

# UNITED WAY OF OLMSTED COUNTY

## LISTENING TEAM

2017 SUMMARY REPORT



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## AT A GLANCE....

**Activities:**

- **7 trainings and meetings** held for inaugural Listening Team members **beginning in March 2017**
- **69** community members shared their views on what makes a strong community in **7 United Way Community Conversations**
- **11 volunteers and staff** participated in public listening activities with hundreds of community members
- **28 hours** were spent engaging the community



## WHAT PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT:

- **Awareness:** Knowledge of barriers and of resources available to meet them
  - o “[People] think there are no poor people here.”
  - o “A friend of mine directed me to Channel One when I first moved here.”
  - o “Rochester doesn’t want [people] to know that we have low-income, homeless, and alcoholic people [who live here].”
  
- **Access:** Being able to get the resources you need
  - o “The wait times are too long...There aren’t enough mental health providers, especially for children.”
  - o “Parking while attending multiple appointments for health care can add up quickly.”
  - o “Even if housing was affordable, you need utilities. You need to ask yourself, can I actually afford this?”
  
- **Safety & Wellbeing:** Feeling physically and socially secure
  - o “[Seniors in emergency shelters] are in the same place as...young people, and it’s just not appropriate and it’s not safe.”
  - o “You don’t want to tell the outside world that you don’t have enough food.”
  - o “We know there’s a lot of fishy stuff going on but....we don’t talk about [it] because we don’t want it to get back to [the landlord] and suddenly we’re homeless.”
  - o “Who do I trust?”
  
- **Equity:** Different communities need different types of support
  - o ”Maybe [it’s that way] in Rochester, but what about in Kasson or Dodge Center?”
  - o “Many black families don’t own cars.”
  - o “What about the single mother [headed] family, families with two moms, two dads...Today’s families are more than ‘traditional’ families.”



**INTRODUCTION:**

United Way of Olmsted County is a community change organization that fights for the education, health, and financial stability of every person in our community. United Way fights to erase divisions, bridge divides, and right inequities. We work to connect people with resources that change lives and transform our community.

We do this in a variety of ways. We operate programs and shared resources that support the community, such as our 2-1-1 information and referral service or our Get Connected volunteer matching portal. We work collaboratively with partners from many organizations and walks of life to create system change and solutions that elevate our community more than any single program or organization could. We provide financial, technical, and volunteer support for programs that make a difference.

At United Way, we LIVE UNITED with the change-makers, risk-takers, and problem-solvers as we seek, find, and create lasting solutions to the challenges that face our community.

This document is a summary of the public knowledge work conducted by United Way of Olmsted County’s Listening Team from the team’s inception in March of 2017 through the end of that year. This report—as well as the listening work it describes—builds on the Community Conversations Summary issued by United Way in September, 2016 ([click here for the full 2016 report](#)). The learnings represented in this document are meant to inform the ongoing work of United Way and are made available here for other community-based organizations seeking to create change in Olmsted County.



**7**  
Trainings & Meetings



**69**  
Community Members



**11**  
Volunteers & Staff



**28**  
Hours

**BACKGROUND:**

Late in 2015, as part of an effort to “turn outward” as an organization, United Way of Olmsted County set out to develop a plan to more deeply engage with the community of individuals and families most likely to benefit from our work. By January of 2016, we had begun to implement a plan to host community conversations to better inform an organizational perspective on the community of Olmsted County and to root future decision-making in the aspirations of and challenges faced by community members.

Most immediately, United Way intended these community conversations and the many things learned from them to inform ongoing development of our work in the community.



By listening deeply to people with lived experience of the kinds of conditions that United Way works to improve, we anticipated that we would become better positioned to develop strategic goals and actions that align with people’s needs and priorities.

In order to develop this kind of public knowledge, we held a large number of community conversations over 8 months in 2016. This volume and pace of conversations allowed United Way to build depth and breadth of understanding quickly to assist in shaping strategies and tactics for future impact.

Yet, the process of “turning outward” is not one that has a clear beginning and ending point; rather, it is an ongoing journey that brings an organization like United Way continually closer to the people we seek to serve. That is why, in late 2016, United Way announced our intention to form a Listening Team dedicated to carrying out our public knowledge work. The ongoing gathering and synthesis of public knowledge ensures that our work remains aligned with the populations we serve. This document represents the first public summary of this more comprehensive listening work that began in 2017.

**PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE**

*Public knowledge comes only from engaging in conversation with people in a community. Only the people within the community themselves can tell us their aspirations, concerns and how they see different facets of their community.*

*It is usually in plain language that everyone can understand.*

Source: Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, n.d.

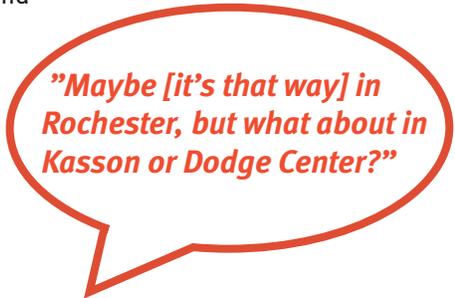
**RATIONALE AND PURPOSE:**

Too often in the course of public life, voices are missing from the public dialogue, and important perspectives go unnoticed. This occurs when conversations take place among the powerful, and intentional efforts aren’t made to include the voices of the less influential and the marginalized. Because of the systemic inequities that characterize public institutions in 21st century America, that marginalization primarily affects low-income community members and people of color, who are less likely to hold positions of influence and less likely to be consulted about important public issues.



When people from marginalized groups are consulted, their stories may be interpreted too broadly, as representative of all people who share their racial, religious, or socio-economic background. Too often, unconscious biases lead the broader community to distrust and even discount perspectives emerging from marginalized groups. When the voices of individuals from already-marginalized groups are underrepresented in public discussion, the harmful effects of social inequities are compounded. Individuals and whole communities may be effectively shut out of public knowledge-making, depriving them of full participation and recognition in public life (Fricker, 2007).

Such social inequities also have material consequences. Research demonstrates that individuals of color may feel socially isolated from the wider community, despite being active employees, citizens, and family members (World Health Organization, 2012). Lack of social connectedness has been correlated to poor mental health, especially for vulnerable populations such as seniors, teenagers, and individuals of color.



Social isolation is considered a threat to physical health and in many studies is considered a risk factor comparable to smoking or obesity. This is particularly true for health outcomes affected by the stress response, such as coronary heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, cognitive decline, and dementia (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). The relationship between physical health and social isolation can be cyclical, with a physical health challenge resulting in a lack of social connectedness due to decreased mobility, which often leads to mental health challenges and exacerbates physical health challenges (Osborn, 2001).

*“The wait times are too long... There aren’t enough mental health providers, especially for children.”*

Olmsted County is not immune to these inequities, as is borne out by both quantitative research and public knowledge. For example, Rochester’s dissimilarity index—a measurement of segregation—is slightly worse than other cities of comparable size. In Rochester, the average white resident lives in a neighborhood where fewer than 10% of residents are people of color. Black residents, on the other hand, tend to live in neighborhoods where people of color comprise more than a quarter of the population (Frey & Myers, 2001). Neighborhood segregation by race can also be seen in Rochester’s city ward maps, which split plurality non-white neighborhoods into different wards (Krieder, 2016). Formal neighborhood associations recognized by the city run alongside, but do not include, some of the city’s lowest-income areas.

Community conversation participants spoke about disconnection and marginalization as they experience it in community life. The most notable theme in United Way’s initial community conversations in 2016 was the social disconnection people in Olmsted County feel from one another and from the rest of the community. Many people expressed dissatisfaction with social disconnectedness that they experienced differently as inequity, segregation, and isolation.

*“You don’t want to tell the outside world that you don’t have enough food.”*

These same themes surfaced as United Way’s listening work continued in 2017. To take just one example, participants in one community conversation expressed deep frustration with what they perceived as a wide and growing gap between people like themselves and our community’s decision-makers. Comments such as “Rochester for most people is overpriced for housing; it’s built for Mayo and IBM” or “It’s Med City, they don’t want anything to look low-income” were met with nods of agreement from around the room. Said one participant, “It’s funny, they welcome people like us if we are building those investments [as construction workers], but we can’t afford to use them.” The conversation concluded with participants asking the facilitator where to find more opportunities to voice their concerns about housing costs in our community. In this and other public discussions, community members told United Way that they feel shut out of economic and social opportunity.

Qualitative and quantitative data show that there is a need for thorough, thoughtful, and authentic engagement of our whole community in designing efforts to shape a bright future for Olmsted County residents. At the core of United Way’s evolving community engagement efforts is our public knowledge work. That work, which began in 2016 as a series of community conversations, in 2017 became the Listening Team.

*“A friend of mine directed me to Channel One when I first moved here.”*



## THE LISTENING TEAM

United Way of Olmsted County’s volunteer advisory groups are intended to enhance our understanding of community conditions and best practices in the human services field. Each group provides perspectives and/or recommendations for United Way staff to consider when making decisions and implementing strategies to change our community for the better.

As one of the volunteer advisory groups, the purpose of the Listening Team is to gain public knowledge. It is particularly concerned with hearing the voices of individuals who are not commonly heard in community life. The public knowledge work of the Listening Team has three components: hosting community conversations, attending public listening events, and synthesizing and sharing knowledge.



### *Community Conversations*

United Way of Olmsted County’s community conversations model draws from a framework established by The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. United Way works with community-based groups and organizations to gather small groups of stakeholders for a 90-minute conversation about the community’s hopes for the future, the barriers to realizing those aspirations, and what types of steps might make a difference. As a facilitator from the Listening Team guides the group through the conversation, participants have opportunities to respond to identified themes. After each conversation, United Way staff and volunteers share with participants a brief summary of what we learned and invite further response to clarify or add to the themes identified.

Each community conversation centers on a topic within United Way’s scope of work. In 2017, conversation topics included affordable housing, food security, living independently, and social connectedness. The findings below move beyond these topics to identify recurring themes that emerged across multiple community conversations and other listening events, regardless of topic.

### *Public Listening Events*

Public knowledge is continually being produced and shared at meetings, forums, celebrations, and events throughout our community. Listening Team members are tasked with attending these various public listening and learning events and sharing the knowledge gained with the team. While United Way of Olmsted County staff regularly attend community meetings, the relationships and experience of volunteers allow the organization to learn with and from a broader cross-section of Olmsted County residents.

### *Synthesis & Sharing*

The final component of United Way’s listening work is to synthesize and share the public knowledge that is gained by engaging with the community. Listening Team volunteers and staff meet periodically to review the emerging themes from community conversations and public events. We developed the following findings based on the most common and significant themes found across many conversations with different groups of community stakeholders.





Others went further, saying that powerful people and organizations don't want the public to be aware of economic and social inequality in our community. Without a broad consensus that there are people in Olmsted County who struggle to meet their basic needs, achieve their financial or educational goals, and enjoy a high quality of life, it is difficult to build lasting solutions.

While many agreed that ours is a resource-rich community, people also feel that awareness of those resources remains a significant barrier. Community conversations participants repeatedly highlighted the need for greater community education on a variety of issues, including diversity and cultural differences, nutrition, housing options, and how to navigate support systems. At times, people asked for organizations to provide structured educational opportunities, but conversation participants also suggested community-driven solutions that support individuals in sharing their different knowledge and skills with one another. This sort of knowledge-sharing is often on display in community conversations, where participants make recommendations to one another, such as "Try XYZ agency for nutrition classes."

Awareness of existing resources was also suggested as a problem for service providers. With so many agencies offering needed services, it is hard for case workers or providers to stay informed about what resources are available in order to make appropriate referrals to clients seeking additional supports. It was suggested repeatedly that agencies need to build stronger systems for sharing information and making referrals. Some people also feel that providers are not aware enough of the way clients understand and experience barriers to achieving their goals. As Olmsted County continues to grow and change, there is a need to continue to educate providers about the types of services that are needed and how to provide them in responsive ways.

### Access:

Accessibility of services and resources was one of the most consistent issues raised across our listening work in 2017. Many barriers exist that make it harder for people to access the services they need. Transportation was one of the most frequently-mentioned barriers. Another common challenge is securing housing that is both affordable and accessible to people with disabilities or mobility limitations. As these two commonly heard examples suggest, Olmsted County residents typically do not experience barriers to access discretely. Instead, barriers like transportation and housing are interconnected. For example, families may find themselves choosing between more expensive housing located on a bus route in Rochester and a less expensive rental outside of town that requires them to own and maintain a reliable vehicle.

Beyond the limitations of physical resources and infrastructure, our listening work also reveals a deeply-felt need for more culturally-responsive services. Clients and agencies would like to see more service providers with linguistic and cultural skills that reflect the diversity of Olmsted County. More broadly, people want to feel that services and infrastructure are being designed around the needs of people being served. This idea was most often expressed in relation to specific services, such as culturally-relevant mental health care. However, residents also expressed concerns that transportation, housing, and entertainment offerings are not designed to support independent but socially connected lifestyles for people of all generations and abilities. For example, participants in a community conversation with seniors said that transportation is a barrier to staying connected with their friends and family members, leading to a lower quality of life.



## Safety & Wellbeing:

Concerns about safety were prominent in community conversations and other listening activities in 2017. This includes both physical security and social wellbeing. Often this sentiment was expressed in the question, “Whom can I trust?” As one community conversation member said, “I don’t even trust my shadow!”

Some people have feelings of insecurity related to accessing services: Is this service legitimate or a scam? Is the food from the food shelf expired? If I seek help from a senior advocate, will they force me to move out of my home? Can I count on the staff at my child’s school to treat my child with respect? These and other questions raised in community conversations reflect Olmsted County residents’ apprehensions about being safe physically and socially when interacting with institutions or accessing services.

Community members have particular safety concerns related to housing. For seniors, this can be connected to aging in place; people may feel more comfortable remaining in their homes as they age, but they may not be or may not feel physically safe doing so. When it comes to affordable housing, people told us more than once that they have struggled to find a place to live that is safe and dignified. Some Olmsted County residents have no choice but to live in buildings with mold, insect infestations, or other health hazards. In the absence of public policies designed to distribute and integrate affordable housing throughout the community, affordable rentals in Rochester tend to be concentrated in high-poverty neighborhoods with poor public reputations. People we spoke with who are seeking affordable housing expressed some concerns about their physical safety in these areas. The combination of these issues—unsafe or neglected properties, clustering of low-income housing, and the perception or reality of high crime rates—leads people to feel forgotten by the community. This can be detrimental to their sense of wellbeing.

Regardless of income, age, or neighborhood, many Olmsted County residents feel disconnected from their neighbors, which was a significant theme that emerged in United Way’s 2016 community conversations as well. This feeling of social isolation makes people feel less physically safe; they wonder if they can count on their neighbors to respect their property or keep an eye out when they are away from home. The Listening Team observed that at times these concerns appeared to reflect a suspicion of people perceived to be different from the speaker—whether that difference was one of race, socio-economic background, or rural/urban upbringing. At times, they seemed to reveal discomfort with how quickly Rochester and surrounding towns are growing. Demographic changes leave some long-time Olmsted County residents wondering where they will fit in the social and economic fabric of our community in the future.

While we clearly heard concerns about safety, including social connectedness and wellbeing, there was also reason to hope. In our 2017 listening work, United Way frequently heard people expressing a desire to connect with others. People told us that they want feel heard, to know their neighbors, to feel like part of a community, to support each other, to volunteer, to learn about other cultural traditions, and to feel their own identity “honored” by others. People have hope that community members can unite across difference and decrease feelings of isolation. Moreover, people are willing to contribute to increasing social connectedness and building a community that is welcoming and safe for all.



## Equity:

Issues of equity were at the forefront in United Way’s listening work in 2017. While all four of the key themes identified here are interconnected, equity most of all permeates the other themes. This is because concerns about inequity were expressed frequently by the people we heard from (this does not mean that community members didn’t also advocate inequitable perspectives). We want to draw particular attention to this theme as it emerged in our listening work because it is consistent with our core values as an organization and is the lens through which we choose to view our community change work.

United Way of Olmsted County understands equity as an effort to undo discrimination and bias to create a just and fair society in which everyone can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. In our listening work, we heard this expressed in the idea that different people and different communities require different types of supports based on their identity, culture, and history. This idea was present in the desire for culturally responsive services that we described above. It was also communicated as a wish to be recognized by others as existing, mattering, and having dignity. For example, parents of transgender children want service providers and businesses to acknowledge their children’s correct gender without asking invasive questions. From these community members and others, we heard that individuals and families want to feel empowered to decide how they live and how their lives are understood by others.

Unfortunately, many members of our Olmsted County community do not feel this way much of the time. In a variety of contexts, people said that they feel ignored, overlooked, or forgotten. They feel that powerful institutions—such as local government, businesses, or community development initiatives—are not “for” people like them. This idea was conveyed by different individuals in relation to their race, socioeconomic status, country of origin, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, gender, and family type.

At times, these concerns were expressed in an “us against them” framework in which “people like me” deserve access to support services but “other people” abuse the system. We also heard “not in my backyard” sentiments, especially in relation to affordable housing. One lesson we took from this is to remember that individuals experience Olmsted County differently based on their life experiences and expectations of what community life should look like. One benefit of United Way’s community conversations is that people have the opportunity to talk with other individuals whose points of view may be different than their own.

## WHAT’S NEXT:

When United Way of Olmsted County holds community conversations, we share with participants our desire to learn about the community’s aspirations without promising that we will undertake any specific program or activity based on the learnings from any individual conversation. However, what is learned in community conversations does shape United Way’s perspective and actions. For example, learnings from our community conversations and public listening activities are informing our upcoming grant opportunities. More specifically, concerns about awareness and accessibility of available resources have encouraged United Way to improve our outreach and communications efforts related to the 2-1-1 information and referral service, which connects people with the resources they seek.

One positive outcome from United Way’s listening work has been new and deepening relationships established with community members and community-based organizations. We hope these relationships will continue to grow and flourish, helping to foster further dialogue in the



future. As we continue to host community conversations and participate in other public listening activities, United Way will strive to remain grounded in the aspirations, needs, and perspectives of the community we serve.

If you or your organization are interested in being part of United Way’s ongoing listening work, please contact us at 507-287-2000 or [impact@uwolmsted.org](mailto:impact@uwolmsted.org). Applications for Listening Team volunteers are accepted on a rolling basis. Opportunities for community-based organizations to co-host community conversations are ongoing. United Way is eager to involve the community in shaping our evolving understanding of local needs and assets.

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