

THE LANDSCAPE



COMMUNITY LISTENING REPORT

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PRODUCED BY:



Omaha Community
Foundation

WHAT IS THE LANDSCAPE?

To be able to invest in the community, we must first know the community. To that end, the Omaha Community Foundation (OCF) has built a strategic operating model of community knowledge and investment. Our work is encompassed by the principles of The Landscape, a community-driven research project that incorporates publicly-available data, policy review, and insight gathered from direct engagement with residents in targeted areas.



DATA ANALYSIS + POLICY REVIEW + RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

Our purpose is to learn from both data and residents and to understand the systems that prevent people from accessing the many opportunities in our community.

Ultimately, The Landscape is an approach for knowing the community—both its assets and opportunities—and for understanding how to invest in its future. Our goal is to build a community investment strategy that allows OCF to affect change within our community and to invite donors, funders, and nonprofits to join us in this pursuit.

PRINCIPLES OF THE LANDSCAPE

- **RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT:** To ensure that people most affected by the issues outlined in The Landscape have a voice in determining priorities and designing solutions.
- **EQUITY & OPPORTUNITY:** To address systemic inequities that prevent people from accessing opportunities that allow them to thrive.
- **INVESTMENT:** To provide a framework for donors and other partners to understand the community, and make informed decisions to guide their philanthropic investments.

ENGAGING WITH RESIDENTS

This report encompasses what we learned from engaging with over 1,600 residents during the Fall of 2017, to better understand their lives. The Omaha Community Foundation connected with six local nonprofit organizations: Heart Ministry Center, Creighton Hope Financial Collaborative, Family Inc, InCommon, Heartland Workers Center, and Completely Kids. Through both individual and small group conversations we heard from more than 1,062 residents. We also launched an online listening campaign, Voices of The Landscape, where we heard from an additional 558 people.

Throughout the listening activities, key themes emerged around opportunities where our community has room for improvement as well as existing strengths and assets. While our community has tremendous resources available to some residents, the results of this listening campaign tell us that not all residents have access to the support networks, vibrant arts and cultural offerings, beautiful parks, and strong neighborhood schools in our community.

Understanding what stands in the way of opportunity helps **build connection** in the community and reveals that we have so much **in common** regardless of where we live or our socioeconomic status.

This report details the findings from the Foundation's listening campaign.



HEARTLAND WORKERS CENTER

SOCIAL AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

Local residents place a high value on the available support networks throughout their lives.

SUPPORT NETWORKS WITHIN SCHOOLS

- Residents spoke often about the pride they feel towards their local neighborhood school. They spoke of this pride beyond the quality of education their child receives, often specifically calling out school staff and resources that provide support to the entire family. Schools were also mentioned as a place that residents can rely on for their kids to feel safe, that encourages family involvement through various programming.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS AND OTHER SUPPORTIVE ADULTS OR ADVISORS

- A common theme that emerged among listening session participants was the importance of strong, adult support systems that young children and teenagers could look up to. Residents also spoke frequently about the significance of having strong neighborhoods, school, and family networks, and how critical that was to their own individual growth and well-being.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

- Residents identified family and friends as a critical resource and source of support in their lives, especially when they needed extra help or assistance. Those individuals who lacked a familial network shared the difficulties in finding a close, supportive network in the community. Some participants shared that in lieu of a family network, they turned to a nonprofit for support; and oftentimes the people (staff, professionals) they met through that nonprofit became an important part of their resource network in place of family or friends.

“I’ve been extremely fortunate to have unconditional support and encouragement from my parents, and as I’ve grown, have had mentors and role models that have helped me find fulfillment and security.”

“A lot of the time we come to the school and talk to the school counselor. They can help us or they refer us to an organization that can help us.”

→ WHAT WE LEARNED ←

- Support systems are essential part of a resource grid that help us all thrive and lead strong, healthy lives.
- For many residents, family and friends offer critical support and resources during times of stress or crisis.
- Some residents most in need do not have access to a support network.

ARTS, CULTURE, AND RECREATION

Many residents value the strength and assortment of our region’s arts, culture, and recreational activities and believe this strongly contributes to the quality of life.

- When discussing the “best” parts of our community, residents often cited the variety of entertainment and recreational options available to take part in, highlighting the museums, cultural centers, and dining opportunities. People shared that these places and opportunities help make Omaha a great city to live in—especially for families.
- While individuals who participated in the online listening campaign often talked about these arts and cultural activities being both accessible and affordable, there were many other listening participants who spoke about the difficulties accessing recreational activities, or the lack of awareness about what cultural and arts opportunities may be available or affordable to them.

“It has something for everyone - music, tech, outdoors, art, culture- and experiencing most of those is affordable - which means you can do more of what you love, with time and money left to learn and try new things.”

“We want the same opportunities for our kids, that other kids get.”

“I want all communities to have opportunities to art, education, and connection. I want the walls that separate us to be knocked down.”

→ WHAT WE LEARNED ←

- Access to affordable arts, culture, and recreational opportunities is important to all residents, no matter where they live. These activities have an ability to foster engagement and connection through creative learning and activism, while increasing our community’s vibrancy and livability.
- Arts, culture, and recreation can be important economic drivers in a community; they create job and career opportunities for people, and can be an important attraction as people consider moving to a new city.

TOP 10 COMMUNITY LISTENING WORDS



VIBRANT NEIGHBORHOODS

Residents want their neighborhoods to be more engaged, safe, and livable spaces.

SAFETY AND BEAUTIFICATION:

- Many listening session participants were concerned about crime in the neighborhoods and expressed that they would like to see greater police presence in areas, and heighten the sense of security for residents. Some individuals highlighted smaller safety measures that can help make a difference such as better lighting, safer drivers, and neighborhood watch groups.
- There was strong feedback from residents around the importance of clean neighborhoods with engaged neighbors. People frequently shared that they would like to see a decrease in the amount of trash on their streets, less littering, a reduction in vandalism, and more neighbors actively involved in helping to beautify the neighborhood—both its public areas and individual streets and homes.

AFFORDABLE, ACCESSIBLE ACTIVITIES TO CONNECT WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS & NEIGHBORS:

- Listening session participants talked about a desire for more recreational activities in their own neighborhoods. Many specifically shared that they would like to see cleaner, safer parks or other public places for families
- People want more opportunities to gather and have fun, while also connecting with their neighbors, and more awareness about what lower cost arts and culture options exist in the community. For many residents, popular attractions are not affordable, or many of the free, community-wide activities are not geographically accessible. Some people cited that many family activities take place in West Omaha which can be difficult to access for many residents.

→ WHAT WE LEARNED ←

- How we feel about our broader community or city often starts with where we live—our street or neighborhood, or the places where we spend most of our time.
- When people feel safe in their neighborhoods, they are more willing to spend time connecting with each other in public spaces like parks or playgrounds. Clean, safe parks allow families to spend quality time together, with little or no cost and in close proximity to their home.
- The importance of relationships and neighborhood engagement cannot be overstated. People in our region are looking for points where they can connect, both formally and informally, with their neighbors and other members of the community.

“(I want) more involvement of neighbors in activities that can help this neighborhood look better and beautiful.”

“I would like to see more safety watch, like police patrols driving around more often, and of course, less crime.”

FINANCIAL STABILITY

Many residents are working diligently to build a strong financial future, but they face multiple barriers that prevent them from achieving financial stability.

Residents spoke often about the barriers they face in achieving financial stability and the difficult decisions they must make when they aren't able to pay their bills each month. There were several common challenges that emerged among participants as the greatest obstacles to reaching financial independence:

- High childcare costs and the lack of childcare options for people do not work a traditional 9-5 job
- The absence of paid leave options, including sick-time, meaning that parents must often take unpaid time off when they or their children are sick
- Difficulties in finding a job if you are formerly incarcerated
- The complexity and bureaucracy associated with employment assistance services

Residents expressed frustration that these basic obstacles to everyday needs limited their opportunities to secure employment and/or grow their career, and as a result, their overall economic mobility.

→ WHAT WE LEARNED ←

- When we support and address the fundamental needs that can lead to financial stability, it ensures that everyone has a greater chance of reaching their fullest potential.
- These barriers prevent people from accessing opportunities for upward mobility.

“(We need) programs to help people gain job skills so people could make their own money with one job not three.”

“I think for myself its (the biggest challenge for me is) getting caught up in bills etc. I get one paid and then another is behind... Just a cycle that's VERY hard to get out of.”

SEGREGATION

Residents want a more open, honest dialogue when confronting issues of segregation in our community and a path forward that embraces diversity, equity, and understanding.

- While our community was talked about as “kind” and “supportive,” people shared that we are challenged when it comes to addressing diversity, segregation, and inclusion. People said that as a community, we shy away from discussing difficult issues around race. And that because these conversations may be uncomfortable, or invite controversy, they are often avoided. Residents noted that the avoidance only furthers the divide between different groups of people within the region.
- Listening session participants often acknowledged the differences in individual experiences. They cited that one’s race or socioeconomic status dictates vastly different opportunities and life experiences. Residents stressed that as a city and community, we must rally around ways to address these inequities.
- Residents shared that they wished diversity was a stronger value within the community. Some participants shared that we must embrace different cultures, and a failure to do so will seriously impact not only the type of people that we can attract to the region, but the type of people who will stay and work to strengthen the community.

→ WHAT WE LEARNED ←

- We are a stronger community when all people—regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, or sexuality—feel welcome and that they have a voice in shaping the priorities and policies that will inform our future.
- To move forward as a united community, we must be willing to acknowledge the systems and beliefs that create inequities, have difficult conversations, and acknowledge the history of segregation in Omaha-Council Bluffs.

“The city of Omaha is very segregated and pronounced. There needs to be major improvement with race relations because there is an illusion of kindness here. A lot of people do not want to acknowledge there is a problem when it comes diversity.”

“It’s highly segregated in terms of economic status and race. If you’re middle class & Caucasian it’s great, but marginalized folks have a significantly different experience.”

ACCESS TO PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Residents have a desire for more multi-modal transportation and increasing the accessibility of our public transit options.

- A recurrent theme was a strong desire for improved and expanded public transit options, with an emphasis on the frequency, accessibility, and affordability of any future transit
- Residents often shared that our community is too car-centric, and those who did not have—or could not afford—a car were extremely limited in their ability to get around the region.
- People shared that they would like to see increased biking and walking access throughout the community. Some individuals wanted to expand the availability of both biking trails or bike lanes to make bicycle travel safer and easier.
- Many listening participants cited specific issues with the conditions of streets, and challenges with available parking in some neighborhoods. People often wanted streets to be safer for pedestrians, and for traffic to generally slow down.
- Some residents also shared that the buses can be unreliable or inconsistent, causing challenges for those who rely on them as their primary means of transportation.

→ WHAT WE LEARNED ←

- A high-quality, multi-modal transportation system would help connect all people to important resources such as jobs, schools, recreation, and other needed services.
- Relying on a car for transportation is often the most expensive cost for a family, even greater than housing. Expanding public transportation options can significantly lessen that financial burden.
- Neighborhoods with walkable, bikeable paths create a healthier, more economically vibrant, and more welcoming community.

“You really need a car. Our public transit system is not particularly good and, in many instances, almost non-existent.”

“I’d like to see transportation infrastructure that accommodates everyone, not just people driving cars.”

CONCLUSION

“We are strong, resilient and growing in many different ways. There is always room for improvement and only together will we make a difference.”

“Let’s stop seeing us as south, west, and north Omaha. We are a single city that has its virtues, but also flaws that we ourselves can solve.”

A resounding theme that emerged from listening to more than 1,600 residents was that everyone has a strong desire to connect more with the community—connect with neighbors, meet new people, and create lasting relationships.

While some people mentioned the availability of opportunity to connect with other residents, many also overwhelmingly responded that as a community we could be doing more to create communal places and spaces for residents from across the region to come together. Residents stressed that it is the people and relationship building that fosters a sense of community and will truly be able to create a stronger region for all.

As we move forward, considering the importance of public places, bringing people from different neighborhoods and backgrounds together, and rallying the community around a common vision are vital to create a thriving community for all.

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this community listening project was to better understand what was working well in people’s lives and what people wanted improved. In the development of this project, adaptability was critical. We worked to gather this insight in two different ways. The first was by partnering with six local nonprofits who work directly with people that are affected by topics included in The Landscape. These nonprofits included: Heart Ministry Center, Creighton Hope Financial Collaborative, Family Inc, InCommon, Heartland Workers Center, and Completely Kids.

We wanted nonprofits to have the ability to structure the conversations and questions asked in a way that was best for the people participating. Nonprofits were provided a list of possible questions but could adapt—or even create their own—if they fit within the intention of learning about people’s lives. Nonprofits most often asked questions such as: “What are you most proud of in your neighborhood?” and “If you could change one thing about your life, or neighborhood, what would it be?”

The listening sessions consisted of either individual one-on-one conversations, or facilitated group discussions, depending on the organization. These conversations occurred during meetings or gatherings already taking place within the nonprofit’s programming and were facilitated by the nonprofit staff; notes were taken in each of the listening sessions. Two nonprofits had already collected this information through individual conversations and shared the written results. In total, we heard from 1,062 people in partnership with these six nonprofits.

The second method used to collect responses from individuals in the community was through online engagement via Voices of the Landscape (<https://yourvoice.thelandscapeomaha.org/>). For this collection, six residents each posed a question to the greater community on the website that asked about their experiences living in the Omaha–Council Bluffs region. People from across the city were invited to weigh-in via a mix of digital marketing and communications outreach. The questions were meant to be universal—so anyone could answer them. Questions included: “What is your dream for your neighborhood,” and “What would you say to a friend considering a move to our city? In total 558 people shared insight on this website.

These responses from both the nonprofit listening and Voices of The Landscape were compiled and used to identify topics or ideas being discussed across groups, resulting in the themes identified in this report. Due to the inconsistencies in how data was collected and the varied sources we drew from, these listening activities should not be considered as formal research or a qualitative study. Rather, this project was about listening to residents for purposes of learning and gaining insight.

*The quotes appearing throughout this report represent the perspectives shared by residents through listening, and don’t necessarily reflect the views of the Omaha Community Foundation.