



Community Voices

IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY SOCIAL ISSUES



“Attitude doesn’t cost dollars and it helps create new approaches and actions.”

“I hate to be beholden to people all the time. I want to be as independent as possible.” – Journey Forward Participants



JOURNEY FORWARD – A COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT INITIATIVE



Over 3,000 Winnipeggers have demonstrated how much they care for their city through their thoughtful participation in United Way’s Journey Forward. The process has tapped into a deep commitment to the well-being of our city from those who have participated. Journey Forward is bringing the community together to identify priority social issues and shape responses to those issues.



This process has four aims:



1. Engage the community in identifying Winnipeg’s important social issues.
2. Build consensus on priority social issues.
3. Create an environment to inspire solutions.
4. Mobilize collective action to work towards solutions.



With the release of this report – Community Voices, Identifying Community Social Issues – the first aim has been accomplished. Information has been gathered and released in a series of reports through a process that began in June 1999.

- An environmental scan outlined trends and demographics in Winnipeg.
- A report on the experiences and views of people who deliver social services provided a compelling perspective on the successes and struggles service providers face each day and their commitment to a vibrant and innovative social services sector.
- The report on the views of people who need to find and use social services captured frustrations and determination. They want to find ways to make things better for themselves, their families and neighbourhoods.
- A widely distributed public survey drew over 2,800 responses and reflected Winnipeggers’ awareness of the challenges in our city.

The following report summarizes what various community voices have said through the above noted reports.



THE ENVIRONMENT – WHERE WE LIVE, WORK, PLAY, INVEST AND RAISE OUR FAMILIES

Businesses, organizations, families, individuals, governments and anyone who spends, invests, raises dollars or works feel the impact of the economy each and every day. The economy may drive or be driven by other factors including demographics, social trends and policy decisions. All of these factors affect both the demand for social services and the resources available to meet the demand.

Manitoba's usually stable economy is experiencing solid and sustained growth. In many sectors there are more jobs than people qualified to fill them. Governments remain fiscally cautious. The possibility of new government funding competes with the call to lower taxes after a decade of fiscal restraint. This restraint froze, shifted, or reduced funding support for a range of health, education and social services. This in turn put different demands and pressures on the voluntary social services sector.

Despite a healthy economic outlook, poverty continues to affect individuals and families, particularly those with children. The gap between rich and poor is widening and there appears to be an imbalance in the ability to take advantage of economic health and the well-being it can generate.

Our population is aging as general health and medical advances increase life expectancy. That raises issues of elder abuse, inter-generational conflict and the adequacy of retirement savings, along with opportunities to strengthen and extend the nuclear family with older relatives. The demand for caregivers and their respite is a new, but growing issue.

A young and expanding Aboriginal population is dealing with serious social and economic issues. For example poverty affects more Aboriginal families, more intensely, particularly in the inner city. However, the seeds of future successes have been sown and a time of healing has begun.

COMMUNITY VOICES – COMMON THEMES

Three common themes that underline the following specific issues were:

- No single issue stands on its own. Each one is linked or affects another. This inter-dependency highlights the complexity of social issues and the need to address multiple challenges, not just one.
- The community as a whole must work together to make effective and positive changes. No one sector or entity such as government, police, business or social services can effectively address these challenges on its own. When all sectors come together, the impact can be far-reaching and sustain lasting solutions.
- There are solutions at work in the community that make a positive difference in people's lives every day. Most of these solutions are rooted in the concept of community development. These solutions are driven by individuals neighbourhoods and community, with public and private sector support, in proactive, positive and effective ways that implement change.

People in crisis or facing difficult problems need access to social services. When receiving services they need to move from crisis to treatment, if appropriate, to healing, recovery and ultimately independence and self-sufficiency. The systems ability to deliver this range of services is an asset that can be improved.

Poverty

“We had one family that has been on social assistance for four generations – now three members are employed. The kids take pride in showing off mom’s office.”

“I was a viable person in society. Overnight I moved from comfort to poverty. It can happen to anyone at anytime.” – Journey Forward Participants

The powerful grip of poverty and its pervasive effects on individuals, families, neighbourhoods and the community at large was identified by virtually all participants who contributed their views during the information gathering phase of Journey Forward.

Poverty can strike suddenly and dramatically change an individual's or family's economic and social fortune. Poverty can also be generational, creating an increasingly difficult cycle to break with each new generation. In either instance poverty is linked to a feeling of desperation, isolation, hopelessness and helplessness. These feelings magnify the impact of poverty and other issues such as addictions and violence.

Most people receiving social assistance are not there by choice. They would prefer to be contributing, productive members of society. They may be unable to do so because of a physical or mental disability, a lack of job skills, illness, or the loss of a spouse and the need to care for young children.

The choices people face can be profoundly difficult. One participant spoke about trying to decide if she should attend a training session where daily participation was required or stand in line at the food bank so that she and her children would have food for the last few days of the month.

Housing was identified as a problem. The issues identified related to affordability, especially for those receiving social assistance, the condition of some homes and the safety of some neighbourhoods, particularly when raising young children. The ability to own a home, establish roots and build a sense of community were seen as solutions that would begin to address housing and other social issues.

Poverty contributes to and magnifies family and social instability. It has a profound impact on the demand for services and the long-term stability of neighbourhoods that experience violence, transience and hopelessness.

Families, Children and Youth

“Many organizations take responsibility away from parents instead of helping them become better families.”

“Family breakdown leads to street gangs, violence and addictions to alcohol, drugs and gambling.” - Journey Forward Participants

Strengthening families, preventing future problems by working with young children and making positive connections with young people were referenced over and over again. At times it was seen as a stand-alone issue and in other cases it was seen as a solution that could address other issues. The family, no matter what its structure, has sometimes been undermined by the very programs put in place to support it. Overall, support for the family unit as a stable and safe place to raise healthy and happy children was seen as an important undertaking and a good long-term investment.

Family breakdown is both a cause and a result of other problems such as addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling, and issues of abuse, poverty and street gangs. Factors such as the high number of teen pregnancies and the impact of residential schools on Aboriginal parents were noted as factors that took away parenting skills and family cohesiveness. Other family stresses which were noted include low wages, poor access to affordable daycare by parents who are working or taking educational upgrading or job training, and who have non-traditional working hours.

Safety and Well-being

“It is better to build lives than mend them.”

“When the sun goes down everyone wants to go home and get behind locked doors.” - Journey Forward Participants

A widely distributed public survey found that Winnipeggers want a safe and healthy community. Issues related to crime, gang violence, family violence and general safety were the highest rated concerns by the 2,800 respondents, no matter what age or what area of the city they lived in. In discussion groups, seniors said they were afraid to go out at night and were uncomfortable around groups of youth. Young people were worried about their personal safety and the potential threat in some neighbourhoods from gang activity. Fear was a concern that threaded its way through several discussions. It took different forms for different groups but the result was similar in that it hindered or prevented people from making efforts to improve their lives.

The Road to Self-Sufficiency and Independence - It's a Bumpy Ride

“When you're focused on just surviving, it's hard to get beyond that. How do you do that?”

“I risk losing my job every time I have to stay home and care for my sick child or take her to the doctor.”

“Program eligibility is so specific and restrictive. We've tried to make people fit into boxes to meet eligibility criteria. This means they have to accept services they don't need in order to get what they do need.” - Journey Forward Participants

Social services in both the voluntary and government sectors generally exist to foster a healthy community by encouraging self-sufficiency and independence and by helping people achieve their potential. From the perspectives of people who provide and people who use services, there was a sense that accessing services, finding information and moving ahead could be more than challenging and occasionally daunting.

Information is almost as valuable as cash and sometimes much harder to come by. In an era labelled as the information age, those who lack the skills and means to acquire and use information are greatly disadvantaged. It is a major stumbling block in acquiring the necessary resources to overcome obstacles that limit people from meeting their physical, emotional and economic needs.

Transportation was flagged as another serious obstacle to achieving self-sufficiency and independence. Bus fares are significant costs for people on fixed incomes who must ride several buses throughout the day looking for employment. In an automobile-based society, tasks such as grocery shopping, getting to doctors and dentists – particularly with young children – can be difficult and time consuming.

Participants noted the enormous strengths and outstanding individuals working very hard to deliver effective services in the social services system. At the same time, there need to be more linkages between services and sectors. This can be frustrating for individuals who often need more than one service. Service providers in particular felt it was crucial to link with other sectors in the community – business, labour, health, education – to effectively create and implement lasting meaningful solutions.

Wanted: Safe and Caring Neighbourhoods...

Missing: Community Confidence, Self-Respect, Courtesy, Respect for Others...

“Respect and dignity as a human being. That's what I'm missing.”

“We have a culture of violence. Media, movies, video games and sports use aggression to resolve disputes and solve problems.” - Journey Forward Participants

The way people are treated in their homes, workplaces and community was a common theme from participants. There was a plaintive plea for such simple things as basic manners, common courtesy and respect for one another.

There was also deep concern over the level of violence in our society and a sense that a culture of violence was becoming more entrenched as a result of movies, television, video games and sports. Poverty, disconnected families, hopelessness and a shift in morals and values all

exacerbate issues of violence. Some participants felt that treatment, healing and most importantly, early intervention programs were critical to addressing violence.

The value Canadians place on a civil society has been confirmed in numerous polls. United Way's Journey Forward has found a strong feeling that how we treat each other is important. This feeling appears to be linked to people's sense of community and pride of place. It is a broad and encompassing issue that begins with an individual and moves out to define community.

Quality of Life

There have been great strides in providing the opportunities and means for people with disabilities to achieve their potential. However, some advances do not mean it is time for complacency. For example, participants in discussion groups often felt frustrated dealing with several parallel, but separate "stove pipes" when they need services from the health-care, education and social services sectors.

Inconsistent services for children with special needs turn many parents into aggressive advocates for improvement. The quality and accessibility of services change from pre-school to school age to adolescent to adult. Many services at different ages were identified as excellent and critical to the long-term development of children. The long waiting lists however, are daunting.

Changing programs, short-term projects, waiting lists, are some of the obstacles that people with physical and mental disabilities have to overcome. The need for technology and quick repairs is critical to many people with disabilities. Waiting lists for technology or repairs often mean isolation and an inability to work. Accessing appropriate and timely transportation is also important to ensure people with disabilities have the opportunity to plug into daily activities such as jobs, recreation and routine errands.

Age Matters

"Why is it that when your hair turns white you are treated like you are stupid, especially if you are a woman?"

"Just because you look young doesn't mean you aren't responsible." – Journey Forward Participants

Age really does matter in determining how you are treated, particularly if you are a teenager or a senior. Both deal with stereotypes that are sometimes insulting and demeaning. Both groups also face distinct and serious challenges.

Seniors spoke of issues relating to fear, mobility, respect, trust and health. They also noted that there are different groups of seniors with different financial circumstances and perspectives on being old. So-called "new" seniors are more recently retired and likely have a reasonably comfortable income and are healthy and active. "Old" seniors who may be close to their 80's have different issues and may feel more frail or cautious. Dignity and a life of independence are important goals. Lack of transportation was also noted as another factor that contributes to long periods of isolation and loneliness for the elderly.

Quality of life concerns also affect services for seniors at different ages, raising issues of dignity and independence. Another area of note is respite for service providers. Families, jobs, and children are demanding of time, energy and money. Add in aging or ill parents or relatives and the balance for both the patient and the caregiver can begin to fray. Participants identified palliative care as a definite need.

The demands on young people – both positive and negative – can be overwhelming. The negative pull of street life and gang activity is especially difficult in an environment of violence, poverty and despair. Youth want opportunities to make positive choices in a stable and healthy environment. Affordable, accessible and fun recreational opportunities, personal and family counselling, education and training were all flagged as important issues. Young people were also frustrated with the public's negative image of young people.

Aboriginal People – A Time of Healing

“We need to recognize the gifts, talents and resources in the Aboriginal community.”

“We teach people the positive side of Aboriginal culture. Often they’ve only known the negative things.” – Journey Forward Participants

The Aboriginal community is Winnipeg's fastest growing population group. It is also a community facing serious economic, social and systemic problems tracing back to colonization and residential schools which disrupted family life for generations. The challenges faced by Aboriginal people are known to many. What may not be as well appreciated are the efforts of the Aboriginal community to come together and address these issues from a cultural, economic, traditional and social perspective.

Several consultation processes and papers have been completed in recent years including a discussion paper on an Urban Aboriginal Strategy, Priorities for Action: Towards a Strategy for Aboriginal People Living in Winnipeg; and Manitoba Roundtable to name a few. Aboriginal empowerment, self-reliance and ensuring Aboriginal people are driving and controlling solutions that affect them is a theme which echoes through all the reports. Some other observations include:

- Aboriginal people have the ability to add to the economy and need to capitalize on those abilities to make overall improvement.
- Aboriginal people are not a homogenous group. Needs and interests may vary from one group to another.
- Government and social agencies can't solve all problems. Individuals and communities must work together to make a difference.
- True partnerships with Aboriginal people and all levels of government are necessary.

CONCLUSION

Over 3,000 people have added their thoughts, views, experiences and perspectives to United Way's Journey Forward process. The information gathered to date reflects a broad understanding of the community's challenges. It also suggests a commitment to learn and build on what is working, and to make changes that address issues of common concern.

Journey Forward is a community involvement initiative. As the process moves from identifying issues to identifying what changes can be made, it will provide more opportunities for increased community involvement, awareness and activity. A series of cross-sectoral discussions will involve over 150 community leaders in the development of a draft community agenda to address social issues. This agenda will be widely circulated and lead to an interactive community forum. The forum will be an opportunity for Winnipeggers to review the agenda and find ways to connect people to plans and actions.

Journey Forward builds on community strengths. No single entity – government, charitable groups such as United Way, organizations or companies – can deal with social issues on its own. By working together, the impact can be long lasting solutions that effectively address complex and inter-related issues.

COMMUNITY VOICES – SUMMARY OF WHAT WAS SAID
THE FOLLOWING ARE HIGHLIGHTS OF FOUR JOURNEY FORWARD REPORTS

Environmental Scan	People Who Provide Social Services	People Who Use Social Services	Public Survey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A stronger economy has not benefitted all people – increasing numbers are living in poverty. • Demographic and social trends affect social service demands: an aging population, the number of at-risk children and youth, and the high number of teen pregnancies. The city also has a strong Aboriginal presence and a diverse ethnocultural base. • Government responses to high deficits have changed funding and operating approaches. Roles of the public, private and voluntary sectors are changing, affecting both supply and demand for social services. • The charitable sector is changing and developing, and continues to look closely at issues of revenues, accountability and ethics in its work with the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty is affected by issues related to literacy, challenges in the inner city and housing. Community development is seen as a key approach to address poverty. • Stressed families often result in stressed out kids. • Violence, anger and unequal opportunities undermine families and communities. The sense of a civil society is deteriorating. • Aboriginal people face numerous social and economic challenges and have begun to address them as a community. • Quality of life issues are important to seniors and people with disabilities. Advances need to be maintained and enhanced. • Project funding can start valuable services that end when the money runs out. • People who provide social services need strong community wide commitment and involvement to be successful. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty results in an exhausting effort to survive. Breaking the cycle of poverty takes energy and determination. • Lack of information is a barrier to accessing and using services. • Transportation is an issue for individuals looking for work, young families with small children, seniors and people with disabilities. • Youth identified the need for more recreational services, family counselling, education and a stable and healthy environment. • Dignity and respect for individuals is often missing. • There are “young” seniors and “older” seniors with different needs in terms of support, recreation and social interaction. • People with disabilities deal with the stigma of disabilities, challenges in the health care system, continuity of services for different age groups and opportunities to access technology, education and employment. 	<p>The top 10 issues, ranked in order below, were identified by 2,800 respondents from a list of 26:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduce the incidence of youth crime and gang activity. 2. Reduce family violence/abuse and help victims of violence/abuse. 3. Reduce the incidence of neighbourhood crime and violence. 4. Educate/train Winnipeg's youth and adults for employment. 5. Assist Winnipeggers in breaking the cycle of poverty. 6. Enable the elderly to live as independently as possible. 7. Rejuvenate Winnipeg's inner city neighbourhoods. 8. Increase employment opportunities for Winnipeggers. 9. Provide emergency assistance for those in crisis. 10. Enable people with disabilities to live as independently as possible.

