

Community Conversations

Prepared for the United Way of Bristol
VA/TN Transition Task Force

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Photo: American Planning Association

Community Impact Plan

Introduction and Purpose:

Lisa Cofer, Executive Director-United Way of Bristol TN/VA

The United Way of Bristol has been in our community for more than 79 years, evaluating the needs and providing a safety net of services around our most vulnerable population. We sew the fabric of our community to ensure that no one falls through the cracks.

For decades our United Way has been improving the lives of individuals and families, but it's time for our organization to help make a deeper impact by changing our community.

In 2020 we embarked on a new strategic vision to move the needle on critical issues facing our community by addressing the root causes of problems. To make this happen, United Way of Bristol is transitioning from a traditional funder/allocator model to a collective impact approach to our work.

One of the first steps is hosting community conversations with our citizens to get their input on what they feel are our community's greatest needs and to gain insight into what kind of community they want now and in the future. This information will enable us to begin thinking critically about turning the curve on our community's wellbeing in a positive direction.

Transitioning to a community impact model will enable us to look at our community in a new way and develop specific, focused, strategic tools to address our unique underlying needs. This focus will allow us to not only concentrate on results for our community as a whole, but to really focus on targeted goals of our organization and how we can help make those goals become results through investing in local programs, initiatives and partnerships.

The United Way of Bristol's transition to a community impact model will help improve the quality of life for all of us.

“We sew the fabric of our community to ensure that no one falls through the cracks.”

The United Way Transition Task Force launched the Community Conversation feedback gathering process by identifying potential groups in the community from which to solicit feedback. The *Community Conversation Workbook* available through the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation was adopted as a guide for conducting the meetings. (www.theharwoodinstitute.org)

About the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation- The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that teaches, coaches and inspires individuals and organizations to solve pressing problems and change how communities work together. With a proven 25-year track record the Institute’s approach to change – the Harwood practice – has spread to thousands of communities across the U.S. and to groups in more than 40 countries.

The Community Conversations took place over the course of a four-month period beginning in December of 2020 and ending in March of 2021. The conversations were conducted using Zoom by facilitator Beth Page, Ed.D. and non-identifying participant feedback was captured by Scott Emerine, M.Sc. All sessions were observed by Lisa Cofer, Executive Director of United Way Bristol and Lorie Bradley, Director of Community Outreach for United Way Bristol.

The participants in the ten Community Conversations consisted of employees or volunteers associated with the following groups:

United Way Bristol- Board of Directors
Several Leadership and Alexis de Tocqueville donors

Mental Health

Frontier Health

Highlands Community Services

Government

City of Bristol TN

City of Bristol VA

Schools Systems

Bristol TN City Schools

Bristol VA Public Schools

Health Care

Ballad Health Community Health Workers

Health and Human Services

Girls Inc.

YMCA

YWCA NETN and SWVA

Bristol Redevelopment and Housing Authority

Bristol Faith in Action

People, Inc.

Salvation Army

Haven of Rest

Upper East TN Human Development Agency

Appalachian Regional Commission on Homelessness (ARCH)

The questions selected from the Harwood Workbook for the conversations included:

- 1) What kind of a community do you want?
- 2) How is that different than what we have now?
- 3) What are the two to three most important issues or concerns when it comes to the community?
- 4) What do you think is keeping us from making the progress we want?
- 5) What are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?
- 6) If we came back together in six months or a year, what might you see that would be an indication that the things we talked about today were starting to happen?

Observation: While there was some concern initially that the current COVID pandemic would skew the responses of the participants, that really did not seem to materialize. The issues identified by the respondents existed prior to the pandemic though some were invariably exacerbated by the health crisis. Very few responses were specifically identified as COVID concerns.



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Question One Results- What kind of a community do you want?

The prevailing theme in the responses to this question was economic stability and included the quality of life ideas that many people desire. Some of the terms used were “vibrant, good-paying jobs, growth, successful, economic opportunity, full employment, sustainable, self-sufficiency, skilled, and educated”.

The second prevailing theme centered on well-being. Terms used included “safe, healthy, hopeful, security, drug-free, low stress, peaceful, thriving, and empowered”.

The desired community was loving and supportive and included a place for everyone where young people stayed for work opportunities and raised their families.

Question Two Results- How is that different than what we have now?

The prevailing theme in the responses to this question may provide a surprising insight. Respondents identified the lack of collaboration, cooperation, and a unified community focus as a prevalent and pervasive barrier to improvement. This was recognized as an obstacle from both the service provision and the economic development perspective. Respondents would like to see the community recognize and support the needed changes through more collaborative efforts for improvement. This lack of a collaborative endeavor was regarded as ineffective and inefficient and resulted in an overlap of services and a disjointed response. Of particular note were “border” barriers for TN/VA that agencies and organizations encountered routinely but similar barriers were also recognized between city and county organizations.

The second prevailing theme from this question focused on the issues associated with financial hardship and the visible results of poverty, economic instability, and the insufficient realization of basic needs. The most visible results of these community burdens are food insecurity, lack of housing, low-wage jobs, lack of access to transportation, and systemic barriers in services.

Question Three Results- What are the two to three most important issues or concerns when it comes to the community?

The consistent and most frequent response theme to this question was financial hardship. Those who were familiar with the United Way coined term “ALICE” which stands for “Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed” included those families as well as those meeting federal poverty guidelines. The top concerns for both the poverty level and ALICE families were “cycle of poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, limited public housing, as well as affordable housing” with lack of both public and affordable housing being the overwhelmingly most cited single issue. (Affordable housing was defined as being rental properties for families who are employed). Another theme included the hindrances for those who are struggling to transition themselves out of poverty that are deemed almost insurmountable.

These income related observations are supported when we look at the Census Bureau: 2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates for the community. In Bristol, VA, at least 16% of families fell below the federal poverty level and in Bristol, TN, at least 15% of families met the guidelines. That equates to about 1800 households. This is despite the fact that 94% of Bristol, VA, residents age 16 and up and 93% of Bristol, TN, residents age 16 and up were employed in the Civilian Labor Workforce.

The second and related theme of responses to this question was economic opportunity. The terms associated with this included “Better Jobs, Better Wages, and more Education and Workforce training opportunities”. Related to both identified themes were the lack of transportation and childcare for those seeking education and training or better employment.

(More information about the ALICE report for Tennessee United Way Agencies can be found at [2020ALICEReport TN FINAL.pdf](#) and the ALICE report for the Virginia United Way Agencies can be found at [2020ALICEReport VA FINAL.pdf](#)).

These findings are consistent with the results from other community assessments including the Bristol TN SWOT. That report stated the need to expand employment opportunities as well as education and workforce training. That report also identified expanded access to public transportation as key for success. Homelessness and health concerns such as drug and alcohol addiction were also identified as priority community issues in that report.

Question Four Results- What do you think is keeping us from making the progress we want?

The consistent response to this question was primarily that the lack of available resources was the barrier to addressing the community concerns. The most often cited resource needed was funding from both public and private sources. Also noted was the lack of capacity for local governments and agencies to expand services and find qualified employees. Lack of time to volunteer was frequently noted in addition to the overall need for more economic opportunities.

Another significant barrier to progress that was discussed included the perceived resistance to change in the community. The community is seen as not open to new ideas and shares no sense of urgency. Many noted that there is a belief that change is not possible or that community members perceive they have no agency to promote change.

Question Five Results- What are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?

Participants offered a wide range of viewpoints as to what could help move the community towards the preferred one described in question one. Repeats of previous themes emerged: Additional social service type programs and increased funding for new and existing programs in order to serve more people—particularly at-risk children. Expanded access to a wider variety of mental health services, both public and affordable housing, and access to public transportation were frequently identified as key initiatives for improvement. The proposed new Day Center for downtown Bristol was also cited multiple times as an example of a collaborative effort to provide greater access and better services.

Another repeated theme from a previous question was the belief that agencies should better coordinate, collaborate, and streamline their services. An idea repeated frequently was that community efforts should focus on one or two issues at a time and “go deep” in order to make a meaningful impact. Many noted that the United Way is over tapped and cannot be expected to work on all issues.

Finally, economic development including better paying jobs and access to workforce training were seen as the most critical pathway to overall better financial stability for the community.

Question Six Results- If we came back together in six months or a year, what might you see that would be an indication that the things we talked about today were starting to happen?

It is encouraging to note that the most common response to this question was simply that these reflective conversations about community concerns were continuing to occur. Other similar hopes expressed that the identification and focus on at least one critical issue had transpired and that implementation of a focused strategy to address that one issue had been initiated. Participants also stated that coordinated visible community partnerships would be a sign that change was occurring and would include a combination of agencies/organizations, businesses, and church efforts.

Participants also noted that a reduction in the number of homeless people and those who met poverty guidelines would be an indicator of improvement. Other markers of advancement would include a decrease in unemployment and demand for agency services. Participants would be encouraged to see the public become more aware of the overall effects of poverty on people and the community in general. They would like to see more support for families who have successfully transitioned out of poverty as well as increased hope and respect in the community for ALICE families. Overall, group participants would wish to see an improvement in the stability of families throughout the region.

Next steps: As the United Way Transition Task Force digests the results of these community meetings, there will be continued dialog to determine how the results will potentially affect the priorities of the United Way. Not all priorities identified by the community participants, such as Economic Development, currently fall under the purview of United Way of Bristol. Nevertheless, the agency clearly can prioritize numerous other identified issues for support.