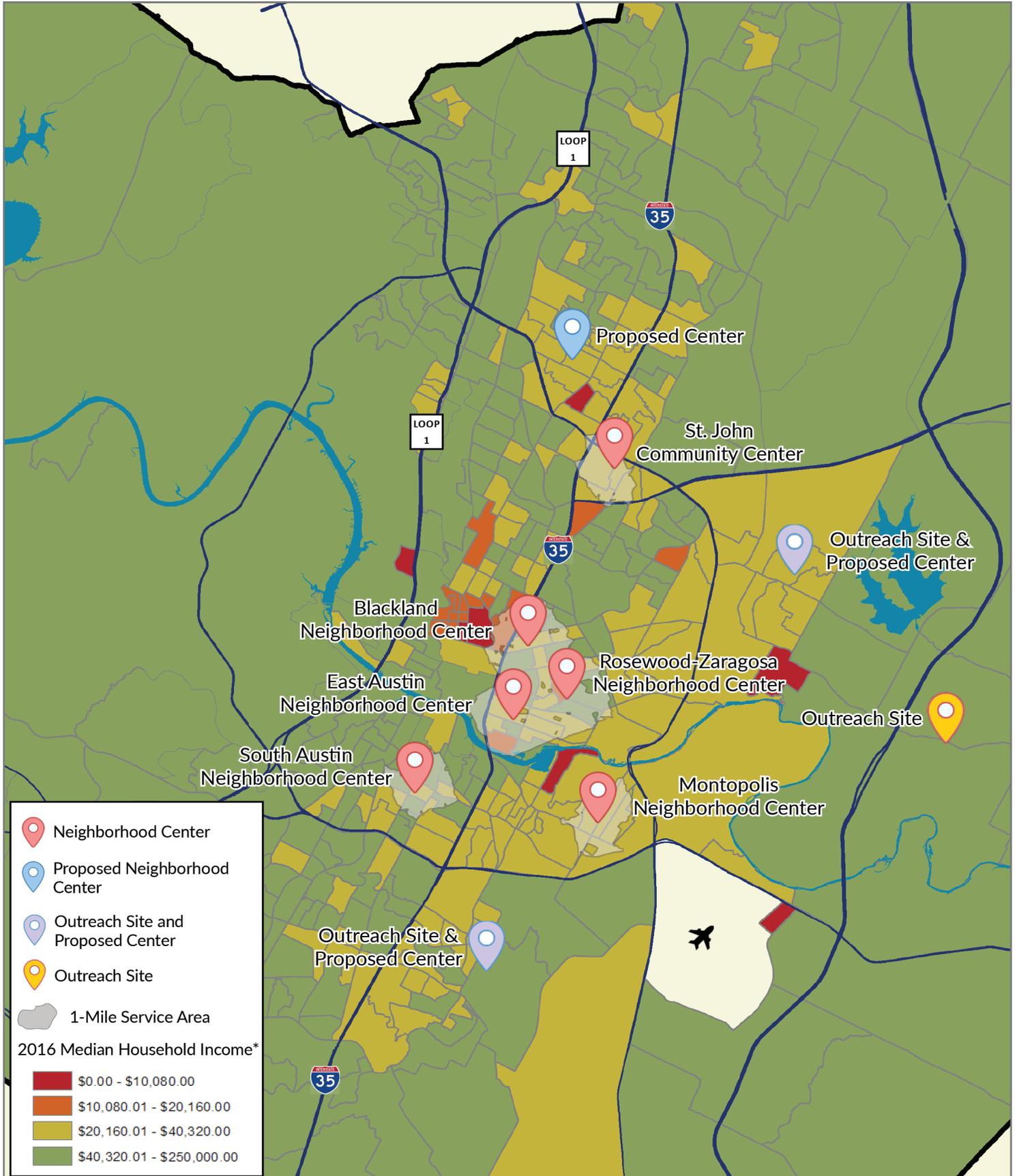
Through peer city research, we identified strategies that Neighborhood Centers could explore to make it easier for residents to access services and to bring services to where people live. Such as:

- mail in or online application
- co-locations
- additional funding

What We Recommend

1. The Austin Public Health Director should identify and implement strategies to improve accessibility of Neighborhood Center Services, and expand service delivery into areas with high concentration of low-and moderate-income residents.
2. The Austin Public Health Director should develop and implement an outreach plan to create awareness for Neighborhood Center services.

Appendix: 2016 Median Household Income by Block Group with Neighborhood Center 1-Mile service Area Overlay



*2016 Average Household Size in Travis County was 2.51.

A 3-person household earns an income of \$20,160 at 100% and \$40,320 at 200% of 2016 Federal Poverty Income Guidelines.

SOURCE: OCA Analysis of Business Analyst 2016 Block Group Data and Network Analysis of 1-Mile Service Area, September 2017.