

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH IN NORTH OMAHA

Heart Ministry Center's Monen Healthcare Clinic



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Made possible by Carequest Institute for Oral Health
In partnership with Nebraska Appleseed and RISE
For more information, contact: amy@heartministrycenter.com



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=621Y5cAyTEk&t=3s>

Use the QR code or the link above to hear powerful stories from community members facing health challenges due to a lack of affordable dental care.

INTRODUCTION

At Heart Ministry Center, our guiding motto is “Dignity for All.” For us, this means everyone we serve deserves a vital role in a healthy, thriving community. Nothing is more closely tied to a person’s dignity than their oral health. Your smile can make or break your first impression, and a dental problem can lead to more serious health problems.

With support from the Carequest Institute for Oral Health and in collaboration with Nebraska Appleseed and RISE, we interviewed dental patients at Heart Ministry’s Monen Healthcare Clinic and clients of other Heart Ministry Center services regarding their social determinants of health.

- 40 one-on-one interviews
- Completed from September 2025 to February 2026
- 29 interviewees spoke English, and 11 spoke Spanish

WHAT WE LEARNED

Health: Many are living with chronic health conditions and mental health challenges.

Income: Many are earning income.

Expenses: Most are not earning enough to cover basic expenses, including oral health care.

PROCEDURE

The interviews were completed using Heart Ministry Center’s trauma-informed interviewing process, which includes:

- Personal invitations to participate in the interviews. Marketing materials were not used to recruit participants.
- Conversations with participants about the purpose of the project.
- One-on-one conversations with participants that move at a pace they are comfortable with.
- Interviewers who are also staff members of the Heart Ministry Center and are trained in compassionate communication.
- Interviewers identify needs expressed during the interviews and offer real-time resources at the Heart Ministry Center or with other community partners.

HEALTH

REPORTED EXPERIENCE:	% REPORTING
Living with a chronic health condition	45%

Overwhelmed or stressed	68%
Depressed	50%
Anxious	42%

Those who seek oral healthcare at Heart Ministry Center often face other challenges in their lives. In our experience, community members have the greatest chance of achieving positive oral health outcomes if all of their basic needs are met. This is why we provide free medical, dental, mental health, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and vision services in the same location with providers who work collaboratively. This is also why our clinic is co-located with our food pantry, job placement services, case management, and laundromat. If community members can easily access the services they need, we see improvements in their oral health outcomes.

Everyone we serve in the Monen Healthcare Dental Clinic has significant barriers to accessing oral healthcare. The cost of care is often the biggest barrier. Additionally, 45% of Monen Healthcare Clinic patients would utilize local emergency rooms, were it not for our clinic. Given this information, access to preventive oral health care is a priority for Heart Ministry Center.

INCOME

REPORTED EXPERIENCE	% REPORTING
Employed, retired, student, or disabled	53%
Unemployed and looking for work	23%
Income does not meet basic needs	43%*

*While 43% of survey participants stated that their income does not meet basic needs, we believe this data may be misleading. All survey participants are clients of Heart Ministry Center, which provides services to help meet basic needs. An assumption could be made that 100% of survey participants struggle to afford their basic needs.

Almost half of the individuals accessing Heart Ministry Center services are employed. 53% of survey participants were either employed (45%), attending school, disabled, or retired. We asked 1,360 community members who were utilizing our pantry in early 2026 if anyone in their household was working, and 40% said yes. Employment may be underreported among community members accessing our pantry who are undocumented, so we suspect that a higher

percentage of community members accessing our pantry are working. This is consistent with the U.S. Census data showing that 70% of Omaha’s households in poverty include at least one worker.

EXPENSES

In the past year, had trouble paying for:	% REPORTING
Food	63%
Housing	48%
Utilities	45%
Transportation	25%

60% of survey participants reported that they could not afford a \$300 emergency expense. In our community, rising food and housing costs have taken a huge toll. In 2023, we served 125,172 community members in our food pantry. In 2024, we served 135,121 (an 8% increase from the previous year). In 2025, we served 160,426 (a 19% increase from the previous year).

Heart Ministry Center offers a homeownership program that provides financial assistance and case management to those interested in homeownership. The majority of individuals who apply for this program do not qualify, however, because their income is not high enough to afford even the least expensive homes in our area. We have successfully assisted 3 individuals in purchasing a home, but we may need to shift focus away from homeownership, as those we serve are being priced out of the market. As homeownership has historically been the leading method for wealth-building in the United States, this creates another major barrier to financial self-sufficiency for those we serve.

CONCLUSION

Dignity through health

Good health care is a vital part of a healthy, thriving society. Our families, communities, and economy are all stronger when people can get the medical attention they need when they need it, regardless of their income or circumstances. A lack of access to care, on the other hand, has a negative ripple effect throughout society. When people don’t see a dentist regularly, it can lead to more health problems that could have been prevented. When people delay seeking care due to cost, problems often become more difficult and expensive to treat. In the meantime, our neighbors, coworkers, and loved ones aren’t as healthy as they could be, and our health care system isn’t fulfilling its potential.

Using our nation's resources wisely means making smart decisions now to avoid problems later. By making sure that our community has strong prevention efforts in place and access to oral health care, we can reduce costs by stopping problems before they start.

Many of the people we interviewed were living with a chronic health condition, and all faced barriers to accessing dental care. Therefore, access to healthcare is a focus for Heart Ministry Center.

Dignity through quality of life

Income and financial stability significantly impact health. When people have higher, more stable incomes, they can afford to spend money on things that improve their health, such as better dental care or healthier food options. On the other hand, when people are unable to meet their household expenses, they are more likely to forgo necessary dental care, which can result in more serious and expensive problems to treat.

Most of the people we interviewed struggled to cover basic expenses and lacked sufficient funds to meet basic needs, including dental care. Therefore, the income of our community members is another area of focus for Heart Ministry Center.

Our policy priorities include:

- Increase access to affordable health coverage.
- Ensure our community members have the information they need to access health coverage.
- Reduce hunger and increase access to nutritious foods.
- Promote quality jobs, livable wages, and access to adult education and skills training.
- Defend the legal rights of low-income community members.
- Support economic and social progress for community members impacted by the criminal justice system.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Get involved with the Heart Ministry Center and help us improve health outcomes throughout the community.

- **Donate:** Support our essential healthcare services with a [financial contribution](#).
- **Volunteer:** Sign up on our [website](#) to lend your time.
- **Stay Connected:** Follow us on social media for updates, stories, and ways to make a positive impact.