Topeka Community Conversation on Poverty

Executive Summary

Summer 2014
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Letter from the Organizers

First and foremost, we would like to thank you for your interest in alleviating poverty from our community. This is a daunting but critical endeavor, and without your commitment to fighting this debilitating circumstance, we wouldn’t make it very far.

When the organizers of this event first started talking, it was clear to us that there was a disconnect between those in poverty, those with a firm desire to fight poverty on their personal time, and those who spend their professional lives assisting those in poverty. There were, we acknowledged, great things happening in Topeka to combat poverty, but no one seemed to be talking to each other about those great things.

And that’s how the Topeka Community Conversation on Poverty was born.

Our goal, as organizers, was to gather as many people in the poverty arena as possible, put them in the same room, and get them to talk to one another. It was critical, we knew, to include as many people as possible, including local government officials, service providers, those in or near poverty, teachers, nonprofits, community leaders, volunteers, and anyone who felt passionate about poverty.

And we did it. On June 11, more than 150 people gathered at Washburn University to discuss poverty, exchange resources, and brainstorm solutions to the smallest and largest poverty-associated problems facing our community. Through the unconference format, Conversation participants chose topics that were impacting our community the most and proceeded to have hour long conversations in self-selected groups about those topics.

The following pages provide a brief overview of the most salient points as decided by the participants in those sessions. We hope you find these ideas to be helpful, refreshing, and overall, we hope that they will inspire you to create a new program, provide a new service, or collaborate with others in the area to address the needs of our community.

Our goal was to start the conversation. Now we need you to continue the conversation and take action. Please keep in touch with the event organizers through our Facebook page or by emailing us about any activities you have undertaken as a result of the Conversation. We would love to be able to highlight these outcomes at next year’s event.

Thank you, from the bottom of our hearts, for all that you do and for all that you sacrifice. Our community would be nothing without you.

Sincerely –

The TCCOP Steering Committee
The following is a complete list of the topics submitted as potential session topics. The Conversation attendees then voted on the topics they found most important or interesting and the day’s schedule was created based on the topics that received the most votes.

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Session Summaries

Below are summaries of each Conversation session as presented by each group. These points represent the main findings, thoughts, and/or solutions of the respective sessions.

Session: Mentoring for Survival Skills
- Started by creating a list of the skills that would be needed by those in poverty.
- Next, we discussed how we would provide these skills to both kids and adults.
- Determined that we don't need more programs, there are enough out there already. However, there are gaps and barriers to overcome.
- There needs to be one access point. There is one for kids mentoring programs. (ksmentors.org), but we need one for adult programs.
- Focus needs to be on survival, how-to's, and self-sufficiency.

Session: Access to Healthcare
- Started the conversation by determining if we really know what’s available.
- What are some measurables? How do we know when we have succeeded?
- There needs to be a focus on preventative care.
- Idea: a free expo with Washburn and Baker nursing students, a type of health fair, maybe at the Expocentre?
- There is a lack of diagnosis education and follow-up education. How can we improve this?
- Pharmacists need to be engaged in this process.
- Medicaid expansion is crucial.
- Transportation hinders access. Need to overcome this barrier.

Session: Parenting Education
- Parenting education needs to happen early and often, starting when the child is in womb and continuing throughout its life.
- We must consider differences between cultures.
- There is a need to “unlearn” some things in multigenerational families and retrain to now-common practices.
- There needs to be easy access to available resources.
- We need to educate BOTH parents, men and women.
- Perhaps providing them with positive parenting role models?
- We need to work on engaging the fathers and showing them that they do have an impact on their child’s life.
- The Pine Ridge model is doing well. Where else can we implement this?

Session: Faith and Spirituality in Empowerment
- Humility can make us vulnerable.
- Faith-based workers need to serve whole-heartedly.
- We must teach empathy for others’ life situations.
- The importance of giving without expectations needs to be stressed.
We need to get back to loving our neighbors in tangible ways and nurture each and every person.
- We are all effected by poverty.

**Session: Rural vs. Urban Poverty**
- The availability of services in rural areas is lacking.
- Access to food is a huge issue.
- Rural communities are aging without an influx of youth. Who will take care of them?
- Is there a central resource we can implement in Topeka to serve surrounding rural communities?
- What are the best places to collaborate and provide services in rural areas? Libraries? Churches?

**Session: Poverty in Public Schools**
- Again, poverty affects everyone.
- There is a strong need for community engagement and public partnerships within our schools.
- Teachers need a better understanding of the situations their students are in.
- We need to focus on treating students as individuals.
- Educating the community at large about poverty could help them be more active in schools.
- We need to lean on volunteerism to help address the issues caused by poverty in public education.
- School should be a judgment-free environment.

**Session: Job Creation**
- How do we overcome the barriers to jobs and job creation?
- We need to streamline local government policies. How do we do this?
- We need to take a look at economic development policies.
- Creating a skill ladder: teaching soft skills through technical skills.
- We need to work to create/find barrier free jobs, especially for felons.
- There needs to be a focus on helping to mainstream and integrate felons into the workforce.
- Are donations for economic development going to the right place?
- Access points are hard to find.
- Should economic development return to being under the city government?
- Perhaps we could mimic the Seattle Street Market.

**Session: People on Disability Being Self-Employed**
- What are some of the challenges of being self-employed?
- It’s true that a lot of people want to work for themselves.
- Where can we find resources to help start a business?
- Sometimes disabled people isolate themselves. How can we help them to get the network they need to start their own business?
- Furthering their education in business development is critical.
Session: Reduction of Food stamps
- Started by addressing some of the myths about SNAP.
- How can we work to reduce the stigma of being on food stamps?
- We need to focus on the meal gap – filling the gaps between what they receive and what they actually need.
- How can we educate others on what’s available and how they can apply for what’s available?
- There need to be resources, education, and advocacy for cooking on budget.
- Maybe Topeka could follow the Beans and Greens model, where SNAP benefits are doubled at the farmer's market.
- Key is creating awareness at local government levels.

Session: Job Training for Unskilled Workers
- We need to find a way to break down the barriers for homeless workers and felons.
- How can we change the stigma of being a felon? People can and do change their lives and become contributing members of society.
- How and where can we obtain funding for programs and facilities to assist in this?
- A culture change could go a long ways towards righting these problems. We need to encourage people to stand up when you see something going wrong.
- We need to treat our workers better and model good behavior for them.
- Make people aware of the opportunities available to them.
- Apprenticeships could be an alternative to traditional job training.

Session: Access to Nutrition and Nutrition Education
- We first have to acknowledge and get our clients (those in poverty) to acknowledge that there is a nutrition problem.
- We need to find a way to teach that eating healthy can be affordable.
- We need to meet people where they are. For example, help them to understand the benefits of choosing a salad, yogurt, or apples at a fast food restaurant if that's all they can afford.
- How do we reach those that need this information?
- Can we work with fast food restaurants to offer healthier options cheaper?
- Partnerships will be critical here.

Session: Access to Mental Healthcare
- There should be a unity in the message provided by mental health care providers.
- There should be collaboration across the board from entry to aftercare.
- How can we implement relational-based recovery? Sometimes a person gets stabilized but then returns to a bad home environment. How can we connect them to someone outside that environment to help them and hold them accountable?

Session: Meeting the Educational Needs of Struggling Children
- We need to connect the community with the schools, and this needs to be an ongoing effort.
- We need to stress the point that poverty does not equal uneducated.
- Also need to stress the fact that poverty is situational, not a life sentence.
- How can we help to decrease the counselor caseloads in high schools?
- We need to educate the educators.
- We also need to provide emotional support to the teachers who are dealing with these children day in and day out, because it’s exhausting.

**Session: Food Insecurity and Hunger**
- Food insecurity is described as not knowing where your next meal will come from.
- Often those in poverty are forced with choosing between food and other necessities, which is often exacerbated by the fact that they live in a food desert.
- It’s always the easiest to cut food from your budget instead of things like rent and electricity.
- Parents will often feed their children and starve themselves to stretch money.
- Education in school could go a long way towards bettering this situation: teaching children how to manage a budget and how to cook healthy foods.
- Healthy is the goal, but also need to teach balance with what’s affordable.
- “We have to fill stomachs before we can worry about nutrition.”
- Consequences of food insecurity: obesity, health, hard to concentrate and therefore to work or learn.
- We need to get feedback from those who are hungry to learn what is working and what isn’t.

**Session: Improving Collaboration**
- The problem: lack of communication between local nonprofit and service agencies.
- There is not a consistent networking program,
- Local service agencies and nonprofits are failing to garner media attention.
- Solution: Create a networking event for nonprofits.
- Idea: Topeka-cares.com – a progressive community calendar with a resource list and list of events that would be meetings, protests, volunteer opportunities, rallies, etc.

**Session: Reproductive Rights and Education**
- This group believes that reproductive rights are human rights.
- Everyone deserves to be educated about their bodies and sex.
- More education in schools is key. There is a gap between first “talks” in middle school and subsequent talks in high school.
- Control over your body means control over your life.
- Transportation is a barrier. We need to create some kind of transportation network or mechanism.
- How do we break the cycle of teen parents having teen parents?
- How do we make birth control and clinics more accessible?
Session: Improving Quality of Life in Impoverished Neighborhoods
- One's ability to survive and thrive is in their community – their health, happiness, paid bills, and transportation.
- We need to create a safe environment to encourage people to speak up and affect change.
- How can we help to establish pride in one's community?
- There needs to be extensive trust building between the city and the residents.
- Do community gardens play a role in this area?
- We can use existing events as a platform for many of these changes.
- Can we teach residents how to solve interpersonal conflict without violence?
- There needs to be bottom to top planning – the people plan and then bring it to the city.
- Each person needs to take personal responsibility. There's power in numbers!

Session: Policy Decisions by State Legislature
- State legislature at this time is being governed by ideology, not individuals.
- The legislature is influenced by non-state/non-KS forces.
- Local taxes will be going up because of policy made at the state level.
- Government involvement needs to be a personal priority – get involved and get other people involved in elections and government.
- We need to support and help good candidates for legislature.
- When all else fails, we need to run for office ourselves.

Session: Racial Inequality in Education
- It is important to accept that racial inequality is systemic.
- What is a vision of a system without inequality?
  - Comparable outcomes and goals across the races.
  - Equal access to opportunities for post-secondary education.
  - Every student maximizes their potential.
  - More diverse teacher population.
  - More diverse and engaging curriculum.
  - Collaboration at all levels of education.
  - Developing our children as resources in and of themselves.

Session: Battered Women and the Effects of Abuse on Poverty
- Do you know what abuse looks like?
- Do you know what to do when abuse happens?
- This is not a personal issue, it's a community issue.
- Understanding PTSD and trauma is crucial.
- We must connect victims to the resources they need.

Session: Reintegration after Jail/Prison
- Most incarcerated people wonder “Where do I go now?” when they get out.
- There needs to be more programs to assist with reintegration.
- There are people who are changed and they need help to move ahead.
- Mentorship, housing, and transportation all present issues.
- If you take a chance and reach out, you'll see that they work hard, too.

**Session: Early Education Mentoring Programs**
- We have to support a child within their family context.
- Use a holistic view of the family when creating these programs.
- Current needs exceed the availability of existing programs.
- Perhaps we could use the pod system.

**Session: Minimum Wage Tied to Rate of Inflation**
- Seattle as a city made a decision to raise their minimum wage.
- Inflation means that the same dollar in hand will buy less and less.
- Paying a minimum wage increases dependency on government services.
- There is no solution to inflation.
- There is a wealth gap. We must acknowledge the gap between employers’ pay and employees’ pay.
- Less hours at one job = working more part time jobs to pay bills.
- Convincing businesses and government why it’s important to pay a living wage is critical.
- The money you pay over minimum wage comes right back to the community.
- Idea: Is it possible (legal) for the city of Topeka of Shawnee County to set its own minimum wage?

**Session: Political Involvement**
- We need to do a better job of targeting young adults and convincing them that their vote counts.
- We can work to make sure correct information is given in local media.
- Maybe a day of action or involvement with a countywide goal to register X voters.
- Can we make voting days holidays?
- We need to overcome transportation barriers when it comes to voting.
- Incentivize voting? If you vote, you get a free x?

**Session: Support for Creativity**
- Creativity empowers our communities.
- We need to develop alternative job opportunities to help those in poverty start where they are. Make art or use your technology skills and sell it!
- Art is activism.
- Having a community that is receptive to art is critical.
- We need to support people who might not have mainstream art.
- Negatives of donating art to auctions without pay is becoming increasingly problematic. Is there a way around this?

**Session: Hunger Relief Programs for Kids**
- Shawnee County is the 3rd highest county in number of children on SNAP.
- Existing resources include the backpack program (Harvesters, many churches, etc.) and the summer feeding program.
- Access to summer feeding sites is critical. Topeka offers free transit rides, but what else can we do to improve access?
- Do community gardens play a role here?

**Session: Immigration and Poverty**
- Language is the #1 roadblock.
- Often kids are forced to interpret for parents.
- We need to offer ESL classes at times parents can attend and offer childcare.
- Cultural values merit and need mutual respect.
- How can we connect bilingual volunteers to the places that need them the most?
- How can we translate existing skills to comparable jobs here?