

Jackson County Public Library & Jackson County United Way 2016 Community Conversations Findings Reports

Overview

From March- September 2016 the Jackson County Public Library (JCPL) and Jackson County United Way (JCUW) engaged over 300 members of the community from all walks of life and backgrounds in 25 deep conversations about the kind of community we want Jackson County to be. People came into these conversations with honesty and a willingness to share and for this we are deeply grateful. In return, JCPL& JCUW are committed to broadly sharing what we heard so that anyone in our community who wants to take action can get involved.

This is what we've heard:

People's Shared Aspirations

Residents want a community where people *choose* to live, a community that is healthy and vibrant with places to go and things to do. We want to be known as a place where we work together to take care of our neighbors and generations.

"Making a choice to live here. Making a choice to NOT live in Columbus."

"EVERYONE wants to live in an active, vibrant community."

"We need to take care of each other- not just your family."

"Community leaders have to be involved. The city can't do much without it. Everyone needs to buy in."

Main Concerns

Here are the things that came up in most conversations and *specific voices that were echoed over and over*:

- **Community Connectedness & Pride-** People want others to be engaged and be a part of the community. *"Be involved. Stay involved."* People want a community that is proud of itself and takes care of the appearance of the community. *"A well-kept community: nice parks, yards mowed, no weeds in sidewalks, no graffiti, no trash in yards."* *"Our hometown should take pride and want it to be something."* People want residents from the community to feel pride in where they are from and want to see young people move back home after obtaining education. *"We see a future here, our children must see a good community to attract these students to come back after college."* People want all residents from the community to feel invited to community activities and events. There are concerns that language barriers and poverty create unequal access for community members to come together and drive success. *"Outreach and creating an inclusive and welcoming environment will get people more active and involved with the community."*
- **Community Investment, Collaboration, and Follow Through-** People want a community where public and private sector invest into the community with both money and time. We heard people say things like, *"I want to live in a community that is willing to invest in itself."* People are demanding real collaboration where partners work together for the betterment of the community. *"We need more people and organizations working together to move the needle in a coordinated effort with collaboration."* People want to ensure that follow through happens as promised. *"We have started with HCI and Vision 2025 there have been collaborative efforts with lots of groups and people participating in discussions and planning for a stronger future. We are getting people involved and building engagement. There is stronger collaboration now than there has been."* In summary people felt strongly that, *"We are all in this together."*

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2016 Community Conversations Findings Reports

Main Concerns (continued)

- **Growing Poverty Rates & Working Poor-** People are concerned about the job market- the number of jobs that go unfilled; the lack of willingness to work; and jobs with low wages that make it hard to make ends meet. An example would be, *"I have noticed that everyone is hiring, but no one wants to work."* People want income levels to support and sustain local businesses, restaurants, and events. Residents provided examples like, *"Working 50 hours a week- you can't get a different job, they don't have time for education, kids, and more. They have to work. It is like they're trapped."* and *"People can't afford necessities."* They also say that more people are working and still living in poverty. *"People should be able to get SOME assistance while still working a job."* Whether people are working or unemployed, there are too many people stuck in a cycle of poverty because there are too many barriers for accessing resources to help them. *"With all the free meals & other opportunities, it seems hard to believe how many people still need help."* *"There is a gap...if you make too much money you don't get benefits."* People are concerned about how to break the cycle, especially for students who are part of families that have been living in poverty for several generations. *"I struggle to have a job because of the \$9 an hour pay rate. If I get a better job I lose my support system. It feels like a trap. Poverty is a cycle. People don't understand how hard it is to be poor."*
- **Getting out of Poverty-** People went on to describe this cycle of poverty in more detail. They are concerned about the barriers that stand in the way of getting out of poverty, including the cost of health insurance or penalty; rent housing prices and the lack of appropriate housing; being stuck in the 'government assistance hole' when you work hard and receive more in wages and lose even more in benefits; easy access to community resources; low wage jobs; and the lack of child care on weekends and evenings (second & third shift). *"People may make more money on government benefits than by working so they're stuck in the cycle."* *"We need more affordable housing that is also handicapped accessible."* *"High rent and the quality of rentals don't match amount of rent, low income families have to take what is there and don't have skills to push back, clients can't afford utility bills because their aren't doors or windows at their property ... it would be helpful if landlords were more accountable."*
- **Safety of Children & Adults (particularly seniors)-** People want to feel secure letting children ride their bike around the neighborhood or play in the yard without being with them, but they don't feel like they can trust other people. *"I noticed that kids don't play outside as much as they used to."* *"I don't let my kids ride their bike to Kovernor's Korner like my parents let me."* People want to feel safe when going home alone and playing in public parks. *"We want drug free parks that are patrolled regularly, well-lit, with surveillance."* People want to feel safe and secure, not witnessing or experiencing theft or drug deals. *"The more people are out in the community, the safer I feel."* *"Neighbors used to watch out for us besides our parents."*

**Jackson County Public Library & Jackson County United Way
2016 Community Conversations Findings Reports**

Main Concerns (continued)

- **Drugs & Mental Health-** People are concerned that those with lower income play a big part of drug use. *"There's a stereotype that poor people are dangerous."* *"The drugs are across all economic levels."* People are concerned that we do not have adequate resources to help those who have addictions and more support for mental health services. *"Drugs are a symptom of the problem."* *"It is hard to get an appointment without insurance, especially if mental healthcare is need. If clients have trouble with one source, they do not have alternatives here in the county."* People want less babies born addicted, less students to die from drug use, and less parents creating generational drug use. People want more medical personnel following best practices to limit abuse/fraud with controlled drugs and more evidence based prevention work. *"Drug Free- Red Ribbon Week should be supported by the whole community showing that adults are behind this."* People want to better understand the law enforcement/legal side of reducing drugs and more awareness of what to do when you see visible signs of drug use. *"We can't arrest our way out of this."* *"What should I do when I see someone tweaking while driving down Tipton?"* *"A lot of houses look like drug houses and no one calls in about it, needs to be accountability. Multiple people need to be calling the police, especially about places we see and have an uneasy feeling about."* *"Having a drug-free community conversation would be a good thing."*
- **Lack of Social Gatherings & Places-** There is a lack of quality places to go, things to do, places to eat and a lack of an income level to support and sustain these amenities. *"Well-rounded offerings for different things for all ages; all incomes."* People fear to go to the parks due to drugs and the lack of monitoring. *"I fear going to the park- we don't have drug free parks. They are not monitored."* People want one community where everyone works together often mentioning language differences between Latinos & Anglos*. People want places to interact and more events (or knowledge of events in advance). *"We have wonderful things going on, but it is very difficult to communicate together."* *"Better communication- if we had more, free internet spots for communication it would help."* *"We need better communication system for these events."*

*Latinos & Anglos- People in our community use different terms to describe different ethnical groups, we've used the terms most noted in the conversations for this report.

The following issues came up in many conversations and are also important to many in Jackson County:

- **Transportation-** People are concerned that there is limited, costly public transportation, a lack of safe sidewalks, bike & walking trails. *"We need better public transportation system for talking and bikes."* *"City Bus Routes should be expanded."* *"It is hard for anyone to cross Tipton safely. Unless you run you can't get across."* This concern provides barriers for people to get to community resources and events. *"We need the help; handicapped accessible, I can't ride the bus because I can't do the steps."* *"I can't afford to ride. It is \$4 for one round trip. One month pass is \$25, you can't buy the pass on the bus- you have to buy it at City Hall. If you miss your ride it is \$4. Imagine if you have a child and a car seat and groceries. The bus won't wait for you to unload."* *"Now it is hard to get there (events on Saturday afternoons), no transportation on Saturdays."*

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Secondary Issues (continued)

- **Quality Education & Accepting Diversity-** People want to ensure all students excel and succeed, especially students that are English Second Language Learners. *“I would like to see an integrated community where everyone is treated equally and children can play with one another.”* There is a desire to understand and embrace people from other cultures (specifically mentioning Latinos). *“A community that takes care of its own- where everyone has an equal opportunity.”* There is a negative public perception about schools from outside of the community, where online data has discouraged young families from choosing our community as home. *“People here don’t know how good the schools are. The education here is so much stronger than other communities.”* There are growing concerns regarding the educational environment, especially with students questioning authority instead of respecting.

People & Trust in Groups & Organizations

People trust in organizations with a broad scope of influence and those they have a current relationship with. While people believe big organizations should be involved and there was no consensus about which organizations are trusted. Trust is in short supply due to the lack of relationships and decisions made without public input.

People want to see Progress

Residents have seen many community plans come and go without much to show for it. For people to believe this time will be different, they need to see clear attainable goals, objectives, and a timeline identified. They also want to see strong partnerships, more collaboration and community leaders involved.

Members of the community also say that they too will need to get involved if Jackson County is to become a community where attitudes change; and people are respectful and respected.

When people were asked what kinds of things would sense a change these things were noted:

- People want to build relationships with fellow residents in particular there is need for more opportunities to gather together. They also specifically noted more individual volunteering opportunities (including serving youth and those in need of accessing services) being available.
- People want to create and utilize modern ways of communication across the county and better advertisement of community resources, activities, and events.

What do you think?

We’d love to hear from you to understand what you think about the information we’ve heard.

Please let us know if this resonates and think about these questions in order for our whole county to move forward on what residents see as the opportunity for hope and possibility.

1. What do you make of what we are learning?
2. What are the implications for the work that each of us does in our community?
3. Where could we use what we are learning?
4. What possibilities are there for moving ahead?

Contact Us

If you have questions about this information. Contact Tonja Couch, Jackson County United Way Executive Director, tonja@jacsy.org or 812-522-5450.