CHAPTER 3

COMPLETE COMMUNITIES

Vision Elements

Resilient Community

Diverse Housing

Economic Growth and Opportunity

Goals

In 2050

Harlingen aspires to foster a resilient community that supports its people through inclusivity, safety and robust support systems.

In 2050

Harlingen will offer diverse housing options to accommodate all income levels, life stages and family types.

In 2050

Harlingen will focus on creating opportunities for economic growth that benefit all residents and future generations.

Objectives

- Strengthen public safety and emergency preparedness for natural disasters and community challenges.
- Provide resources and initiatives to address poverty and affordable housing.
- Increase the availability of affordable housing for low- and middle-income families.
- Encourage development of “missing middle” housing such as townhomes, duplexes and small-lot single-family homes.
- Desire for luxury housing to attract professionals and boost economic growth.
- Incentive the rehabilitation of vacant and underutilized housing.
- Provide rental assistance and homeownership programs.
- Promote mixed-use developments that include residential options for all income levels.
- Align housing strategies with transit-oriented development to enhance connectivity.
- Encourage investment in underutilized areas such as downtown and vacant properties.
- Expand mixed-use developments to integrate business, housing and public spaces.



Housing Policies

Ensuring high-quality housing options is essential for fostering a resilient and thriving community. These housing policies aim to promote affordability, inclusivity, connectivity and well-being, guiding future development to support Harlingen's diverse population and long-term growth. By prioritizing walkability, mixed-use development and access to essential amenities, the City can create neighborhoods that enhance quality of life and economic opportunity for all residents.



Diverse & Inclusive Housing Options

Encourage a variety of housing types that cater to all income levels, life stages and family sizes. Promote mixed-use developments that integrate residential spaces with jobs, retail and services.



Walkable & Connected Neighborhoods

Enhance pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, expand public transit and create vibrant streetscapes. Prioritize developments that reduce car dependency and improve access to essential amenities.



Strong Sense of Place & Community

Support policies that promote high-quality public spaces, parks and gathering areas. Encourage development patterns that foster social interaction, local identity and long-term neighborhood resilience.



Health & Wellness Policy

Incorporating health and wellness policies into the Housing Chapter ensures that residential developments promote safe, walkable neighborhoods, access to parks and green spaces and high-quality housing conditions. Prioritizing equitable access to healthcare facilities, active transportation options and environmental sustainability will enhance overall community well-being.

What We've Heard So Far...

"We need more affordable housing options for families just starting out."

"The city should encourage development of mixed-use housing to attract young professionals."

"Downsizing options for older residents would help keep them in the community."

"Affordable housing is critical for service industry workers and blue-collar employees."

"Single-family starter homes are in high demand; we should focus on providing more of these."

"Small-lot single-family homes and townhomes could address the gap in the 'missing middle' housing."

"The lack of housing diversity is a barrier to attracting diverse populations to the city."

"Investing in subsidized affordable housing would make Harlingen more accessible for everyone."

"Developers should incorporate higher-end luxury housing to attract executives and high-income workers."

Key Takeaways:

- Strong demand for affordable starter homes for families and workforce housing for service industry employees.
- Need for downsizing options for older residents to help them remain in the community.
- Interest in "missing middle" housing, such as small-lot single-family homes and townhomes, to bridge affordability gaps.
- Desire for higher-end housing to attract professionals and boost economic growth.
- Emphasis on investments in subsidized affordable housing to improve accessibility for all income levels.
- Concern that lack of housing diversity may hinder population growth and economic opportunities in Harlingen.

Housing & Resilience Connection

Incorporating housing resilience into growth planning entails strategically aligning city development with a focus on fostering resilient housing solutions. This approach leverages growth to promote responsible housing development practices and supporting community needs.



Housing Resilience

Policy/Finance

Establishing policies and financial structures that support housing development and maintenance contribute to community resilience by promoting stability and adaptability in response to challenges.

Neighborhood Infrastructure

The physical infrastructure of a community, including transportation, utilities and public spaces, enhances resilience by providing essential services and facilitates connectivity and accessibility during disruption.

Housing Stock

The physical condition and design of housing units directly impacts resilience by determining their ability to withstand environmental stressors and meet evolving resident needs.

People and Social Capital

Strong social networks and community relationships enhance resilience through support, information sharing and coordinated responses, fostering community cohesion and reducing vulnerability.

Environmental Resilience

Integrating design principles into housing development minimizes environmental impact, conserves resources and enhances the long term ecological resilience of communities, promoting adaptability to environmental changes.

Equity Resilience

Equity in access to resources, opportunities and decision-making processes fosters social cohesion, reduces disparities and promotes inclusive development strategies that support the well-being of all residents.

Diverse & Inclusive Housing Options

Housing Stock & Supply

Harlingen's housing landscape reflects a diverse mix of household types, with 37% of households including children and 29.4% with seniors. The City's average household size is 2.76 people, highlighting the need for flexible housing options to accommodate families, seniors and individuals living alone.

The City's housing stock is primarily single-family detached homes, making up 60% of all units, with multi-family housing at 31% and manufactured or other housing types at 7%. While 56.5% of homes are owner-occupied and 43.5% renter-occupied, affordability remains a challenge for many residents. A wider variety of housing types, including townhomes and duplexes, could address these challenges by offering more attainable options and supporting diverse household compositions.

Housing affordability is a critical issue, with median monthly costs at $910 and a median mortgage value of $215,000. The majority of households (28.7%) spend $500-$799 monthly on housing. Introducing "missing middle" housing options, such as duplexes and small-scale apartments, could provide cost-effective alternatives for families and individuals while maintaining the City's character. Expanding these options can help attract young professionals, retain retirees and meet the needs of multi-generational families.

Recent housing permit trends reveal growth, with 178 single-family home permits and 148 apartment unit permits issued in 2024. This recovery reflects efforts to address housing shortages, but strategic planning is necessary to ensure future developments align with affordability and accessibility goals. Additional focus on mixed-use developments could also bring jobs and amenities closer to residents, further reducing overall household costs.

To support its growing population, Harlingen must diversify its housing options by increasing affordable rentals, expanding homeownership opportunities and promoting missing middle housing. These efforts will ensure a vibrant and sustainable community that meets the needs of current and future residents.

Figure 9. New Single-Family Homes in 2024

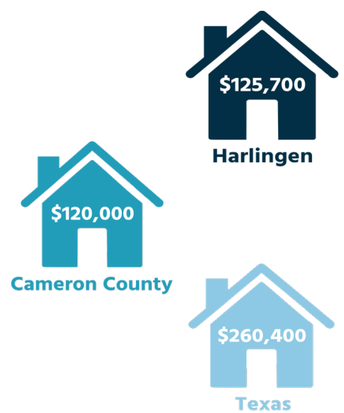


Figure 10. New Multi-Family Units in 2024



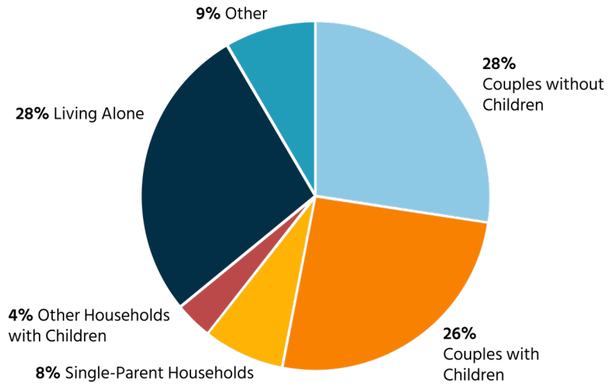
Source: City of Harlingen Planning & Development

Figure 11. Median Home Value



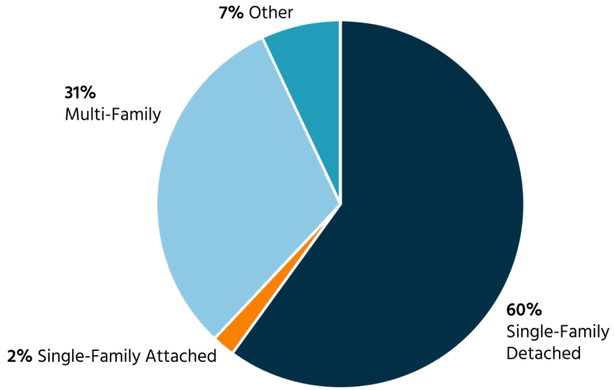
Source: 2019 - 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 12. Existing Household Makeup



Source: 2018 - 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 13. Existing Housing Mix



Source: 2018 - 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Housing Estimate and 10-Year Projection

This housing study provides both the composition of the existing housing stock, including the total number of units, and a projection for the number of housing units needed ten (10) years into the future.

As of 2023, Harlingen has approximately 27,000 housing units, consisting of 60% single-family homes, 31% multifamily and 7% manufactured or other types.

Based on the projected population growth of 82,500 residents by 2035 and an average household size of 2.7, Harlingen will need an estimated 3,900 additional housing units to meet future housing demand.

Housing Affordability

Harlingen's housing affordability presents challenges and opportunities, as revealed by recent statistics from the H+T Index. With a median household income of $38,758 and an average household size of 3.36 people, housing affordability is a key concern for many residents. Housing costs in Harlingen represent 29% of household income on average.

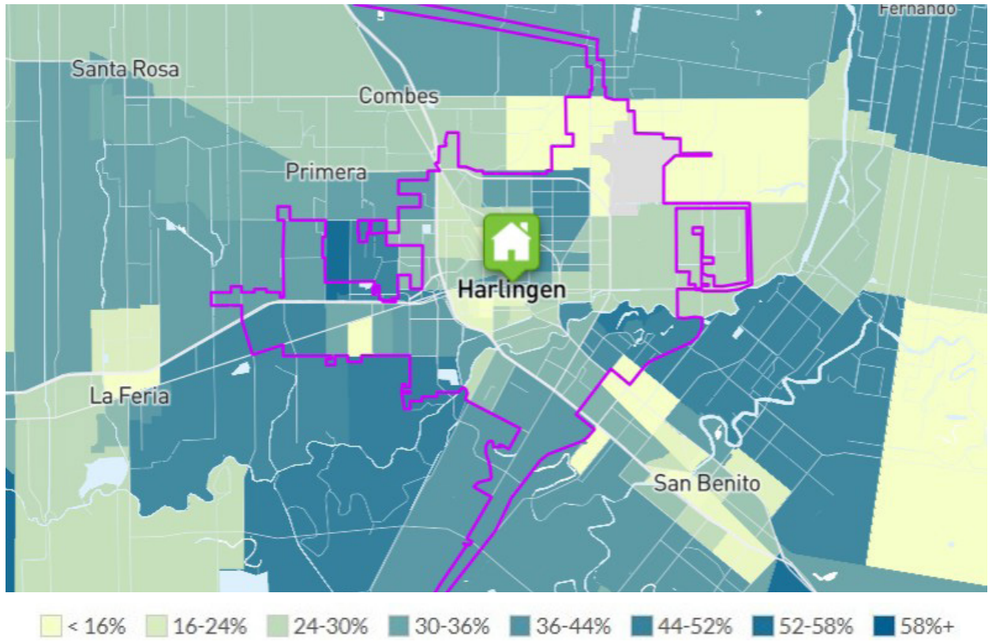
Highlights

- 34.8% of households spend 24-30% of their income on housing costs.
- 20.9% spend 30-36% of their income, marking the threshold for housing cost burden.
- Nearly 24% fall into the 36-44% range, indicating a substantial portion of residents are facing high housing expenses.
- A small fraction, 2.7%, experience extreme housing cost burdens, spending more than 44% of their income on housing.

Recommendations

- Increase Affordable Housing Supply
- Support Rental Assistance Programs
- Promote Mixed-Income Development

Map 7. H+T Index Map - Housing Costs as % of Income



Housing + Transportation Affordability

The H+T Index, which combines housing and transportation costs, provides a clearer view of affordability. Nationally, only 26% of neighborhoods are affordable when transportation costs are included, compared to 55% under the traditional 30% housing-cost benchmark. In Harlingen, households spend an average of 61% of their income on housing and transportation, 29% on housing and 32% on transportation, far exceeding the recommended 45% threshold. Transportation costs, the second-largest expense after housing, are driven by Harlingen's reliance on personal vehicles, long commute distances and limited access to nearby jobs and services, leading to higher fuel, insurance and maintenance expenses.

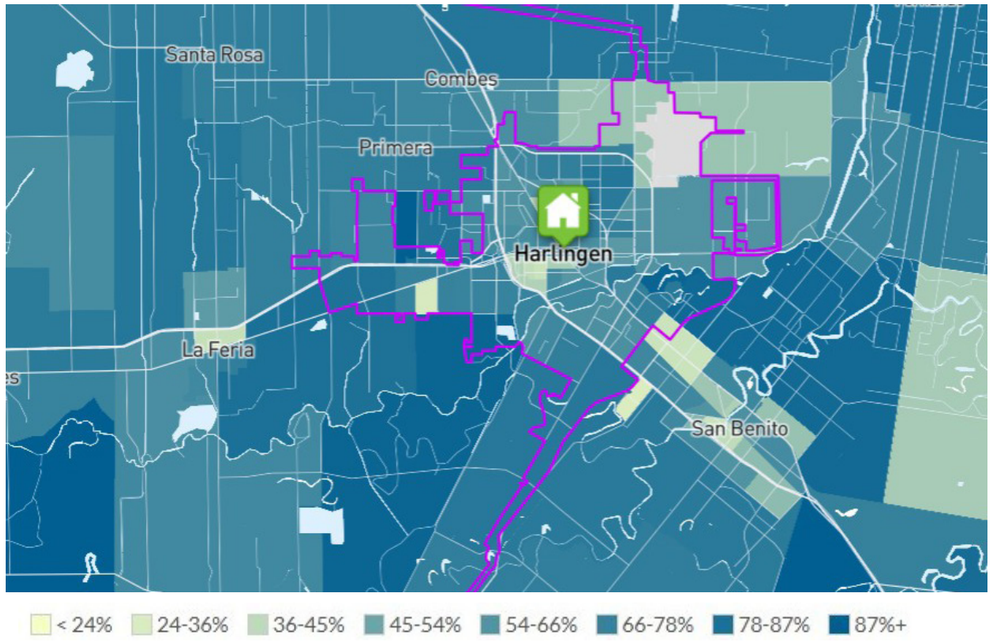
Highlights

- Harlingen's urban and suburban areas have the highest concentration of households spending 54-66% and 66-78% of their income on housing and transportation.
- Nearly 29% of the population spends 66-78% of their income on these combined costs.
- A significant portion, 47% of the population, spends between 54-66%, highlighting how transportation costs strain overall affordability.

Recommendations

- Expanding public transportation options and promoting walkability to reduce car dependency.
- Encouraging mixed-use developments to bring jobs and services closer to residential areas, lowering transportation costs.
- Implementing policies that ensure housing remains affordable while addressing the broader cost burdens

Map 8. H+T Index Map - Housing + Transportation Costs as % of Income



Identification of Future Housing and Diversification Needs in Harlingen

As Harlingen continues to grow and evolve, ensuring a diverse and resilient housing market will be critical for long-term sustainability and affordability. The City's housing needs must align with changing demographics, economic development goals and infrastructure investments, ensuring that all residents whether young professionals, families or retirees, have access to suitable housing. To build a future-ready housing market, the City must prioritize a balanced mix of housing types, strategic investments in revitalization and policies that enhance affordability and resilience.

Future Housing Needs and Diversification Strategies



Expanding Missing Middle Housing

Harlingen's current housing stock is predominantly single-family detached homes, making up 60% of all housing units, while multi-family units account for 31%. To address affordability challenges and changing household preferences, the City must promote "missing middle" housing including townhomes, duplexes and small-scale multi-family developments to bridge the gap between single-family homes and large apartment complexes. These housing types:

- Provide more attainable homeownership options for young families and first-time buyers.
- Support density and walkability in key areas, reducing car dependency.
- Encourage diverse neighborhood compositions that accommodate families and single professionals.



Affordable and Workforce Housing for Economic Sustainability

With a median household income of $38,758 and nearly 24% of residents facing high housing costs (spending 36-44% of their income on housing), affordability remains a significant issue. The City must expand housing options that cater to essential workforce members, including service industry employees, healthcare workers and teachers. This can be achieved through:

- Incentives for developers to build affordable housing, particularly near employment hubs and transit corridors.
- Partnerships with local employers to support workforce housing initiatives.
- Rental assistance programs and first-time homebuyer support to help residents achieve housing stability.



Downsizing Options

Approximately 29.4% of Harlingen's households include seniors, yet the City lacks a significant number of downsizing-friendly homes for aging residents who wish to remain in the community. Addressing this need requires:

- Age-friendly housing design, including accessible units with universal design principles.
- More single-story townhomes and smaller lot homes to provide easier maintenance options for seniors.
- Senior-focused mixed-use developments that integrate housing with healthcare, retail and recreational opportunities.



Luxury Housing to Attract Professionals

While workforce housing is essential, Harlingen must also diversify its higher-end housing market to attract professionals, business leaders and remote workers who are relocating due to Texas' favorable business climate. Expanding luxury housing options can:

- Strengthen economic growth by retaining and attracting higher-income residents.
- Support local businesses and amenities by increasing demand for high-end retail, dining and services.
- Enhance Harlingen's appeal as a business-friendly city, complementing ongoing economic development efforts.



Mixed-Use and Transit-Oriented Development

Housing should be integrated with commercial and transit opportunities to reduce long-term transportation costs for residents. Currently, Harlingen households spend an average of 32% of their income on transportation, reflecting the need for better connectivity. Future planning should:

- Encourage residential growth near retail centers and employment districts to reduce commuting burdens.
- Promote mixed-use development in areas like Downtown Harlingen to create a vibrant, walkable urban core.
- Enhance transit infrastructure to connect residential areas with major job hubs, education centers and healthcare facilities.

Key Neighborhood & Housing Strategies for Harlingen

To address Harlingen's evolving housing needs and ensure long-term community resilience, the City should expand existing efforts and introduce new initiatives that promote affordability, inclusivity, sustainability and neighborhood vibrancy. These programs should prioritize revitalizing older areas, supporting homeownership, expanding housing variety and enhancing livability in all neighborhoods.



Infill Development and Adaptive Reuse

- Revitalize vacant lots and buildings, to support compact mixed use housing near existing infrastructure.

Housing Rehabilitation and Homeownership Support

- Expand repair grants and first time homebuyer programs to preserve aging homes and help more families build equity.

Sustainable and Resilient Housing Solutions

- Encourage storm resistant and energy efficient homes while integrating green infrastructure to reduce flooding and long term costs.

Neighborhood Revitalization and Placemaking

- Invest in community led improvements, beautification projects and preservation efforts to strengthen neighborhood identity and livability.

Walkable & Connected Neighborhoods

Evaluating Neighborhood Completeness in Harlingen

A walkable and connected neighborhood is one where residents can conveniently access essential daily needs such as grocery stores, restaurants, schools, parks, healthcare and employment centers without relying heavily on a car. These neighborhoods enhance quality of life, improve public health and support local businesses by fostering vibrant, pedestrian-friendly environments.

In Harlingen, neighborhood completeness varies depending on proximity to commercial centers, transportation infrastructure and residential density. While areas like Downtown Harlingen and parts of the Arroyo Colorado Corridor offer relatively strong walkability, much of the City remains auto-dependent, with limited transit options and fragmented pedestrian and bike infrastructure. Evaluating Harlingen's existing walkability and connectivity helps identify areas for improvement and shapes future development that supports a more accessible, livable and resilient community. Recent housing permit trends reveal growth, with 178 single-family home permits and 148 apartment unit permits issued in 2024. This recovery reflects efforts to address housing shortages, but strategic planning is necessary to ensure future developments align with affordability and accessibility goals. Additional focus on mixed-use developments could also bring jobs and amenities closer to residents, further reducing overall household costs.

To support its growing population, Harlingen must diversify its housing options by increasing affordable rentals, expanding homeownership opportunities and promoting missing middle housing. These efforts will ensure a vibrant and sustainable community that meets the needs of current and future residents.

Strengths in Walkability and Connectivity

Downtown and Commercial Corridors

Downtown Harlingen, particularly along Jackson Street and Commerce Street, offers a mix of shops, restaurants, and local businesses within walking distance of residential areas. Areas near Valle Vista Mall and the Bass Pro Shops corridor also function as regional retail hubs, though pedestrian access and safety features in these areas are limited.

Parks and Recreational Access

The Arroyo Colorado Trail System and City Parks provide key recreational assets and pedestrian pathways, supporting health and mobility. However, sidewalk gaps in surrounding neighborhoods limit full accessibility to these destinations.

Emerging Mixed-Use Areas

Some locations especially near schools, retail corridors, and major intersections show potential for compact, mixed-use development. Zoning adjustments and infrastructure investment may be needed to encourage this form of growth.

Gaps and Challenges in Walkability



High Car Dependency



Public Transit Limitations



Lack of Safe Walking and Biking Routes



Service Gaps in a few Areas

Key Strategies to Enhance Neighborhood Completeness

Improving walkability and access in Harlingen requires a targeted, place-based approach. These strategies focus on expanding everyday connections, improving public spaces and reducing car dependency. Together, they support the creation of safe, vibrant and inclusive neighborhoods.



Strengthen Neighborhood Connectivity

- Fill sidewalk gaps, improve bike and trail networks and enhance pedestrian safety through better lighting and crossings.

Support Mixed Use and Walkable Development

- Encourage grocery stores, clinics and services within neighborhoods and focus new growth near transit and high-activity areas.

Enhance Public Transit Access

- Expand Valley Metro service, introduce flexible microtransit options and upgrade bus stops for safety, comfort and accessibility.

Activate Public Spaces and Streetscapes

- Invest in downtown events, pocket parks, shaded sidewalks and public art to create more inviting, people-friendly places.



Strong Sense of Place & Community

Defining Harlingen's Identity

Harlingen is known for its welcoming atmosphere, cultural heritage and strong sense of community. The City's character is shaped by its historic downtown, public spaces and community-driven events that bring residents together. Strengthening these elements through thoughtful design, preservation and engagement can enhance local pride, foster social connections and support long-term community resilience.

Community Assets & Opportunities

- Harlingen's historic downtown, public murals and cultural landmarks celebrate local heritage and provide gathering spaces for residents.
- Community events such as Market Days, Winter Texan celebrations and local parades foster engagement, tourism and economic activity.
- Beautification projects, public art and well-maintained streetscapes enhance neighborhood identity, civic pride and overall livability.

Challenges and Gaps

- Public spaces and gathering areas are limited in certain neighborhoods, reducing opportunities for community interaction.
- Inconsistent streetscape improvements and a lack of cohesive design standards impact the overall visual appeal of key corridors.
- Walkability and accessibility need enhancement in certain areas to create safer and more inviting public spaces.

Key Community Needs

Vibrant Public Spaces

- Improving parks, plazas and gathering areas will create more opportunities for social interaction and cultural expression.

Historic and Cultural Preservation

- Protecting and revitalizing historic sites and landmarks will strengthen Harlingen's identity.

Neighborhood Beautification

- Investing in landscaping, public art and streetscape enhancements will improve the visual appeal and character of local areas.

Local Events and Community Engagement

- Supporting festivals, farmer's markets and neighborhood initiatives will strengthen social connection.

Safe and Walkable Streets

- Enhancing sidewalks, lighting and pedestrian-friendly design will create a more inviting and connected city for residents and visitors.



Health & Wellness Policy

Evaluating Health & Wellness in Harlingen

Harlingen has the potential to become a more resilient, equitable and vibrant community by making health and wellness a central focus of housing and neighborhood planning. The City benefits from a strong healthcare network, including Valley Baptist Medical Center, Harlingen Medical Center and the UTRGV School of Medicine, which provide essential medical care, specialized treatments and professional training. Parks, trails and recreational facilities further support active lifestyles, fostering physical and mental well-being for residents of all ages. Investments in walkability, mixed-use development and access to fresh, nutritious food contribute to a healthier and more connected community. By continuing to enhance healthcare accessibility, expand wellness initiatives and integrate health-conscious planning strategies, Harlingen can create an environment where all residents have the resources to lead healthier lives.

Current Health Indicators and Access

- Harlingen's average life expectancy is around 77 years, which falls slightly below the state's average. This highlights the need for targeted health initiatives and improvements in environmental factors that contribute to well-being. Chronic illnesses such as obesity and diabetes are common in the community, with a greater impact on older adults and lower-income households.
- The City has a well-established healthcare network that includes Valley Baptist Medical Center, Harlingen Medical Center and the UTRGV School of Medicine, ensuring access to essential medical care and professional training. However, some neighborhoods, particularly in West Harlingen, face challenges in accessing preventative healthcare, fresh food options and spaces for physical activity.

Community Needs to Improve Health and Wellness

Improving health and wellness in Harlingen requires a focus on accessible healthcare, nutritious food options, active living infrastructure and safe housing. Addressing these key areas will help create a healthier and more resilient community.

Walkable and Active Neighborhoods

- Investing in sidewalks, trails, parks and bike infrastructure will promote physical activity and improve overall well-being.

Safe and Healthy Housing

- Addressing code enforcement, overcrowding and aging homes will help reduce health risks related to poor living conditions.

Health Education and Wellness Programs

- Promoting initiatives focused on nutrition, chronic disease prevention and senior wellness will support long-term community health.

Access to Fresh, Affordable Food

- Encouraging grocery stores, farmers markets and community gardens will help address food insecurity in underserved areas.

