

United Way of Olmsted County

Listening Team

2018 Summary Report



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AT A GLANCE...

Activities:

12 trainings and meetings held for Listening Team members in 2018

66 community members shared their views on what makes a strong community in **7 United Way Community Conversations**

8 volunteers and staff took part in community listening activities

The team spent **18 hours** engaging community members in conversation



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 garner 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 providing synergy 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's Listening Team throughout 2018. This report—as well as the listening work it describes—builds on the Community Conversations Summaries issued by United Way in [2016](#) and again in [2017](#) (click for links). 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. These learnings are not intended to be exhaustive or prescribe a set of actions for United Way of Olmsted County.

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.*



WHY WE LISTEN TO THE COMMUNITY:

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, the influence-wielders, 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.

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, continues today as the Listening Team.

KEY FINDINGS IN 2018:

The most common and significant themes noted across United Way's listening work in 2018 were institutional distrust, race, modern life, and population growth – each of which will be explored in greater detail later in this document. These themes did not emerge in every conversation. Where they did occur, people at times expressed different views. The Listening Team noted other concepts that did not rise to the level of these most common themes but nonetheless deserve mention. These included generational divides, a suspicion of those new to the area who are perceived to be “outsiders,” and the tension between individual and collective responsibility for social problems.

These themes shed light on how people think and feel about these important topics that captured the attention of our community in 2018. These themes are helping to inform United Way's perspective in developing and executing community change strategies. This work can also provide a solid basis for others in the community to better understand what Olmsted County residents hope for, in addition to what barriers stand in the way of sharing a community that benefits everyone.

TOP THEMES

Institutional Distrust

...

Race

...

Modern Life

...

Population Growth



THE LISTENING TEAM

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 and on whose life experience there may exist little or no quantitative, local-level data. 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 share their perspectives on identified themes. After each conversation, United Way staff and volunteers share with participants a brief summary of what was learned and invite further response to clarify or add to the themes identified.

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 met periodically to review the emerging themes from community conversations and public events. The following findings were developed based on the most common and salient themes found across many conversations with different groups of community stakeholders.



WHAT PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT: INSTITUTIONAL DISTRUST

People do not trust institutions to do what is right. They believe that public and private institutions have interests distinct from those of the people they serve. Residents feel unable to place their trust in systems and prefer to place it in people.

This distrust is not centered on a single institution, or a particular sector. Residents shared stories about misinformation spread throughout the community which obscured the role and purpose of public and service-focused institutions, causing residents to avoid interaction with the institution even in times of need. Similar stories were shared about public opinion which questioned the *purpose* of various local institutions – whether they were self-serving or ultimately for the benefit of the common good. Frustration with leadership at all levels was expressed, with residents feeling that leadership could often be hyper-focused on one issue at the expense of many others. This distrust of institutions seems to lead to a breakdown of communications, wherein data or communication efforts by local institutions may be met with distrust even if they are undertaken with the best of intentions.

Relationship with Other Listening Team Themes

Awareness, access, and accessibility of services have all arisen as themes in 2016 and 2017. Often, residents experience different levels of awareness and access depending on their income, background, and previous interactions with service providers. Issues of access and awareness likely contribute to institutional distrust. At the same time, one should be aware that access and distrust often manifest in a decrease in service usage, and the cause may be obscured unless one asks residents *why* they are not utilizing services.

Other Data

According to a survey by American Public Media in 2017 (Egbert, Helmstetter, & Kassira, 2017), Rochester residents show overall levels of institutional distrust on par with most regions of the state (urban and rural), with the exception of Minneapolis-St. Paul being far more distrusting of institutions than the other regions. When we dig into those survey results, however, we can see that the overall amount of institutional trust was skewed by the exceptionally *high* level of trust Rochester residents place in the medical system, likely influenced by the high degree of familiarity many residents have with our world-class health care institution and primary employer, Mayo Clinic. For other institutions – police, religion, public schools, media, big business, and government – Rochester residents

“I wish someone would take the initiative and teach kids: respect the uniform, whether that’s Girl Scouts, Boys Scouts, police, Marines....”

“Part of it is the community believing in you, but the other part is the community having the resources that will support you.”



WHAT PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT: RACE

Fear and blame occur frequently when the topic of race surfaces. As Olmsted County's population has grown, it has also become increasingly diverse. At the same time, a national atmosphere of racism and nationalism has prevailed. We see community members self-segregate, avoid discussing topics of race, while at the same time harboring hostility towards institutional responses to race-based issues.

This theme in particular grew out of conversations focused on connectedness, as well as in community-wide meetings (as opposed to Community Conversations). We heard that a sense of belonging is an important component of feeling safe and supported, while at the same time, opportunities to connect and include others don't just happen; they are created. That connectedness includes the opportunities to build relationships with people like you *and* different than yourself.

Long-time residents feel that Rochester is becoming fragmented, with lots of smaller communities within it. This works against building a connected community, where you can be yourself and feel that your identity – however defined – is honored.

Relationship with Other Listening Team Themes

Social disconnection and safety & well-being were Listening Team themes in 2016 and 2017, and are closely intertwined with the theme of race. In conversations, we hear about communities defined by race and ethnicity rather than geography, as well as lack of safety & well-being experienced by some residents in reaction to these communities. Other themes from 2018 are also related to race. In conversation, it seems that institutional distrust is particularly strong among people of color with regards to law enforcement and the education system. Growth, another theme from 2018, is frequently cited as contributing to the increasing diversity of Olmsted County along with the tensions that have risen.

Other Data

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). Olmsted County is not immune to these inequities, as is borne out by both qualitative research and public knowledge. For example, 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).

"People want to feel like they belong so they can ask for help."

"What are the right words to use?"

In Rochester, there were no reported hate crimes in 2016.

However, last year there were 13.

(FBI, 2017)

Hate Crime: a crime, typically one involving violence, that is motivated by prejudice on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation, or other grounds



WHAT PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT: MODERN LIFE

Technology, busyness, and daily obligations keep us disconnected from one another. Twenty-first Century life is busy, with individuals disconnected from one another as they are inundated with information and activity. As communities are built around common interests and stages of life, residents' experiences of life in Olmsted County may look vastly different from one another despite occupying the same geographic space.

There was a strong consensus among residents that connections look like neighbors helping neighbors, and that this way of life was disappearing as people build their communities around common interests rather than geography. Technology and the pace of modern life are seen as being interrelated with connectedness, with accompanying generational divides around technology. While we are increasingly connected in up-to-the-minute ways with the media and those in our inner circle, we find it increasingly difficult to make meaningful connections with individuals we don't know.

In addition to the technological divide, residents note that not everyone is able to participate in community events – often because they are preoccupied with meeting their basic needs. This leads to a lack of time to connect and participate in community life. This theme arose especially in relation to education; schools find it challenging to engage parents in events, while at the same time parents face barriers finding the time to participate in said event.

Relationship with Other Listening Team Themes

Social disconnection, one of the main themes from 2016, was the theme that often spurred residents to talk about modern life – particularly the sub-theme of technology and changing social norms. Other themes – particularly access and equity – relate to the subtheme of conflicting demands on our time. Even when opportunities may be available, many in our community may not be able to participate due to other, more pressing demands on their time.

Other Data

Americans spend 5.5 hours each day on leisure with the majority being TV. Seniors consume the most TV, while working-age individuals tend to consume less TV the younger they are. Those aged 15-24 actually consume the least TV and spend more time socializing, communicating, and playing games than any other age cohort (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). The younger a person is, the more likely that media time is spent on individual screens: smartphones and computers. The older a person is, the more likely that media is to be mass-media: TV and radio (The Nielsen Company, 2018).

“Families tend to go it alone.”

“I’m so busy digging myself out of a hole, how can I be there for my kids when I have to work [to provide] for them?”

“Kids don’t want to work hard; they would rather be on their cell phones.”



WHAT PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT: GROWTH

Olmsted County's population is growing rapidly, resulting in drastic changes in employment patterns, the cost of living, and diversity. A tight labor market is felt by employers, at the same time workers find it difficult to make ends meet. Particularly felt is the lack of affordable housing, driven by the increase in demand.

Relationship with Other Listening Team Themes

Above and beyond the other themes, growth is the theme that seems to typify the Olmsted experience. It is tightly related to virtually every other theme that surfaced in Listening Team work through 2016, 2017, and 2018. The frequency at which growth is mentioned has increased over time, and we anticipate it to be a theme that continues well into the future.

Residents readily acknowledge that there are segments of the community that are not reaching their full potential; the cost of living, segregation, and the rate at which our community is changing contributes to that. Rochester's rapid growth and demographic diversity, as well as changes in technology, make the loss of connection readily apparent in our neighborhoods.

Rochester is a city without much economic diversity, which contributes to a fractured sense of community. In some sectors, growth presents opportunity. In others, wages become less livable and the disparity in wages among different occupations become tangible. Residents express a desire to for community leaders to find a balance between profitability for business and sustainability and livability for employees and clients.

Growth affects both affordability and the community's sense of safety, often amplifying concerns around race and change. Residents note an apparent disconnect between the public and private sector in addressing questions around affordable housing, increasing the level of institutional distrust.

Other Data

Olmsted County's population has been growing at a rapid pace, an estimated 10,000 new residents since the 2010 census (US Census Bureau, 2017). The unemployment rate has remained low throughout that time, but the labor market has tightened in recent months. The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development placed the unemployment rate for Olmsted County at 1.8% in the fall of 2018, a rate which had not been seen since 1999 (Minnesota Employment and Economic Development, 2018).

"There is too much focus on development and [we're] not seeing the benefit of all aspects of Rochester outside of major projects."

"It's hard to teach self-sufficiency when our standard of living keeps changing so fast."

Population Growth in Olmsted County 2010-2017



WHAT'S NEXT:

One outcome from the community conversations hosted since 2016 has been new and deepening relationships established between United Way of Olmsted County and community members along with 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. 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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