

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

SUMMARY – TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2016



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ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

United Way of Olmsted County would like to thank each of these organizations for their support in bringing these community conversations to life. Without these partners, whose relationships in the community helped make many of the conversations possible, neither this effort, nor United Way’s work in the community would be possible.

- | | |
|--|---|
| Ability Building Center | Oak Terrace Estates |
| Bonner Elementary
Stewartville | Olmsted County Social
Services - Adult Foster Care |
| Boys and Girls Club | Park Towers |
| Byron Public School | Rochester Alternative
Learning Center |
| Catholic Charities | Rochester Area Family YMCA |
| Diversity Council | Rochester Public Library |
| Elder Network | Rochester Senior Center |
| Emerging Leaders in Giving | Shorewood Senior
Community |
| Families First of Minnesota | Silver Creek Corner |
| Family Service Rochester | Somalia Rebuild |
| Gage Elementary School | Summer of Service Students |
| Hawthorne | The Place |
| Homeless Network | The Salvation Army |
| Lincoln K-8 District-
Wide School | United Way of
Olmsted County |
| LINK - Youth Advisory Group | Women’s Leadership Council |
| Lutheran Social Services | Youth Leadership Council |
| NAMI | |
| Neighbors Helping Neighbors | |
| Northrup Community
Education Center | |

CONVERSATION LEADERS

A special thanks is also owed to these individuals who provided guidance, feedback, leadership, and labor to make this community conversation effort possible. Each contributed in a unique and valuable way. United Way of Olmsted County is grateful for your passion, effort, and care.

- | | |
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INTRODUCTION

United Way of Olmsted County is a social change organization working to improve the lives of people in need in Olmsted County, Minnesota by creating and promoting supports to cause lasting change in conditions for our community. This happens by uniting people and resources, with a special focus on four interconnected building blocks: education, income, health and basic needs. In driving improvements in these areas, United Way of Olmsted County gives special attention to alleviating poverty and reducing inequities.

This document is a summary of the community conversations held over the course of eight months in 2016. The learnings represented in this document are meant to inform the ongoing work of United Way of Olmsted County and are made available here for other community-based organizations seeking to effect change in Olmsted County.

The lessons learned from community members have been transformative for the perspective of United Way. This document is intended to help inform and transform the perspectives of other organizations and leaders across the community.

PURPOSE & BACKGROUND

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 minority and low-income community members, who are less likely to hold positions of influence and less likely to be consulted about important public issues.

United Way of Olmsted County has not offered a perfect solution to this “inequity of voice” through the Community Conversations that have recently been held. Undoubtedly, there are countless ways that more outreach could have been included more deeply, and that more barriers to participation could have been removed.

And yet it was important that United Way waste no time in making greater efforts in this respect. Late in 2015, as part of an effort to “turn outward” as an organization, United Way set out to develop a plan to more deeply engage with the community of individuals and families most likely to benefit from the organization's work. By January of 2016, a plan to host community conversations was being implemented in order to better inform an organizational perspective on the community of Olmsted County and to root future decision-making in the aspirations and challenges faced by community members.

Most immediately, United Way of Olmsted County is using these conversations and the many things learned to inform adjustments to its work in the community. By listening deeply to people with lived experiences of the kinds of conditions United Way works to improve, the organization is better positioned to develop strategic goals and actions that align with people's needs and priorities.

In order to develop that kind of public knowledge, a large number of community conversations were held in a short period of time. This volume and pace of conversations allowed United Way to build depth and breadth of understanding in a short span of time to assist with its work in visioning 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 of Olmsted County closer and closer to the residents and constituents it seeks to serve. As a result, United Way envisions continuing these community conversations indefinitely into the future, keeping a constant listening ear to ensure the organization remains aligned with the population it serves.



PROCESS

United Way of Olmsted County is committed to grounding its work in the community. The community conversations effort was designed to help the organization understand the aspirations of those it seeks to benefit. Through a series of conversations, modeled after The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, every effort was made to connect with the voices of those with personal lived experiences reflecting the conditions United Way works to alleviate.

At the outset, United Way aimed to host at least 20 conversations, with an optimistic goal of 30 or more. The community responded enthusiastically, and over the course of eight months 45 conversations were held and 424 individuals attended. 17 conversation leaders were involved, and more than 70 hours were spent in conversation about the community's hopes for the future, the barriers we face together, possible actions we can take together, and what assets our community possesses to address our shared challenges.

Most of the conversations were held by invitation, with requests extended primarily to communities that are traditionally underrepresented or that disproportionately experience barriers to reaching their full potential. Additionally, public sessions were held in Byron, Stewartville and Rochester with open invitations to the entire community of Olmsted County.

Each conversation focused first on learning what kind of community the participants hoped for – understanding their aspirations for our shared community. From those aspirations, the conversations sought to then identify barriers and challenges to reaching those preferred futures. Often, that would lead to some discussion of what kinds of actions our community might be able to take in order to make progress, and some exploration of which organizations or individuals in the community were trusted to be involved in solutions. United Way was quite deliberate to not set any expectations or make any promises to carry out any particular ideas or take any specific course of action.

Conversation participants had opportunities to respond to identified themes throughout the process. In carrying out this effort, a group of volunteer community members, United Way staff members, and partners reviewed the themes from each conversation and developed these findings based upon the most common themes found across many conversations and groups.



45
Conversations



424
People Attended



17
Conversation Leaders



70
Hours



KEY FINDINGS

While the learnings from this process so far have been rich and seemingly unending, there are several themes that very clearly emerged from the conversations. Those themes are helping inform United Way’s perspective in approaching community impact and can provide a solid basis for partners and others in the community to better understand what Olmsted County’s underrepresented residents hope for, in addition to what is standing in the way of sharing a community that benefits everyone.

Social Disconnection

The most consistent and powerful theme from these conversations has been the strong sense of disconnection that people feel from one another and from the rest of the community. Disconnectedness presents in three distinct, but related ways: inequity, segregation and isolation.

Inequity is perceived in our community in two primary ways: inequity of voice and inequity of access. Participants report that people of color and low-income individuals are neither heard nor adequately represented in civic life. Decision-making bodies do not include votes and voices from underrepresented groups, and outreach efforts fail to effectively engage their voices. Moreover, processes and services are designed in such a way that these underrepresented groups are prevented from participation due to a variety of challenges, such as public transportation availability, meeting and event times, and conflicts related to work requirements. The disproportionate presence of these barriers among underrepresented groups serves to perpetuate the disproportionality by creating inequitable access to services.

Segregation is a kind of macro-level disconnectedness. Community members feel as though “groups” are isolated from one another, both geographically and socially. That is, there are divisions between black residents and white residents, upper- and lower-income residents, Rochester and other Olmsted County residents, Mayo employees and non-Mayo employees, etc. These divisions are many and are seen as pronounced and accepted throughout the community. However, participants in our conversations are consistently dissatisfied with this condition and long for a more inclusive community.

Isolation is another way in which disconnectedness affects Olmsted County community members. There’s a strong and pervasive feeling of alone-ness that seems to arise from weak or nonexistent support networks. People commonly report not knowing their neighbors, lacking a sense of community in their neighborhoods, and wishing for a stronger common bond with others in the community. Living among strangers also heightens fears and anxieties about crime and other social dangers. They also told us it hasn’t always been this way – that there was a time in our community’s (even our nation’s) history when people knew and relied on neighbors.

“We are getting more isolated. We use to be more of a community.”

“I want a community where neighbors know their neighbors.”



Cost of Living

There are several specific concerns that are repeatedly raised in the conversations: affordable housing, public transit, affordability and availability of child care, and the “cliff effect” on public benefits. Considered together, these specific issues add up to a broader concern about the cost of living in Olmsted County.

Participants in United Way’s community conversations routinely struggle to conduct their day-to-day business due to the lack of affordable housing available; an inability to use public transit to get to-and-from work, grocery stores, child care centers, public events and entertainment venues; a lack of affordable child care options; or the loss of important public supports for households before they’ve reached self-sufficient income levels.

“I work 3-4 jobs and still cannot keep up.”

It’s widely known that Olmsted County enjoys high rates of employment, a high median income, and many jobs that can support a stable family. People also believe that a strong economy has driven up costs in Olmsted County, and especially in Rochester, exacerbating separations between groups (“the haves and the have-nots”).

While affordable housing has become widely recognized as a concern, participants are discouraged that there does not appear to be any clear consensus or direction toward providing solutions. Further, expansion of routes and hours of public transit appears to be a longshot, leaving those who need public transportation to struggle on their own. Child care assistance have long waiting lists and is a major cause of the “cliff effect” for families, under which small increases in income can cause devastating losses of benefits and leave families worse off.

“What are we going to do if we lose our house?”

Affordability and the cost of living are a serious issue for people living in low-income homes. There are few, if any, options available to individuals requiring low-cost housing and public transportation. And while limited public supports are available, there are structural issues that prevent households from stabilizing finances and reaching self-sufficiency.

Accessibility of Services

One of the most frequently raised concerns has been the ability of individuals in our community to access and navigate the human services system. There is a perception that supports exist in our community, but that people in need are unaware or unable to access them. Awareness is lifted up as an information problem – people don’t know about the availability of services, programs and supports, and they don’t know what their own knowledge gaps are. Additionally for those who are aware of the availability of supports, there are perceived barriers to accessing services for marginalized groups – often the very groups most in need of such supports.

A support currently available in the community, and supported by United Way of Olmsted County, that might significantly impact this concern is the 2-1-1 information and referral service. Broadly felt lack of awareness speaks both to the need for such a service, and to the inadequacy of the service as currently provided by United Way, leading to an opportunity for possible near-term action with far-reaching effects.

“People don’t know that solutions and services exist.”



Suggested Actions

As part of the process of setting up and holding conversations, United Way shared their desire to learn the community’s aspiration while maintaining that a specific program or activity would not necessarily be enacted based on the learnings from each individual conversation. However, it has been routinely shared that what’s learned in the community conversation will shape (and already is shaping) the perspective and future actions of United Way of Olmsted County, especially with regard to revisions to its work in the community.

When discussing actions the community can take, action steps often revolve around feelings of social disconnectedness. While there isn’t a clear consensus as to what causes segregation and isolation, individual relationships with others who don’t represent the same group-types is one personal action that’s been frequently suggested. “Busy-ness” is also implicated often, leading many participants to suggest that people need to reduce their workloads, children’s schedules, and other obligations.



The most specific action that’s been suggested with some regularity has been the development of more informal, publicly available, indoor gathering places. People of many backgrounds and from different walks of life suggest that finding times and places to gather with others (sometimes, others “like me” and sometimes others “not like me”) for entertainment, recreation and conversation would be valuable. Welcoming spaces like that are uncommon, but people seem to be looking for them.

RELATIONAL FACTORS

Emotions Expressed

In the course of a 90 minute conversation with community members, a wide array of emotions are often displayed. Most commonly, United Way witnessed people’s frustration. There is a great deal of frustration around the many barriers to assisting people in need, and further frustration about the perceived inability of civic institutions to understand and overcome those barriers.

Nearly as often, there have been expressions of gratitude, which come primarily in two ways: first, gratitude to the many organizations who have helped. In any given conversation, especially those among affinity groups of some kind, there is a common relationship to a single nonprofit or public agency. Those agencies and their help are deeply and consistently appreciated by their own beneficiaries. And second, people have expressed gratitude for being listened to. They are grateful that people have showed up, asked and listened to their concerns.

Who We Trust

At the outset, there was an expectation that the community would look to an organization or group of organizations or individuals for consistent, trustworthy leadership on issues of community concern; however, our community does not appear to have a clear theme indicating that any single, identifiable individual, organization, or agency has the trust of the people. The two most common themes around trust are that people trust those agencies that have helped them in the past, and they trust the group(s) that connected them to the conversation we were having (often, United Way relied on local partner agencies to gather people together for conversations).

More resoundingly (and consistent with national trends), there was a strong theme around mistrust. People shared with great frequency their lack of trust in some of our community’s largest public and nonprofit institutions – both when asked about trusted organizations and without being asked. This was a major theme and discussion point in nearly every conversation we hosted over the course of eight months.



