



V E R N O N
RESEARCH GROUP

Grand Forks, East Grand Forks Community Needs Assessment Service Providers' Focus Group Report

*Prepared for
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East Grand Forks and Area
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Purpose and Methodology

The United Way of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks (UWGFEGF) conducted two focus groups in order to gain a better understanding of findings that came from Phases I, II and III. The primary goals of this phase were two-fold: gain a deeper understanding of how service providers can use the findings of the previous phases and the role the UWGFEGF plays in the effort.

Specifically, the focus groups were designed to explore:

- ▼ The biggest challenges for service providers in the Greater Grand Forks area
- ▼ The role service providers play in addressing the critical issues identified by community residents
- ▼ How the gap between perception and the day-to-day realities of the severity of issues in Grand Forks can be addressed
- ▼ How service providers can present their impact in a meaningful way to community leaders, decision-makers and community residents

Vernon Research Group and the UWGFEGF developed a moderator guide that targeted the issues outlined above. The groups were held March 11 and March 12, 2010, at the United Way and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Fifteen service providers participated: five in the first group and ten in the second group. The participants came from a variety of sectors throughout the service provider industry, including homelessness, domestic violence, mental health, senior services and health care.

This data is qualitative and directional in nature. It should not be regarded as completely representative of all service providers.

Summary of Focus Groups

Connecting the dots: Addressing the underlying issues

Service providers in the Greater Grand Forks community wear many hats, but arguably the most important is that of storyteller, explaining their clients' lives. Every day service providers must advocate for their client to an audience that, many times, has no frame of reference. It is this front-line experience with the neediest residents and their unique perspective that gives service providers an insight that is difficult for others to understand, even if they want to. This battle to convince people, who may have never seen a homeless person or experienced life with someone who has mental issues, that the programs and services present in the community are necessary and must be funded, is one service providers fight every day.

Non-profits and service providers spend too much energy explaining why a program is necessary and how it will help residents. When asked about the severity of specific community issues, like drug and alcohol abuse and mental issues, we see a significant difference between the perception of service providers and others living in the community, including residents, decision-makers and community leaders. Service providers are in the unfortunate position that on a daily basis they must convince people that their jobs are necessary.

How can service providers connect the dots for people? For example, the economy, and more specifically, unemployment and underemployment, is a critical issue for everyone: residents, community leaders, decision-makers and service providers. Many of those working part-time could work a full work week but can only find part-time work. In Grand Forks, this means many workers are holding multiple part-time jobs that pay low wages. Service providers help these people make up the difference. How can service providers demonstrate to the rest of the community that they are addressing the underlying issues?

How do I present my program as addressing the root cause?

Others do not realize the underlying issues; they do not realize the severity of issues.

The UWGFEGF has two opportunities to help non-profits in the community: first, a voice for service providers and, second, helping to legitimize the knowledge and experience that lies within the service provider community. Community leaders and decision-makers said, "I am pretty sheltered," when it comes to social issues, like domestic violence and homelessness; further explaining, that when they were made aware of issues, it was usually through non-profit reporting, not because they had not seen it or experienced it firsthand. Service providers are the source people turn to for information about social problems. Social service providers need the UWGFEGF's help in tailoring that message; what does a community that cares look like?

How can the UWGFEGF help cultivate a culture that respects the firsthand knowledge and years of experience that lie within service providers? When an evaluation of a program is completed and presented to community leaders and decision-makers, that needs to be seen as an accurate depiction of the situation in Grand Forks. Many service providers feel there is a stigma associated with being a non-profit that leads to mistrust. There needs to be recognition by city leaders that the work of service providers is valid and needed.

There is a real lack of our respect of our opinions professionally. Probably no one knows needs of the community better than service providers, but that means that people in other industries should respect our expertise. Not that they shouldn't question it, but respect it.

The greatest challenges for service providers

Service providers identified funding as their greatest challenge; but it is more than not having enough money, it is the constant battle that non-profits must wage to prove their service or program is still necessary. All participants discussed how the constant struggle to secure funding and resources takes up most of their time and energy.

We will fund this portion of your program because we think it's important.

The following were the layers of the funding debate:

- ▼ Competition for funding
- ▼ More funding for new programs
- ▼ Multiple funding sources
- ▼ Politicalization of funding

There is recognition among service providers that they are competing for money from the same pot. This competition has led both service providers and outsiders to say that some “mission stretching” does occur. However, this is really a result of the other layers of the funding debate. New programs that address a trendy issue receive funding, but as that issue loses its notoriety, funding becomes more difficult to secure. It is extremely difficult for service providers to find funding for an existing program.

As an organization, you struggle to stay true to your mission versus chasing this money. If the buzzword is collaboration, you have to play the game.

In addition, there is not a single funding source for an organization and many service providers report that partners keep passing the buck. For example, there is a perception that educational issues should be handled by the school and the city should handle infrastructure. There is a perception that specific issues have specific stakeholders and that is who should be supporting social services in that area.

I am tired of everyone saying someone else should fund programs.

Funding is political – and that makes the difficult job of finding funding almost impossible. Many focus group participants cited the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) committee structure as an example. Everyone agreed that when the CDBG distribution process was under the UWGFEGF, it was more equitable and less political than it is now under the city.

If you think something isn't equitable and you bring it up, you aren't very popular with city leaders.

Other critical issues faced by service providers include a perception that there isn't a problem, a perception that there is a duplication of services and underutilization of services by those in need.

Most people have needed social services.

Alcohol abuse and binge drinking are acceptable.

Clients are complicated.

This is a prideful community.

Service providers constantly battle the perception that the problems they work to erase every day are perceived as not being present in the community at the levels they claim. For example, in Phase III, we saw significant differences between the percentage of service providers and community residents when ranking the severity of issues. While both groups agreed that finding a job that paid a living was a serious issue in the community, only 41% of community residents said it was an extremely serious issue, while 78% of service providers gave such a rating.

As service providers, I think we are just more in tune.

In addition, service providers must address the perception that there is a duplication of services. This perception is not widespread, and those who do feel this mostly agree that more communication would solve the problem.

We don't want duplication; we want to provide the best services to our clients.

As service providers work to ensure that there is little duplication, the following were listed as components of solutions: more top-level reporting of the evaluation of services, more communication between service providers and others in the community, increase sharing of funding opportunities between organizations and holding recipients of services more accountable.

Evaluation

During Phase 1, community leaders and decision-makers felt that they did not have a good grasp on what specific organizations did or how successful they were in their efforts. Service providers spent some time discussing how they evaluate their programs and how the results are presented to the public. Service providers spend a lot of time reporting to funders, including the federal government, on how they spend their money and the results of their programs. Participants also feel that they do a good job presenting this information to the Greater Grand Forks area, including city and county leaders. The point is that leaders need to get educated, and how do we do that? Currently, service providers use a variety of outlets to tell their stories: direct mailing, television, and radio, but in the end, service providers are trying to interrupt people, to grab their attention, and that is difficult.

The challenge of service providers in terms of evaluation is two-fold: How do you prove you have a good business? And how do we get people to stop focusing on budgeting sheets and really look at the results?

It's not apples to apples when looking at evaluation – but there could be some definitions.

What would it cost the city, county and state to provide the services of non-profits?

There are also barriers to evaluation that lay people do not understand, like whether people who need services are getting services and the difficulty of tracking people after they receive services.

Addressing the challenges

When participants were asked to discuss how the funding crisis, perception that there isn't a problem, perception that there is a duplication of services and underutilization of services could be addressed, a united service provider voice and more communication with decision-makers and community leaders were given as solutions.

We have a voice; we just aren't together. As one organization, we can't say hey, listen here, city government.

We have personal relationships between agencies, and we encourage our staff to work together. We don't have that with city council.

The cooperation and coordination that is present in the Greater Grand Forks area is commendable. Service providers noted that in the beginning, they were all in their own world. Now, area service providers do a good job of collaborating and coordinating resources. How can the UWGFEGF help open lines of communication between service providers and community leaders and decision-makers?

When looking at the role of others in the community, it was mentioned over and over that county and city need to come together. There is a perception among service providers that the cooperation they enjoy is not shared by other organizations in the community.

When asked if, “establishing a committee or organization that would help service providers coordinate with one another to maximize the availability of necessary services to local residents in need,” would be helpful, most service providers answered that there are already organizations that do this. They do not want another layer of oversight. Service providers feel that these organizations move too slowly to help them address their day-to-day issues, but there is room for organizations to address more long-range issues.

We have to solve problems much more quickly.

Helping to promote the work of service providers

Service providers need a united voice that is spreading the same message. One idea that was mentioned was promoting the work of non-profits, like colleges promote educational attainment. Non-profits are working to help the community better itself and, in the end, everyone will benefit.

Can't have too many messages, simple and consistent and many times or else it will get lost.

Tailor one message to community and city leaders, similar to college advertising.

We are a valuable business. We bring in money, federal money, and we are good business owners.

We need to present non-profits as effective businesses.

It was mentioned that UWGFEGF could play more of a role as the voice of the service providers. In this role, the UWGFEGF could provide bullet points that everyone could mention in speeches to community funders, demonstrating that service providers address quality-of-life issues. Service providers are excellent at elevator speeches; hand them a new script that will promote their work and the community.

Service providers really need the UWGFEGF to market social service providers to the community and leaders in a way that it resonates.

Service providers are the voice of those who have no voice.

We are helping to provide a safer community.

Creating a community that cares.

Branding and marketing the service sector

Service providers would like the UWGFEGF to brand its efforts. Market non-profits like a business. Non-profits in the community need to create an identity. A number of taglines were suggested: A Grand Forks that Cares or What Does it Look Like in a Community that Cares?

In addition, there needs to be an effort to bring the public and private sectors together to discuss issues/barriers. Service providers want to have the private sector coordinate the efforts to promote buy-in. This needs to be part of an ongoing conversation that will help keep everyone talking about social services.

Create an environment where we are talking about issues and not asking the private sector for money.

We met the unmet needs of our most venerable citizens; we are their advocate.

Service providers would like to see the UWGFEGF create website, Facebook and nonprofit feature – like the chamber – that promote the efforts of service providers in the community.

The Grand Forks Herald publishes economic indicators; why not publish social indicators?

As service providers work to improve the quality of life in the Greater Grand Forks area, they need the UWGFEGF to help them promote their work. Specifically:

- ▼ Brand the non-profit industry in Grand Forks
- ▼ Create a metric that allows for easy evaluation of programs
- ▼ Create a social health indicator for the Grand Forks area similar to the economic indicator
- ▼ Create an environment where we are talking about issues and not just money
- ▼ Demonstrate that social service providers help make the area more appealing to businesses and others looking to visit or relocate by making the community safer
- ▼ Develop talking points that every non-profit can use to promote the industry
- ▼ Endorse the expertise and experience of those in the non-profit industry
- ▼ Help non-profits create a brand; what does a community that cares look like?
- ▼ Help community leaders, decision-makers and residents make the connection that a healthy community means a healthy social service network
- ▼ Keep the conversation going

- ▼ Market the efforts of non-profits to the community
- ▼ Promote the collaboration and communication among service providers and community leaders, decision-makers and residents
- ▼ Provide more opportunities for the public and private sectors to discuss issues and barriers

As one service provider stated, “We met the unmet needs of our most venerable citizens; we are their advocate.” The UWGFEGF needs to be the advocate for the service providers.

As Grand Forks works to address critical issues, like underemployment, alcohol abuse, binge drinking, shortage of affordable housing and lack of affordable medical care, it will need the input of service providers who have been working to address many of the underlying issues. And, in turn, service providers will need the UWGFEGF to help them promote their work in an effort to maintain a healthy community.