STRONG NEIGHBORHOODS:
ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS REPORT
In 2014, United Way of Rock River Valley decided that a new approach was necessary to help change the condition of the community. It was decided that in order to improve the real quality of life for children and families in our community, we needed to begin working closer to the ground with a geographically focused vision for our work.

Two of the region’s most challenged neighborhoods – Ellis Heights and Midtown – became the strategic focus of United Way. The Community Impact team developed a plan for advancing the neighborhood work, beginning with engagement.

Before any resources were allocated, United Way did not want to make the mistake of assuming the problems were apparent and we had solutions. Since August 2014, we have been working hard to connect with neighborhood residents, listening to their experiences and perspective. The Community Impact team depends on this local knowledge to inform our neighborhood work.

Engagement efforts include attending neighborhood meetings, and being present at community events to have brief one-on-one discussions with residents to uncover the strengths and weaknesses that exist in the neighborhoods. We also organized “community conversations” with residents to have deeper discussions about their aspirations around education, income and health. These efforts have yielded significant information, with similar findings coming out of both neighborhoods.

This report will provide an overview of the Community Impact team’s engagement efforts. It will begin with findings on resident aspirations, followed by resident responses concerning education, income and health.
“We don’t have to move to have a nice neighborhood.”

Each of our community conversations begin with a discussion on the aspirations residents have for their community, addressing the strengths and weaknesses that exist. To help facilitate the discussions, we asked participants:

- What kind of community do you want?
- What are the barriers to achieving this type of community?

This section covers issues that are not directly related to education, income and health, but must be considered in working to improve the quality of life for neighborhood residents.

**Trust issues are a barrier to development success**

Residents do not feel connected to or trust potential service providers. In a conversation about the barriers to achieving the kind of community desired, one resident identified “haters” and described them as “People acting like they want to help, but at the end of the day they drop off.”

Barriers also include “unhelpful people doing their job just for a paycheck.” Residents underscore the need for true support from the service providers.

**Feelings of apathy and hopelessness**

After years of unfulfilled promises, poor performing schools, and underinvestment, some neighborhood residents are not confident that things can actually get better. “These problems aren’t new,” one attendee said.

The attendee then began a brief discussion on undereducated youth and parents, employers leaving the community and a general lack of citizen involvement. There were comments such as “What’s the use? We’ve been through this before.”

We found that residents were very aware of their experiences with larger societal issues such as racism and discrimination as well.
People Like Their Neighborhood
In both Ellis Heights and Midtown, there were many residents who shared how they generally like the area that they live in; that they are not bad neighborhoods, they just have bad parts.

We understand that people that know their neighbors have a more positive experience in the neighborhood. Residents are interested in social opportunities, chances to connect with their neighbors and build community.

During community conversations, we learned that many residents find value in the idea of coming together. One attendee stated, “We don’t have to move to have a nice neighborhood.”

Strong Neighborhoods
It is interesting that when United Way decided to begin working in a community development capacity, the efforts were named the Strong Neighborhoods initiative. What we have heard repeatedly in both Ellis Heights and Midtown were that residents aspire to have strong neighborhoods. Of the range of responses we received, many were related to the physical condition as well as the “people” elements that contribute to the feeling of a strong neighborhood.

In describing a strong neighborhood, residents made comments similar to the following:

• Safe/Crime free – “We should be able to walk down the street and feel safe.”
• Connected/Supported – “People don’t know about all the programs...There needs to be real support from the professionals.”
• Clean – Attendee discussed how she pays kids $1 to walk around and fill Walmart bags with trash
• Drug Free – One aspiration that was mentioned often was to have a drug free neighborhood.
• Loving/Unified – “People need to come together more, build neighborhood pride...doors will start to open.”

We are adamant about our commitment to listening to this work. It will be very important that we hold true to our word.
“I never learned that my life could be different...”

Education was discussed from two perspectives; access and resources for adult education and the experience young people have in the public schools.

**Adult Education**

**Does Not Feel Attainable**

Neighborhood residents understand the importance of education. During a community conversation, one resident plainly stated to other attendees, “No education means no money.” The challenge is that some people do not feel that higher education is attainable.

The struggles residents experience related to conditions of poverty (single parent households, teen pregnancy and violence) leave people feeling far removed from education opportunities. One resident mentioned, “I never learned that my life could be different... Thought that college had to be paid for ahead, that you need all the money.” The resident later learned that there are financial assistance programs available but didn’t understand how to access the services.

Although programs exist, there are still misunderstandings as to how to navigate the education system.

**GED**

People shared that getting a GED does not seem to be sufficient in leading to economic opportunities. Residents indicated that individuals with diplomas are given jobs over those with GEDs. Concerns about cost and distance came up frequently as well.

During one meeting, an attendee shared “It just costs too much to go back to school to finish a degree.”

There were also calls for better education options closer to the neighborhood, and programming related to employment skills. “We need programs for adults to learn skills to get a job.”
Youth Education

Questions of Quality
The quality of Kindergarten-12 education was discussed as a concern during community conversations. The parents we interacted with felt that two things impacted the quality of their children’s classroom experience.

First, was the classroom size. People felt that there are too many students in the classroom for every teacher, and not enough teachers’ aids. The concern is that teachers cannot provide the level of attention necessary. Parents feel that larger classes contribute to behavior issues and distractions. One attendee mentioned, “My daughter is easily distracted in school because there are so many kids in the class.”

Second, was related to the instruction and advisement that students receive. In many of our community conversations, attendees questioned the cultural relevance of classroom material. One attendee stated, “The kids need teachers who will allow the students to learn about people that look like them.” There were discussions on neighborhood schools scoring low on state report cards, and whether low pay for school district faculty lead to low quality teaching and counseling. Someone shared a story, “advisor says to my daughter who is a junior she should wait until next year to look at colleges.”

Safety In And Out of Schools
Inside the schools, a major concern was bullying. Attendees questioned if schools are equipped to handle bullying. In handling bullying situations or any safety concern, attendees discussed that students should feel comfortable sharing information about safety issues in confidence without being viewed as a “snitch.”

In terms of safety outside of schools, residents expressed concerns with kids who live within the neighborhood school zone having to walk to school in harsh winter conditions. Also, kids have to cross busy arterial roads to get to school.
Need for Hope
There were comments about hopelessness in younger people today. Attendees expressed that there is no clear career path for students in Rockford. “Students don’t feel motivated to get good grades. They engage with the wrong things and the wrong crowds.”

These exchanges were mostly centered on exposing youth to different post-secondary school opportunities to provide them with hope. Comments were made about the need for father figures and positive role models as well.

Nothing to Do
Perhaps the most discussed issue facing our neighborhoods was the notion that “there is nothing for kids to do,” particularly for younger people ages 7-21.

During a one-on-one interview, an eighth grade neighborhood resident framed it as, “we need more chances to meet, learn and have fun at the same time.” Residents understood that there were some afterschool programs in the community, but there were questions about their capacity, the quality of programming and access to programs – access being proximity to the neighborhoods and affordability.

When asked what programming should look like, the following ideas were contributed:

- Fitness/gymnastics – “kids flip at the park all the time”
- Dance/Art – “There’s a child at the park who draws all the time, but he has nothing to do with the talent.”
- Computer Training – “These kids need to do more than Facebook on the computer.”
- Tutoring – “Teachers don’t always have time to help kids during lunch or after school...it would help those that cannot afford tutoring and extra help.”
“The less money you make, the fewer opportunities you have.”

When discussing aspirations for the neighborhoods, one phrase that continued to surface was “a working community.” Income, jobs and access to retail services were repeatedly identified as critical needs by residents in both neighborhoods. Many people expressed interest in working, but discussed the challenges and barriers that make it difficult to gain employment.

**Lack of Job Opportunities**

When asked about the major barriers related to income, one resident put it plainly, “There are no jobs available to provide income.” There was also discussion around the shortage of employment opportunities in the neighborhoods due to lack of business activity.

**Underemployment**

The prevalence of low quality jobs available in the community was mentioned as a challenge. Temporary/staffing agency placements, fast food, retail and minimum wage jobs were described as low quality. “Two people have to be making minimum wage just to KIND of survive.”

We also heard from neighborhood residents frustrated with working multiple jobs, which keeps them away from their families.

**Discrimination**

There were spirited exchanges around the notion that discrimination has been, and still is, a barrier to employment for neighborhood residents. Attendees shared feelings of being discriminated against as minorities, immigrants, having criminal background or even being pregnant.

The challenges that those formally incarcerated have finding employment was a major concern. Attendees made the connection between crime in the community and lack of employment opportunities, “those people could be potential criminals if you let them.”
Limited Transportation
Lack of reliable transportation was presented as a barrier to employment. Many residents without vehicles find the public transportation system time consuming and inconvenient. One attendee that recently moved from Chicago stated, “These buses here are super crazy... if you can get to a job, you’re stuck there.”

Another attendee shared issues with having to juggle other obligations around bus schedules, “If it takes an hour to get to work on the bus, that’s an hour that you have to pay for childcare and you’re not getting paid during that time.”

Frustrating Experiences
There was a great deal of frustration in some neighborhood residents with their general experience trying to find work. This frustration seems to leave many people feeling hopeless and apathetic.

Some of the more broadly discussed frustrations were:

- Online applications do not allow you to connect with employers to explain work history.
- Online aptitude tests are difficult and frustrating.
- The notion that “you gotta know somebody” to be considered for job opportunities.
- Temporary employees getting fired before the 90 day full time threshold, stopping them from receiving benefits or union membership.
- Employers do not offer full time hours in order to avoid providing benefits.
- Issues finding reliable childcare that meets needs (schedules, price, proximity to work or home).

There was also frustration with how food and housing benefits are reduced as family income increases. It was said that the worst thing food and housing assistance providers do is reduce subsidies just as families are working to become financially stable. One attendee offered, “It’s almost like they’re punishing you.”
“You all need to acknowledge that fewer opportunities leads to more crime.”

Our conversations around health in the neighborhoods were usually the shortest. This is likely related to the fact that, as we learned during our dialogues, many residents do not feel knowledgeable enough to address the health issues they have or those that their family members are struggling with. This is true for adults and youth. There was, however, substantial dialogue around physical and mental health. There were also comments about the environmental factors that impact safety.

Access to Healthy Foods and Access to Health Services
We heard many comments about how healthier foods like fruits and vegetables are more expensive than other food, and how difficult it is to eat healthy with a limited income. Residents acknowledged that there are stores that stock healthier items, but these stores were described as “so far away.”

In terms of access to health services, neighborhood residents discussed how constraints related to time and distance make it hard to access health services. Working families struggle with schedules and time off to get kids looked at by a doctor during the day. Another concern was for senior citizens that own homes in the neighborhoods with no one to check on them, and how they may not have knowledge of or access to the support they need.

Physical and Mental Health
There was much dialogue around the physical and mental health of young people and adults in the neighborhoods. When asked what the major health issues were, residents said the following:

- ADHD
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Cancer
- Depression

As mentioned previously, many residents do not feel they have a good enough understanding to help their families with health issues they are struggling with. There was a large amount of concern for kids being medicated for learning disorders like ADHD. Concerns centered around two questions: whether or not the diagnoses were warranted and if young people are receiving proper care for their mental health issues in general.
Substance Abuse
We asked for neighborhood aspirations during our interactions with residents. One that was mentioned often was to have a drug free neighborhood. We heard concern for adults with substance abuse issues, but also for middle and high school students smoking and drinking at young age. It was mentioned that young people may not understand the health effects of their substance abuse.

Residents aspire to have a neighborhood free of drug sales as well. One attendee shared, “people ask me if I want to buy drugs every day.”

Environmental Factors That Affect Health

Crime
Safety was a concern for residents in both neighborhoods. In our discussion with residents, we learned that incidents of crime often involve fights, robberies, shootings or prostitution. Younger people often were mentioned when fighting was discussed. Some residents expressed the opinion that playgrounds and places that should be safe are not always safe for kids.

We asked people’s opinion as to why people shoot, and heard that many incidents are related to drugs, gangs and people needing money. We also heard that crime could be related to the fact that young people have nothing to do. One community conversation attendee said, “You all need to acknowledge that fewer opportunities leads to more crime.”

We learned that there are not many positive interactions between neighborhood residents and police. There were mixed responses around the police presence in the neighborhoods. One resident offered, “The police harassing us doesn’t help...I never know what to expect.” Another shared, “I’m glad they’re here, but some just carry it too far.”

The Physical Condition of the Neighborhood
Residents discussed the poor neighborhood infrastructure, namely crumbling sidewalks, as a barrier to engaging in exercise. One resident shared “I almost twisted my ankle walking kids to school.” Some felt that these conditions cause people to walk in the street and exposes them to dangerous traffic. There was also concern with the number of vacant and abandoned houses, and the idea that people could be occupying them.

Cleanliness is something that residents identified as an aspiration. It was said that less trash in the streets and better yard maintenance would improve the condition of the neighborhoods. One attendee discussed how she pays kids $1 to walk around and fill bags up with trash.
The information in this report will be used to inform the work we do as an organization. As we work to design programs and build partnerships, it is crucial that we revisit the feedback that we received from neighborhood residents to help create solutions. United Way will continue its outreach efforts, working to connect with neighborhood residents to ensure the work that comes out of the Strong Neighborhoods initiative is addressing the concerns residents have communicated to us.

There is great power in the Ellis Heights and Midtown neighborhoods. This power exists in the people who live there. United Way aims to help remove barriers, allowing people to leverage this power to improve their own lives.

Together with neighborhood residents and community partners, United Way is using a collective impact approach by developing a common agenda to find solutions for issues of education, income and health.
THE 5 COMPONENTS OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT


2. Shared Measurement Systems - A common set of indicators for monitoring progress, impact, and how we are “moving the needle.”

3. Mutually Reinforcing Activities - The distinct activities undertaken by various collective impact partners reinforce the activities of other partners and together, lead to system-wide change. United Way will work with social service agencies, faith-based organizations, governmentally supported bodies, and more importantly, the residents and stakeholders of the neighborhood.

4. Continuous Communication - Collective impact partners communicate frequently in the spirit of continuous improvement and learning.

5. Backbone Structure – United Way of Rock River Valley will support the alignment and coordination of the collective impact partners.