

LET'S TALK

jobs **families**
organize **together** **focus**
educated **united** **great** **supports** **advocate**
future **strong** **active** **residents** **strong** **build** **involved**
back **give** **inclusive** **diverse** **clean** **hope**
all **pride** **neighborly** **art** **culture** **responsible** **safe** **equitable**
believe **coalition** **willing** **caring** **boost** **succeed** **share** **trust**
concern **active** **thriving** **generous** **resources** **peace**
better **go** **economy** **energy** **visionary** **beauty**
get **matter** **schools** **teachers** **innovation** **faith** **grow** **community** **restore**
tolerant **empower** **teamwork**
lead **progress**



Regional Report

An open honest dialogue with region residents about the state of our community



THANK YOU

An effort of this scale could not have been possible without the commitment and service of more than 40 individuals that collectively donated more than 150 hours as trained volunteer Community Conversation Leaders. United Way and One Region collaborated with Ivy Tech College – Valparaiso Campus, NIPSCO, and the Young Professionals – Urban League of Northwest Indiana. These organizations recruited a pool of students, employees and young professionals to be trained as conversation leaders. These very special volunteers played a critical role in leading and guiding residents through meaningful and productive conversations.

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Stephanie Jones, CISCO Systems

Acknowledgements

TIMES Media Company

A special thank you to the Times Media Company for their generous support as the "Let's Talk" media sponsor. Throughout the Let's Talk initiative, The Times provided an array of digital and print advertisements, in addition to spotlighting the effort in news articles.

Ivy Tech College

United Way of Porter County would like to extend a special thanks to Ivy Tech College, Valparaiso and their campus president, Aco Sikoski, for his continued support of the United Way of Porter County and Community Conversations Initiative. Thank you to the professors who helped us integrate the process into their classrooms: Matt Howell, Program Chair of the Social Sciences; Don Spears, Human Services Department Chair; and Professors Dan Mallon and Maria Rebecca Cockroft Fehr. We would also like to thank all the students that took part in the process, either as facilitators and note takers; but also as participants.

AmeriCorps

Two AmeriCorps members that were instrumental in composing the Local Focus: Porter County Report: Sarah Reed from Ivy Tech, who helped input and organize the data; and Rebecca Tucker, who helped to facilitate conversations, collect the data and write the report.

A VERY SPECIAL THANK YOU TO EVERY RESIDENT THAT CAME TO THE TABLE TO SHARE THEIR HOPES AND DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE!

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FOREWORD

January 2015

Dear Reader,

When we embarked on this journey, our goal was to create honest and open dialogue with community members. We very much wished to know what hopes and aspirations they had for themselves, their families and their community. We sought to understand the concerns that weighed heavily on their minds and the opportunities for change. We also wanted to determine potential action steps that could be taken to address priority concerns.

Our regional grassroots approach was unique and labor intensive. More than 120 hours were invested by community volunteers and United Way staff to ensure that the voices heard around the table represented the rich diversity of our region. To our knowledge, this is the only effort of its kind in Northwest Indiana.

The community's response was inspiring. Residents came to the table and were eager for the opportunity to express their hopes and concerns. They impressed upon us that they love this community, they care about its future, and they are ready, willing and able to step up and be a part of the change that is needed to move our region forward.

We hope that, like us, you are rejuvenated and inspired by the passion and commitment of our neighbors. Join hands with us as we strive to make Northwest Indiana a better place to live, work and play.

Sincerely,



Lisa M. Daugherty
President/CEO, Lake Area United Way



Chris White
Co-Chair, One Region
Publisher, The TIMES Media Company



Sharon Kish
President/CEO, United Way of Porter County



Thomas L. Keon
Co-Chair, One Region
Chancellor, Purdue University Calumet

“LET’S TALK” INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

“Let’s Talk” is an exciting, new collaborative effort to engage the community at the grass-roots level in order to gain a better understanding of the shared aspirations for the future, define the challenges that hold residents back today and identify opportunities to make things better. Over the summer, the United Ways of Lake and Porter counties, in collaboration with The Times Media Co. and One Region, convened the community through a variety of vehicles to ensure that residents had multiple opportunities to engage in the larger discussion.

Our Partners

United Way

Lake Area United Way and United Way of Porter County came together to fulfill the role of community convener. United Way, utilizing the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation’s Turning Outward approach, coordinated and facilitated community conversations across the region. Collectively, the United Ways served as a steward of community knowledge and were responsible for communicating and engaging residents in the Let’s Talk initiative. Additionally, United Way led the efforts to record, compile and report back the results of the individual and collective conversations.

The Times Media Company

The Times served a critical role as media sponsor for the Let’s Talk initiative. Their generous support resulted in an extensive public education effort in which residents were informed and encouraged to engage in the Community Conversation vehicle. During the course of the campaign, The TIMES provided an array of digital and print ads targeted at community residents, in addition to casting a spotlight on the effort through news articles in the paper and online.

One Region

One Region represents the merger of two civic organizations devoted to improving life in Northwest Indiana. The Quality of Life Council, founded 20 years ago by leaders of the region’s institutions of higher learning, and the One Region: One Vision initiative launched five years ago by The TIMES Media Company, have become One Region: Improving the Quality of Life in Northwest Indiana. To complement their own quantitative survey, One Region sought a qualitative approach to identify the most pressing issues facing our region as seen through the eyes of our residents. This knowledge will be used to inform the decision making and strategy building processes of One Region initiatives and efforts.

• Community Engagement

Community residents were invited to take an active role in the Let’s Talk initiative through one or more of the following vehicles:

• Community Conversations

Based on the Harwood Institute model, a community conversation is an intimate “kitchen table” discussion with five to twelve residents facilitated by a trained Community Conversation Leader and lasts 60-90 minutes.

• Opinion Survey

Community residents were able to visit the Let’s Talk website and take a five question survey to quickly share their aspirations and concerns. Responses from the survey were compiled and are integrated in this report.

• Facebook

Community residents could follow the larger conversation through the Let’s Talk Facebook page. Posts to the Facebook page updated followers on issues that were being identified in community conversations in an effort to spark greater dialogue. Residents who could not attend a community conversation had the ability to easily share their input and contribute to the overall discussion.

• Media Engagement

In addition to the exposure provided by the media support of The TIMES Media Company, the community was made aware of the effort through the following vehicles:

• Radio

United Way representatives engaged in multiple on air interviews with local radio stations across the region.

• Web and Social Media:

In addition to the Facebook page, a dedicated website www.letstalknwi.org was established. The website provided general information about the campaign, an opportunity for residents to participate in the online opinion poll, the ability to request a Community Conversation in their local community, and a linkage to connect to a conversation through Facebook.

• Billboards:

Residents were encouraged to get involved in the effort through the display of multiple billboards throughout the region.

HARWOOD INSTITUTE: COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS MODEL

United Way Worldwide and its network of more than 1,800 affiliates have a powerful partnership with The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation.

Mission

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a nonpartisan, independent nonprofit that teaches and coaches people and organizations to solve pressing problems and change how communities work together. The Institute has worked across the U.S. and increasingly around the world and has partnered with some of the world's largest nonprofits, including United Way Worldwide, AARP, the American Library Association, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and others.

The Institute believes that the people they teach and coach, called public innovators, are the leaders that move our communities forward. They come from nonprofits, businesses, government, the media, educational and religious organizations. They are an essential ingredient to solving our most vexing challenges.

The Harwood Approach

The Harwood Institute believes that for public innovators to be truly effective in their change efforts, they must be turned outward. This means using the community -- not their conference rooms -- as the main reference point for decisions, from the strategies they and their partners pursue, the partners they choose, how they start and then grow their efforts over time, and even how they structure and run their internal organizations.

The Institute believes if you turn outward and make more intentional judgments and choices in creating change, you will produce a greater impact and relevance in your community. The Institute uses a series of frameworks they have developed over the past 25 years to create this shift in people's approach; and then coach them over time to apply those frameworks to their organization, their community work and even their own day-to-day lives as community leaders.

Community Conversations Model

Civil discourse (conversation intended to enhance understanding) in a community conversation is respectful, constructive, collaborative, solution-focused and conducive to building healthy communities. Community Conversations provide a safe space in which a small group of people (8 to 12) come together for a thoughtful discussion to identify and prioritize community aspirations, concerns and needs.

Each conversation typically lasts about 60-90 minutes, during which a trained Conversation Leader facilitates the discussion and guides the group through a series of questions. The ultimate goal at the conclusion of the conversation is to gain an understanding of the group's aspirations and community concerns, identify priority issues to be addressed and barriers that prevent progress, determine potential actions steps that could be taken, and gain insight into the individuals and/or organizations that the group would trust to take action and lead change.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Let's Talk initiative reached across all sectors of the community, spanning Lake and Porter Counties. Residents were convened in the workplace, community based organizations, places of worship, and civic/social organizations. The community conversation efforts began in February 2014 with the United Way of Porter County joining other United Ways across the state through the Harwood pilot project sponsored by the Indiana Association of United Ways. The Let's Talk initiative began May 2015, when Lake Area United Way and United Way of Porter County joined forces to take the initiative to a regional scale.

Conversation Hosts

United Way took a non-traditional approach to convening the community. Strategic partnerships were formed with community and faith based organizations, local employers and civic organizations. These groups were asked to become a Community Conversation Host. In this role, the host informed and invited residents to participate in the discussion and hosted the conversation at their location. United Way found this strategy was the most effective in gaining community trust and participation.

Special thanks to the following organizations that served as Community Conversation Hosts.

1st Source Bank
AmeriCorps
Bomber Girls VFW
Boys & Girls Club of Northwest Indiana
Braken Pkwy.
Campbell St. Café
Campagna Academy
Caring Place Shelter
Catholic Charities
Crossroads YMCA
Duneland YMCA

Early Learning Partnership
Family and Youth Services Bureau
First Financial Bank
GNIAR (Greater Association of Realtors)
Holy Rosary Church
Housing Opportunities
Ivy Tech
Meals on Wheels of Northwest Indiana
Mental Health America Lake County
Mental Health America Porter County
Neighbor's Educational Opportunities
One Region

Opportunity Enterprises
Pines Village
Power of Youth
St. Andrew Episcopal Church
St. Agnes Church
South Shore CVA
The TIMES Media Company
Tradewinds
Valparaiso School Administration
Valparaiso YMCA
Young Leaders United
YWCA of Northwest Indiana

Conversation Locations

A critical element of the Let's Talk campaign was accessibility. It was of the utmost importance that conversations were held in diverse communities across the region. To that end, Community Conversations were held in the following cities/towns.

Cedar Lake
Gary
Hobart
Merrillville
St. John

Chesterton
Griffith
Kouts
Michigan City
Valparaiso

Crown Point
Hammond
La Porte
Munster
Westville

Dyer
Hebron
Lake Station
Portage
Whiting

East Chicago
Highland
Lowell
Schererville

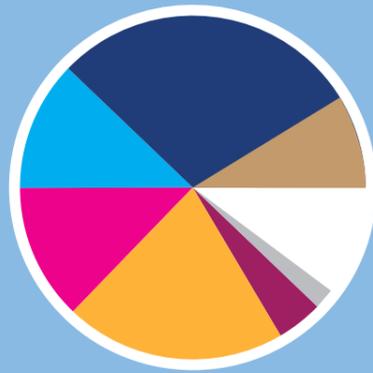
A LOOK AT WHO CAME TO THE TABLE

508 PARTICIPATING RESIDENTS



52% Lake County
38% Porter County
10% Other

PARTICIPANTS BY AGE:



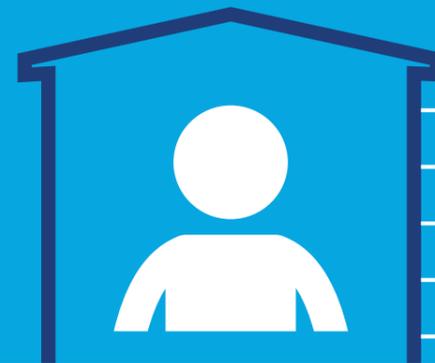
16-24 yrs	13%
25-34 yrs	17%
35-44 yrs	16%
45-54 yrs	16%
55-64 yrs	16%
65-74 yrs	9%
75 yrs +	5%
No Response	8%

PARTICIPANTS BY GENDER:

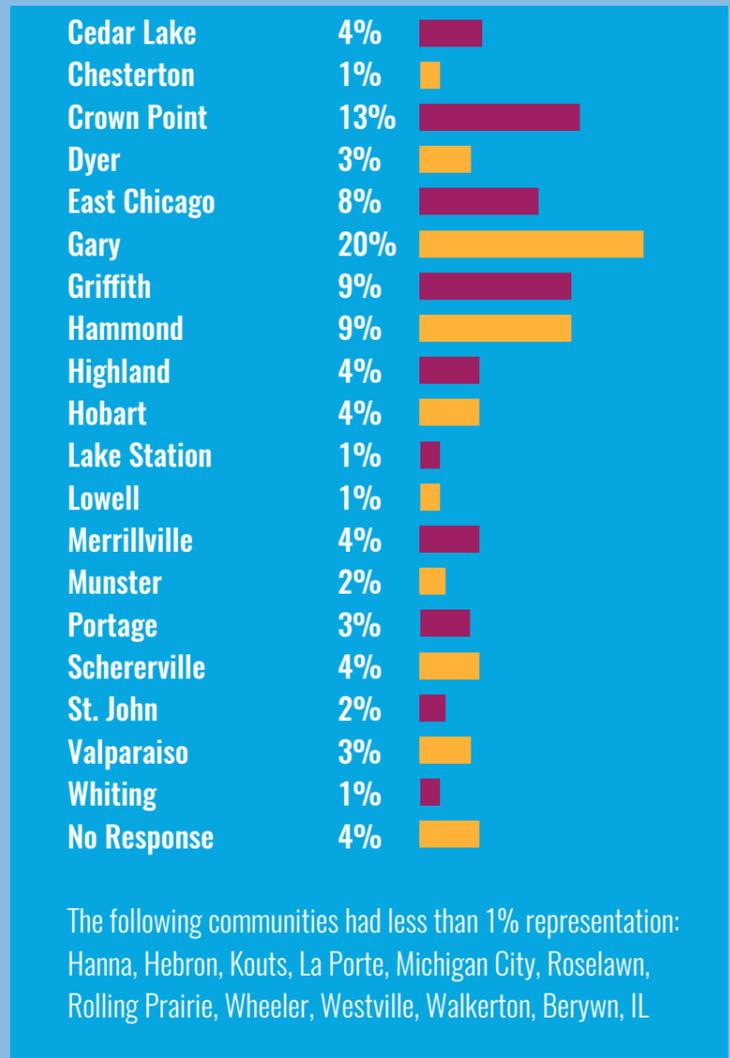


Female	66%
Male	23%
No Response	11%

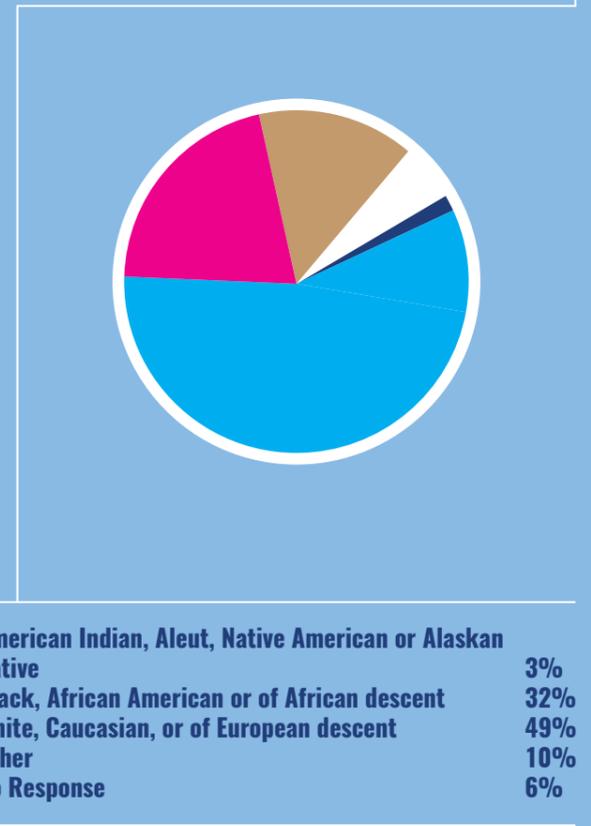
PARTICIPANTS BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME:



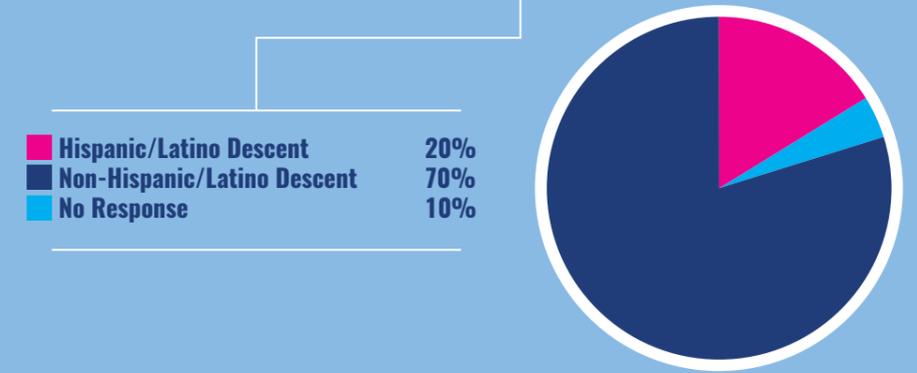
PARTICIPANTS BY CITY/TOWN OF RESIDENCE :



PARTICIPANTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY :



PARTICIPANTS BY HISPANIC/LATINO DESCENT :



LET'S TALK

A REGION UNITED: A LOOK AT WHAT RESIDENTS HAD TO SAY

As we engaged in conversation with residents around our regional “kitchen table” our perspective began to change. During each discussion, we had the ability to see the world from their unique points of view. This was an amazing and humbling experience. As each person began to share their hopes, dreams, worries and vision for the future, we were challenged again and again to rethink our traditional approaches to engaging and mobilizing the community. The voices around the table were as rich in diversity of thought, as they were of ethnicity, age, income and life experiences.

The “Let’s Talk” initiative represents our thirst for public knowledge and insight. At the core of this effort was a deep desire to ascertain what was on the hearts and minds of the men and women who make this region great – our local residents. We understood that to accomplish this aim, we would have to step outside ourselves and in essence become a fly on the wall. Our role in each of these conversations was not to interject our opinions or beliefs, but to create a space in which our residents would feel safe in sharing their hopes for the future and candidly discussing the concerns and challenges they face today.

The goal was not to change beliefs, nor to steer those around the table to a certain agenda. The goal was to listen with the intent to understand; not with the intent to reply. At times, this goal proved challenging. There were moments when the discussion was unsettling and at times almost painful to hear. The depth of emotion displayed was keenly felt as our own perceptions and beliefs were challenged.

As you read this report, we ask you to keep an open mind, to remember that the thoughts shared within these pages are the opinions of men and women who may have a drastically different life experience than yourself. Some of the concerns and barriers cited by residents may not sit well with you. You may feel that your perspective contradicts strongly with what is reflected here. At other times, participants’ hopes, concerns and thoughts will resonate deeply with your own beliefs and point of view. This is the beauty of this experience - to open ourselves to the views and thoughts of others - in an effort to gain mutual understanding and respect.

COMMON CONCERNS FACING COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE REGION

Residents in both Lake and Porter Counties most often identified the following concerns as the most critical issues compromising the vitality of our communities:

- Lack of a comprehensive, sufficient support system that meets the educational, emotional and social development needs of children and youth.
- Lack of strong, quality educational opportunities for all children, regardless of the community they live in or their socioeconomic status.
- Residents were concerned about the challenged economic climate and cited the negative impact of external forces impacting the steel industry, the need to strategically invest in the development and job readiness of the local work force, and the need to attract new industries and businesses to the region.
- Residents were concerned that the rise in crime, drug and alcohol use, gang and gun violence has put the public’s safety and well-being at risk. It is perceived that some communities across the region are safer than others.
- Our region does not provide an affordable and reliable mass transit system for its residents. The lack of this critical resource has been cited as one of the principal barriers that is impeding progress in our communities.

SHARED ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Our residents want to live in a community that...

Feels safe, peaceful, and free of crime,

Protects and provides opportunities for children, youth and the elderly,

Embraces family values, civic engagement and fosters a friendly, caring and supportive “hometown” feeling,

Invests in a strong and healthy physical infrastructure: Streets, lighting, clean environment, greater land use, improved transportation and stronger police presence,

Thrives economically: Increased job opportunities that provide livable wages, debt free, affordable housing and ability to locally shop for goods and services,

Provides a high quality and effective education for all,

Provides equal opportunities to all residents regardless of race, ethnic origin, socio-economic status, and/or religious beliefs,

Ensures all children and youth have the best chance to succeed.

LOCAL FOCUS: LAKE COUNTY REPORT

210

RESIDENTS
CAME TO THE TABLE

25

CONVERSATIONS
WERE HELD

3

PRIORITY ISSUES
IDENTIFIED

PRIORITY ISSUES OF CONCERN



CHILDREN & YOUTH



EDUCATION



PUBLIC SAFETY

PRIORITY ISSUE 1: CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Strong supports for children and youth to ensure they have the best chance to succeed.

Residents fear that children in communities across the county are not afforded the same opportunities necessary to grow into self-sufficient, productive adults that make positive contributions to society. Poverty, disparities in the quality of public education, unsafe neighborhoods, and disengaged and, in some cases, uncaring parents jeopardize the safety and well-being of our children. Residents expressed sadness and dismay over the fact that many children in their communities are seemingly unloved and lack positive, caring adult role models in their lives. Many shared anxiety over two parent and single parent households that are struggling to survive and often times are working two or three jobs to make ends meet. These financial stressors on the family exhaust parents emotionally and physically and limit their ability to be actively engaged in the raising of their children. Additionally, working families that cannot access safe and affordable before and after school childcare are forced to have their children become “latchkey” kids. These children and youth are unsupervised and as such are at higher risk of engaging in unhealthy and unsafe behaviors.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

As residents across the county talked more about these concerns, they specifically spoke about:

Financial Instability

Many children are being raised in families that are in a state of financial crisis. Financial instability among these households is negatively impacting the ability of these children to excel in their academics, leads to poor physical and mental health, and increases their likelihood of making poor life choices in the future. Generational cycles of poverty and teen parents exist in many communities across the county.

Parental Engagement

Residents feel that there is a strong need for parents to become more actively engaged in their children’s education. There is a perception that lack of effective parenting is leading to poor behaviors displayed at school, poor academic performance and an increased number of youth engaged in illegal activity. Parents, especially those that had children at a young age, lack the necessary support systems and skills needed to successfully rear their children.

Child Abuse

There is a concern that there are some children and youth in our schools that are being physically and/or emotionally abused by their parents or caregivers. Residents fear that there is a deficiency in the number of foster homes available to take in and care for these children.

Safe Havens Before and After School

There is a shortage of safe and affordable alternatives that are easily accessible for children and youth to participate in before and after school. Most youth programs focus heavily on sports related activities and do not offer a diverse set of opportunities for non-athletic youth.

Bullying

Bullying among youth is a growing concern. Few resources exist that are aimed at supporting and equipping parents in helping their children to appropriately respond to bullying incidents and situations. Additionally, increased education among school personnel and children in responding to and eliminating bullying is needed.

Safety Net for Older Youth

Many residents feel that most existing programs tailor to younger children and do not offer activities that will attract and engage older youth. There is a concern that middle to high school students lack access to safe places before and after school and as a result are susceptible to getting involved in situations that can jeopardize their physical safety and their future.

Engaging in Volunteerism

Children and youth are not being afforded the opportunity to realize the importance and benefit of volunteerism. They should be exposed to meaningful volunteer experiences in which they can serve the greater good and give back to their local communities. Residents shared that by providing these experiences at an early age, children would be more likely to continue to volunteer as adults.

Lack of Transportation

Lack of transportation prevents children and youth from participating in extracurricular activities and programs. In some cases, families lack a vehicle and cannot access reliable public transportation in their communities. In other instances, parents are working and cannot arrange for transportation to and from activities for their children. Many school systems and youth programs do not offer nor provide transportation for before and after school activities.

Increased Support for Single Mothers

In some communities, it is perceived that single mothers are often raising their children alone without the support and aid of their fathers. Absentee fathers do not have a presence in their children's lives and fail to provide emotional, physical and financial supports. There is a growing concern that single mothers lacking a support network struggle to meet the needs of their children.

Making Poor Life Choices

Children and youth are unaware and uninformed of the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse. It is perceived that there is an alarming number of young people that are making poor life choices and engaging in risky behaviors such as gangs, drug and alcohol use, and criminal activity.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

Residents strongly encourage leaders and citizens to build a community culture that makes the physical, mental and emotional well-being of our children a top priority. Toward that end, residents support the expansion of safe, quality, and affordable before and after school programs for children that provide a diverse array of activities including sports, fine arts, and music. They strongly urge schools and community organizations to consider developing programs that specifically target older youth and young adults. Ideally, these programs should include activities that older youth would find attractive and should leverage the power of technology and social media. Summer break presents a unique challenge for working families and parents who struggle to keep their children and youth active and away from unsafe activities. Government, community based organizations and schools should work together to create summer programs that are affordable and engaging. Additionally, residents recommend summer job programs for high school youth that will provide a safe alternative to "hanging out on the streets." Residents call for the expansion of mentoring and tutoring programs to meet the emotional and academic needs of struggling children and at-risk youth. Lastly, there is a strong desire for the advancement of mentoring and tutoring programs to meet the needs of struggling children and at-risk youth.

Finally, residents recommend stronger support systems for single parents and families. Preferably, these systems would include comprehensive parent education and training programs, support groups for children of single and divorced parents, and extensive community resources for both parents and children.

PRIORITY ISSUE 2: EDUCATION

Lack of strong, quality educational opportunities for all children regardless of the community they live in or their socioeconomic status.

There are concerns that disparities exist in the public education system from Pre-K through high school and post-secondary opportunities across the county. Specifically, residents cited a lack of school readiness due to poor or limited investments in early childhood education. There was significant unease with a perceived changing school culture and environment that is heavily focused on student test scores as the primary metric of a school's performance and a student's academic achievement. Residents identified lack of parental engagement as one of the most critical barriers impacting our public education system. Additionally, residents shared that lack of support for public education, specifically funding and budget cuts have negatively impacted the overall quality of our education system. Other concerns included the inability of schools to easily connect students and their families to supportive community resources and services, significant number of students that have a negative attitude towards school, negative attitudes towards education from parents who may be uneducated themselves, and lack of alternative education pathways for non-college bound students.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

As residents across the county talked more about these concerns, they specifically spoke about:

Underperforming Schools

Families living in underperforming school districts have limited choices for their children. Often the families must choose to relocate in order to provide their children with a quality education. Unfortunately, most families lack the financial means to relocate and feel unable to provide their children with the best opportunities.

Lack of Adequate School Funding

Lack of school funding has led to numerous school closings and the elimination of critical educational programs such as arts, music, and physical education. Additionally, budget cuts have resulted in larger classroom sizes with high student-to-teacher ratios. Large classroom sizes make class management difficult and individualized student attention near impossible. Lastly, lack of resources have negatively impacted students. In some cases, schools are unable to provide necessary student resources including study materials and books.

Voucher Program

The voucher program is not well known and can only be utilized by families that have access to a vehicle to transport their child to a school that is out of their neighborhood. There is a perception that these barriers are resulting in families underutilizing this program.

Support For Students with Special Needs

Programs and curriculum for students with special needs are not universally available in all school districts. In poorer communities, students with special needs cannot access programs and support services needed to be successful in their academic careers.

Unsafe School Environments

Lack of school safety endangers the physical and mental health of students, teachers and school administrators. Bullying, drug abuse, and violence are daily occurrences in many school environments.

Some Students Unprepared for College Success

Students that graduate from underperforming schools are at a significant disadvantage compared to their peers when they enter college. There is a concern that the educational experiences afforded to these students do not compare with their peers that graduate from higher performing schools. This makes it increasingly difficult for these students to achieve college success.

School Based Supports for Families in Crisis

Schools lack the infrastructure to provide or connect families in crisis to supportive services and community resources. There is a need for additional school based social workers that can provide case management support to families in need.

Unstable Family Environments

Students living in unstable family environments struggle to concentrate and engage in the classroom. These children battle hunger, unsafe home environments, familial drug and alcohol abuse, and in some cases lack caring, positive adult role models.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

Residents encourage action to provide parenting education as well as opportunities for parents to engage in their children's public education. Ideally, they would like to create a culture of education within the home and family as well as develop a "home away from home" environment through quality after-school programs. They cite support and better pay for teachers, better technology, and student academic support as important contributions to rebuilding a culture of valuing education. They believe that we must prepare children for school early and significant investments are needed in early childhood education. They support the creation of a comprehensive infant to age 5 program that could be integrated into all schools to provide adequate supports for students and their families. Additionally, they envision building a bridge between schools, families and the community as a whole. They strongly suggest that a pathway be created that would provide ongoing, candid, and open dialogue among students, parents, teachers, school administrators and community representatives. Lastly, they encourage leaders to make a conscious effort to employ best practices from other models of educational success.

PRIORITY ISSUE 3: PUBLIC SAFETY

Residents are concerned that the rise in crime, drug and alcohol use, gang and gun violence has put the public's safety and well-being at risk.

It is perceived that some communities across the county are safer than others. Individuals that reside in high crime neighborhoods shared that they live in a constant state of fear. Some residents indicated that interactions between police departments and community members, specifically young people of color, are not always safe. Also, they felt that channels of communication need to be developed to aid the police in developing strong relationships within the community. Residents expressed worry and unease in regard to public school learning environments that are unsafe and jeopardize student and teacher safety.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

As residents across the county talked more about these concerns, they specifically spoke about:

Fear

Fear is preventing residents from getting involved or taking action. Residents fear retaliation from gangs and/or offenders should they report suspicious or criminal activity to the authorities. Many residents also shared that often times they rarely interact with their neighbors and don't feel a sense of trust to work together to address issues that arise within their communities.

Gun Violence

Residents felt that drug use is one of the primary contributing factors to increased cases of gun violence. In some cases, young people are resorting to gun violence as a means to resolve conflict. Youth in these situations lack the ability to deescalate tense situations through peaceable means.

Crime and Gang Activity

The rise in crime and gang activity is preventing residents from enjoying community recreational activities such as neighborhood parks and social events.

Police and Community Relations

There is a concern that some neighborhoods distrust their local police departments. This distrust leads to disengagement among residents and disconnects the community from supporting police driven efforts to reduce crime and violence. There is a perception that lack of diversity within police departments is contributing to negative interactions between police officers and community members of color. Residents also expressed a desire to improve communications and dialogue between community members and local law enforcement.

Apathy among Community Residents

Apathy among community residents is perceived as a growing problem. Many residents shared that they feel that some community members seemingly do not take pride in their neighborhoods and are not actively engaged. These residents felt that a lack of caring and involved citizens has propagated the rise in crime and violence in many communities across the county.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

Residents support increased gun control policies, especially those that include extensive background checks for gun purchases. They expressed a desire to see a stronger police presence in communities that have higher incidents of crime and violence. Residents also wish to see police and community members engage in a more collaborative and productive fashion. Consistent and effective communication between police members and the community would be necessary to foster this type of relationship. Residents strongly urge local police departments to take steps to improve the diversity of their police force, employ strategies to improve relations with community members, and create environments where community members and police officers can have open dialogue. They also emphasized the need for education among community members, especially young people, on how to safely and respectfully engage with police officers in the event of an altercation. Lastly, residents give a strong call to action to all citizens. They deeply felt that the only pathway to change is one in which community members themselves take responsibility, ownership and collective action to improve the safety of their neighborhoods.



INDIVIDUALS & ORGANIZATIONS TRUSTED TO TAKE ACTION

IF THESE GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS PLAYED A PART IN THE ABOVE MENTIONED ACTIONS, RESIDENTS WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO TRUST THE EFFORT AND STEP FORWARD.

AmeriCorps
Boys & Girls Club of Northwest Indiana
Big Brothers/Big Sisters
Boy Scouts
Chamber of Commerce
Churches
Coalition for Housing
Concerned Citizens
Congressman Pete Visclosky
Early Learning Partnership
Educators
Families
Gary Neighborhood Services
Girl Scouts
Habitat for Humanity

Help at Home
Homeowners Association
Ideas in Motion
Ivy Tech
Kiwanis
Mayors/City Council
Mr. Logan
NICTD
NIPSCO
NIRPC
Northwest Indiana Forum
Nurses
One Region
Parents
Police Department

PTO/PTA
Professional organizations such as Lake County Bar Association
Revival Indiana
Rotary
Salvation Army
School Board
School Districts
Township Trustee
Tradewinds
Unions/Trades
United Way
Universities/colleges
YMCA
Youth serving organizations

REFLECTIONS IN LAKE COUNTY

AS THE LAKE AREA UNITED WAY “LET’S TALK” TEAM BEGAN TO THREAD INDIVIDUAL CONVERSATIONS TOGETHER INTO A COLLECTIVE VOICE, WE BEGAN TO SEE PROFOUND THEMES EMERGE. REGIONAL ASPIRATIONS, COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY CONCERNS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT WERE EVIDENT. IN MANY WAYS, WE HAD ACHIEVED OUR INITIAL GOAL. TO OUR SURPRISE, THERE WAS MUCH, MUCH MORE TO LEARN. THESE NEW INSIGHTFUL AND PROFOUND DISCOVERIES CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS OUR “AHA” MOMENTS.

#1: We are much more alike than we may think.

Many of us can agree that one of the biggest barriers to progress in Northwest Indiana is our fragmented governing structure. With more than 30 municipalities, 27 school districts, and an eclectic mix of rural, suburban and industrial areas, we sometimes feel it is next to impossible to implement systemic changes. Beyond our governing structure, this disjointed and divided mindset has spilled into the hearts and minds of our community residents. Many individuals cannot see beyond county lines and neighborhood streets. We struggle to unite around a common agenda for change because we believe that our needs and concerns are vastly different.

We were encouraged to learn that our counties, our cities and our neighborhoods are more alike than what may seem at first glance. Regardless, of where residents lived or their household annual income their hopes and dreams for the community were surprisingly similar. We learned that all communities across the region are dealing with the impact of common social issues that are systemic in nature and complex. Suburban and urban communities alike seek to create safe havens for children and youth after school. Communities of wealth and those in extreme poverty are equally concerned about the rise of drug and alcohol abuse. All residents wish to live in a community that embraces and celebrates diversity in all its forms and promotes inclusiveness. How remarkable that the very issues that we believe divide us in reality present the greatest opportunity to unite and transform us. It is only when we realize and embrace this simple truth that we will have a chance at rebuilding our communities.

#2: We are ready for transformation.

There was a resounding cry for real, sustainable change in our communities. Residents shared their frustration with past efforts that proved fruitless and left the community disheartened and in some cases distrustful. Many who have seen firsthand the deterioration of once robust communities across the region were saddened by the lack of measurable progress over the years. Residents are tired of unfulfilled promises and “flash in the pan” ideas that fail to make a real difference.

Despite this frustration that in some cases manifested itself as anger, residents expressed a desire and willingness to support new efforts that would take a hard look at the systemic issues within our community and devise strategies to combat these issues. There was much discussion of the good old days – when all communities across the region were thriving. Residents hope to one day bring our region back to that place of prosperity.

Lake Area United Way believes that to transform our region we must understand the complexity of the prevalent issues in our communities. We must set realistic goals, create supporting and effective strategies and drive solutions that are data driven and results focused. It is only then that we will be able to harness the incredible caring power of our community members.

#3: We are hungry for honest, candid and open dialogue with each other and our community leaders.

There is a point in time in each community conversation when we steer the group to begin to think about action steps that could be taken. A key question is posed to the group, “When you think about what we’ve talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?” More often than not, residents would express a deep desire to continue to have ongoing dialogue about the community’s needs. Many felt that in our technology driven society, very little time is spent actually speaking to one another. Few could cite the last time that they had an open conversation with family or friends about the community or its leaders.

Most concerning, residents felt that they did not have a venue to regularly engage with community leaders and elected officials. They were also not interested in traditional conversations that typically turn into a venting session. There was a common belief that these types of dialogues are not productive and are often divisive. While they desire to speak candidly about community challenges they also wished to do so in an environment that was solution focused.

Lake Area United Way believes that with effective facilitation, residents and community leaders can come together and engage in honest, candid dialogue that focuses less on the problem and more on the solution. This type of dialogue is healthy and necessary to address the complex issues facing our region.

#5: We need more grassroots leaders that are capable, willing, and equipped to champion change.

Often times, residents shared their concerns that a void exists in effective and capable leadership across our communities. This leadership gap spans all sectors and includes positional as well as grassroots leaders. In some cases, leaders have the passion but not necessarily the ability to effect change in their communities. Leaders that lack support, resources and technical skills struggle to lead efforts that go beyond vision to reality. In some cases, residents felt distrustful of established community leaders and were hesitant to support existing efforts led by such leaders. Rarely were residents able to identify individual leaders in the community that could be entrusted to take action on priority issues discussed. Grassroots leaders have the potential to spark transformational change in their local communities. As we met these individuals it was evident that they are trusted voices in the community, they are passionate about their neighborhoods, and they strongly desire to make a difference. A significant barrier that prevents their progress is lack of technical training and resources. Traditional development opportunities afforded to positional leaders are often out of reach for grassroots leaders. Lake Area United Way strongly believes that tremendous gains could be realized in our communities by an intentional and strategic effort to identify, engage, equip, nurture, and support local grassroots leaders to champion change.

#4: We want to drive solutions that are part of a collective agenda for change.

The largest barrier to progress that was most often identified by residents was a lack of unity—an inability to come to consensus on the most pressing issues within our community, how they will be addressed and by whom. From the view point of our residents, most organizations in our region, both public and private, operate in a vacuum. While efforts are underway to address many challenges across the region, they are done in a silo, separated by county lines, funding streams, or prejudicial beliefs. There was concern that fear of change and territorialism leads to a disproportionate use of community resources.

Residents believe that our region has an array of resources that could be maximized for the greater good with stronger collaboration and coordination. It was suggested that a universal common agenda for change could transform our communities. Participants described a plan that would have all sectors of our community playing a critical role, a plan that would focus on measurable results and would build on our region’s assets.

NEXT STEPS IN LAKE COUNTY

Single Issue Focus: Working Families on the Edge of Survival

Input from Lake County residents greatly informed the decision making process of Lake Area United Way's board and staff. Lake Area United Way recently announced a transition to a new single issue focus and has come to the decision to take a laser like approach to the issue of Working Families on the Edge of Survival. These families earn a little too much to qualify for most assistance and support programs but still lack enough income to provide the basic necessities for themselves.

Over the next year, Lake Area United Way will begin convening community stakeholders to better understand the plight of these families and to begin devising strategies that will address the root causes of their condition.

Let's Talk Debrief Sessions

It was evident that citizens in Lake County have a strong desire to engage in healthy dialogue with their elected officials and community leaders. Over the course of the next twelve months, Lake Area United Way will convene roundtable discussions bringing together residents, elected officials and community leaders to have further discussion regarding the concerns raised in this report.



HARD CHOICES NO WORKING FAMILIES SHOULD HAVE TO MAKE:

GO TO THE DOCTOR OR PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE?

1 IN 4
OF LAKE COUNTY'S
WORKING HOUSEHOLDS
IS ON THE EDGE OF SURVIVAL.

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Exploration of Investment in Grassroots Leadership Development

Lake Area United Way is taking initial steps to convene thought leaders and organizations in our county that are dedicated and concerned with leadership capacity in our communities. It is our desire to begin exploring the development of a comprehensive grassroots leadership program to equip, empower, and engage local residents in championing change in their local communities.

LOCAL FOCUS: PORTER COUNTY REPORT

United Way of Porter County (UWPC) was involved in a Harwood pilot project sponsored by the Indiana Association of United Ways with 11 other United Ways in Indiana during the past year. In a twelve month period, UWPC convened 55 conversations with 298 community members who live, work, and/or play in Porter County.



RESIDENTS
CAME TO THE TABLE



CONVERSATIONS
WERE HELD



PRIORITY ISSUES
IDENTIFIED

PRIORITY ISSUES OF CONCERN



ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH & FAMILIES



AFFORDABLE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION



AFFORDABLE SAFE HOUSING



GOOD JOBS WITH LIVABLE WAGES



DRUG FREE COMMUNITY



DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY



HIGHLY ENGAGED COMMUNITY

WHO DID WE TALK TO?

United Way invited groups to come together across Porter County, including business leaders, senior citizens, high school and college students, faith based groups, and non-profit agency directors, staff and clients. In addition, we extended the invitation to anyone in the community who wanted to gather or be part of a group and we also gathered community members through the involvement of Ivy Tech social studies students.

THANK YOU TO ALL WHO PARTICIPATED!

1st Source Bank
AmeriCorps
Bomber Girls
Caring Place Shelter
Duneland YMCA (staff)
Family and Youth Services Bureau
Gabriel's Horn
GNIAR (Greater Northwest Indiana Association of Realtors)
Hebron Chamber of Commerce
Housing Opportunities (Clients and Staff)
Ivy Tech Community College (Staff and Students)
Kouts Ministerial Association

Mental Health America Porter County (Clients and Staff)
One Region
Opportunity Enterprises
Power of Youth
Pines Village Retirement Community
St. Agnes Adult Day Service
Neighbor's Education Opportunities (Students and Staff)
St. Andrews Episcopal Church
Valparaiso Schools Administrative Staff
Valparaiso YMCA (Staff)
United Way Board of Directors
Young Leaders United

WHAT DID WE FIND?

Input from the Community Conversations was compared and analyzed for common themes. Across the 55 conversations with 298 participants, several common hopes and aspirations emerged:

- Meaningful, fun, low cost activities for youth and families.
- Affordable safe housing, as well as homeless shelters and transitional housing to help people get back on their feet.
- A drug free community where people receive the help they need.
- Affordable public transportation throughout the region.
- “Good” jobs that pay a livable wage and people who are trained to take those jobs.
- An open minded community that is accepting of diverse populations.
- An engaged community where people come together in shared goals.



PRIORITY ISSUE 1: ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH & FAMILIES

Meaningful, fun, low cost activities for youth and families.

It is felt that the community needs to take a vested and active interest in the youth of our community. There is a need for more meaningful opportunities for teens and young adults to be involved in, such as: volunteerism, sports, clubs, after school activities, mentorship or summer jobs/internships. All of these opportunities need to be kept at a low cost, so groups of people don't feel isolated. Also people see a need to create safe, monitored locations for teen and younger children to gather, hang out, and socialize. On the other end of the spectrum, childcare and preschools are seen as becoming too expensive and hard to access. People see a need for a low cost alternative option that is possibly connected with the schools, so there are trained professionals working with children.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

- Not enough resources.
- Transportations to programs can be challenging, especially for working parents.
- Lack of programing can lead to behavioral problems, like unsafe and/or illegal activities.
- Kids may end up getting into trouble if they don't have well planned activities to participate in, or safe places to go.
- Preschool education needs to be available for all children at an affordable price.
- It is hard to keep older children involved. They end up thinking that the program is just for “babies” and not for them. Activities need to be geared to their age groups.
- Programs can be very pricey and the cost can push those in the low income bracket out.
- There is a lack of mentoring programs for youth to be involved in, especially with male mentors.
- Quality supervision by a trained professional needed for all programs.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

- More volunteer activities geared towards youth.
- Funding from grants and sponsorships to cover cost of activities.
- Involvement of the community.
- Get children/ teens involved in planning activities for their peers.
- Education classes on making good life choices in middle school and high school.
- Expand current programs like the Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCA's afterschool programs.
- Partial or full scholarships for preschool.
- Longer before and after school programming.
- Varied activities besides sports, like arts, music, etc.
- Low cost or free community events that focus on bringing youth together.
- Mentoring programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters.

PARTICIPANTS' COMMENTS

“There are no programs for youth to take part in, which lead to behavioral problems like unsafe and/ or illegal activities.”

“Low income people feel pushed out because everything is crazy expensive.”

PRIORITY ISSUE 2: AFFORDABLE, SAFE HOUSING.

Affordable safe housing as well as homeless shelters and transitional housing to help people get back on their feet.

Across many of our conversations, the topic of affordable housing kept coming up in several different forms. Participants believe that having a place to live and call your own can increase a person's stability and ability to conquer other challenges in life, like finding a job. Some see that home ownership needs to be made affordable and available for everyone, with education on how to start the process and budget for a home. Others see the need to make affordable housing easier to rent with more availability in safe, easy to access areas. There is a stigma attached to “low income housing” that prevents meaningful discussion and action. The topic of affordable housing cannot be discussed without mentioning homeless shelters and transitional housing and how we are in need of more, especially those serving families. Many times when people are in need of help, their families are separated or they end up sleeping in their cars. Many participants agreed that there was a need to raise awareness of services that are available and get organizations interacting with each other to better serve the clients.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

- Rent is unaffordable especially for those working at minimum wage.
- Social service agencies appear to be competing with each other instead of working together.
- Section 8 housing slots are few and far between with lots of paper work when there are openings.
- Buying a home is overwhelming and many people lack the knowledge to know where to start.
- There are many all women shelters and all men shelters but not a lot of family shelters.
- Home ownership is not affordable or possible for everyone with requirements and restrictions too demanding.
- Homeless shelters have long waiting lists but people are homeless now, not in 8 months.
- Locations of subsidized housing are not safe or easy to access or on transportation routes.
- Substandard, empty, or abandoned buildings are dangerous and eye sores.
- \$600 deposit for electric on top of security and beginning and ending month's rent is more than anyone can pay.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

- Educate the community on the demographic of low income residents and how poverty affects people.
- Budgeting, financial education, and home buying classes should be offered by someone who doesn't have a vested interest in selling their services.
- Financial help for people who can afford monthly rent but need assistance for security and utilities deposits.
- Community needs to take ownership of the issue.
- Locate affordable housing near jobs and transportation.
- Agencies should work together and join resources.
- Develop empty and abandon buildings into low income housing.
- Educate landlords and offer federal incentives to them.

PARTICIPANTS' COMMENTS

“Section 8 [housing] is a bear. When there are empty slots, there are so many hoops to jump through, it makes the process feel

“Housing leads to stability.”

“Develop a whole family shelter- instead of men go here, women go here.”

“Make home ownership more affordable and a possibility for all.”

“No one was of any help; there needs to be home buying education from someone without a vested interest in selling.”

PRIORITY ISSUE 3: DRUG FREE COMMUNITY

A drug free community where people receive the help they need.

The issue of drug use surfaced in many of our conversations across the county. People are concerned about the perceptions of the drug problem. It is believed that the public is in denial about the problem, and they take the stance of “it's not as bad in my town as it is in others.” Many believe that there needs to be more education on the problem across all levels: children, parents, community members, and officials. It's also believed that the problem needs to be treated more like a health concern and less criminalized. There are long waiting lists for people to receive the help they need, and there are very few inpatient treatment facilities where they can go. Many believe that agencies need to coordinate their efforts and come up with a comprehensive plan on how to tackle this issue.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

- Community is in a cycle of denial, “This can't happen in my back yard.”
- Shaming the issue causes people to not seek help because they feel like a failure.
- Myth and stereotypes prevent actions or lead to misplaced actions.
- Addiction is an illness that is not easily fixed and there is no place for addicts to go for long term recovery.
- There are long waiting lists for treatment.
- Parents are apathetic or in denial about their children's drug use.
- There is no unified vision of the problem, and there is no good data on how big the problem is.
- Marijuana being socially acceptable is a gateway to stronger drug use.
- Our system is more punishment based and less treatment based.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

- More education for parents, children, professionals, and the community beyond explaining how drugs are bad to giving people the tools they need to avoid them, address the issue with their children, or get the help they need.
- Education needs to start at a younger age in schools and be constant.
- Treat the drug problem as a public health issue and not just as a crime.
- More positive activities and programs for teens.
- Bring all the key players together to come up with a unified plan for what needs to be done.
- More rehab and treatment programs throughout Porter County.
- Bring awareness to the problem.
- Agencies need to work better together and not be so territorial.
- Create greater awareness of what programs and resources are available.

PARTICIPANTS' COMMENTS

“Children need to be taught about real life situations and given the tools to handle them.”

“People need to stop having a fear that talking about the drug problem will cause more usage.”

“Start at the prevention end not in the jails or rehab.”

“Turning a blind eye will not make the problem disappear.”

“One coordinated effort by the agencies would work better than each of them being very territorial.”

PRIORITY ISSUE 4: AFFORDABLE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Affordable public transportation throughout the region.

Participants expressed a need for improvement and expansion in the public transportation system. Currently the system is viewed as unaffordable and not available for those working lower paying jobs, especially those working nights and weekends. Also the system is not offered outside the Valparaiso area, which isolates many communities. Many parties find it difficult to make it to doctors' appointments, college courses, and their jobs because of our current system. It's strongly suggested that the system needs to be expanded to cover not just all of Porter County but the region.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

- People are not able to get good jobs and have to settle for what they can get to. This is not a hopeful message for those on the margins.
- Public transportation is very limited. People are not able to make it to jobs, school, doctors' appointments, social services or be involved in the community.
- Buses are under-utilized.
- People can't afford the V-line everyday on minimum wage.
- Other transportation options like cabs are very expensive.
- Communities are not walkable.
- Buses have very limited routes.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

- More walking and biking trails.
- Get the cities together to develop a plan and routes that can unify the county.
- Expand the hours of the bus service.
- Tap in to alternative resources like the universities and nursing homes, who have vehicles.
- Maintain sidewalks to make the community more walkable.
- V-line is a good start but it needs to keep expanding.
- Work with employers and service providers to make sure routes go where they are needed.
- Easy access to alternative transportation like rental cars or bicycles.

PARTICIPANTS' COMMENTS

“We can't unify the county without affordable public transportation.”

“People outside of Valparaiso need transportation too.”

“Can't get or keep jobs with unreliable transportation.”

“Lack of transportation isolates the community.”

PRIORITY ISSUE 5: GOOD JOBS WITH LIVABLE WAGES

“Good” jobs that pay a livable wage and people who are trained to take those jobs.

Throughout our conversations, the term “livable wage” was a recurring theme. One major question that comes with this term is what is deemed as a “livable wage”? Is it just making enough to keep one’s head above water, knowing that when an emergency hits, it becomes a crisis situation? Or is it making enough to have a good life for you and your family? When this came up, some people wanted to discuss raising the minimum wage. However it was agreed that that would not be enough to make a difference. Participants believed that if we are to truly make a difference in the community, we need to diversify our economy. Some believe to do this, we first need to have a work force that is trained to do the higher paying jobs. It was suggested to do this, we need to have more vocational training for all people, and colleges need to look to the future to decide what training classes they will offer. Also local government needs to do more to help and support local small businesses.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

- Working but not making enough to “make it” and just one emergency away from a crisis.
- Young graduates leave the area to find work.
- Saving money is not feasible for many families.
- Economy is not diversified enough. If steel mills would leave, our economy would collapse.
- People are not trained to take the job opportunities that are out there.
- Fear about job security: “How long will my job be needed or stay here?”
- It’s hard to get a business started and there is very little help out there.
- There are too many dead end jobs with no upward mobility.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

- Increase job training so people can gain needed skills to take higher paying jobs.
- Raise the minimum wage.
- Guidance counselors need to focus on local jobs and help children to get ready for them.
- High Schools need to do a better job preparing students to go into the work force.
- Build a community that brings large employers to the area, and create employment opportunities for area students who want to come back to work here.
- Gain access to more funding through grants or government funding.

PARTICIPANTS’ COMMENTS

- “One emergency takes you into a crisis.”
- “We have huge problem with income disparity; and if it continues, we’ll have a caste system.”
- “Social mobility is harder and harder.”
- “We need to be training new skills because our work force is unqualified for new jobs.”
- “Our economy isn’t diversified enough, we are very dependent on the mills.”
- “Good paying jobs are a driving factor as to why people move or stay.”

PRIORITY ISSUE 6: DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

An open minded community that is accepting to diverse populations.

Participants would like to see their communities not just welcoming and accepting to those who are different, but find ways to celebrate and include everyone. They also see a diverse population not just as those who have different religions, cultures and skin color, but also those that have physical and mental disabilities. They would like to see more community events that celebrate and include everyone; also better ways to welcome people into the community.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

- Stigmas that surround people that are different, whether it’s their skin color, religion, or they have special needs.
- History education is dominated by the white perspective.
- People operate blindly and base their judgments without all the information.
- This is a difficult topic for people to discuss.
- Racial profiling.
- There are not enough people of color in leadership roles.
- People move to where the jobs are.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

- Create opportunities for awareness, education, and cultural appreciation.
- Create more opportunities for people with special needs, so they can become self-sufficient.
- A culture where being disrespectful is not tolerated.
- Welcoming procedure for sharing information to help new residents.
- Show more positive stories in the news.
- Embrace diversity.

PARTICIPANTS’ COMMENTS

- “We need to have more cultural fairs in schools to teach our youth about diversity.”
- “Everyone needs to feel equally empowered and valued.”
- “We are all in this together.”
- “People shouldn’t be divided into stereotypes based on race.”

PRIORITY ISSUE 7: HIGHLY ENGAGED COMMUNITY

An engaged community where people come together in shared goals.

Many participants want to live in a community that has a small town feel, where everyone is welcomed and lives and works together. They also take this one step further by noting businesses, government, and non-profits need to be working together to solve community problems. They see that city and county lines create unneeded boundaries and they want to try to cross these boundaries by creating county-wide events and making sure resources are shared by the whole county. Communication throughout the county needs to be greater with ways to share activities, resources, and just good news.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS

- Top officials might not be on board.
- Lack of communication.
- Not enough funding.
- Not enough spaces or events for everyone to participate.
- South County is left out.
- Poor relationships sometimes with the police.
- People are self-centered.
- Children are not taught how to give back to their communities.

IDEAS THAT CAN DRIVE SOLUTIONS

- Free county events to bring people from across the county together.
- More communication.
- Have service learning integrated into lesson plans for K-12 grades.
- Concentrate on Porter County as a whole not just the cities.
- Include the police in more activities around the community to improve the relationships between civilians and law enforcement.
- Get local people helping each other.

PARTICIPANTS' COMMENTS

"I want a small town feel where everyone knows each other and are willing to help each other."

"Response is not as effective as it could be if we all worked together."

"Unite Porter County."

"More togetherness as a unified county not separate towns and cities."

REFLECTIONS IN PORTER COUNTY

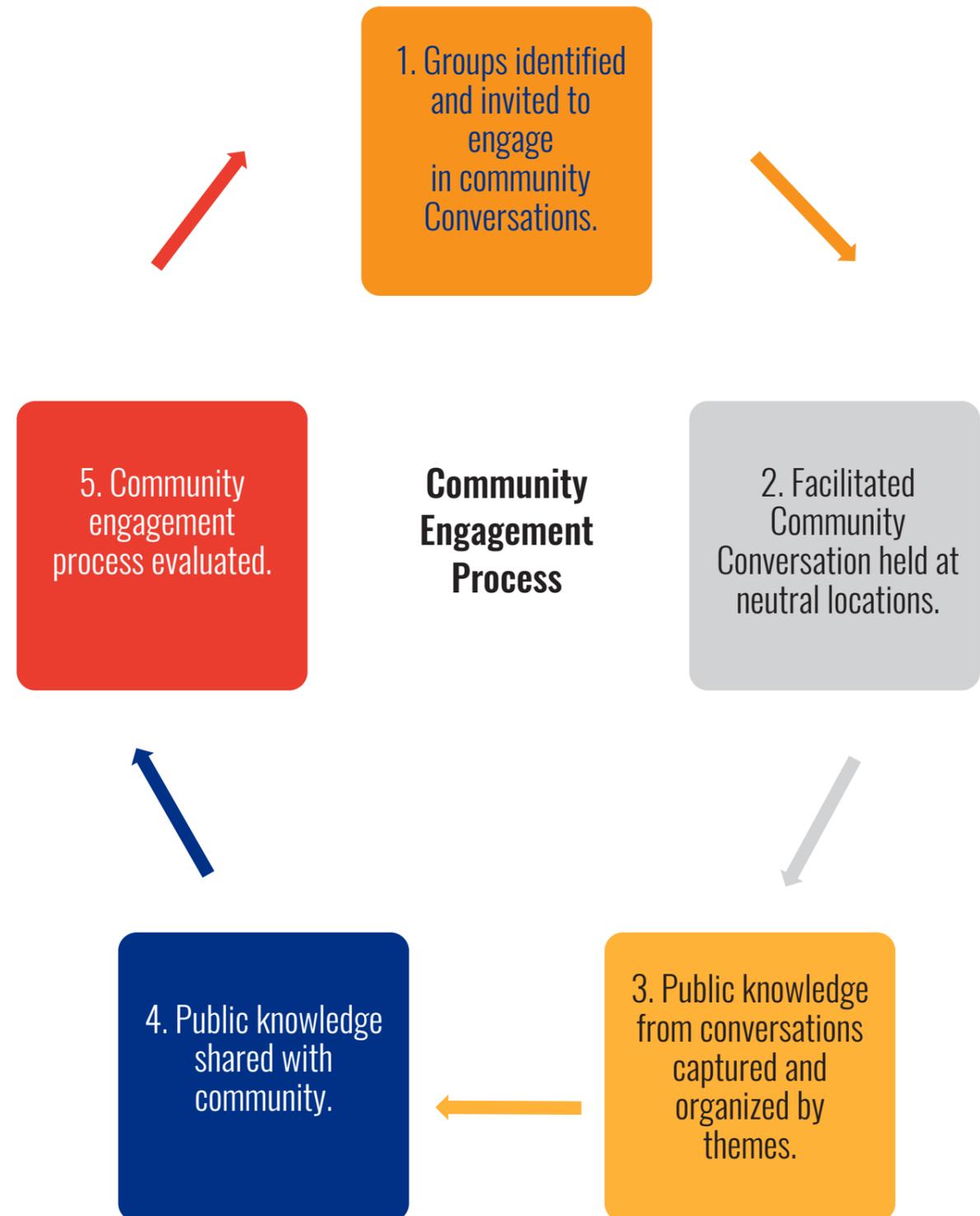
As we engaged the community and began linking all of the conversations together, a collective voice emerged. No matter how different everyone seems, these five points were echoed throughout all of the conversations. The United Way has learned so much from the community but understand there is still much to be learned and many conversations to be had. Through this report and our reflections, we hope that you will gain some different perspective; and hopefully become more involved in your community.

- Everything is interconnected, as we spoke with people across the county, we got to see how interconnected all of their hopes are. For example: if we are to make an impact on the drug issue, we need to create more activities for youth. Good jobs and affordable housing are intertwined: people need a good job to afford a house; but having the stability of housing makes it easier for them to find a job. With everything so interconnected, where do we start?
- Awareness is key; people know that there are services out there, but they just don't know how to access them or they are unaware of how many resources there are.
- Everyone wants a better life for their children and grandchildren with more opportunities, good education, well-paying available jobs, healthy futures, and safe communities.
- People are ready to step up and seek meaningful change. In Porter County, people expressed trust in their leaders and organizations but expressed a desire for more collaboration to solve the issues facing our community.
- Regardless of the age of the participants from high school students to seniors, the concerns were remarkably similar: education, diversity, transportation, drug free community, an engaged community.

NEXT STEPS IN PORTER COUNTY

This summary is one of the first steps by sharing the results and considering the possible actions. In some cases, United Way may choose to take the lead in addressing an issue. In other cases, there may be complimentary works already underway. Some issues may find homes outside the United Way, while still engaging the United Way at some level. In the coming months, United Way will weigh its priorities, engage more community members and leaders; and then report back to the community about the next steps.

- Convene deeper and more extensive conversations about the topics that rose to the top i.e. activities for youth and families, affordable housing, etc.
- Develop an action plan to address issues and bring partners to the table.
- Keep open lines of communications with the community by continuing to hold community conversations throughout Porter County.



THANK YOU!

We appreciate that you have taken time to learn about our community's aspirations for the future!

If you would like to join us in making our communities a better place or if you would like more information about Community Conversations, please contact your local United Way:

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Griffith, IN 46319
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United Way of Porter County
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www.unitedwaypc.org

LET'S  TALK