



## Public Knowledge Report

United Way of Southwest Michigan values and prioritizes Turning Outward to our communities' aspirations.

Turning Outward is a fundamental orientation and practice of making the community the reference point for growing civic faith and creating change, where one keeps people and the community always in their line of sight. It's not new work, it's *how* we do our current work.

Between August 2022 and February 2023, United Way of Southwest Michigan spoke to 135 community members in community conversations and surveyed 169 additional community members to find the common aspirations and challenges of our neighbors in Southwest Michigan. The participants included those whose voices have been underrepresented in these spaces and those who had perspectives that UWSM felt needed to be heard.

This is what we learned...

“What we need is unity in this community. If we can all recognize that everyone wants the same things -food on the table, a safe place to stay. If we can all just recognize that, I think this community would change significantly.”

“I don't feel like it's one person. But sharing ideas is what is important. People need to work together to make a difference.”

“If we aren't all working together to help everyone in our community, then we are never going to move forward – how do we convince everyone that every problem is everyone's problem?”

“It's not about language, it's about love.”

Consider these questions as you read about what we've learned.

1. What do you make of what we are learning?

2. What do you think this means for our community?

3. Where could you use what we are learning?

4. What possibilities are there for moving ahead?



# First and foremost, community members want cohesion

*(no attempt was made to rank order the importance of these themes)*

## Community Connections and Collaboration

- A longing for community members to come together, respect and appreciate each other, and work toward solutions to common community problems.
- Friendship, warmth, kindness, empathy, respect, understanding, trust, safety, sense of belonging, and giving and receiving help and support between neighbors and across neighborhoods.
- Building quality relationships between individuals was viewed as a key community goal. Similarly, community members want to see different agencies, such as schools, churches and businesses collaborate to help in areas that may lack resources.

## Reduced Divisions within Communities

- The absence of conflicting standpoints (values or opinions), socio-economic divides, and racism/racially driven behaviors that negatively impact residents.
- Less fear and misunderstanding about differences between groups.
- Fewer divisions between community members that are creating isolation from each other and fostering an “us versus them” mentality.

## Increased Equity, Equality and Diversity

- Equal access to resources, equity, and fairness for all community members.
- A community without racism, discrimination, and disengagement.
- Engagement by all groups in actions to improve community outcomes. Adding diverse voices when planning projects and products.

## Greater Representation and Voice in Community Decision-Making

- A strong desire for more citizen involvement in the shaping of their communities.
- More diversity in leadership positions to foster better trust in community leaders.
- Improved communication between leadership and community members. Participants believed that current systems of communication were piecemeal and inconsistent, which results in poor communication and miscommunication.

## Equitable Access to Resources

- Services and resources that are more equitably distributed across communities to meet the needs of community members.
- Increased awareness of resources available to help community members meet basic needs.

## Safety

- The absence of danger physically, mentally, and emotionally in one's community; an expression of concern for the level of crime, violence, safety, and racism within the community.
- Desire to live in a peaceful community, with access to safe outdoor spaces and activities.
- While all groups discussed safety, the concept meant different things to different groups, depending on where they lived, their role, and their age.

It is important to note that community initiatives are generally more successful if they focus on neighborhoods (as opposed to towns or cities) as a unit of planning. The ‘neighborhood’ is conceptually broad enough to help individuals think beyond themselves but has small enough scale to support the idea of ‘neighborliness’ and encourage collaboration between community planners and stakeholders.

## What next?

Share this with your organization; learn more about the Turning Outward Approach at [thearwoodinstitute.org](http://thearwoodinstitute.org); become a UWSM Turning Outward partner by emailing [heather.cole@uwsm.org](mailto:heather.cole@uwsm.org).



Visit [uwsm.org/turning-outward](http://uwsm.org/turning-outward) to learn more about how United Way is Turning Outward and centering the community's voice as our reference point for creating impact.