

United Way of Olmsted County

Listening Team

2019 Summary Report



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AT A GLANCE...

Activities:

30+ community members shared their views on what makes a strong community in **5 United Way Community Conversations**

5 volunteers and staff took part in community listening activities

The team spent **18+ hours** engaging community members in conversation and attending community events

The Listening Team assisted with the Community Health Needs Assessment listening sessions, which included **184 residents** sharing their thoughts on community health.



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 that support the community, such as our 211 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 systems 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 2019. This report—as well as the listening work it describes—builds on the summaries issued by United Way in [2016](#), [2017](#), and [2018](#) (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 systematic 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 2019:

The most common and significant themes noted across United Way's listening work in 2019 were cultural barriers, homelessness, social connectedness, and education focusing on literacy – each of which will be explored in greater detail later in this document. Other themes that arose included mental health, community growth, equity, and socioeconomic disparities. These concepts were noted in the synthesis process but were not present consistently across the conversations in which we participated this year.

These themes frame the undertones of conversations taking place in our community. These important topics captured the attention of our Listening Team in 2019 and will inform how we engage with our larger community moving forward. These themes are helping to inform United Way's perspective in developing and executing community change strategies. This work can also provide insight 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



Cultural Barriers

...

Homelessness



...

*Social
Connectedness*



...

*Education &
Literacy*



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 routinely 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. 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: CULTURAL BARRIERS

Olmsted County’s population is becoming increasingly diverse. Cultural diversity brings new ideas and collaboration opportunities to communities; however, there are obstacles for families and individuals navigating a community that is still increasing intercultural competence.

Topics under this theme included both cultural barriers for diverse families in Olmsted County and these same families’ efforts to work with the schools their children attend. Students coming from immigrant families experience many barriers in the traditional school setting. Traditional standardized testing and cultural interpretations of mental illness are just two examples of how parents feel cultural needs are not being addressed in some local schools. Individuals also mentioned concerns about school leadership not reflecting the diverse community that they serve.

Another point of interest that developed from this theme was the lack of accurate media representation of immigrants. Individuals said that national, state, and local media sources do not portray the immigrant community fairly. Several conversation participants acknowledged the variety of groups and initiatives (e.g. Diversity Council, Intercultural Cities Initiative, Government Alliance on Race and Equity) working to address cultural barriers that families in Olmsted County are experiencing; however, it is not enough to alleviate all cultural barriers in the community.

Relationship with Other Community Themes

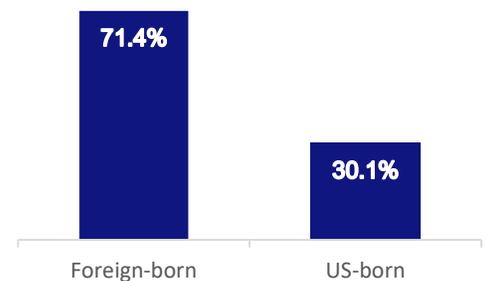
In past years’ summaries, race has been a theme of community conversations, particularly in relation to institutional distrust of law enforcement and the education system. Individuals coming from minoritized populations experience barriers because of the way systems in our community currently exist. Residents explained that consistent growth in our community makes disparities in our community more visible. The rapid growth of our community was a consistent theme in our listening work from 2016-2018.

Other Data

Research demonstrates that individuals of color are more likely to feel socially isolated from the wider community, despite being active employees, citizens, and family members (World Health Organization, 2012). 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). The most recent Community Health Needs Assessment found that 71.4% of foreign-born residents in Olmsted County feel unaccepted by the community, compared to 30.1% of US-born residents (CHNA 2019).



Percent of Population That Feel Unaccepted by Community





WHAT PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT: HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness has become a community wide topic of conversation in the past year. Conversations around homelessness have increased in 2019, some led by Rochester's mayor, others by community organizations, and several amongst community members spurred by local media attention.

Community members are concerned about the lack of coordinated support for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. While several agencies are taking steps to support individuals experiencing homelessness, the community recognizes that working separately will not address the issue. According to residents, organizations working with homeless populations should communicate on a regular basis.

Some see housing and income as a barrier to equity in Olmsted County. Residents shared that affordable housing is a barrier for individuals who earn minimum wage. The community feels that there is little to no effort being put into creating affordable living options, adding to the inequities in our community. Conversations continue to bring up the question, "How do we remove barriers to provide resources to individuals and families experiencing homelessness?"

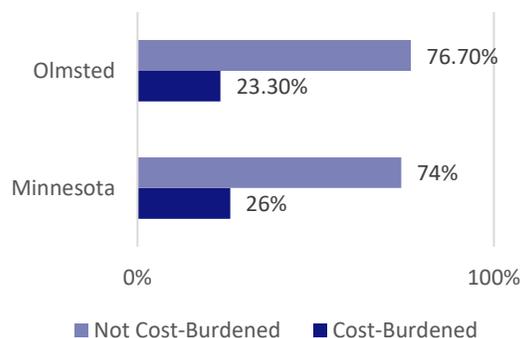
Relationship with Other Community Themes

Experiencing homelessness can increase the chances of individuals feeling isolated or experiencing anti-social behavior (CHNA, 2019). People's ability to connect socially can be limited by financial instability: people living in crisis situations or struggling to meet basic needs have less time to engage in consistent, meaningful relationships.

Community conversations have centered around community growth since 2016. Rapid population growth brings challenges and demands that we address how this growth can be sustainable for all populations. How do we include all in growth?

Other Data

Recent attempts to count Olmsted County's homeless population documented 355 families and 335 singles experiencing homelessness in Olmsted County (CHNA, 2019). Lack of affordable housing has been credited for the increase of the homeless population across Minnesota. 26% of Minnesota households are housing cost-burdened, paying 30% or more of their income just for housing (Wilder Research, 2018). In Olmsted County, 23.3% of households are housing cost-burdened (MN Compass, 2017).





WHAT PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT: SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

There is a feeling of disconnection in the community. This theme presented itself in community conversations and also in the most recent Community Health Needs Assessment.

Personal connections can bridge community barriers. Individuals feel disconnected from their neighbors and in turn, the wider community. Residents expressed that people in the community with disabilities, mobility challenges, or experiencing cultural barriers are more isolated than ever. Technology does not fulfill this human need for personal connection; there need to be more conversations.

Residents explained that when people are in situations that are uncomfortable, or they are concerned that they may unintentionally offend someone, they have a tendency not to engage at all. This lack of engagement with individuals who are different from themselves creates larger barriers. There needs to be intentional engagement opportunities to remove these barriers.

Relationship with Other Community Themes

Social disconnection has been a persistent theme of our listening work since 2016 and is closely intertwined with the theme of cultural barriers and growth. Rochester's rapid growth and demographic diversity make the loss of connection readily apparent in our neighborhoods. People are uncertain of how to engage with their neighbors and therefore chose not to engage at all. Listening Sessions for the Community Health Needs Assessment also revolved around social connectedness, as is reflected in the 2019 CHNA Report.

Conversations about social connectedness often paired with concerns about community mental health. When someone is suffering from poor mental health, they begin to withdraw and become disconnected. Some studies have indicated that the opposite is also true; a lack of social connectedness can lead to poor mental health (Saeri et al. 2018).

Other Data

Individuals with strong social connections have a 50% increased chance of living longer and lower rates of anxiety and depression (Seppala, 2014). In Olmsted County, 68% of adults are socially connected, which is decreased by 4% since 2016 (CHNA, 2019). Community members of color are less likely to be socially connected compared to their white peers.



*"I live by people,
but I don't know
any of them."*



*"...loss of connection
makes an unhealthy
community."*

Social connectedness as defined by the state of Minnesota:

"Social connectedness refers to an individual's engagement in an interactive web of key relationships, within communities that have particular physical and social structures that are affected by broad economic and political forces."

(Minnesota Department of Health, 2010)





WHAT PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT: EDUCATION & LITERACY

Education and literacy of the children in our community was a prioritized theme in community conversations. Two hosted conversations revolved around childhood literacy.

Conversations regarding education and literacy had a tone of urgency. Residents expressed the idea that literacy is a cornerstone to a successful life and predicts further academic achievement. They inferred that the amount of school resources directly impacts student educational experiences. There were shared concerns among Community Conversation participants that teachers do not receive proper training or have proper administrative supports to meet the needs of students.

Basic needs must be met for students to be engaged in the learning process. Residents are concerned that students whose basic needs are not met tend to struggle in the classroom setting and ultimately don't reach academic milestones. Once students fall behind, it is easy to miss more than one milestone. Residents stated that there is a large gap between students without resources and their peers. A few residents felt that illiteracy leads to crime, homelessness, and a life of hardship. Participants noted a high need for more literacy supports in schools.

Relationship with Other Community Themes

The theme of educational opportunities and literacy tied closely to community members' concerns that cultural barriers are creating disparities in our community. Students and families who are immigrants experience the traditional school setting differently than those who are from the United States. Community members are concerned that there is a disconnect between the schools and parents because of language, culture, and prior experiences.

A few residents insisted that a lack of education leads to homelessness and strife. When conversations about barriers to education and achieving literacy goals arose, individuals shared about the perpetual cycle of lack of resources leading to homelessness and creating a next generation that is lacking resources.

Other Data

In Olmsted County, fewer 3rd graders are testing proficient in reading every year (MDE, 2019). Information from the most recent census data shows us that individuals who graduate high school are estimated to earn \$10,000 more per year than those that do not graduate high school (US Census Bureau, 2017).



"Kids have potential, but schools don't have the tools to help break the economic divide."



"Parents' literacy level impacts the generations..."

3rd Grade Reading Proficiency in Olmsted County



WHAT ELSE PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT?

Community conversations and other listening team events provided our team with an array of topics and themes. Beyond the highlighted conversation themes for the year were other topics worth mentioning.

Mental Health

Several community conversations and events addressed the topic of mental health. Residents are concerned for those who are not receiving the services they need, particularly youth that need supports. Listening Sessions for the Community Health Needs Assessment asked about creating a healthy community. Many residents encouraged getting more mental health practitioners in the area, adding resources in the schools, education for families, and making these services available to those who cannot afford them. Mental health is a top community health priority (CHNA 2019). In response to the growing concerns about mental health in our community, Mayo Clinic and several community organizations, including United Way, collaborated to bring the Mental Health: Mind Matters exhibit to Rochester in the summer of 2019. 4,741 community residents attended this event and engaged in building empathy and understanding for persons impacted by mental illness (Mind Matters 2019).

Community Growth

Olmsted County has increased in population considerably in the last decade. This theme has been addressed by residents in community conversations since 2016. Residents suggest that this growth adds extra challenges and changes to the community. There is an awareness that this growth will impact the way schools, organizations, nonprofits, businesses, and healthcare providers will serve the community in the future.

Socioeconomic Disparities

Financial stress has consistently remained a top community health priority from Community Health Needs Assessments since 2013. Concerns about money limiting access to resources in Olmsted County came up several times in community conversations. Residents expressed that our community has opportunities for those who can afford it, but Olmsted County is becoming a less accessible place to live because the cost of living is increasing with the population. Individuals that live below or near the poverty line are at a disadvantage.

“Resources (for mental health) have to be available to everyone – not just those who can afford it.”

“Socioeconomic inequality is a problem; resources are not equally distributed. Transportation to these resources is a problem for a lot of communities.”



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 individual 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. 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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