

A Story of Impact:

United Way of Knox County, Indiana

Background

The *United Way of Knox County* (UWKC) serves a population of 39,256 residents in Knox County. The county seat is Vincennes, with a population of 18,430. Knox County is located in southwest Indiana, sharing a border and a sense of community with Crawford County, Illinois. Mark Hill joined UWKC in November 2015 and took the reins as Executive Director a few months later.

The Path They Were On

Like many United Ways across the country, the fund-raising efforts of UWKC stalled several years ago and distributions to the 25 local not-for-profit agencies that relied on United Way contributions to support their services were static. Despite this challenge, UWKC had made significant impact in the past few years on the reading level of children in Knox County by supporting Kindergarten Jumpstart and k-3 tutoring of youth to increase their pass rates on the third grade IREAD test.

Even with their local reading program successes, Mark knew his challenge as Executive Director was to guide the Board and lead UWKC through a transition to a different relationship with its partner agencies and to a different leadership role in the community.

When the *Indiana Association of United Ways* (IAUW) offered an 18-month Harwood Learning Collaboration with nine other United Ways from across the state, Mark and his Board were interested. In February, 2016, Mark, along with Board members Dan Ravellette and Emily Bunyan, attended *The Harwood Institute* Public Innovators Lab as a kickoff to IAUW's Harwood Learning Collaboration. Emily, Director of *Knox County Library* (KCL) was already familiar with the Harwood approach and Dan, a member of City Council was an active volunteer in his community.

Where the Practice Led

In 2016 and early 2017 UWKC, in partnership with KCL, held Community Conversations with twelve diverse groups of people including Vincennes police officers, high school students, library patrons, hospital employees, young entrepreneurial adults, Salvation Army patrons, CASA volunteers and grade school teachers. From these Community Conversations, Mark and his team began to see the community's aspirations and the things that mattered to them in a new light.

One early win came as a result of UWKC's involvement with a local Christmas gifting program in which several organizations, including the *Salvation Army* and *Helping Hands Ministry*, were all doing good work gathering and distributing donations to families in need at Christmas. The trouble was that, over time, well-intentioned efforts began to overlap resulting in duplication, unaddressed needs and, in a few cases, people taking advantage of the lack of coordination for personal profit.

UWKC hosted a Community Conversation with the agencies and people involved in the Christmas gifting programs and, through a shared discovery of the community's aspirations and exploration of what needed to change, it soon became clear that UWKC could occupy a new space in the community as a convener and boundary spanner. Mark took the lead and brought the partners together to set up a Charity Tracker software program that helps agencies receiving United Way benefits track charity efforts from other

agencies across Knox County. The effort started off with 3-4 formal groups and 7-8 informal groups joined in later. Reflecting recently on the impact of this first effort, Mark says, “we meet about every month and when we said maybe we should meet less often – they said no, no. We really have learned a lot about other charitable giving that occurs throughout the area.”

Meanwhile in another corner of the community, the timing of UWKC’s work using the Harwood approach fit perfectly with the fact that *Knox County Development Corporation* had recently convened numerous groups of key individuals from business, education, government, and social services to take a “10,000 foot view” of the community. Mark met with Kent Utt, President/CEO of KCDC and told him that UWKC would like to take a street level view of the community and solicit the input of the average neighbor, employee, and citizen – and a new partnership was forged.

As more and more people participated in Community Conversations and as UWKC became known as a steward of Public Knowledge, other new partnerships began to form. For example, the offices of *Vincennes Business and Arts Initiative*, known around town as INVIN, shared a hallway in the same building as UWKC but more than that, their mission (i.e. to bring new businesses to downtown Vincennes) and UWKC’s mission (i.e. to improve lives by mobilizing the caring power of communities) were mutually supportive. Ellen Harper, Executive Director of INVIN, immediately understood what Mark and his team were up to – and another ally was recruited.

A New Direction

Momentum was building. Mark, Emily and Dan could see that their efforts were steering UWKC and KCL in a new direction – and further, that their community was on a new trajectory of hope and possibility.

It may be difficult to make a direct link to the turned outward approach that UWKC was taking since joining IAUW’s Harwood Learning Collaboration but some promising through lines can be drawn between Community Conversations and the way UWKC was showing up as a steward of Public Knowledge and a boundary-spanner in the community.

It didn’t take long for the community to see what this new direction might mean when they learned, in May 2017, that the City of Vincennes was one of three Division 1 communities still being considered for a Stellar Grant. Launched in 2010, the *Indiana Stellar Communities Program* (ISCP) is a multi-year, 58+ million dollar initiative operated by the *Indiana Lieutenant Governor’s Office* and funded by three state agencies: the *Indiana Housing and Community Economic Development Authority*, the *Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs* and the *Indiana Department of Transportation*. ISCP recognizes the need for “more innovative, comprehensive development efforts in rural communities in Indiana to meet the unique local needs and make a bigger impact.”

With a deadline of August 2017 for their final submission, City Council decided to hold a series of Community Conversations with residents of Vincennes to find out what really matters to them. Mayor Joe Yochum said, “I want to encourage everybody to come and speak during these Community Conversations... We want to hear what [people] have to say.”

City Council turned to UWKC to facilitate the Community Conversations and when they did that, Mark said, “A lot of times at public hearings and things you see some pretty familiar faces, you hear the same kinds of things.” An example of how ‘engaging with the community in a turned outward way is different by happened when a participant in one conversation gave some rather uncomfortable feedback about the community – they weren’t shut down. The Community Conversation created a safe place for people

to voice their concerns. As a turned outward leader, Mark recognized what was really going on, “When I saw a new face in the crowd, I wanted to be sure and pull that person out, talk to her. I thought it afforded a wonderful opportunity.”

Would the community’s leaders have been as open to hearing this feedback in the past as they were now? Did UWKC’s example of leadership in building a more turned outward relationship with the community making a difference? Again, we can’t know for sure but we can draw some very promising through lines from the Harwood Learning Collaboration and the change that was taking place in the community.

The Path Forward

With the Public knowledge that UWKC had gathered in its first twelve Community Conversations, Mark and his team themed what they heard and used that insight to develop a strategic plan to guide actionable steps towards creating a lasting impact. The plan included the establishment of a *Community Advisory Board (CAB)*, comprised of one or two representatives of each of the groups that had participated in the Community Conversations.

The CAB’s first task was to set community-wide priorities based on the Public Knowledge gathered through the Community Conversation process, based on the ten major themes that surfaced:

1. Reasons for youth to stay
2. Reasons for youth to return
3. A more prosperous community
4. Safety
5. Ownership/Responsibility
6. A drug-free community
7. Mentorship/values/respect
8. A clean community
9. More volunteers
10. Lack of communication between groups

The CAB also considered action steps that could be pursued as a “community” to fulfil the community’s shared aspirations.

In April 2017, UWKC presented their findings and plans to City Council. At the same time, UWKC began to share the Public Knowledge they had gathered and the action plan developed by the CAB with all the partners and agencies that were going to be involved in the process of moving the community forward.

With input from its Community Impact Committee and Board of Directors, UWKC used this information in their application for a matching-dollar Lilly Grant. As they launch into campaign work for 2017, UWKC will again review all their findings with the CAB. They will build off the traction they got in 2016 when they first introduced the concept of aspirations and turning outward in their campaign video, [Keep the Ball Rolling](#).

Talking about how the Harwood Institute’s philosophy has put UWKC on a different path, Mark says, “it now permeates all that we do at United Way. It evolves how we hear things from the community and will affect our approach to community problem solving moving forward into the future.”

UWKC hopes to continue its commitment to the Harwood approach. They plan to continue the Community Conversations with even more groups and people in Vincennes as well as reach out to North and South Knox County in the coming year. UWKC is actively seeking the means to grow the team of individuals who are trained to facilitate Community Conversations, including UWKC Board members and

faculty at Vincennes University. They plan to hold a workshop to recruit and train others in the community who might be interested in the approach, including city staff and department heads.

In just 18 months, Mark, Emily and Dan have spread the skills and value gained from their participation in IAUW's Harwood Learning Collaboration with UWKC Board members, partner organizations and agencies, civic leaders and the broader community. Their success is evidence that each of us has the power within us to choose a path of possibility and hope and that, when we turn outward, individually, organizationally and as a community, we will produce greater impact and relevance.

Notes:

Charity tracker clip - <http://www.wzdm.com/2017/03/24/united-way-of-knox-county-grows-charity-tracker/>
INVIN - <http://www.invin.org/>