

Chapter Ten

Health

Introduction

Health is more than the absence of illness; it is a product of the environments in which people live, work, and age. In Bainbridge, health outcomes are shaped not only by access to medical care, but also by factors such as housing quality, walkability, environmental conditions, food access, and economic opportunity. Chapter 10 of the Bainbridge Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan recognizes that health equity — regardless of income, age, or ability — is central to a thriving community, and that the built environment and public policy play a critical role in shaping well-being. Drawing on public input and regional data, this chapter examines the conditions that affect physical and mental health across Bainbridge. It addresses barriers to care, including transportation, affordability, and service availability, and highlights disparities that disproportionately impact low-income households, seniors, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations.

Key Community Concerns about Health Services

Access to quality healthcare is a critical factor in Bainbridge's overall well-being, and community feedback has identified several key concerns that impact residents' health outcomes. Ensuring affordable healthcare access remains a priority, particularly for lower-income individuals and families who may struggle with the cost of medical services. Memorial Hospital and Manor serves as the primary healthcare provider in the area, and ongoing improvements are essential to meet the growing and changing needs of the community. Additionally, the lack of neo-natal resources presents a challenge for families, requiring many expectant mothers to seek care outside of Bainbridge. As the city's aging population increases, there is a growing need for expanded senior healthcare services, including long-term care options and specialized care for those with chronic conditions. Another significant issue is Bainbridge's food desert areas, where residents have limited access to fresh, healthy food, increasing the risk of diet-related health conditions such as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. Addressing these concerns will require a coordinated effort between policymakers, healthcare providers, and community stakeholders to ensure that all Bainbridge residents can access the care and resources they need to lead healthy lives.

- Affordable access to Health Care
- Memorial Hospital and Manor improvements
- Neonatal resources
- Aging population
- Food deserts

Bainbridge is typical of many small communities throughout the United States. Major health and safety issues include an aging population, poverty, poor nutrition, obesity, stress, depression, diabetes, and infectious diseases.

The average life expectancy in Bainbridge is less than the Georgia average, which was 74.10 years in 2022. Life expectancy for males in Decatur County was 70.1 in 2007 and female life expectancy in the county was 77.1. The leading causes of death in Georgia are heart disease, cancer and accidents.

A 2019 Community Health Needs Assessment was prepared by the Memorial Hospital & Manor for Decatur County which represents their primary service area. The assessment assumed that population would be relatively stable although the age 65+ cohort would see the primary increase in percentage as other age groups declined in proportion. The population aged 65+ was proportionally higher than the state average and the black or African American portion of the population was about 10% higher than the state average.

The most common causes of death within the community served by the Memorial Hospital and Manor were heart and vascular disease (#1), followed by chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cancer, and mental and behavioral disorders.

Approximately 12.1% of the population in Bainbridge under 65 years old have disabilities in their vision, hearing, cognition, walking, self-care or independent living. As people age, disability rates increase rapidly (In Georgia, 25.7% of people between 65 and 74 and 46.8% of people over 75 are disabled).¹

Cost is considered a barrier to health care and the affordability of visiting the doctor or obtaining prescriptions. Median household income in Bainbridge was below state and national averages with about 30% uninsured and 20% of the Bainbridge population reliant on Medicaid. In 2022, the Bainbridge median household income (MHHI) is \$42,093, about 83.4% of the County MHHI (\$50,485). In Georgia the MHHI is approximately \$74,664.

Persons with an annual income of \$20,000 or less reported a much higher rate (45.3%) of poor or fair health status compared to higher income levels. The low-income group also reported a higher rate of using a hospital emergency room as their usual place of care rather than a clinic or doctor's office.



Figure 10.01: Medical facility behind Memorial Hospital and Manor

1 U.S. Census. 2023. "American Community Survey."

The other reasons people may delay, defer, or avoid getting medical care are availability of their time and the hours the clinic or doctor's office is open, or access to the medical care facility or the pharmacy. Transportation to medical care or to retrieve prescription or over-the-counter medications was a greater barrier to lower income groups than higher income levels.

In June 2021, the Community Health Needs Assessment Steering Committee presented their report, and the following priorities were identified by the Hospital Authority of the City of Bainbridge and Decatur County:

- Access to Providers and Affordable Care
- Support Mental Health and Reduce Substance Abuse
- Reduce Unhealthy Lifestyles and Obesity
- Support Family Life Education and Prevention

A 2025 report from the World Bank reported that the US has fallen from the 19th best nation for life expectancy in 1960 to 29th in 2023.² The report also found that life satisfaction fell from 5th to 10th, and the US reported a much higher prevalence in depression even as the US remains the 2nd in gross development product (GDP) and is increasing GDP faster than any other developed country.

Health Strategies

Access to Healthcare

Georgia has 68 rural hospitals across the state in 2025, including the Bainbridge Memorial Hospital and Manor. Since 2005, 104 rural hospitals have been closed across the United States and more than 600 additional rural hospitals (30% of all rural hospitals in the U.S) are at risk of closing.³ A breakdown of these statistics show nine rural hospitals closed in Georgia and 32 hospitals reduced services since 2005.⁴ Rural hospitals, continue to be at risk of closure (37 closed in the U.S. between 2020 and 2024). The reasons rural hospitals close are varied, but many are shuttered because they lose money providing services to patients.⁵ Historically, many hospitals have received grants, local tax

2 World Bank. "State of the Nation Report." Quoted in the New York Times, February 4, 2025.

3 Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform.

4 Ibid.

5 Becker's Hospital Review. "Rural Hospitals in Crisis Mode." <https://www.beckershospitalreview.com/finance/rural-hospitals-in-crisis-mode/>.

revenues or subsidies from other businesses that offset these losses, but there are no guarantees that these funds will continue to be available or sufficient to address their financial challenges amid persisting workforce shortages, rising costs and leveling reimbursement.



Figure 10.02: Medical facilities behind Memorial Hospital and Manor

Bainbridge Hospital and Manor was dedicated and opened in April 1960. The 80-bed hospital was built under the Hill-Burton Hospital Survey & Construction Act of 1946 and pioneered the use of federal funds to construct healthcare facilities. Memorial Hospital has been operated by the Hospital Authority of the City of Bainbridge and Decatur County. Since 1960, the physicians and employees at Memorial Hospital have treated over 450,000 people in the emergency department, provided care to over 147,000 inpatients, and birthed over 20,000 babies. Facilities and staff have expanded throughout the hospital's 65 years, with the addition of long-term care intensive care, a Level II emergency department, the Kirbo Woman's Center, Willow Ridge Personal Care, and Memorial Medical Center. Memorial Hospital and Manor replaced three small private hospitals that served Bainbridge and the surrounding counties.

Care for Aging Populations

Older adults often require specialized medical care. Expanding senior healthcare services, including primary care, specialized treatment, and in-home care, will be essential to supporting the city's aging residents.



Figure 10.03: Magnolia Place Senior Living Center

Beyond medical care, the availability of assisted living, long-term care, and aging-in-place resources is a significant concern. Many older adults prefer to remain in their homes for as long as possible, yet barriers such as home accessibility, social isolation, and limited transportation options can make independent living difficult. Strengthening programs that provide home modifications, social engagement opportunities, and transportation for medical appointments will help seniors maintain their independence and quality of life.

Another key factor in senior well-being is the availability of community support systems. Expanding partnerships with healthcare providers, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations can improve access to wellness programs, caregiver support, and services that promote healthy aging. Efforts to ensure that Memorial Hospital and Manor, along with other local providers, are equipped to handle the increasing demand for senior-focused care will be critical in ensuring that Bainbridge's older residents can continue to live safely and comfortably in their community.



Figure 10.04: Community facilities for social, cultural, and religious activities.

Challenges

Heat

Bainbridge is at severe risk from heat. A hot day in Bainbridge is considered to be any day with a temperature that “feels like” a temperature of 109°F or higher. Bainbridge is expected to experience approximately seven days over 109°F this year. In 30 years, Bainbridge may expect to experience as many as 19 days above 109°F assuming recent trends continue.⁶

Heat trends for an area are primarily determined by its latitude, exposure to sunlight, elevation, climate, and additional factors that can amplify the effects of heat across an area creating “heat islands.” Daytime maximum temperatures within a heat island can vary from the surrounding neighborhood or city by as much as seven degrees. A heat island also may retain heat through the night, greatly increasing the cost of cooling for homes and businesses located there. Common causes of the heat island effect include, but are not limited to:

- **Neighborhood Construction Materials:** Manmade materials such as asphalt, concrete, and glass trap and reflect heat, causing heat to radiate in areas that are densely built up with these materials even after sunset.
- **City Planning and Layout:** The way buildings are arranged and spaced across an area can create pockets of insulation that trap heat and prevent airflow that would release it.
- **Distance to Water and Vegetation:** Unlike manmade materials, trees, plants, and bodies of water absorb heat from sunlight and even reduce the surrounding air temperature. Areas that are far from both water and vegetation are more likely to experience heat island effects.
- **Human Activities:** Operating vehicles, use of air-conditioning, and industrial activities all release heat as a by-product, which means that areas where these activities are abundant will experience more severe heat island effects.

Heat Impacts

One of the resulting effects of heat is the increase in energy usage that occurs as homes and businesses try to keep cool indoors. Based on heat projections for this year in Bainbridge, it is estimated that the use of air conditioning would cause an increase in energy consumption on 280 days annually.⁷

6 Firststreet. “Does Bainbridge have Heat Risk?” https://firststreet.org/city/bainbridge-ga/1304896_fsld/heat.

7 Ibid.

This risk may become even more pronounced in the future, as the number of days where air conditioning is utilized is expected to increase by nine days to 289 days per year by 2060. This needed increase for cooling is expected to require a commensurate increase in electricity usage for cooling purposes by 8.9%.

Heat Implications

Heat poses threats to health and human safety including fatigue, heat stroke, heat exhaustion, heat cramps, and dehydration. Although a heat wave may be dismissed as inconvenient, it may be the most common and the most severe weather event in the US. As temperatures (and high energy bills) rise, protection from the effects of extreme heat may depend on preparations to stay cool. Proper insulation helps to prevent heat transfer as cooled air seeps through windowsills, walls, floorboards, and doors. Double-glazed windows also help prevent heat transfer. In addition, these same measures help keep cold temperatures from seeping into buildings during cold periods of the winter.

Beyond external temperatures, interior heat sources also contribute to rising indoor temperatures, making it harder to maintain a cool and safe living space. Heat generated by household appliances, electronics, and lighting can accumulate throughout the day, particularly in buildings with poor ventilation. Reducing unnecessary heat buildup by using energy-efficient appliances, switching to LED lighting, and limiting heat-producing activities during peak heat hours can help lower cooling demands. In commercial and industrial settings, implementing heat-reduction strategies, such as improved airflow, reflective roofing, and ventilation systems, can enhance workplace safety and lower cooling costs.

Stagnant air can further exacerbate extreme heat conditions, trapping warm air in urban areas and preventing natural cooling. Lack of wind circulation, particularly in limited green space, intensifies heat stress and increases reliance on artificial cooling. Designing spaces that encourage air movement, such as incorporating breezeways, ventilated facades, and open-air corridors, can help dissipate heat and improve overall comfort levels. Encouraging the use of fans and natural ventilation when outdoor temperatures allow can also provide relief and reduce energy consumption.

Heat Mitigation

Expanding shade coverage throughout Bainbridge can significantly reduce heat exposure and mitigate the effects of extreme temperatures. Trees, awnings, covered walkways, and strategically designed buildings can all provide relief by blocking direct sunlight and lowering surrounding temperatures. Tree-lined streets and shaded public

spaces not only offer cooling benefits but also enhance the overall livability of neighborhoods and commercial districts. Increasing the urban tree canopy and promoting shade structures in high-exposure areas, such as bus stops, parks, and pedestrian corridors, can help reduce the severity of heat islands and create more comfortable outdoor environments.

Education and awareness about heat-related illnesses are crucial for preventing heat-related health emergencies. Recognizing the early signs of heat exhaustion, heat cramps, and heat stroke — such as dizziness, nausea, rapid heartbeat, and confusion — can help individuals take appropriate action before symptoms worsen. Community outreach programs, public service announcements, and workplace safety initiatives can educate residents on effective heat management strategies, including hydration, cooling centers, and heat advisories. Ensuring that vulnerable populations, such as older adults, children, outdoor workers, and individuals with medical conditions, have access to cooling resources and emergency assistance is a key component of reducing the risks associated with extreme heat.

Cold Weather & Frozen Precipitation

While Bainbridge's winters are relatively very mild, extreme cold events and occasional frozen precipitation can pose challenges to public safety, infrastructure, and vulnerable populations. Sudden temperature drops, freezing rain, and rarely, snow, can create hazardous road conditions, disrupt utilities, and strain emergency response services.

Particularly for senior residents and the unhoused, prolonged cold spells can increase the risk of hypothermia. Many homes in Bainbridge are not designed for extended freezing temperatures, which can lead to issues such as burst pipes, heating system failures, and increased energy costs. Additionally, snow, though rare, can result in road closures and hazardous driving conditions, limiting mobility and access to essential services.

To mitigate these risks, the city must continue to coordinate with regional and state agencies for cold-weather preparedness, including public communication strategies, emergency warming shelters, and road maintenance plans to address icy conditions. Expanding community education on winter safety, such as preventing home heating fires, insulating pipes, and recognizing signs of cold-related illnesses, can further enhance resilience. Identifying vulnerable populations in advance and ensuring access to temporary shelters and emergency services will be essential in reducing the impact of extreme cold events on the community.

Air & Water Quality

While the city benefits from relatively good air quality compared to more urbanized regions, concerns about industrial emissions, vehicle pollution, and agricultural runoff remain relevant. Airborne pollutants can contribute to respiratory conditions, particularly among children, seniors, and individuals with preexisting health issues such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Addressing these concerns requires ongoing monitoring, enforcement of air quality regulations, and initiatives that promote clean energy, green infrastructure, and reduced vehicle emissions.

Water quality is another critical issue, particularly in ensuring safe drinking water and protecting local waterways such as the Flint River. Agricultural runoff, stormwater pollution, and potential contamination from industrial sites pose risks to both human health and aquatic ecosystems. Ensuring access to clean and reliable drinking water requires continuous investment in water treatment infrastructure, source water protection, and pollution prevention measures.

To safeguard air and water quality, Bainbridge should continue collaborating with regional and state agencies, including the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) and the Southwest Georgia Regional Commission. Public education campaigns on pollution reduction, proper waste disposal, and conservation efforts can also strengthen community involvement in environmental stewardship.

Emergency Planning

Ensuring Bainbridge is well-prepared for emergencies is a fundamental responsibility of local government and community stakeholders. The city faces a range of potential hazards, including extreme weather events, public health crises, and infrastructure failures.

Effective emergency planning begins with proactive preparedness efforts. This includes maintaining clear and reliable public communication systems to ensure that residents receive timely warnings, evacuation procedures, and emergency response information. Expanding local emergency notification systems, such as text alerts, social media updates, and community-wide sirens, can help keep residents informed during sudden threats. Additionally, preparedness efforts must focus on infrastructure resilience, including stormwater management, road maintenance, and power grid reliability, to minimize disruptions during extreme weather events.

Local agencies should also conduct regular training exercises and emergency response drills to ensure that first responders, healthcare facilities, and city departments can act quickly and efficiently in a crisis. Encouraging individual and household preparedness through public education campaigns can further strengthen the community's ability to respond effectively.

During an emergency, rapid response efforts are essential to minimizing harm and protecting lives. Coordination between first responders, healthcare facilities, and emergency management agencies ensures that immediate needs, such as medical attention, shelter, and evacuation assistance, are met efficiently. Special attention should be given to at-risk populations, including older adults, individuals with disabilities, those without access to personal transportation, and the unhoused population.

Emergency shelters and designated evacuation sites must be well-equipped to handle displaced residents, particularly during extreme weather events. Ensuring continuity of healthcare services during crises is also vital, including maintaining access to emergency medical care, medication, and support for individuals with chronic conditions. Additionally, maintaining a well-trained volunteer network can help mobilize community support, providing resources such as food distribution, transportation assistance, and temporary housing solutions.

Following an emergency, long-term recovery efforts focus on restoring infrastructure, supporting displaced residents, and rebuilding community resilience. Recovery plans should address housing needs, including temporary shelters and repair assistance for those impacted by disasters. Additionally, restoring essential services such as power, water, and healthcare must be a top priority to ensure that residents can return to normalcy as quickly as possible.

Economic recovery efforts should support local businesses and workforce stability, providing resources to help businesses reopen and ensuring that workers have access to necessary financial assistance.

Finally, post-crisis evaluations should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of emergency response efforts and identify areas for improvement. Implementing lessons learned from previous events can help strengthen Bainbridge's preparedness for future emergencies, ensuring that the city remains resilient in the face of evolving challenges.

Access to Healthy Food & Exercise

Ensuring access to nutritious food and opportunities for physical activity is essential for improving public health outcomes in Bainbridge. Limited access to fresh, affordable food and safe recreational spaces can contribute to chronic health issues such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of policy initiatives, infrastructure improvements, and community programs that promote a healthier lifestyle for all residents.



Figure 10.05: Construction of new Aldi to replace the former Winn Dixie

Food insecurity remains a challenge for some Bainbridge residents, particularly in areas with limited grocery store access. Community feedback has highlighted concerns about food deserts, where fresh produce and nutritious options are difficult to find, which may lead to many residents relying on fast food or convenience stores. Expanding access to grocery stores, farmers' markets, and food assistance programs can help bridge these gaps and ensure that all residents — regardless of income or location — can access fresh, affordable food.

Supporting urban agriculture initiatives, such as community gardens or partnerships with local farmers, can further increase fresh food availability while fostering a sense of community engagement. Additionally, improving public transportation options to grocery stores and food markets can help residents without personal vehicles access healthier food options.



Figure 10.06: New Fitness Court along the Riverfront near Chason Park

Creating environments that support active lifestyles is equally important for community health. Bainbridge has an opportunity to improve park infrastructure, recreational facilities, and pedestrian connectivity to encourage more residents to engage in regular exercise. Expanding and maintaining walking and biking trails, increasing green space in underserved areas, and ensuring parks are safe and well-lit can help residents feel more comfortable engaging in outdoor activities.

Schools, workplaces, and community organizations can also play a role in promoting active living programs, such as fitness classes, youth sports leagues, and corporate wellness initiatives. Investing in public recreation programs, such as low-cost fitness classes, senior activity groups, and youth sports leagues, can help increase participation in exercise, particularly among populations who may lack access to private gyms or sports facilities. Additionally, encouraging local businesses to provide incentives for employees to engage in active commuting — such as walking or biking to work — can further reinforce a culture of physical well-being.

To create lasting change, Bainbridge can explore comprehensive strategies that integrate access to healthy food and exercise into residents' daily lives. This includes supporting mixed-use developments that place grocery stores, parks, and fitness centers within walkable distances of residential areas. Community health initiatives — such as healthy cooking classes, nutrition education, and wellness events — can further empower residents to make informed lifestyle choices.

Health Action Plan

A healthy community is built through coordinated infrastructure, policies, and programs that support physical, mental, and environmental well-being. While investment in hospital and emergency services remains essential for ensuring timely and equitable access to care, long-term public health also depends on proactive, systems-based planning. This includes improving the built environment, enhancing social cohesion, protecting environmental quality, and expanding access to nutritious food and essential services.

This section outlines seven interrelated priorities that together support a healthier Bainbridge. Each priority includes specific goals and recommendations aimed at ensuring that all residents — regardless of age, income, or ability — can access the medical care, resources, and environments they need to thrive.

Healthy Lifestyles & Community Well-Being Goals & Recommendations

1. Promote Active Living and Daily Physical Activity

- 1.1: Locate community facilities, such as schools and parks, strategically to promote connectivity between places where residents live, work, and play.
- 1.2: Expand community wellness programs, recreational activities, and health education initiatives to encourage active lifestyles and reduce preventable illnesses.
- 1.3: Support public programs that encourage recreation and physical activity at all ages — such as clubs, events, and group fitness — to reduce obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and social isolation.
- 1.4: Collaborate with businesses, churches, and other community organizations to foster more interactive, healthy lifestyles and to promote the use of community resources.

2. Strengthen Healthcare Infrastructure and Access

- 2.1: Identify and maintain programs to support the Bainbridge Hospital and Manor and expand local healthcare resources such as neonatal care, emergency services, and general clinical access.
- 2.2: Work with the Hospital Authority and healthcare partners to modernize facilities and plan for future expansion.

3. Support Behavioral Health and Aging in Place

- 3.1: Support the expansion of mental health services, crisis intervention programs, and substance abuse treatment to address behavioral health concerns.
- 3.2: Support senior care and retirement facilities in the area to allow older residents and incoming retirees to thrive, with attention to aging in place, access to city resources, and fixed-income needs.

Emergency Preparedness Goals & Recommendations

4. Increase Community Resilience to Public Health Threats and Disasters

- 4.1: Plan proactively for impacts of environmental challenges on public health through mitigation and adaptation strategies, with emphasis on vulnerable populations.
- 4.2: Use evidence-based approaches to address public health impacts in both pre-disaster planning and post-disaster recovery.
- 4.3: Incorporate strategies to prevent and control the spread of infectious diseases in emergency preparedness plans.
- 4.4: Coordinate with Decatur County, state agencies, and other partners to manage emergency communications, readiness efforts, and rapid recovery operations.

Regional Cooperation & Environmental Health Goals & Recommendations

5. Coordinate Regionally to Strengthen Health Systems and Services

- 5.1: Work with healthcare providers and regional agencies to assess health trends, identify gaps in services, and ensure data-driven health planning.
- 5.2: Encourage the growth of local preventive care programs, including regular screenings, immunizations, and chronic disease management to reduce long-term healthcare costs and improve overall community health.

6. Improve Environmental Quality to Support Public Health

- 6.1: Use air and water quality data as indicators for where to locate infrastructure and future residential units; monitor land-use changes and enhance connectivity and related uses.
- 6.2: Promote brownfield cleanup and/or reuse to improve environmental quality, support redevelopment, and address equity concerns.
- 6.3: Use green infrastructure to improve environmental quality for human health benefits.
- 6.4: Identify programs to mitigate excessive heat impacts on vulnerable populations.
- 6.5: Work with the Regional Commission to monitor and improve air and water quality.

Food & Nutrition Goals & Recommendations

7. Expand Access to Healthy, Affordable Food and Clean Water

- 7.1: Promote access to clean water and public drinking fountains.
- 7.2: Designate areas in rural communities for agricultural use and allow community gardens within all residential neighborhoods.
- 7.3: Promote the availability of healthy, fresh foods in identified food deserts.
- 7.4: Encourage local residents to grow their own fruits and vegetables through public or private gardens.
- 7.5: Support access to grocery stores, markets, and produce sellers through land use and transportation strategies.

Health, Human & Public Services Goals & Recommendations

8. Ensure Equitable Access to Health and Human Services

- 8.1: Enact policies that strengthen community linkages and improve access to clinical care, especially for underserved populations.
- 8.2: Connect public health programs and services with broader strategies for active transportation, walkability, and mobility.
- 8.3: Consider transportation solutions to connect residents without personal vehicles to healthcare facilities — or to bring mobile health resources into underserved neighborhoods.
- 8.4: Provide improvements to the health and human services safety net through direct communication about available services and partnerships with organizations like Memorial Hospital, the YMCA, the Salvation Army, ABAC, SRTC, and Decatur County Schools.

Social Cohesion & Mental Health Goals & Recommendations

9. Create a Supportive Built Environment that Fosters Mental Well-Being and Community Belonging

- 9.1: Increase visibility and access to parks and public spaces to support mental and physical health.
- 9.2: Reduce the negative health effects of air, noise, and light pollution through coordinated policy, systems, and environmental strategies.
- 9.3: Integrate meaningful engagement of historically underrepresented communities throughout public planning and design processes to ensure equitable participation and representation.
- 9.4: Communications, Partnerships & Outreach Goals & Recommendations

10. Strengthen Communication and Cross-Sector Partnerships to Support Community Health

- 10.1: Provide direct communications about available resources in partnership with organizations like Memorial Hospital, the YMCA, the Salvation Army, Decatur County Schools, ABAC, and SRTC.
- 10.2: Consider support for transportation services to connect residents to care facilities or bring mobile care to underserved neighborhoods.