

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In 2011, United Way of the Midlands' (UWM) Board of Directors convened a task force to develop a robust and meaningful strategic plan that would best position the organization to serve the area's most vulnerable populations, in a community that has evolved substantially since UWM opened in 1923. Through this strategic planning process, as well as through multiple input sessions, the need for UWM to create focus and priority became clear.

To gain a better understanding of the challenges currently facing our most vulnerable neighbors, UWM partnered with the Iowa West Foundation (IWF), Omaha Community Foundation (OCF) and with the support of the ConAgra Foods Foundation to conduct a comprehensive community assessment in Douglas, Sarpy and Pottawattamie counties. In total, nearly 4,700 community members participated in various portions of the study, resulting in collection of qualitative and quantitative data through surveys, focus groups and interactive world café discussions.

At the conclusion of the assessment, UWM management provided recommendations to the UWM Board for the organization's future direction. United Way's Board of directors approved the proposals on March 25.

Through the work of the community assessment, many complex problems were identified and discussed recognizing that several interrelating causes cannot easily be isolated. To examine a complex problem, a system must be employed to address and, likely more realistically influence the issues.

Through the assessment, seven themes emerged:

1. Transportation
2. Healthcare
3. Education – Early Childhood
4. Safety
5. Education – School Aged Children
6. Jobs and Opportunity
7. Basic Needs

In both the strategic planning process and throughout discussion in the newly-formed UWM Board of Directors, UWM's ongoing commitment to providing support to basic needs has been confirmed and formalized.

### **The Assessment's Roots in Strategic Planning:**

During the strategic planning process in 2011, we gathered input from Board Members, donors and United Way's funded partner agencies. Board members stated that UWM should leverage its unique position to provide leadership and collaborate with other community funders. Additionally, UWM would need to more clearly communicate its local impact and value proposition. Since the community's needs often outweigh the funds raised, focus and prioritization are critical.

UWM donors indicated the organization is in a unique position in the community, by virtue of its breadth and diverse set of relationships. As mentioned by one stakeholder, "UWM has unique opportunities to bring the community together." However, donors differed in how this might be done and how to define leadership. Additionally, they indicated there is more money available for funding in the community when donors are made aware of work underway on local issues.

When asked about the strengths and best role of UWM, the funded agencies responded that the organization can provide support for things that are difficult to fund in other ways, such as capacity- building and unrestricted funding. Some perceived UWM as well-positioned to play a leadership role of facilitating collaboration and coordination, in partnership with and between agencies. This group indicated that, in the past, UWM had not listened well to those in need and historically has not been successful in taking a leadership role.

In the pursuit of clear communication and messaging, United Way engaged the firm of Bailey Lauerman to conduct focus groups with stakeholders, including donors. Participants expressed the importance of making a connection with the next generation of donors. More importantly, participants stated that UWM must maintain

and increase both donor engagement and public understanding of a finite number of priorities, versus funding a broad spectrum of programs with minimal impact. The established priorities must be specific, clear and measurable.

### **2013/2014 Community Assessment Overview:**

Wilder Research was engaged to gather data and previous research studies that were conducted in the metro area. A community survey was deployed in summer 2013 using a multi-method collection approach. Next, four Community Conversations were held in locations throughout the region UWM serves, allowing for collection of data at the neighborhood level. These initial inputs provided topics for further discovery. Subject matter experts were consulted to help categorize the feedback from this research into themes. The identified themes were then utilized to develop the items used for the targeted survey, focus groups and World Cafés. To ensure validity, UWM reviewed data by demographic (all respondents, and those with household income of less than \$50,000). Strong alignment across these populations existed, providing a “green light” to gather feedback from community residents in need. In January 2014, a targeted survey was launched using specific qualifying criteria. As a second input from this demographic, UWM engaged professional facilitator Deb Burnight to conduct 13 focus groups exploring each of the themes.

All data collected was assimilated prior to the launch of four World Café sessions, whose participants included community leaders, stakeholders, corporate leaders, donors, funders, CEOs of service providers, government representatives, and policy makers.

The following is a brief summary of findings from across the collection methods for each of the themes explored.

### **TRANSPORTATION SUMMARY**

A vast majority (88%) of respondents across all three counties felt that reliable public transportation was important to the quality of life in this community, but those making less than \$50,000 were more likely to view reliable public transportation as important to quality of life than more affluent respondents.

### **HEALTH SUMMARY**

More than 90% of South Omaha attendees said they had trouble accessing mental health and dental care. More than 80% of the guests at the North Omaha conversation agreed. Nearly 90% of Council Bluffs participants reported the biggest issue was access to mental health care, while in West Omaha health, dental and mental health care was less of a problem.

### **EARLY EDUCATION SUMMARY**

An overwhelming majority of Community Assessment survey respondents (85%) agreed that there are adequate resources to prepare children for kindergarten in the three-county metro area, though the cost of childcare did surface as a significant concern in the general community-wide survey. Focus group attendees reported that their own work schedules and other conflicts often make it difficult to attend registration and orientation programs at the pre-kindergarten child care sites.

### **SAFETY SUMMARY**

Nearly all (97%) of the respondents from the three-county metro area said a safe neighborhood is important for their quality of life. 56% list crime and safety as one of their biggest concerns. (This includes gangs, drugs, guns and sexually-transmitted disease.) In the metro-wide survey, 85% of respondents agreed “this community is a safe place to live.” However, 97% of African American and Hispanic respondents reported that crime/safety was a problem in their community.

### **EDUCATION (SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN) SUMMARY**

Participants at the Community Conversation in South Omaha ranked education as the top priority for community partnerships. Similarly, participants at the North Omaha Community Conversation ranked education as their second-highest priority. However, improving education was not considered a high priority in Community Conversations occurring in West Omaha and Council Bluffs. These differential findings represent a common theme in the perceptions about education within the tri-county area. Specifically, differences in perceptions were found as a function of race, and location (e.g., county and location within Omaha).

## **JOBS & OPPORTUNITY SUMMARY**

A majority of the people surveyed (75%) said that jobs, wages, and cost of living were a major issue in their community; but jobs and employment were of particular concern to low-income residents. Respondents with a household income less than \$35,000 were more likely than those with higher incomes to view the economy as a problem, although even higher-income earners were concerned about economic issues. Community members indicated strong interest in getting skill development, training and/or education to make them a better match to the skills needed for available jobs in our community.

As was revealed in World Café discussions, working more and making more money may be a detriment to workers if doing so means losing essential benefits. The “funding cliff” was discussed often as an issue for low income families.

## **INTEGRATION & ANALYSIS**

As part of the data collection and analysis of needs facing our community, we codified a set of persistent issues that, when analyzed together, are both complicated and complex, especially when considered systemically.

Persistent issues are usually both complicated and complex. The sources of complicated issues, or problems, can be identified and tackled individually (Poli, 2013). In contrast, complex problems result from systems of several interrelating causes that cannot easily be isolated. To address a complex problem, a system must be employed to address and – likely more realistically– influence the issues.

Though transportation challenges may be a symptom of other issues relating to poverty and economic hurdles, it was identified as a consistent barrier to successfully addressing issues raised while examining other themes.

Educational attainment, skills and training were cited as barriers to jobs and can result in crime, unemployment and underemployment.

### ***Healthcare***

Community members made clear that they have serious concerns with the access to and the cost of both diagnostic and preventative healthcare. Furthermore, many in our community have issues with not having adequate health and dental care coverage, and they struggle to address and understand the complexities of our current system.

### ***Education – Early Childhood***

Early Childhood Education is important and valued in the community. In many neighborhoods however, there are issues with the availability of and/or qualifications for having children in high quality centers. Costs and the time needed to be associated with high-quality options were reported as barriers for parents to get their children and families involved; but the data also showed that parents are sometimes not aware that newborns can benefit from enriching environments, even when children are 18- and 24- months old.

### ***Safety***

It is not surprising that safety is a concern for almost all community members, especially those living in certain areas of town, and those confronted with multiple challenges (e.g., being underemployed, having less education). Young adult crime was cited as the most-personally experienced by those participating in surveys and focus groups. Some respondents also reminded us that crime can have lasting effects; community members with previous involvement in crime find that the bad choices have a lifelong impact on their employment options.

### ***Education – School-Aged Children***

Education was referenced as a potential solution to a number of issues examined in the Community Assessment. Although it may not be adversely influencing every household, most participants in the World Café concluded that issues with education are a community-wide concern. Experiences with children’s education and access for educational supports (e.g., mentoring, high quality after-school or extended learning opportunities) differ greatly based on community members’ ethnicity and race.

## ***Jobs & Opportunity***

There were multiple mentions of the words “jobs,” “opportunity” and “employment” throughout the assessment. Many times, the lack of opportunities was highlighted; other times it was explained that jobs are available, but the knowledge, skills, abilities and opportunities (KSAOs) were not present in many of those who want to be hired. The mismatch of KSAOs and job experience with available opportunities in the community were mentioned with respect to youth and education, as well as most adults who responded to the targeted survey; unemployment subject matter experts concurred. Barriers to sustainable employment were often related to transportation, lack of education, lack of work experience, inadequate childcare options, and no funding for job skill development.

There is a great deal of passion, energy, and expertise available in each of the themes that were explored. Taking into consideration the data collected, integrated and analyzed, the following rationale was utilized by UWM staff to make recommendations for the priority areas, as well as to help guide the decision-making process and discussion for the UWM Board of Directors.

The following considerations will be important as priorities are selected and strategies developed:

- The core objective of success must be to solve a problem rather than simply expand a successful program
- The focus must be on a well-defined unit of impact
- The approach to funding and investment must include: investment in new capabilities, fund training for staff/ agency personnel, hire new people, adopt new systems (i.e., technology, strong financial systems, innovation to drive down costs), remaining open to capitalization and recruiting and engaging co-investors
- Long-term investments must be considered, since grantees need consistent, multi-year support in order to build strong leadership, effective operations, community partnerships necessary to scale impact
- We must partner across sectors: government, non-profits and business, and continue to engage the community; knowledge of local circumstances and local players will be critical to helping a solution spread and stick
- There must be a focus on driving demand – can’t just have a “build it and they will come” attitude; unlocking demand can be a game-changer

While UWM enjoys relationships with a diverse set of stakeholders, communication with donors regarding this work and UWM’s continued commitment to basic and core needs is imperative – starting with the CEOs/decision makers within an organization, down to the campaign managers inside the organization and finally, current donors and potential donors.

The currently-funded agency audience has been consistently engaged throughout this assessment process by providing: input for survey content, access to clients for various input during the assessment process, and participation during community listening sessions.

## **UWM BOARD REVIEWS RESULTS & VOTES ON RECOMMENDATIONS**

Members of the United Way of the Midlands Board of Directors reviewed the results of the year-long community assessment and the recommendations of UWM management at a retreat in early March 2014.

Based on the findings of the needs assessment, along with discussion and exploration at its retreat, the board voted on a motion to continue United Way of the Midlands’ historic 90-plus year commitment to providing support for basic needs services that are critical to our community’s most vulnerable residents. In addition, board members determined that United Way’s strengths and resources would be focused on breaking the cycle of poverty by funding programs that support children during their academic years, and help prepare teens and young adults for productive careers. Together, the two areas, CLASSROOM READY and WORKFORCE READY will be known as “UNITED BY STRENGTH”.