

Building Aligned Action: Sharing Learnings from United Way's Community Engagement EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT WE DID

The United Way of the Franklin and Hampshire Region's (UWFH) 2022-2025 strategic plan focuses on how it can move the needle to better meet the region's greatest needs as a convener and collaborative partner. To support the implementation of this plan and its Children, Youth & Education program area, in June 2023, UWFH sought community input through:

- **A Community Survey:** The survey was completed by nearly 160 UWFH partners, donors, and community stakeholders across Franklin and Hampshire Counties
- **Community Conversations:** UWFH organized three community conversations in Franklin County and Hampshire County with 28 partners invited for their crosscutting regional knowledge

WHAT WE LEARNED

Implementing UWFH's Strategic Plan

Resoundingly, survey respondents felt UWFH is best positioned to do transformational work by "collaborating with partners and the community to make the most of the region's finite resources."

This role was teased out in the community conversations, as participants described UWFH's unique superpowers, as a "collaborative partner," "trusted," and "connected," and that UWFH can help "break down silos between organizations" and "connect businesses and nonprofits."

Conversation attendees were consistently positive about UWFH playing a "greater aligned impact role," and that UWFH should "add capacity to existing aligned initiatives to propel regional change."

Preparing for UWFH's Children, Youth & Education Program Area

Survey respondents overwhelmingly said the biggest challenge was "strengthening mental health and wellness supports and services in schools and organizations that serve young people."

Respondents thought that UWFH could best strengthen youth wellness by giving targeted grants to address a specific issue / outcome, investing in grantmaking that incentives collaboration, and advancing a shared agenda.

Community conversation participants were unanimously positive about youth wellness as a focus for UWFH's upcoming Children, Youth & Education program area.

NEXT STEPS

UWFH's community input affirmed its move towards a greater aligned action role, as outlined in its strategic plan. Based on these learnings, UWFH's next steps, in close consultation with its community partners, are to:

- **Strengthen UWFH's role as a collaborator and a convener** in addressing the region's needs.
- **Focus on youth wellness for its next Children, Youth & Education Request for Proposals (RFP)**, which will launch in early 2024.
- **Ensure justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (JEDI-B) are at the center** of all of UWFH's funding, programmatic, and community efforts.

OPENING

To inform the implementation of the United Way of the Franklin and Hampshire Region's (UWFH) 2022-2025 strategic plan, UWFH sought community input on how it can address the region's most challenging needs. In June 2023, UWFH conducted a community survey and held a series of conversations gathering feedback from nearly 200 community partners. This document summarizes UWFH's learnings and next steps.

WHAT WE DID

This past year, UWFH completed a strategic plan focused on how it can move the needle to better meet the region's greatest needs. What emerged was a vision of a contemporary United Way as a convener and collaborative partner, and the beginning steps UWFH needs to take to implement this vision. To support the implementation of this plan, in June 2023, UWFH sought community input.

Community Survey

UWFH's community survey went out to all of UWFH's partners, donors, and community stakeholders. The survey was completed by 158 respondents. The respondents included:

- **Franklin County:**
 - 34% live here
 - 24% work here
- **Hampshire County:**
 - 52% live here
 - 47% work here

The majority of respondents were donors (57%), followed by partner agency nonprofits (33%), and community members not currently engaged with UWFH (27%).¹

Community Conversations

UWFH organized three community conversations with Franklin County and Hampshire County partners. Participants were invited for their crosscutting knowledge and deep regional perspectives. The 28 participants included business, partner agency, health, and governmental leaders along with UWFH donors.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Both UWFH's community survey and its community conversations examined:

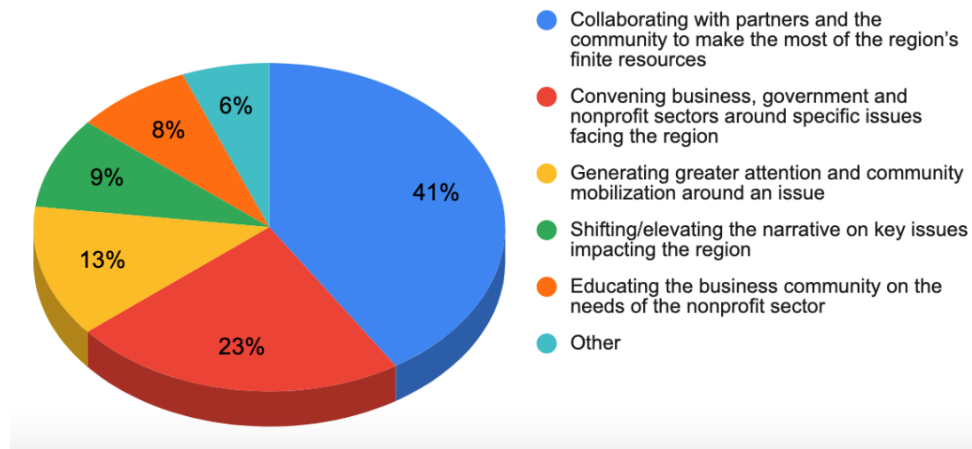
- Implementing UWFH's move towards aligned action as prioritized in its 2022-25 strategic plan

¹ NOTE: Respondents could select more than one answer for both questions, so the totals exceed 100%.

- Preparing for UWFH’s Children, Youth & Education program area, which will be its 2024 funding priority

Implementing UWFH’s Strategic Plan

Where is the UWFH positioned to do transformational work?



Resoundingly, survey respondents felt UWFH is best positioned to do transformational work by:

- **Collaborating with partners and the community to make the most of the region’s finite resources.**

This role was teased out in the community conversations, as participants were asked to describe the organization and UWFH’s unique superpowers. Frequent descriptors included “**trusted,**” “**connected,**” “**engaged,**” and a “**neutral party.**” Respondents consistently spoke about the power of UWFH as a “**convener**” and “**collaborative partner,**” the value of UWFH’s “**flexible funding,**” and how UWFH’s broad portfolio areas “**breakdown silos between organizations.**” Participants also lifted up the critical role UWFH plays “**connecting businesses and nonprofits.**”

In exploring UWFH’s approach, community conversation attendees were overwhelmingly positive about UWFH playing a “**greater aligned impact role.**” A frequent suggestion was UWFH “**adding capacity / momentum to existing aligned initiatives to propel greater regional change.**”

Preparing for UWFH’s Children, Youth & Education Program Area

Youth mental health and wellness is a growing regional challenge and was greatly exacerbated by the pandemic. In alignment with its Children, Youth & Education program area, UWFH sought to better understand regional needs and gaps related to youth wellness.

What do you see as the biggest challenges related to supporting youth wellness in the region?

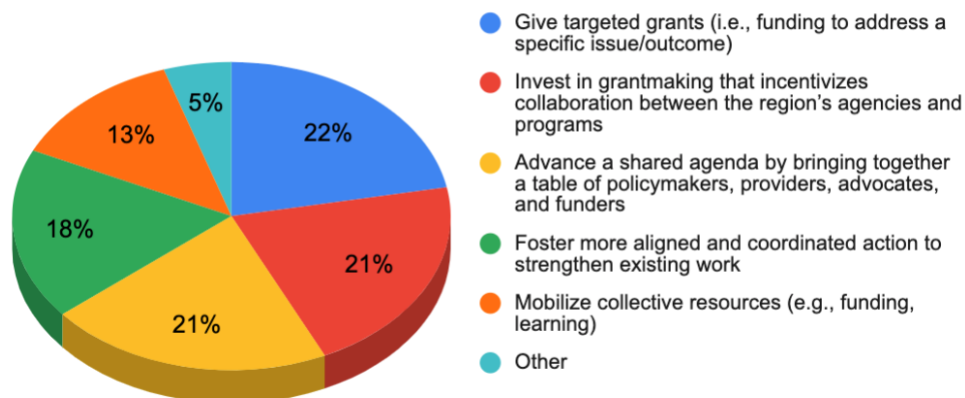
Survey respondents overwhelmingly said the biggest challenge to supporting youth wellness in the region was:

- **Strengthening mental health and wellness supports and services in schools and organizations that serve young people.**

This was followed by:

- Increasing access to quality culturally competent mental health and wellness services
- Building youth power, agency, and connectedness with community and in developing solutions

How do you think UWFH could be most impactful in supporting youth mental health and wellness?



Given UWFH’s unique community role and resources, the survey responses were quite divided on the best role for UWFH in supporting youth wellness. The leading response was to **give targeted grants to address a specific issue and outcome**. This was followed by investing in grantmaking that incentives collaboration and advancing a shared agenda.

Youth wellness as a focus for UWFH’s upcoming Children, Youth & Education program area was explored in depth in the community conversations, and participants were unanimously positive about this direction. Attendees emphasized that UWFH should be **“focused and strategic,”** and encouraged UWFH’s approach to **move from “data to action.”** Participants stated that UWFH should clearly define what attribute of youth wellness it is working on (e.g., adolescence, family stabilization, early childhood mental health, etc.). Participants also guided UWFH to **consult people with lived experience** (i.e., youth and families with mental health challenges and youth more broadly) to inform this work.

Who are key partners addressing wellness in the region?

Key partners elevated in the survey's open response question included:

- **Schools** (over 50 percent of survey respondents mentioned schools)
- Youth youth wellness programs (e.g., afterschool programs, sports, art programs, etc)
- Youth mental health provider agencies
- Health and public health providers
- Existing community coalitions

Across UWFH's grantmaking, on which (additional) community issues do you think UWFH could have the biggest impact?

In the survey, of the eleven cross-cutting community issues listed, the top three were:

- Access to and navigation of basic support structures like public benefits, social services, and healthcare
- Afterschool, weekend, and summer programming that strengthens healthy childhood development
- Homelessness and housing barriers

When asked about what additional priorities should be elevated (via open response), the most frequent responses included:

- Supporting youth wellness
- Improving access and quality mental health care
- Building stronger regional networks and supports between organizations

NEXT STEPS

UWFH's community survey and community conversations affirmed its direction to move towards a greater aligned action role, as outlined in its strategic plan. Based on these learnings, UWFH's next steps are to:

- **Strengthen UWFH's role as a collaborator and a convener** in addressing the region's greatest needs. UWFH will build out this role in close consultation with community partners, honing how to catalyze aligned action across its program areas.
- **Focus on youth wellness for its next Children, Youth & Education Request for Proposals (RFP)**. This fall, UWFH will engage community partners, youth, and the broader community in the design of this RFP, which will launch in early 2024.
- **Ensure justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (JEDI-B) are at the center** of all of UWFH's funding, programmatic, and community efforts.