Summary of Genesee Community Meetings

A series of seven community meetings were facilitated by MSU Outreach Partnerships in October and November 2000 under the sponsorship of the United Way of Genesee County, Michigan. Based on the agreements at the United Way planning meeting, the purpose of the sessions was to shift attention away from the issues people might think are “wrong” with the County and instead to focus on capturing a general community view of what characteristics a healthy Genesee County should have.

This shift in attention from Genesee’s deficits to its strengths is based on the knowledge that just understanding a community’s problems does not easily lead to deciding what to do about them. By focusing on what characteristics citizens believe should exist in a healthy Genesee County the community meetings could both determine the community’s desired end point and gather the community’s suggestions for achieving that vision.

In this context, the goals for the community meetings were as follows:

1. To identify themes that represent what the community believes a healthy, vibrant community might be like
2. To involve the recipients of service in order to find out if they are getting what they need and to have them help identify what good services look like
3. To get practical community input that will help in the allocation process
4. To begin a community discussion of the proper role for United Way of Genesee County
5. To begin a discussion process between donors and community volunteers
6. To begin to inventory successes in the community

The sessions were designed and conducted in a manner to immediately show the intent of United Way to operate in new ways. The process was relaxed and informal, designed to create an enjoyable, comfortable atmosphere where all could participate and speak their mind.

In accordance with the wishes of the planning group, the cluster sessions were to answer certain questions:

A. What do you want in your community? What are the characteristics of a “great” community?
B. What should be the United Way’s role in achieving that vision? Is it beneficial for United Way to be a convener, a catalyst, and a grantor?
C. What examples of healthy services exist in the community? What are their aspects? What are examples of what’s missing?

While there was some variation from meeting to meeting, the discussion at all seven sessions focused on gathering participant reactions to four key questions:

1. What personal stories of yours illustrate healthy themes or values for the community?
2. What key words or phrases would describe a healthy Genesee County?
3. What criteria could United Way apply to help Genesee County move toward health?
4. What is the possible effect over time if the criteria were used?

This approach was designed to capture patterns of thought – to examine how the participants connect language and concepts and form them into patterns. The questions were designed to form a systemic picture of how participants think about positive change occurring in Genesee County. The chart below demonstrates how a community vision can be translated into agency action. In this process, community members are asked to describe personal stories that illustrate healthy communities. They are then asked to apply these positive experiences to identify key words that describe a healthy community. These key words constitute a community vision that forms the basis for agency planning and action.
Themes for a “Healthy” Genesee County

In each session the central idea of helping people connect emerged from the personal stories and key words the community participants used to describe what a healthy community looks like. They identified these themes:

- People helping others
- Coming together as a community
- Strength in diversity

Criteria that United Way could apply in Funding to Help Genesee County Move Toward Health

The community meetings produced the following criteria that United Way might use in its fund allocation process to help support a healthy Genesee County. The participants’ view of a changing leadership role for United Way of Genesee County is imbedded in these criteria:

1. Expand collaboration
2. Focus on outcomes
3. Provide leadership
4. Consider how agencies connect with communities
5. Support volunteers for United Way and other areas
6. Look for added benefits
7. Support kids and families
8. Support older adults
9. Meet basic needs