



CASE STUDY | United Way of Central Iowa's OpportUNITY Plan

Central Iowa is a community with a diverse population, robust insurance, financial services, agri-food and technology sectors, and boundless opportunity. However, the community faces significant challenges — including inequity in health, education and housing. United Way of Central Iowa has made a long-term commitment to reducing poverty in the community, and has recently engaged in concerted efforts to develop a common agenda among community stakeholders while employing a successful collective impact strategy.

Key Points

- Central Iowa has adopted a Collective Impact strategy
- A comprehensive community plan is being implemented
- The poverty rate in Central Iowa is improving

INTRODUCTION

On December 21, 2017, United Way of Central Iowa announced that

The percentage of families in Polk, Warren, and Dallas counties who are financially self-sufficient increased in 2016 to 65.9 percent, (by 11,003 individuals), after remaining flat for the past three years around 65.2 percent. The increase moves central Iowa closer to its community Goal for 2020 of increasing the percentage of families who are financially self-sufficient to 75 percent (United Way of Central Iowa, Press Release, Dec. 2017).

The announcement signalled the first significant decline in the rate of poverty in the community in recent memory, and was evidence that the collective impact approach to community development was having a positive and measurable impact. In 2014, United Way of Central Iowa adopted the “Collective Impact” approach to poverty reduction, where a broad representation of stakeholders came together to

rethink areas of action and to undertake a systems-based approach to community development.¹ This approach was articulated in the [Central Iowa OpportUNITY Community Plan](#).

A long-time focus of United Way of Central Iowa has been the creation of a more equitable society, and the adoption of a collective impact approach extended and amplified this work. A first step in the collective impact approach was initiating an extensive listening campaign and outreach to the top 100 community leaders.

THE OPPORTUNITY SUMMIT, 2014

In June 2014, at the invitation of then United Way of Central Iowa President Mary Sellers, over 100 community members in the Des Moines area came together to learn about the great attributes and challenges of the community and the concerns people had about poverty. The group represented four sectors in equal numbers: business leaders and philanthropists, government and school leaders, non-profit and faith leaders, and community members who have lived with the stresses of poverty. The lived-experience group included single parents, low-wage and low-skilled workers, immigrants and refugees, young people, and those burdened with too much debt. They provided tangible and real-life accounts of the struggles of living in poverty.² The OpportUNITY Summit was the first step in developing a coherent community plan that addressed the particular needs and drew on the unique strengths of Polk, Dallas and Warren Counties in the effort to bring people out of poverty.

Prior to the summit in June 2014, United Way staff participated in a multi-day training exercise, led by Paul Born of the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, where they learned and discussed the principles of a common agenda and a collective impact approach.³ During this exercise, participants

Collective Impact

Collective impact is built upon five interconnected components to produce strong alignment and lead to large scale results:

Common agenda — a shared a vision for change

Shared measurement — agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported

Mutually reinforcing activities — A diverse set of stakeholders across sectors

Continuous communication — All players engage in frequent, structured and open communication

Backbone support — An independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative of community improvement

¹ Elisabeth Buck, President of the United Way of Central Iowa since May 2017, attended a learning event in 2014 led by Paul Born of the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement; the event focused on the “Collective Impact” approach to community development. Buck felt that the collective impact approach was a suitable model for the work of United Way, and she invited Born to coach United Way staff on the approach and its implementation. Paul Born, Interview by author, December 21, 2017.

² United Way of Central Iowa, 2017. *2017 OpportUNITY Community Plan*. Available at: <https://www.unitedwaydm.org/opportunity>

³ Collective impact is built upon five interconnected components to produce strong alignment and lead to large scale results: a common agenda — a shared a vision for change; shared measurement — agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported; mutually reinforcing activities — a diverse set of stakeholders across sectors; continuous communication — all players engage in frequent, structured and open communication; backbone support — an independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative of community improvement.

identified the top 100 stakeholders in community development in the Des Moines area and invited them to a summit where a plan of action could be developed. This approach was crucial to developing a community framework where a broad representation of community members could adopt a realistic understanding of how poverty impacted the community.

The OpportUNITY Summit was a two-day event that began with an evening session, where participants learned about the great opportunities and poverty in the community, followed by an all-day workshop where participants discussed poverty in their community and solutions to it. Before this gathering, the community had never engaged in a multi-sector conversation of this kind.⁴ The gathering included representatives from the business community (25 percent), government (25 percent), non-profit organizations (25 percent), and people with lived experience (25 percent). The cross section of community participants was necessary for a complete and wholesome discussion of the realities of poverty in the community.

At this event, participants were asked: Why is it important that you are here? What is happening now? What is the change you want to see? And, what can we do together? These questions helped organize the discussions and offered a positive framework for action. The key to the approach was engaging a cross-section of community representatives in a discussion where a common goal could be perceived, and participants were able to share their views on how that goal could be achieved.

A COMMON AGENDA FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT

The model for the summit was drawn from Paul Born's paper titled "How to Develop a Common Agenda for Collective Impact: A 5-Step Guide" (Born 2017). The paper outlined the primary purposes of a common agenda: It documents key goals, shares learnings with broader community, and provides a roadmap for action. Building a common agenda is about:

- Building a common commitment
- Reaching out to the community
- Evoking curiosity and creativity
- Taking the time for broad engagement

The OpportUNITY Summit of 2014 demonstrated that a common agenda encourages engagement and dialogue while building commitment; however, developing and implementing a common agenda requires leadership, resources and diligence.

OpportUNITY Central Iowa was initiated by Elisabeth Buck, then Chief Community Impact Officer, now president of United Way of Central Iowa since May 2017. Elisabeth shared then President Mary Seller's recognition of an opportunity for a new vision and how this could have a positive and lasting impact on the community. Buck had attended an event that featured Paul Born of the Tamarack Institute who spoke about the collective impact model for community development; Buck immediately reached out to Born to learn more about collective impact and how it could be applied to central Iowa. Following the



Elisabeth Buck works in remarkable ways. She can feel the community moving.



—Paul Born

⁴ Paul Born, Interview by author, December 21, 2017.

Summit, United Way assembled a team to lead the OpportUNITY project and develop a community plan. Notable members of the team included Renée Miller, then Community Impact Officer of Income (now Chief Community Impact Officer), who was responsible for getting the project off the ground and ensuring its success; Dr. Helene Grossman, Community Impact Services Director, who wrote the report and compiled key data; and Corinne Lambert, Community Impact Manager, who managed communications between Tamarack and United Way of Central Iowa. In 2017, Seth Johnson joined the team as OpportUNITY Program Director.

In the year following the 2014 OpportUNITY Summit, the team held a range of community conversations (there were 40 of these that included a total of 140-170 individuals), established a data team and a communications and engagement team, and established a leadership roundtable. The roundtable brought together OpportUNITY membership on a regular basis for intense discussions to review actions already taken and to discuss implementing the community plan. At these roundtables, the community plan was reviewed and adjusted in relation to changing conditions and emerging circumstances.

DEVELOPING THE COMMUNITY PLAN

The OpportUNITY Summit in June 2014 was designed to bring together members of the community in an unprecedented, multi-sector conversation about poverty in the community and solutions to it. An

Challenge/barrier:

The Leadership Roundtable realized at an early stage that more learning had to be conducted on the realities of living in poverty.

Action/response:

A group of 46 community members from four sectors engaged over 184 individuals in 22 group and 31 individual Listening and Learning Sessions to learn and understand:

- The characteristics of the life that people living in poverty want to create.
- What is helping them create that life?
- What is getting in the way of creating that life?
- What would most help people to get out of poverty?

immediate outcome of the summit was guidance from the community on the realities of people living in poverty; the key points were:

- No one decides to live in poverty.
- People need jobs that pay livable wages.
- There is no such thing as poverty; there are just 100 different reasons why people are poor.
- There is a need to develop a plan and sustain action, not just be well-meaning people talking about it.
- There is no silver bullet; if there was, we would have ended poverty a long time ago. It will take lots of different changes, big and small, to decrease poverty.

The summit marked a good beginning for OpportUNITY, but its overall success would depend on continued effort and follow-up. The regular meetings of the Leadership Roundtable kept the project moving forward, and the OpportUNITY team continued to engage with the broader community to share information and receive input.

To affirm that the draft plan accurately reflected the needs and opportunities of the community, a second follow-up summit took place on November 2-3, 2015. The purpose of this summit was to bring together community members to review, revise and commit to

the plan. The repeated efforts to bring stakeholders together resulted in an increased cohesion among

community members and a deepening commitment to a common agenda.

The overarching message was that: if people work together, the plan could be put into action to bring prosperity to all. After the 2015 summit, the Leadership Roundtable met every other week. The 14-member team was made up of interested individuals representing the four sectors (business leaders and philanthropists, government and school leaders, non-profit and faith leaders, and community members who have lived with the stresses of poverty). The work of this group included building a membership database, sharing and celebrating successes and inspired efforts in the community, informing the membership throughout the process through newsletters and presentations, creating an OpportUNITY website and developing a community plan. The community plan would be released in 2016 as *The Central Iowa Opportunity Community Plan*.

In early 2016, close to 1,000 individuals from all walks of life and from all corners of the community signed on to support OpportUNITY.

POVERTY IN CENTRAL IOWA

The 2016 Community Plan was necessary because poverty rates in Central Iowa had not declined in decades. United Way recognized the need for a new approach in 2014 and took action. The county-level poverty data released on October 23, 2015, showed that there was significant work still to be done to help central Iowans move to sustainable self-sufficiency. The data⁵ was clear; key points include:

- Since 2011, the percentage of central Iowans living below the 100 percent federal poverty level had increased from 9.8 percent to 11.3 percent. The state percentage for 2014 was 12.6 percent.
- With over 22 percent of people who have less than a high school diploma living below 100 percent of poverty in central Iowa, individuals without a high school diploma or equivalency may only be eligible for low-wage jobs. Some minimum-wage jobs require at least an equivalency diploma.
- More females (12.4 percent) are living in poverty than males (10.3 percent).
- In Polk County, 22.7 percent of families in poverty are led by single fathers; 34.8 percent are led by single mothers.
- In Polk County, the percentages of African Americans (36 percent), Hispanics (25.5 percent) and people of two or more races (29.2 percent) living in poverty indicate disproportionate numbers when compared with the white population (9.8 percent).

CHILDREN IN POVERTY

- Low-income children from birth to age five are twice as likely as affluent children to be obese.
- By age four, research shows that low-income children have heard 30 million fewer words than their affluent peers.
- Low-income children have less access to developmentally appropriate, high-quality early care and learning opportunities.
- Children eligible for free and reduced-price lunch are 30 percent more likely to be chronically

⁵ Data points below refer to 100 percent of the Federal poverty level and below.

absent in fourth grade and 40 percent more likely to be absent in eighth grade. This affects their academic performance.

- Nationally, only 15 percent of children who receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year have access to those meals during the summer.

ADULTS AND FAMILIES LIVING IN POVERTY

- In addition to reducing poverty for the family, an increase in the number of adults with high school equivalency diplomas, industry-recognized credentials and the benefit of soft-skill training can increase the skill of the workforce to meet the needs of the community's employers.
- The state's skills gap persists with only 32 percent of working Iowans having the skills and credentials needed to work in the middle skill jobs that make up 55 percent of Iowa's jobs.
- High school dropouts are more likely than those who graduate to be arrested or have a child while still a teenager, which both incur additional financial and social costs.
- Iowa's average earnings for private-sector workers are 23 percent below the national average.
- Des Moines, Iowa, has been named one of the "Worst Cities for Black Americans" focusing on the gap in quality of life compared to whites.

The poverty issues faced by the community were long-standing and difficult to overcome, but community members agreed that they were not insurmountable.

THE OPPORTUNITY PLAN OF ACTION

As a result of the community conversations and continued multi-sector engagement, central Iowans, under the leadership of OpportUNITY Central Iowa, developed clear priority areas for action. These are:

- Education
- Transportation, Homelessness and Housing
- Change: Individual, Place-Based and System Change
- Food Insecurity

In each of these priority areas, the OpportUNITY Plan details the situation affecting each priority area and offers clear **Performance Measures, Action Steps, and Advocacy Efforts**. These three criteria are essential for ensuring that all stakeholders understand where the community is in the process; it provides clear reporting tools for outcomes, and indicates next steps for action.

The community plan included some discussion on success within priority areas, and is clear where work needs to be done. For example, the plan highlights the "Gaining Ground: Child Care Cliff Effect" where a family's ability to move out of poverty when an increase in income results in a loss of child care benefits. Even before the OpportUNITY Plan for 2016 had been released, progress on one of the core issues in system change happened with the reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Fund grant. The Department of Human Services and United Ways of Iowa helped inform changes to the state plan that have been positive for Iowa's children and families as well as child care providers.

- The eligibility for Child Care Assistance (CCA) increased to 12 months (from 6 months).
- There is now a 3-month job search allowed if families receiving CCA lose employment;

individuals lost CCA benefits immediately if they lost employment.

- Families remain eligible for CCA when there is a temporary change in their work and/or education status during the 12-month period. Families with fluctuating hours of employment or work/training/education lost assistance during those periods.
- Families are able to maintain CCA for at least one year after their income exceeds the program limit. They used to immediately lose eligibility.

These are definitive wins on the Child Care Cliff Effect front, but the work continues.⁶

REPORTING OUTCOMES

The community plan concludes with a discussion on how OpportUNITY employs the collective impact approach, and identifies innovations in anti-poverty efforts. The evidence for the efficacy of Collective Impact approach is outlined in the extensive “[Stories](#)” section on the United Way/OpportUNITY website where individuals describe how United Way and community partners impacted their lives. Significantly, the annual [Community Impact Report](#) communicates accomplishments, needs, and areas for action, and offers concrete measures of improvement and of need.

GOALS

The Goals for United Way Central Iowa are articulated in clear, concise terms, both in the context of the OpportUNITY Plan and United Way more generally. The [goals](#) for United Way of Central Iowa are organized under three areas of interest: Education, Income and Health. To achieve progress in reaching these goals, United Way takes action in four ways:

- It unites community stakeholders such as donors, volunteers, businesses, non-profits, faith-based, community leaders, government, experts, and those in need to identify challenges in the areas of Education, Income and Health.
- It breaks challenges down to root causes, and with stakeholders, develops research-based comprehensive strategies to make significant and sustainable progress on addressing central Iowa's toughest issues.
- Once the strategies are set, United Way invests in or creates initiatives designed to advance Goals for 2020. It convenes coalitions, advocates for public policy, raises awareness and mobilizes volunteers.
- Finally, United Way evaluates progress by creating metrics and continuously measuring and evaluating the results of investments, holding every initiative accountable to ensure they are making real progress.

The OpportUNITY Plan concludes with an acknowledgement that the collective impact effort demonstrating success in central Iowa can only be sustained if it is supported by adequate resources. United Way has a clear view of its own role in this effort.

- United Way of Central Iowa will have oversight of this initiative.
- The Leadership Roundtable will provide oversight for prioritizing and leading the work.
- One full-time dedicated person will lead this work, lead the Priority Working Groups, interface

⁶ United Way of Central Iowa (2017). *2017 Community Impact Report*, 27. www.unitedwaydm.org/what-we-do.

with government leaders and funders, and perform other duties necessary for plan implementation and success.

- A second full-time staff person will attend all meetings and help facilitate the communication and collaboration among all members and organizations and will perform duties as needed to support the OpportUNITY work.

It is important to recognize that the goals identified by United Way represent a common agenda shared by the community.

MOVING FORWARD

In December 2017, United Way of Central Iowa announced the first decline in the rate of poverty in that community in several years. This decline can be attributed to the long-term efforts of United Way of Central Iowa and the community, along with its recent adoption of a common agenda and a collective impact approach, articulated since 2014 as OpportUNITY Central Iowa.

There were measurable improvements in the rates of poverty in 2016. In that year “more families were financially self-sufficient in central Iowa” and 1,265 fewer individuals lived below the United States Federal Poverty Line — a decrease to 11.1 percent of central Iowa’s population from 11.5 percent of the population in 2015 (United Way 2016). However, to ensure long-term success, the community needs to maintain its efforts. Renée Miller, Chief Community Impact Officer for United Way points out that

While we are seeing some gains for those who live in poverty and are working, we also continue to have one-third of individuals in central Iowa who live in poverty. This means we have more work to do to address the barriers faced by those living in poverty and to engage central Iowans in the OpportUNITY plan focused on improving the lives of these families (United Way 2017).

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