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Our town: a neighborhood assessment

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Our Town: A Neighborhood Assessment

in Support of the

UNITED WAY OF MCLEAN COUNTY 2014 COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT



Artwork Courtesy of: a local resident



STEVENSON CENTER
FOR COMMUNITY AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Illinois State University

Prepared by

LIVE UNITED



Prepared for

This project was completed by graduate student researchers, under the guidance of Dr. Joan Brehm, in economics, political science, and sociology at the Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development.

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Abstract

This report addresses the question: What factors have the strongest impact on communal and individual well-being in different neighborhoods in McLean County? It is one part of the larger United Way of McLean County Community Assessment 2014, which will evaluate the assets and needs of McLean County by focusing on respondents' experiences receiving health and human services. Our findings are based on data from five key informant interviews and four focus groups. This information was collected from four geographically and economically distinct neighborhoods: rural Lexington, East Bloomington, Normal, and West Bloomington. Common themes that emerged from these sessions are: the dearth of opportunities for young people, the desire for more local businesses, praise for city services such as garbage collection, the desire for growth of community, and the importance of churches. A number of other findings, limitations of the assessment, and recommendations and future research are discussed.

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I. Introduction

The Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development at Illinois State University in partnership with the United Way of McLean County (UWMC) conducted a Community Assessment in Fall 2013 to determine the assets and needs of specific types of neighborhoods in McLean County by focusing on respondents' experiences with social services. We developed the following research question to guide our assessment: "What factors have the strongest impact upon communal and individual well-being in different neighborhoods in McLean County?"

We conducted five key informant interviews and four neighborhood focus groups (one in Lexington and Normal, two in Bloomington). From the key informant interviews with local officials, we obtained valuable knowledge that aided in shaping the design of community focus group meetings. The focus groups facilitated an in-depth analysis of what individual respondents in neighborhoods identified as a priority for their community. Community indicators that were examined included: safety, civic engagement, health services, economic status, access to services, infrastructure, education, community organizations, and youth options. The findings of this project enable UWMC to more accurately target the interests of different populations within McLean County, inform key stakeholders of the issues identified by local respondents, and demonstrate the impact of services among different neighborhoods, allowing for better strategic planning. This report will be incorporated with the larger Community Assessment released by UWMC in Spring 2014.

II. Literature Review

We reviewed a wide array of scholarship in order to better understand some of the themes we would encounter during the Community Assessment. The relevant literature discussed the definition of community, neighborhood, sense of community, social cohesion, social bonds, and the physical environment as measurable indicators of individual and communal well-being. Relatedly, we found that poverty greatly impacts the level of individual and communal well-being. These findings guided our research question, interview protocol, and methodologies, and were critical to our understanding of the complex interrelated factors affecting communal and individual well-being.

A working definition for community has been provided by Wilkinson (1991:2):

“Conventionally, there are three elements of the community, namely, a locality, a local society, and a process of locality oriented collective actions. The third of these is the focus here and is termed ‘the community field’ ... A locality is a territory where people live and meet their daily needs together. A local society is a comprehensive network of associations for meeting common needs and expressing common interests. A community field is a process of interrelated actions through which respondents express their common interest in the local society. While sociologically important units other than the community could embody one or two of these elements, the community, as used here, embodies all three elements.”

The neighborhoods we examined were consistent with the idea of “a locality, local society and a process of locality oriented collective actions” (Wilkinson 1991:2-3).

One of the primary reasons that modern researchers struggle with the concept of the neighborhood is that the fine lines of a traditional neighborhood, both spatially and figuratively, have become blurred; the geographic confines of neighborhoods and their social significance have morphed substantially in recent generations (Mallach 2008; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). The standard system of defining neighborhoods by street boundaries may be inaccurate due to the tendency for people to avoid crossing major thoroughfares (Sampson et al. 2002). This relates to the distinction, and in some cases, the confusion between the understanding

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of the neighborhood and the community. There are instances in which individuals and groups may not identify strongly with their designated neighborhood—that is, their geographic location—in surveys which are designed to evaluate exactly that (Chavis and Pretty 1999). As such, it is crucial for researchers to account for these discrepancies when assessing a neighborhood or community.

Sense of community (SOC) is one indicator of a healthy community. “Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan 1976: 9). The level of SOC can determine how problems are solved in a neighborhood, and impacts the mental well-being of respondents. Research on the effects of sense of community are only meaningful if data can be organized and analyzed in an accurate way. Researchers vary in the metrics they use, the scope of their analysis, and the perspective they take in formulating their research questions.

In terms of choosing a research method, Charzdon and Lott (2010) discuss key informants and their importance in what might be the “nuances” or “intricacies” of a specific neighborhood. “While the data produced by qualitative studies such as this are less objective than survey data with a larger number of respondents, a strength of using qualitative key informant interviews include the subtleties in community dynamics elicited from the interviews” (Charzdon and Lott 2010:174). The insight of key informants aided the design of our focus group questions.

Social cohesion is defined by De Jesus et al. (2010:1007) as “the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups.” Using survey data collected from twelve public housing communities in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, the authors found that respondents reporting higher levels of social cohesion considered their neighborhood to be safer than respondents who reported lower levels of social cohesion (De Jesus et al. 2010). As a result of the increased perception of safety in

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neighborhoods with higher social cohesion, the authors claim respondents will likely have lower levels of anxiety and associated measures of poor health.

The physical environment is also an important factor in social well-being. The physical condition of communities directly affects the well-being of its respondents (O'Brien et al. 2012). Physical infrastructure plays a role in transportation issues, which also affects sense of community. For example, a good pedestrian environment can increase the psychological sense of community in a neighborhood (Lund 2002).

Sampson (2003) discusses the influence of poverty on health outcomes across neighborhoods. The author provides a convincing case for the powerful influence of neighborhood context on individual health and wellbeing, citing studies from Northern California, and as far away as Sweden, that found higher rates of poor health for respondents of low socioeconomic status, and concentrated poverty areas. Both studies controlled for the variables of age, sex, education, smoking, and body mass index. That such similar outcomes are found in neighborhoods across the globe indicates that neighborhood poverty does truly impact the overall health of individuals living in that neighborhood. Further testimony to the host of unique problems faced by areas of concentrated poverty comes from a review of more than 40 academic studies of “neighborhood effects” spanning a decade. Sampson et al. (2002) reiterate that factors such as concentrated poverty, affluence, and stability remain highly predictive of numerous outcomes.

Another element that impacts the well-being of a neighborhood is the social bond. The consensus is that social bonds are important (Chavis and Pretty 1999; Graber, Haywood, and Vosler 1996; Sampson et al. 2002). However, there is dissent about their degree of importance, and also about whether strong or weak social bonds are more beneficial. Sampson et al. (2002) concluded that weak social bonds, such as those which an individual would use to solicit a job referral, may be

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quite constructive. In contrast, strong bonds may be related to more destructive behavior, such as gang activity.

Building on the assets of a community is another important theme in the literature. Gary Green and Anna Haines (2012:7) define community development as “a planned effort to build assets that increase the capacity of respondents to improve their quality of life.” The Grace Hill Neighborhood model is one such approach, which focuses on marginalized communities and devotes its efforts to fortifying an interdependent network built from community assets and strengths. Graber et al. (1996:73) explain, “underlying this empowerment approach to building neighborhood community is a democratic and egalitarian philosophy of the worth and dignity of every person, integrated with a ‘neighbors helping neighbors’ view of healthy social relationships.” The assets perspective adopted by this neighborhood empowered its own residents to improve their individual and communal well-being.

Our research of existing empirical research guided how we conducted the Community Assessment in various ways. We sought to understand the existing and potential assets in each neighborhood. We asked questions that might give us some qualitative data on social cohesion, sense of community, social bonds, services, health, and the physical environment. We focused on assessing lower income neighborhoods, and acknowledged that these boundaries may have been arbitrary.

III. Conceptual Design

United Way of McLean County (UWMC) conducts periodic Community Assessments to determine community needs and assets. UWMC conducted the 2014 Community Assessment in response to the demographic changes and social issues that have surfaced in McLean County since their last assessment in 2005. Specific issues for exploration included, employment, health care, housing, safety, youth services and senior services. Results of the assessment will allow UWMC to determine how to tailor their services to better serve the community. In addition, findings will be distributed to the public, as well as various government and social service programs in McLean County, allowing these organizations to improve upon their services and offer appropriate resources to community members.

UWMC sent out 16,000 surveys targeting Normal, Bloomington and rural McLean County, and led a series of key informant interviews and focus groups with key officials and populations to gather data. Certain interviews and focus groups centered on specific populations or topics (i.e. Youth Advocacy, Senior Services, Caregivers, Homelessness, and Latinos). Others sought to deduce important themes in selected communities. Our cohort, the students in Sociology 477: Community Project Design and Management (see Appendix K), was tasked with completing five key informant interviews and four focus groups in low and moderate income neighborhoods and one rural community. The geographic boundaries of these communities were determined according to U.S. Census tracts of low and moderate income neighborhoods. The Stevenson Center cohort devised the following research question to guide our portion of the assessment:

“What factors have the strongest impact upon communal and individual well-being in different neighborhoods in McLean County?”

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In this assessment, individual well-being was conceptualized to include such factors as a person's health, economic status, and skills and education. The term "health" was taken to mean physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects that impact individual longevity. "Economic status" related to employment and the ability to financially provide for oneself and one's family. In "skills and education," we examined the availability and quality of vocational and educational programming which may contribute to individual success.

Communal well-being is similar to the sense of community as described by McMillan (1967), wherein residents share a mutual sense of belonging and responsibility to their neighbors and the space around them (1967). Wilkinson (1991) makes the claim that the social well-being of the community is largely dependent on the degree of its individual and ecological well-being. In our research, communal well-being was conceptualized by the degree to which the following aspects were present in a community: physical order, social services, civic engagement, safety, and economic stability.

"Physical order" was taken to mean property conditions such as upkeep of houses, yards, parks, streets, and sidewalks. "Social services" included a wide range of programs that may assist respondents in procuring, for example, more affordable housing, food, and health care. "Safety" was a multi-faceted term composed of criminal, environmental, political, and infrastructural threats found within a community. "Civic engagement" was defined as opportunities to volunteer and assist neighbors, whether formally or informally. "Economic stability" of a community denoted job security and availability as well as businesses and services that are locally accessible (e.g. grocery stores, hospitals, schools, etc.).

IV. Research Methods

Our research strategy was as follows: 1) identify geographical areas of focus, 2) pinpoint key informants for each study site, 3) develop a key informant interview protocol, 4) schedule and conduct key informant interviews, 5) analyze the information that was gathered from the key informants for key themes, 6) use key informant data to create a focus group interview protocol, 7) plan and recruit for focus groups, 8) conduct focus groups, 9) identify recurring themes and conflicting themes, and 10) synthesize data into a final summative report.

The first step was to identify what areas would be the focus for our investigation. Understanding that certain groups of respondents in McLean County may lack the forum through which they feel empowered to be heard by the local government, our intention was to reach out to areas potentially having the most need yet lacking the venues to express them. With this view, UWMC chose to focus on areas with a residency of concentrated middle/low incomes and a rural community. Using Census data, one rural town of McLean County and three neighborhoods in Bloomington-Normal were chosen. In Bloomington, there were two neighborhoods--one middle-income and one low-income. Whereas, in Normal, one low income neighborhood was identified, and UWMC selected Lexington to represent the rural town (see Appendices G-J for maps).

After receiving the identified neighborhoods, we brainstormed the types of community members that would be the most effective key informants. A key informant traditionally is an individual from the selected community who helps researchers gain a sense of what questions to probe in the larger focus groups. An effective key informant should have extensive ties to a neighborhood, be a gatekeeper, a person of trust, and well-connected and informed of the assets and needs within the community (Charzdon and Lott 2010). We broke our group of ten into five pairs, and each pair was assigned a key informant in a respective area. Once potential key informants were

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identified, each pair reached out to them to gauge interest. If the initial key informant contacted was not available, another option was explored. Soon, a key informant was identified in each of the four areas. A fifth key informant interview was conducted to gain a perspective for the Bloomington-Normal area as a whole.

TABLE 1

Key Informant Roles	
Normal	Community Leader
West Bloomington	Community Leader/ Stakeholder
East Bloomington	Primary School Official
Lexington	Local Government Representative
Bloomington-Normal Government	City Agency Member

Next, our cohort used the research question to guide the prompts for our key informants, asking the same questions in every interview. We pinpointed how the informant interacted with the community, how long they had been involved and in what capacity, a description of the community, incentives and disincentives to living in the area, and the future goals of the community. (For an in depth look at the key informant interview protocol, see Appendix C) The interviews took anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes and each interview was conducted in person.

Our cohort then analyzed and reviewed the data gathered from key informant interviews to construct the protocol for the focus groups. While some specific characteristics were noted across the scope of interviews, in view of our research question, we chose to use the data from the interviews as a directional guide rather than asking leading questions that might steer the participants away from an area they might naturally feel was more important. The focus group questions addressed strengths and weaknesses, problem solving tactics, available services, food and retail accessibility, housing, civic engagement, and community goals. By keeping our semi-structured questions general, we allowed room for the participants to direct the conversation towards topics that were most pressing to them. We did, however, provide the facilitators with prompts for the

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questions should the participants be unable to initiate a topic organically (see Appendix E for the specific Focus Group Protocol).

Once our focus group interview protocol was solidified, we worked with the key informants to identify optimal locations, times, days, and recruitment methods for the focus groups in conjunction with the different areas. Many of the key informants were influential with this piece of the assessment. All focus groups were held on a weeknight around dinner-time, and as an incentive to participate, we provided a meal. Recruitment methods ranged from attending a block party, distributing fliers, word of mouth, online neighborhood forums, newspaper ads, to church announcements. Table 2 provides an overview of focus group participation.

TABLE 2

Focus Groups		
Neighborhood	Number of Attendees	Date
Normal	3	October 7, 2013
West Bloomington	17	October 16, 2013
East Bloomington	3	October 23, 2013
Lexington	5	October 22, 2013

The focus groups varied in attendance, but all were revealing. The pair of student researchers that were assigned to the area facilitated the discussion. The facilitators' role was to keep the conversation focused while remaining sensitive to the discussion and allowing it room to thrive. The rest of the cohort assisted with a variety of tasks: room set-up, food preparation, greeting, note taking, and cleanup. Each focus group took a unique form, but all produced equally insightful discussions.

Once the focus groups were completed, each team member analyzed the notes and identified common and contrasting themes within and between them. Then we all came together to discuss what we found. A grand list was created containing a collection of the findings of the team members. This data was used to jumpstart the team in our report writing process.

V. Findings

Key Informant Interviews:

Bloomington-Normal Government Agency:

One of our key informants did not represent a specific neighborhood, but rather the larger Bloomington-Normal community. This informant worked for a governmental social service agency, and spoke of the challenges and opportunities for the agency and community as a whole.

Government funding cuts have strained the ability of the agency to meet community needs. In this environment of decreased resources, the informant stressed the importance of cooperation and collaboration between social service organizations. Working together, organizations can decrease individual costs and increase efficiency across the social services spectrum.

Some of the problems identified were meeting the needs of youth and hard-to-serve populations. The informant expressed a need for parental involvement in the lives of children in the community and noted that many children received conflicting messages about conflict resolution from parents. The informant went further, and identified a need for continued adult education, connecting parents to themes being taught to their children.

The informant also mentioned the increased difficulty with placing and providing support to some populations. Individuals with substance abuse and mental health issues, for example, are often marginalized and ineligible for certain services. Consequently, these individuals often view jail as the better alternative. The informant felt that restrictions placed on these populations limited the ability of social service organizations in working with hard-to-serve individuals.

The informant offered many critiques of services, but also identified areas where organizations had been successful. One area the informant viewed as favorable was the improvements to public transportation. The number of routes, frequency, and schedule consistency

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have seen considerable improvements in the past several years. Improved public transportation increases access to resources for individuals with no other transportation options.

Lexington:

The key informant for Lexington was a government official. The informant projected a strong sense of community, with respondents willing to help each other out. A strong school and church system were seen as assets, and both aided and reinforced community support. The informant took pride in the transparent government structure and spoke about an open system where government officials send out publications with water bills, and everyone knows how to contact their local leaders. In addition, the town council is open to all who wish to attend and express their voice.

However, the informant mentioned that the economic downturn had taken its toll on Lexington, and reported a need for financial help to aid in the redevelopment of downtown. Lexington was called a “bedroom community” for Bloomington/Normal, in light of the observation that many respondents work and shop outside of the town. The informant said this was a drain on the local community and created a difficult environment for small businesses to flourish. It was mentioned that Wertz beverage distribution recently approved a new warehouse in Lexington to service central Illinois and it is expected to generate new local economic activity.

The informant also explained the spatial challenges the community faces when it attempts to expand. Farmers with adjacent properties are often unable or unwilling to sell land to the town at a reasonable price. A housing development of 24 homes was recently approved, although it is unclear whether this will be sufficient to accommodate demand for housing. The informant also mentioned that the community has not had a new apartment complex built since the 1970s, and this creates a barrier for potential respondents. Young families do not have a way to try out the community before purchasing a home.

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Despite the difficult times, the key informant was proud of their community and its resilience. They believed that one of the largest barriers for Lexington, and small rural communities in general, was the need to reconcile community change with traditional values. According to the informant, this would need to happen sooner than later for the community to survive.

East Bloomington:

The key informant for East Bloomington was an education official. While much of the interview centered around the school system, the informant also discussed the greater community as a whole. The informant believed that the local school “is the community,” and plays a pivotal role in activities and programs, green spaces, and the facilitation of social services.

The greater community has changed significantly in recent years, and the informant believed those changes had not all been positive. One noted change was the perceived impact of Section 8 housing, specifically, the nearby apartment complexes. While these have provided an affordable housing alternative, the informant said the apartments have contributed to bike theft and an overall increase in student tension. In addition, the community culture was negatively impacted by a murder that occurred in the apartments.

A positive feature of the community was the frequent and open line of communication between the school and parents. The informant said the active Parent Teacher Organization offered a forum for parents to voice concerns and opinions. Through this communication, an issue was identified with local basketball hoops that acted as a hangout for delinquent behavior and illicit activity. The school decided that the hoops would be taken down during the weekend, but could stay up during the week. While this arrangement was not seen as ideal by some, it was a best-case compromise between parents, respondents, and faculty, the informant said.

Although the community is close to services, parks, and the YWCA, there is still room for improvement, the informant stated. Several areas, such as child care and safety, were noted as

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essential to community progress. Improved policing of troubled areas must be increased. Activities and opportunities for young adults should be expanded to lessen illicit activities on the basketball court. Above all, the informant stressed increased engagement with troubled families, specifically by providing counseling services for children, as well as adult education and possibly GED classes for parents.

Normal:

The key informant for Normal was an engaged community member active in the church. The informant explained the strong sense of history and its importance for the community. The neighborhood was said to be quiet and quaint. The informant felt there was a strong interest in maintaining all aspects of the community, seeking to “keep the neighborhood as it is.”

The informant explained that housing turnover has been low, and new residents have not felt welcomed to the neighborhood. The informant noted a high separation between class, occupation, and income level. The community was said to be homogenous; the vast majority of respondents being white.

The informant stated that low income housing had brought crime, however many residents did not consider this housing to fall within the boundaries of their neighborhood. The informant stressed the positive impact of municipal services, such as sanitation and garbage collection, as well as excellent policing.

West Bloomington:

The key informant in the West Bloomington neighborhood was an official in a local non-profit community organization. He spoke about a shift in the composition of the community; residents were generally getting older, with newcomers being more racially diverse and younger than the existing population. Many homes were older with a strong sense of history. The key informant talked about the affordability of housing in West Bloomington; there is a mix of rentals and

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homeownership. A strong sense of community was noted, enhanced by the presence of resources like community gardens, book bikes, and the tool library.

One of the challenges the key informant raised was their ability to maintain contact with residents who did not have a permanent method of communication. Concerns about aging infrastructure, as well as a need for local retail establishments, were mentioned. Specifically, the introduction of a grocery store was seen as a way to increase food access. Additionally, the loss of off-street parking due to trash-collection was raised as an area that needed improvement. A lack of meaningful activities for youth was an area for improvement. Youth involvement in gang activity, violence and shootings was seen as a safety concern.

Focus Groups:

Utilizing information gathered from the key informant interviews, we derived an interview protocol in order to conduct focus groups (Appendix E). We conducted four focus groups throughout McLean County. Attendance ranged from 3 to 17 community members. Although these neighborhoods were identified based on socioeconomic conditions, some participants did not identify with the demographic description. Neighborhoods and communities were pre-determined based on census data, but these general descriptions did not necessarily reflect specific attendants of the focus groups. The information gathered represents the best interpretation of the data available to researchers. These discussions generated several common themes.

Lexington:

Five community members, all white males or females of varying ages, were present at this focus group.

Economics

Generally, the quality of local business has decreased. Day-time business in Lexington is down. Most shopping is done in Bloomington-Normal, because the stores there have a wider

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selection of goods and residents are already in town for work. The Wertz company is bringing hope to the community, participants said, because it could increase the number of people who would live and work in Lexington. Advantages and disadvantages of the economic activity it would bring were discussed. Participants stated that negative effects would be outsiders coming to work in Lexington, more fast food restaurants, and truck stops. Positive effects noted were the building of a hotel in town, which would allow for more local jobs, increased diversity, and new apartments.

Education

Lexington high school has had a high graduation rate. Their AVC (area vocational center) program has offered an alternative educational curriculum to those who are not interested in going to college. Overall, students who decide to go to college do not feel very prepared, especially if they participated in the AVC program.

Youth

Youth activities seemed to be limited in Lexington. Churches have served as a catalyst for youth activity, but they do not appeal to everyone. Participants mentioned a need for job training, especially for high school graduates. Basic financial literacy for young adults and youth, including taxes and understanding benefits, would be very helpful.

Civic Engagement

Participants noted many opportunities to volunteer, mainly through church and school sporting activities. Community churches have frequently organized and sponsored mission trips to help identified communities in need. These churches have also coordinated food drives for victims of hurricanes. In addition to direct action, respondents also felt that neighbors are willing to help others in need. Younger neighbors helping older respondents rake leaves, shovel snow, and carry groceries were all mentioned as neighborly activities.

Local government and services

Focus group participants generally had a favorable view of local government. Respondents spoke of a positive relationship, with transparency highlighted as a benefit of living in a small

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community. Participants viewed local leaders as approachable and available for citizens to voice concerns. Local government has a good relationship with the public and interaction with police was usually positive. One participant mentioned the unbiased nature of the police force, stating that officers did not play favorites. In terms of local services, the participants said that there was only one doctor in town and he was at capacity.

East Bloomington:

The East Bloomington community was identified as middle income. The focus group was attended by three community residents, all white women of varying age.

Housing

Housing in the area was described as having low turnover, changing hands generally only in the event of the death of a homeowner. The majority of housing is owned rather than rented. All focus group participants saw the apartments as a place where a disproportionate amount of the crime occurred and strongly expressed their concern about safety and a general lack of police presence. Like West Bloomington, the respondents were concerned about the outside perception of their neighborhood and the potential impact on property values.

Local services and opportunities for youth

The respondents spoke to the great recycling and garbage services provided by the city. In this area there was also a perceived sense that “neighbors helped neighbors.” While they noted the ease of access to businesses and the mall on Veteran’s Parkway, they noted a lack of local neighborhood-based business. Additionally, respondents spoke about opportunities for youth being on the other side of town. Opportunities for children of low-income respondents were limited, as well as activities for all youth during the winter months. They noted that it was difficult to get into and out of the neighborhood without a car. There was some concern about the bus route through the neighborhood, and participants suggested a diversion along a higher traffic street. A pedestrian friendly way of accessing Veteran’s Parkway was desired.

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Supporting the information reported by the key informant, participants of the focus group spoke very positively of the central role the schools played in the community. Respondents specifically appreciated diversity in the student body population, noting several school sponsored activities for multicultural engagement.

Normal:

The neighborhood identified in east Normal was part of a low-income census tract; however, none of the respondents who we spoke with self-identified as low income. Respondents saw their neighborhood as encompassing a much smaller area than what was outlined the Census tract. Participants saw the target area as two separate neighborhoods. The three community members who attended the focus group were diverse in their race, gender, and ideas. Two of the respondents were a couple and moved into their home a few years ago, while one of the participants was a long time resident.

Housing

In this area of the community, respondents were primarily homeowners. Housing was described as being in high demand with low turnover. High housing prices were viewed as a deterrent to young families, and the area had seen a decline in the number of kids. Nearby apartments were seen as a threat to safety and the cause of area crime.

Community

Respondents identified a good amount of green space and great garbage collection service. According to focus group participants, there was little sense of community and little interaction between respondents. Newcomers were not always made to feel welcome and sometimes felt over-policed. There was general consensus that increased communication between residents would improve relationships and help to solve community problems more efficiently and justly. One resident spoke about how there was no specific neighborhood identity or location she felt she

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'belonged to'. There was also general agreement around a lack of local businesses nearby to get basic necessities.

Participants spoke about how the churches are one part of the neighborhood that offered a sense of community and youth programming. Churches were seen as key to the development of community resources.

Security

A strong police presence was noticed by all participants, but its necessity was debated. Some respondents felt over-policed either by members of law enforcement or public officials. One resident noted some break-ins that had occurred and saw the increased police presence as a positive development. In addition to the perceived risk the apartments brought, safety along the Constitution Trail was also discussed as a concern.

West Bloomington:

The West Bloomington focus group had 17 community members in attendance with diversity across age, race, and gender. Many participants were active in churches and local organizations.

Housing

Participants spoke about the important historical background of the West Bloomington area and the strength in its diversity. Respondents spoke favorably about the affordability of housing being attractive to a diverse group of people, especially young couples. The care of rental properties was one of the concerns raised by the group. Properties that were not well maintained caused some concern among those in attendance. In addition to the care of rental properties, safety concerns about vacant houses were also raised.

Sense of Community

More than any other neighborhood studied, West Bloomington was described as a place with a neighborly sense of community. Respondents liked the parks, but wished to see more gardens. The positive impacts of a diverse community were noted again. Respondents saw their

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neighborhood as a good place to live, but noted that the external perception of their neighborhood had a negative impact. Youth were often perceived as troublemakers by outsiders. The need for reintegrating homeless and formerly incarcerated people back into society was discussed by several respondents. The group offered a variety of suggestions for improving West Bloomington. Respondents saw churches as a place that could provide services to homeless respondents or opportunities to engage youth. Respondents also spoke favorably of fresh and healthy food shopping options like the farmer’s market and Common Ground, however they wished to see a grocery store in their neighborhood.

Relationship to the city of Bloomington

The community noted a slow response to infrastructure repair. One specific concern was the inadequate care of the streets; potholes were covered with traffic cones and were not addressed for months. There was a perception that many aldermen were not responsive to the needs of the community. One area for improvement is a better solution for garbage pick-up that does not have such a large impact on the availability of off-street parking for West Bloomington respondents.

Common themes:

Many themes emerged across communities, and very few needs were specific to one neighborhood. Tables 3-7 provide summary overviews of the most common themes.

TABLE 3

Housing				
	Nor.	WB	EB	Lex.
High residential stability/ low turnover				
Yard maintenance of neighbors a concern				
Increased number of rental units desired				

Housing

Housing was a theme addressed in all neighborhoods. In Bloomington-Normal focus groups, respondents expressed skepticism and at times outright dislike for apartment and rental

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housing, which they perceived as unstable and renters were seen as less invested in the community. In contrast, Lexington focus group participants expressed a desire to increase apartment and rental housing options in their community. Lexington respondents saw a lack of rental options as a barrier to potential community growth, limiting the ability for young families to try out the community before purchasing a home. This rental versus owner dichotomy continued to reinforce participant views on residential turnover and mobility.

In every focus group save West Bloomington, participants believed their community to have low residential turnover. Even though many homes in the West Bloomington neighborhood were owned rather than rented, often times they sat vacant. Vacant homes in West Bloomington were of some concern to participants, as they often fell into disrepair. Deteriorating homes contribute to falling property values of neighboring homes and the negative external perception of the community. The issue of housing conditions also came up in East Bloomington, although the focus was specifically on apartment complexes.

TABLE 4

Safety				
	Nor.	WB	EB	Lex.
Concern for safety of rental properties				
Heavy police presence				
Few reentry opportunities for formerly incarcerated				

Safety

In all focus groups save Lexington, rental units were believed to negatively affect overall community safety. Rental units were seen as magnets for gang and drug activity, and often created an environment where increased policing was necessary. West and East Bloomington would like to see increased police presence as well as engagement, Lexington appeared satisfied with police presence, and Normal felt that police presence was excessive in their community. Normal focus

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group participants attributed high numbers of police officers to their proximity to college student housing.

TABLE 5

Social Cohesion				
	Nor.	WB	EB	Lex.
Negative perception of new residents from Chicago				
Neighbors help neighbors				
Desire for an increased sense of community				
Sense of shared history				
Concern about negative perception of community				

Social Cohesion

A sense of community can manifest among respondents in a variety of ways, and indeed each focus group had their own unique view. While Normal did not feel neighbors were overly friendly to new respondents, all other focus groups explained that where they live, neighbors help neighbors. Examples of this neighborly spirit were raking leaves, shoveling snow, and generally supporting others when they fell on hard times. While they felt strong connections with neighbors, both East and West Bloomington focus groups expressed concern for how outsiders may perceive their community. Much of this centered on negative press, as well as the perception of high crime in their communities. Only participants of the Normal focus group expressed an outright desire to improve their sense of community. Normal participants wished for better communication and interaction among neighbors, be it through social gatherings or community events.

Both West Bloomington and Lexington felt bonded by a sense of shared history. West Bloomington built support under a banner of marginalization and what participants viewed as exclusion from access to resources and government services. Through collective action, this has improved over time. Lexington participants expressed a sense of shared history as part of a small town. Participants were divided in opinion – based on age – as to whether this was a positive or negative.

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TABLE 6

Youth				
	Nor.	WB	EB	Lex.
Lack of extracurricular options for youth				
Desire for additional GED programs				

Youth Opportunities

Perhaps one of the most evident themes across all focus groups was the desire for an increase in opportunities for youth. In some focus groups, participants indicated that opportunities for youth may exist, though access is limited. Often youth may become active through school sports, however this is not an option for all students. In East Bloomington, participants explained that families with financial resources can overcome this obstacle, though often they have to travel to other neighborhoods or communities for activities. There are limited options for lower income youth without an interest in sports.

While most communities spoke positively of the local school system, some participants expressed concern about post high school options for youth. In Lexington, participants spoke of a lack of job opportunities. Furthermore, they believed that many recent graduates left unprepared for college life. Participants in West Bloomington felt similarly and mentioned a need for additional programs to bridge this gap. Both Lexington and West Bloomington expressed a desire for GED courses.

TABLE 7

Community Resources				
	Nor.	WB	EB	Lex.
Desire for an increase in local business				
Churches serve as community hubs				
Concern about responsiveness of local government				
Excellent garbage collection				
Lack of pedestrian access in commercial areas				

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Community Resources

All focus groups spoke of a desire for increased local business presence. In Lexington, the economic downturn has hurt local main street businesses, causing many to close. In addition, many residents work outside of the community, leading them to shop near their place of work. This can be detrimental to small community business owners as they seek to attract more clients. In other focus groups, absence of local business was seen as a continuation of the national trend towards larger brand name chain stores. In Normal, respondents explained that a lack of small businesses affected their sense of community identity.

A lack of business presence can be seen as detrimental to attracting new residents. The Lexington focus group mentioned the recent contract with Wertz beverage to build a distribution warehouse. Participants felt this additional business would make the community more attractive to potential respondents. In addition, this influx of money would create a demand for additional goods and services, driving the generation of small businesses.

While Wertz is an example of a large contract generating opportunity in a community, this effect can be repeated on a smaller scale within neighborhoods in Bloomington-Normal. Encouraging an environment friendly to business can have positive effects and create employment opportunities for respondents. Establishment of local grocers or farmers markets can vastly improve access to quality food, something West Bloomington focus group participants mentioned as a community resource.

Churches were universally present and active in all communities. Participants in all focus groups emphasized the ability for church organizations to facilitate community projects. Church congregations act as a hub for community activity, and bring respondents together.

VI. Project Recommendations

TABLE 8

Social Cohesion
Safety
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying Neighborhood leaders and holding Neighborhood forums Empowering local respondents
Rental property maintenance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue working with the West Bloomington Revitalizations Project to implement the West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan Organizing community members to hold property owners accountable for upkeep and abiding by city codes. Continue to reevaluate city codes and create new codes when necessary Neighborhoods can use the West Bloomington Revitalization Project and Neighborhood Plans to shape their own initiatives for improving housing
Reentry of the formerly incarcerated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community and stakeholder organizations create educational opportunities and job preparation programs for formerly incarcerated individuals Encourage local businesses to extend employment opportunities to participants of these programs
Housing
Transitioning renters into homeowners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Base neighborhood strategies in the Geography of Opportunity Framework Increasing awareness of current programs, such as the Next Step Initiative Recruiting new stakeholders
Youth Opportunities
Youth education and job preparation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen partnerships between community and area businesses to increase access to educational and job preparation programs Develop mentorships between older and younger youth generations
Safe Spaces for youth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host a “Leadership Seminar” or “Youth Summit” to develop youth leadership and identify youth concerns Increase recreational opportunities and make recreational activities affordable and accessible
Community Resources
Attracting local business
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with educational and business institutions Improve transportation system Encourage entrepreneurship
Relationship with local government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase communication and strengthen partnership Work together towards fostering positive perception of neighborhoods and addressing neighborhood-specific needs through forming community watch groups and holding public forums Improve response and follow-up towards neighborhood-specific needs

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The purpose of investigating the four McLean County neighborhoods was to identify communal and individual well-being within each of these neighborhoods. The findings from this portion of United Way of McLean County's (UWMC) Community-Wide Assessment have led to the following eight sections of recommendations:

Social Cohesion

Safety

Focus group participants expressed a safety concern regarding the apartments in the East Bloomington neighborhood, indicating a lower level of social cohesion. We suggest holding a series of neighborhood forums to discuss safety concerns, increasing social cohesion and general feeling of safety. A priority within these forums should be discussing the root cause of the safety concern, and what strategies might be taken to resolve the issue. Existing local organizations could help launch the process by identifying a neighborhood leader to schedule, publicize, and host the forums. City aldermen can be invited to participate in the discussion and share what measures the local government is taking to address concerns. In addition to fostering social cohesion, forums can improve residents' awareness of local issues, facilitate discussion, and increase investment in the community.

Forums have additional benefits as well. By virtue of their democratic nature, they serve to empower local respondents with a greater feeling of control over events within their neighborhood. As evidenced in *An Empowerment Model for Building Neighborhood Community*, one traditional way communities cope with a lack of resources is by forming informal support networks with their neighbors. Forums serve as a platform for developing such networks; they have been long-utilized as a tactic applied to a myriad of community issues in a variety of different contexts. Building off the forum tradition, Graber et. al (1996) explain that allowing respondents to set the agenda of what issues they want to address is key to developing successful community aid programs. In this

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manner, solutions emerge from within, rather than outside the community, and respondents are involved in producing those solutions. Therefore, communities should work to strengthen existing programs while allowing new neighborhood programs, such as forums, to emerge.

Rental Property Maintenance

Respondents in West Bloomington expressed concern over the maintenance of rental properties. Property maintenance is critical for neighborhood social cohesion because visual cues such as physical disorder have been found to impact perception of neighborhood safety (O'Brien 2012). Due to quicker turnover rates, rental properties may be subject to more general wear and tear. Therefore, rental properties typically require more frequent maintenance than owner-occupied properties.

The West Bloomington Revitalization Project (WBRP) is working to implement their West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan (2008) to address maintenance and a host of other neighborhood-level issues. The plan outlines strategies and projects related to community greening, youth, safety and well-being, economic development, and education, as well as recommendations for improving community housing access, affordability and quality. According to the West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan “about 32 percent of...housing stock consists of owner-occupied dwelling units while another 57.8 percent consists of rental-occupied units.” (2008:8). The Plan suggests West Bloomington work to develop mechanisms for holding property owners accountable for repairs and upkeep. In line with WBRP’s suggestion of bringing landlords and tenants to the table for a discussion of rights and responsibilities (West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan 2008), we recommend community members work together to hold each other accountable for complying with existing city codes. Bloomington City Code SEC. 304.6, for example, states that “all exterior walls shall be free from holes, breaks and loose or rotting materials; and maintained weatherproof and properly surface coated where required to prevent deterioration” (City of Bloomington 2012).

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Proper enforcement of this code would go a long way toward improving building maintenance and increasing perceptions of safety in the neighborhood. As one key informant stated, financial assistance for such repairs is already available through the WBRP: “WBRP home repair projects only require 10% of material costs from the homeowner; either in materials or their labor. But if repairs require lots of skilled work, then that 10% may be more than what the homeowner can conceivably do financially.”

Considering the financial challenge, increased funding for WBRP, in the form of public or private grants or donations, would allow the agency to conduct more home rehabilitation projects. In addition, while developing strategies for increasing compliance with existing maintenance codes, respondents could come together to discuss developing recommendations for new maintenance codes.

The West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan was an ambitious undertaking, developed from the cooperative efforts of hundreds of people and dozens of organizations, public and private. It provides a vision statement for the community, discusses its history, current issues, and outlines a plan for its future. We recommend similar plans could be developed for each of the other three neighborhoods involved in this assessment. Each neighborhood plan should involve the stakeholders unique to that community in its development. For guidance, these neighborhoods can call upon the WBRP leaders to share their experiences from the West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan’s development process.

Reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals

Another issue identified during a neighborhood focus group was finding ways to ease the reentry process of formerly incarcerated individuals into the community. Formerly incarcerated individuals are often marginalized from society and communities, affecting their ability to acquire a job, participate in community events, and even access safe and affordable housing. Insufficient

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programming for transitioning such individuals back into society can negatively impact social cohesion and community identity. Furthermore, improving this transition will strengthen the neighborhoods' image within the larger community. Communities and stakeholder organizations can create community-based educational opportunities and job preparation programs specifically for residents who have been formerly incarcerated. Honing in on local economy, communities can encourage local business to extend job opportunities to participants from these programs. Moreover, encouraging local employment will create more opportunities for social interaction between program participants and the community, fostering trust and improving community assets. In the long term, this initiative can help decrease recidivism and increase residential stability within the neighborhood.

Housing

Renter versus Owner-Occupied Homes

Another finding from the neighborhood focus groups was a disparity between renters and homeowners. When analyzing the ratio of renters versus homeowners in a neighborhood, it is important to include factors such as income and race. This can be accomplished through applying the Geography of Opportunity Framework, which situates respondents “within a context of place-based opportunities that shape quality of life” (Osypuk 2013:S62). Further, the framework acknowledges, “there are consistently large racial/ethnic disparities in access to neighborhoods of high opportunity” (Osypuk 2013:S62), as well as “differential access to neighborhood resources by race, social class, nativity, and other meaningful social stratification categories” (Osypuk 2013:S63).

By considering the dynamics of income and race, this framework helps inform perceptions of renters versus homeowners. Homeowners in the East Bloomington, West Bloomington, and Normal neighborhoods had negative views towards renters. Apartments were associated with decreased safety, sense of community, social cohesion, and general quality of life. These associations

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correlate to both the ingrained perceptions and the physical appearance of these building structures. For the neighborhood of West Bloomington, owner-occupied homes reported being more invested in the well-being of the community. This finding is consistent with community development literature, which suggests that stronger informal social ties improve neighborhood stability (Ross et al. 2000). Homeowners who are long-term respondents of a community are more likely to have developed strong, informal social ties.

Our recommendation lies in finding solutions to bridge the divide between homeowners and renters. Therefore, considering the positive community-level impacts of homeownership, we recommend increasing awareness of programs teaching financial literacy and money management, which can assist renters who wish to become homeowners. One such program, Next Step, pairs participants with a financial adviser who helps them develop strategies for meeting fiscal goals. The program, located at Mid-Central Community Action in Bloomington and Heartland Community College in Normal, is a partnership between Mid-Central Community Action, Heartland Community College, UWMC and the University of Illinois's College of Law's Community Preservation Clinic. In addition to the financial coach, Next Step offers alternatives to pay-day loans and provides help for avoiding mortgage foreclosures. According to a WGLT article, "The UWMC will track and monitor progress clients make in improving their credit scores, managing debt, obtaining a liveable income and accumulating savings" (WGLT FM 2013).

Recruiting new stakeholders, such banks and credit unions, to collaborate in this initiative will strengthen its impact and sustainability. These stakeholders could work directly with potential homeowners to improve access to credit and financial services. The Next Step initiative is designed to help people achieve financial independence and stability. New or complementary programs within Next Step could be focused specifically on helping renters transition into becoming homeowners. As more renters make the transition, neighborhood stability and identity will increase.

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The government can also have a role in this process. The Grattan Institute (2013) recently released their “Renovating Housing Policy” report which showcases that the government provides more policy and tax incentives to homeowners; this is another way the divide is perpetuated between homeowners and renters. Although the divide increases with this type of government involvement, it provides another incentive for renters to transition into being homeowners. Since according to the Grattan Institute the divide is income-based and generational, it also shows the need for the government to start enacting policies favorable for renters and for first-time homeowners.

Opportunities for youth

Education and job preparation

The following needs for youth were identified during the focus groups: opportunities in education, workplace and economic opportunities, and safe spaces for youth to spend time within their communities. By holding GED classes within Wayman Church, the West Bloomington neighborhood has already begun to improve youth educational opportunities. As a way of facilitating transitions for youths into the workforce, we recommend United Way to consider employing additional community assets, such as State Farm and COUNTRY Financial Human Resource representatives, to co-facilitate youth driven activities with community members. Furthermore, peer-based empowerment initiatives could be effective in strengthening community assets and human capital through educating community members. Additionally, UWMC could help neighborhoods develop partnerships with businesses wanting to strengthen the community for their employees. Younger generations in all neighborhoods could benefit from the creation of mentoring programs between those who have already transitioned into the workforce and those entering high school.

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Safe Spaces

A sufficient safe space for youth was another need that surfaced in the focus groups. We recommend neighborhoods hold a youth summit to identify opportunities within the community for youth involvement. Just as focus groups and forums can offer democratic opportunities for community development, this summit will promote democratic values among youth. Additionally, the summit facilitates leadership development and could strengthen community social cohesion. Local businesses could donate spaces and money to help fund the summit. Additional funding sources could include parents, non-profit organizations, or local government.

Finally, as identified in the findings section, recreational opportunities for youth are often expensive and require traveling outside the local neighborhood. Sports teams generate opportunities for fostering leadership and teamwork. As seen in Lexington, a sports team can bring together community, give community members a cause to rally around, and serve as a fountain of community pride. We recommend expanding upon existing recreational activities and improving access, affordability and quantity of programs. Additionally, creating local leagues can help make programs accessible to children in all neighborhoods.

Community Resources

Attracting local businesses

Since all the neighborhoods expressed a desire for a variety of new local businesses, we developed recommendations pertaining to this topic. For ideas, we referenced the West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan (2008), which makes several recommendations related to economic development. These include partnering with existing educational and business institutions to promote “new business start-ups and local cooperative enterprises” (2008:26), expanding public transportation services, and enhancing “workforce development programming” (2008:27). These

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recommendations, though directed toward West Bloomington, are applicable to every neighborhood studied.

There are numerous barriers to starting a new business. In addition to capital needs, launching a commercial enterprise requires knowledge of how to acquire the necessary permits, become compliant with existing codes, and an ability to navigate government regulations. These barriers function to deter would-be job creators and service providers from launching commercial enterprises. As suggested in the West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan (2008), communities could partner with area educational institutions, such as Illinois State University, Heartland Community College, and Illinois Wesleyan University, to provide training for entrepreneurs on how to navigate the forest of permits, codes, and regulations associated with launching a new enterprise. In addition, the Economic Development Council of the Bloomington-Normal area could provide training on how to secure the capital needs to start a business.

Accessibility is a primary issue for local businesses. Residents need quick, affordable transportation to the places where they work and shop. Considering this, the West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan (2008) recommends exploring the possibility of extending the operating hours of Connect Transit, as well as adding service on Sundays. Additionally, the Plan calls for expanding bike paths. These paths will encourage biking as a means for transportation, potentially decrease traffic congestion, reduce air pollutants from driving, and increase access to businesses, parks and other community spaces. We support these recommendations, not only as strategies for attracting local businesses, but for making communities more livable.

By creating a large pool of skilled job applicants, enhancing workforce development programming increases the likelihood businesses will locate in a particular neighborhood. The West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan calls for creating a “center for career counseling services, classes on financial literacy, information on starting a business, neighborhood marketing information,

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information on apprenticeship programs, resume workshops, job fairs and free or low-cost skills-based courses (i.e. on information technology, public speaking, technical writing, etc.)” (2008:27). Such a center could function as a liaison between job-seekers, potential businesses, and entrepreneurs. Neighborhoods should explore the possibility of opening such a Center as is outlined in the Plan.

Relationship with Local Government

Lastly, focus groups identified the importance of local government presence within the neighborhoods. As previously mentioned in the findings, there are services that are working well, such as the high standard of garbage and recycling collection reflected within the focus groups held in Normal and Bloomington. Additionally, the Lexington focus group had a favorable view of their municipality, highlighting transparency and a positive relationship with government as being the benefits of a small community. Yet, the government could add more initiatives and more focus in serving their respective communities. In general, we recommend there be increased communication and partnership between the local government and their respective neighborhoods. As evidenced in Lexington, this would lead to a more positive relationship and greater transparency.

A concern voiced in the West and East Bloomington focus groups was a negative perception of their communities. In West Bloomington, for example, a participant stressed the need to “rebrand” the image of the neighborhood. The local government could work with these neighborhoods to develop rebranding and other strategies that present them in a more positive way. A conversation on this topic could be facilitated through public forums. As part of a rebranding, the government could spearhead housing and safety initiatives. In regards to housing, neighborhoods could work with municipalities to address maintenance and code enforcement issues. According to the West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan (2008), one way the city codes can be better implemented is through community watch groups and the local government working together. If

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there are no community watch groups, we recommend that they be formed. These groups can be utilized in regularly reporting code violations to the city or the township. These groups could also report residential vacancies, such as those reported in the West Bloomington focus group. Further, in regards to safety, there were mixed viewpoints on the need for police presence within certain neighborhoods. Specifically, the Normal neighborhood viewed a strong police presence within their neighborhood to be unnecessary. On the other hand, the East Bloomington neighborhood expressed the need for increased police presence. This is another example of where greater communication between the local government and the neighborhoods could assist municipalities in better serving their neighborhoods. Again, a public forum within individual communities could prove useful in gathering input and in starting conversations on these issues.

Another concern regarded the responsiveness of the local government. Specifically in West Bloomington, there was concern about the City of Bloomington's slow response to infrastructure repair. According to the focus group participants, there is need to improve the maintenance of both sidewalks and streets. Across the Normal and Bloomington focus groups, there were mixed reactions towards the aldermen serving these areas. While there were positive remarks on quick responses to concerns and needs, this was not consistent for all the aldermen. This leads us to recommend that there be increased communication and interaction between each alderman and their respective area. This will enable aldermen to better meet the needs of citizens, as well as form stronger relationships with their respective area. Additionally, we recommend repairing and maintaining infrastructure to improve neighborhood perception, make it more inviting for new residents, as well as incentivize residents to upkeep their neighborhood.

Additionally, the East Bloomington focus group expressed concerns about government response to transportation-related complaints. There was a general consensus that the local government was not meeting their needs in this regard. Specifically, participants had concerns

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regarding the accessibility of transportation, as well as the bus routes. In regards to accessibility, participants reported difficulty leaving the neighborhood if they do not own or have access to a vehicle. The main reason cited for this was the lack of pedestrian accessibility on Veteran's Parkway. We recommend finding solutions to make Veteran's Parkway more pedestrian-friendly. One way to do this would be to add sidewalks, cross lights, and/or bike paths. With the topic of bus routes, there was dissatisfaction in how the route went right in front of Stevenson Elementary School. There were passionate concerns about the speed of the bus and the safety of children crossing the street. We recommend either placing a crossing guard to assist children in crossing the street or to divert this bus route. In general, another recommendation would be to follow-through on complaint responses to see if respondents remain dissatisfied.

VII. Recommendations for Future Assessments and Research

Throughout the key-informant interview and focus group process, a few areas for improvement in the process became evident. First, a consistent and standardized form of note taking amongst note takers would strengthen the validity of gathered data. One method by which to achieve this is to tape or video record the focus groups and interviews. Another is by requiring note takers to attempt to capture the verbatim of the interview or focus group, rather than simply summarizing. Additionally, rather than the method of each note-taker focusing on a few individuals, note takers should focus on the group as a whole. This would allow for cross-analysis of the notes, thereby increasing validity of the data. Lastly, standardized notes would allow researchers to verify the reliability of the questions asked during the focus groups, improving the overall assessment tool for the United Way of McLean County.

In addition, since there are diverse income levels existing within the identified neighborhood areas of research, we recommend conducting more focus groups to capture this variety of demographics. On a related note, rather than relying solely on Census data, neighborhood respondents can be utilized in the identification of neighborhood boundaries. Another recommendation pertaining to focus groups is not to rely as heavily on key informants for recruiting focus group participants, as this technique limits the diversity of participants to individuals already connected to the key informant, and may function to limit input to a specific group, rather than the neighborhood as a whole. This concern also applies to having key informants attend the focus groups. This may decrease the validity of the gathered data through the over-representation of a few voices. However, key informants are an important resource and should still be utilized. The concern pertains to the extent of utilization. Additionally, survey data acquired by UWMC for the

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Community Assessment could be used in conjunction with the Census data in identifying and defining neighborhood boundaries.

Further, there was inconsistent communication between UWMC and the Illinois State University student researchers. To address this, we recommend methods for better communication between the two groups. For example, UWMC and the student researchers had different questions for their focus groups. Without having standard questions across all focus groups within the Community Assessment, some ability to cross-reference findings between the focus groups conducted by UWMC and the student researchers is lost. Also, improved communication could have facilitated student researchers taking advantage of the resources UWMC used in recruiting and in planning their focus groups. For example, UWMC submitted an article in the Pantagraph, which detailed focus groups they were hosting. With better communication, the focus groups planned by student researchers could be included in the Pantagraph article.

For future research, we first suggest addressing the diversity of McLean County residents through hosting a few more different categories of focus groups. These additional groups include focus groups for respondents working on/have not completed their GED and for women. Additionally, rather than focusing on one rural neighborhood, Lexington, focusing on two rural areas would provide more validity of data being gathered for the category of rural areas surrounding McLean County. Also, holding repeated focus groups within neighborhoods would help provide a more complete picture of these neighborhoods. Not only would there be greater potential for all neighborhood demographics to be represented, there would also be increased opportunity to cross-analyze data, strengthening the validity of the findings.

Further, we suggest there be a secure online forum or survey which neighborhood respondents who are unable to attend the focus group can use to share information about their neighborhood. To remain consistent, the same questions used in the focus group would be shared in

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the online forum or survey. Also, more incentives, such as a raffle, could be offered to respondents for participating within their neighborhood focus groups. We recommend that there could be improved clarification on how the assessment data will be utilized and on the potential results and consequences. Lastly, for future research, we suggest neighborhood residents map their neighborhoods and for this information be used in conjunction with survey data and Census data in determining neighborhood boundaries.

VIII. Limitations of the Study

A primary limitation was time. The timeframe for this assessment was limited to three weeks for recruiting and conducting four focus groups. The time constraints under which we conducted our research did not allow us to attract a significant number of participants from the neighborhoods analyzed. This affected our ability to speak to the broader population and to address the demographics of the neighborhood, potentially limiting the information collected. Additionally, due to time constraints, the methods of recruiting for focus groups were limited. Time constraints restricted researchers' ability to develop relationships with the neighborhood members that would have enabled more effective, diverse, and complete participation in focus groups.

A second limitation occurred during the identification of neighborhoods. Although Income Census data was used to identify areas of investigation, the income levels represented did not reflect both demographics within each neighborhood and the focus group participants' perceptions of the neighborhood. This led researchers to conclude that more than one neighborhood resides within the identified areas of study. Therefore, the Census data creates an ambiguous and irrelevant boundary of analysis. Sampson et al. (2002) touch upon issues around neighborhoods having geographic boundaries established by the Census Bureau. Since these boundaries ignore the social networks between neighbors, the authors stress that they are not ideal for policy development and research.

Illinois State University researchers were unfamiliar with the areas of analysis. This was a third limitation for the Community Assessment. The weak relationship between ISU researchers and the researched neighborhoods was reflected both in the heavy reliance on key informants for recruitment and in the general recruitment and attendance of the focus groups. Additionally, in some of the focus groups, heavy reliance on key informants for recruiting led to the limitation of key informants influencing the demographic of the attendees, as well as leading to the key informants

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themselves attending the focus groups. When key informants attended the focus groups, this potentially limited responses, drove focus groups in certain directions, and inflated and repeated gathered data. In contrast, there was also failure in utilizing all the key informants, specifically the additional contact from the Bloomington-Normal City Agency Member. This specific key informant could have been an additional asset for recruiting, and United Way could have also benefited from this contact.

In closing, this study provides supplemental data to support the broader 2014 United Way Community Assessment. Although there are limitations to the generalizability of this data, the findings provide a more in-depth examination of assets and needs at a neighborhood level. Combined with the larger 2014 assessment, this data can be beneficial to improving social and community well-being for future McLean County residents.

IX. References

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X. APPENDICES

Appendix A-Key Informant Contact Script

SOA 477, Fall 2013

Making Contact with Potential Key Informant Interviewees:

Hello, my name is _____, and I am a graduate student with the Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development at Illinois State University.

In collaboration with the United Way, we are working on an assessment of neighborhood well-being and related social service needs within McLean County. We are focusing on low income neighborhoods, moderate income neighborhoods, and rural neighborhoods as part of our research. Your name was identified with the help of the United Way as someone who has involvement with a broader range of social services and overall well-being issues in at least one of these types of neighborhoods. I am hoping that you will be willing to talk to us about your perspectives on the broader issues of neighborhood well-being and related social services to help us better identify areas of need and areas for improvement. This information will be used to help us better direct the questions in our focus groups with neighborhood respondents, which will be conducted in mid-October.

I would like to schedule a time and location that is convenient for you to discuss these issues a bit more in person. It is important for us to speak directly with key stakeholders such as yourself that have direct knowledge and experience with these issues, to better understand what could be improved in the future. Your contribution and perspectives are vital to helping us to better understand the issues and possible ways that the United Way and its partners can better serve the respondents of McLean County. The interview should last between 45-60 minutes. Is there a time in the next week that would work for you?

**Please confirm the location to meet and then thank them for their time.

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

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Appendix B-Key Informant Interview Consent Form

In collaboration with the United Way, a group of Graduate Students from the Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development is working on a community assessment of neighborhood well-being and related social service needs within McLean County. We are focusing on low income neighborhoods, moderate income neighborhoods, and rural neighborhoods as part of our research. As part of this assessment, we are conducting interviews with key stakeholders that have some knowledge of the different neighborhoods that we are focusing on to gain a better understanding of the current state of various social services and overall well-being issues in these types of neighborhoods. Your perspectives on the broader issues of neighborhood well-being and related social services will help us to better identify areas of need and areas for improvement.

The interview will last between 45-60 minutes. The questions will focus on getting a better understanding of the current assets and needs as related to quality of life in the various neighborhoods. Results from these interviews will be used to develop focus group questions for respondents to better understand the situation from their perspective. The final results from this project will also be provided to the United Way to inform and guide their county-wide Community Assessment.

Your participation in completely voluntary and all reasonable efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality. However, your name will not be associated with the data collected and only aggregate/group data will be reported. Only those directly involved with the project will have access to interview notes. Participation does not involve any specific benefits beyond helping to improve the sustainability and well-being of your neighborhood. If you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue your participation, there will be no penalty. If you have any questions about the study or need any additional information, please contact Dr. Joan Brehm, Illinois State University, tel: 309-438-7177, email: jmbrehm@ilstu.edu. If you have questions about participant research rights, please contact Illinois State University's Research Ethics and Compliance Office at (309) 438-2520.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions about the project have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the project and know that my responses will remain confidential. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Thank you for your time and participation.

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Appendix C-Key Informant Interview Protocol

Introduce the Project: In collaboration with the United Way, a group of Graduate Students from the Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development is working on a community assessment of neighborhood well-being and related social service needs within McLean County. We are focusing on low income neighborhoods, moderate income neighborhoods, and rural neighborhoods as part of our research. As part of this assessment, we are conducting interviews with key stakeholders that have some knowledge of the different neighborhoods that we are focusing on to gain a better understanding of the current state of various social services and overall well-being issues in these types of neighborhoods. Your perspectives on the broader issues of neighborhood well-being and related social services will help us to better identify areas of need and areas for improvement.

Guiding Research Question:

What factors have the strongest impact upon communal and individual well-being in different neighborhoods in McLean County?

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about yourself and your organization?
 - a. How are you involved in your community/neighborhood?
 - b. How long have you lived here or your organization has worked here?
 - c. How long have you been familiar with the community/neighborhood?
2. Describe your community/neighborhood?
 - a. What is your community/neighborhood known for?
 - b. How have things changed in the last 10 years?
3. What are some reasons that respondents might consider living in this community/neighborhood?
 - a. Why not in this neighborhood?
4. What are some strengths in your community/neighborhood? Weaknesses in your community/neighborhood?
 - a. What are some potential resources that have not yet been developed for your community/neighborhood?
5. What are some needs in your community/neighborhood?
6. What are some future goals for your community/neighborhood?
 - a. Neighborhood vs. organization?
 - b. How could you achieve them?
 - c. Current assets? Potential assets?
 - d. What are some barriers to achieving your goals?

Thank you for your time. Your knowledge and insights will be very helpful to us.

Our next step will be to conduct a focus group in this neighborhood. Do you have any suggestions for where we might hold the focus group that would be convenient to respondents? Who might be helpful contacts for recruitment of neighborhood respondents?

We expect to complete this phase of our work by early December. At that time we will have a public presentation of the findings and you are more than welcome to attend. We will also be

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preparing a written report of the findings and would be happy to share a copy with you if you would like. Would you like to receive a copy of the report?

Thank you again.

Appendix D-Focus Group Consent Form

In collaboration with the United Way, a group of Graduate Students from the Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development is working on a Community Assessment of neighborhood well-being and related social service needs within McLean County. We are focusing on low income neighborhoods, moderate income neighborhoods, and rural neighborhoods as part of our research. As part of this assessment, we are conducting focus groups with neighborhood respondents in different neighborhoods throughout McLean County to gain a better understanding of the current state of various social services and overall well-being issues in these types of neighborhoods. Your perspectives on the broader issues of neighborhood well-being and related social services will help us to better identify areas of need and areas for improvement.

The focus group will last between 60-90 minutes. The questions will focus on getting a better understanding of the current assets and needs as related to quality of life in the various neighborhoods. Results from this focus group will be provided to the United Way to inform and guide their county-wide Community Assessment.

Your participation in completely voluntary and all reasonable efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality. Since the focus group session takes place in a group setting and others are privy to your responses, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. However, your name will not be associated with the data collected and only group data will be reported. Only those directly involved with the project will have access to focus group notes. Participation does not involve any other specific risks other than perhaps some discomfort when revealing personal feelings in the focus group setting. Participation does not involve any specific benefits beyond helping to improve the sustainability and well-being of your neighborhood. If you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue your participation, there will be no penalty. If you have any questions about the study or need any additional information, please contact Dr. Joan Brehm, Illinois State University, tel: 309-438-7177, email: jmbrehm@ilstu.edu. If you have questions about participant research rights, please contact Illinois State University's Research Ethics and Compliance Office at (309) 438-2520.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions about the project have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the project and know that my responses will remain confidential. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Thank you for your time and participation.

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Appendix E-Focus Group Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Welcome! Thank you for taking time to participate in the discussion this evening.

We are Graduate Students from the Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development at Illinois State University. We are working in collaboration with the United Way to help carry out a Community Assessment of neighborhood well-being and related social service needs within McLean County. To assist with this assessment, we are conducting focus groups with a diversity of neighborhood respondents in different neighborhoods throughout McLean County to gain a better understanding of the current state of various social services and overall well-being issues in these types of neighborhoods. Your perspectives on the broader issues of neighborhood well-being and related social services will help United Way to better identify areas of need and areas for improvement.

The focus group will last between 60-90 minutes. The questions will focus on getting a better understanding of the current assets and needs as related to quality of life in the various neighborhoods. Results from this focus group will be provided to the United Way to inform and guide their county-wide Community Assessment.

Ground Rules:

We will do our best to keep all information in this discussion confidential. No identifying information or names will be used in any reports or documents. Please be respectful of diverse viewpoints.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Interview Protocol

1. How would you describe your neighborhood (town) to a new resident?
 - a. How would you define your neighborhood?
 - b. Geographically, socially, etc...???
2. What are the strengths of your neighborhood (town)?
3. Are there any weaknesses in your neighborhood (town)? If so, can you tell us about them?
4. Are there things you would like to improve in your neighborhood (town)? If so, can you tell us about them?
 - Health services
 - Infrastructure
 - Schools
 - Public services
 - Green space
 - Community organizations
 - Social interaction
 - Safety
 - Job opportunities Youth options/services
5. How are problems solved in your neighborhood (town)?
 - a. Describe your neighborhoods relationship with the local government.
 - b. Describe your neighborhoods relationship with local NGOs/community organizations.
6. Describe for us what services you use in your neighborhood (town)?
 - a. Brainstorm a list

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- b. YWCA specifically – for moderate income neighborhood.
- c. Describe the services that are available?
- d. Why might someone use or not use a local service?
- e. Define services....garbage collection, health clinics, public transportation, police, local businesses, infrastructure, schools, community organizations
- 7. Where do you make the majority of your purchases?
 - a. Stores and service providers?
 - b. Inside or outside of the community/neighborhood?
- 8. Can you tell us about the housing in your neighborhood (town)?
 - a. Affordability
 - b. Turnover
 - c. Homeowner vs. renter
 - d. Physical condition
- 9. Can you tell us about opportunities for participation or volunteering in your neighborhood (town)?
- 10. What would you like to see addressed in your neighborhood (town) over the next five years?

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Appendix F- Marketing Materials: Sample Flier

Help your neighbors,
help yourself.

▶ West Bloomington Focus Group

WHO'S THE FOCUS GROUP FOR?

We want to hear about
your neighborhood!

We are looking for participants
who:

- Live in West Bloomington
- Are 18 or older
- Are interested in sharing
their opinions and experiences

If you are interested in participating
in this focus group, please contact
Matthew Tomlin at
mtomlin@uwaymc.org or
▶ 309-828-7383.

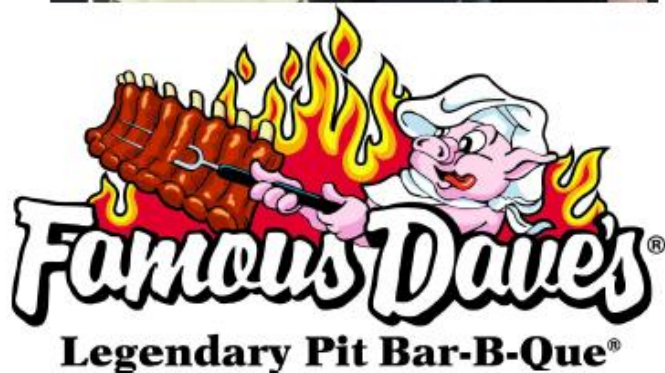


WHEN AND WHERE?

Wednesday, October 16th
5:30 to 7 pm

Wayman AME Church
803 W. Olive St
Bloomington, IL 61701

Famous Dave's will be
provided!



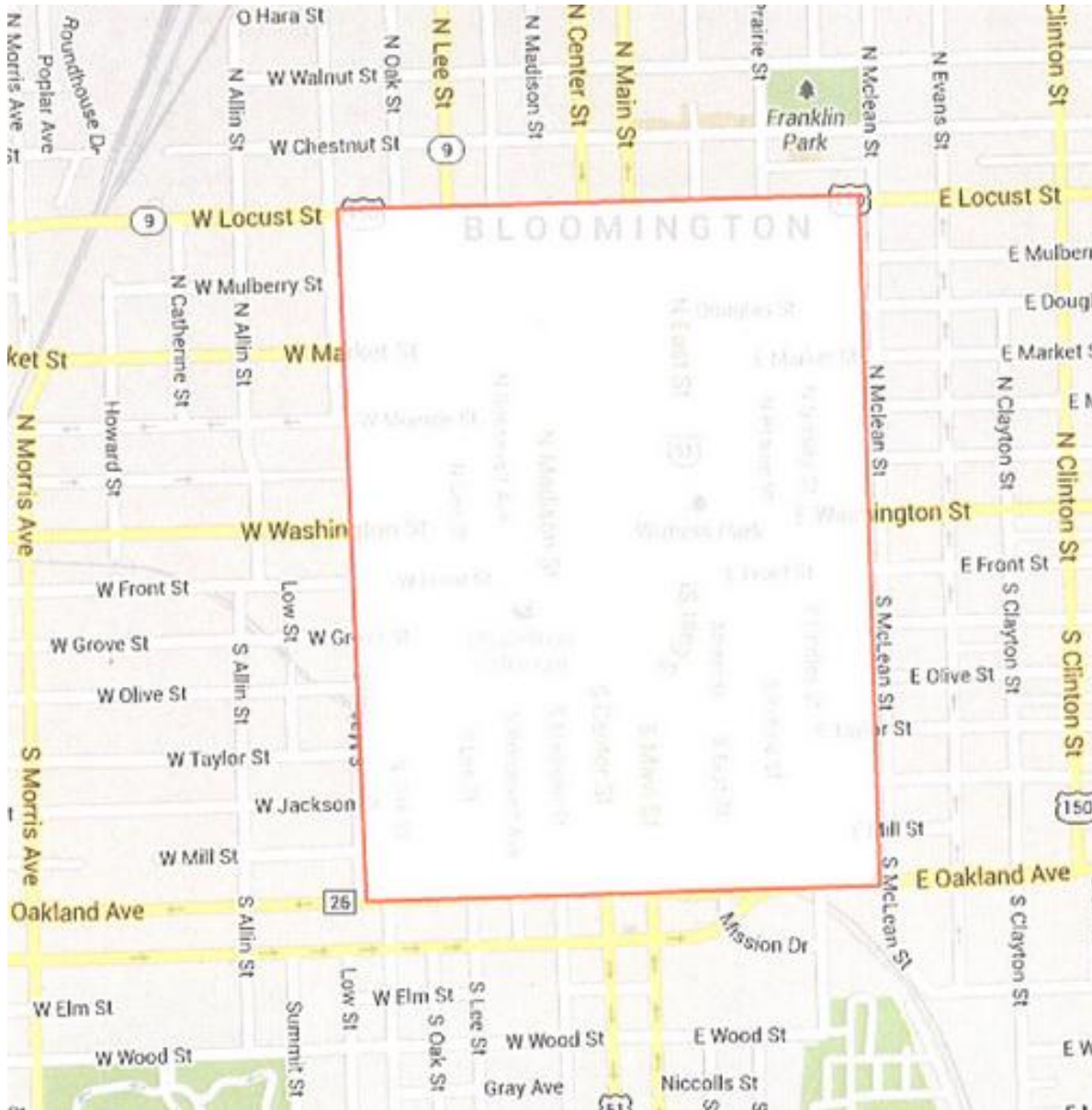
LIVE UNITED



- The focus group will be lead by ISU Stevenson Center graduate students.
- The focus group discussion will be summarized with other Assessment information.
- Participants' names will not be shared by United Way outside of the group or in reporting.

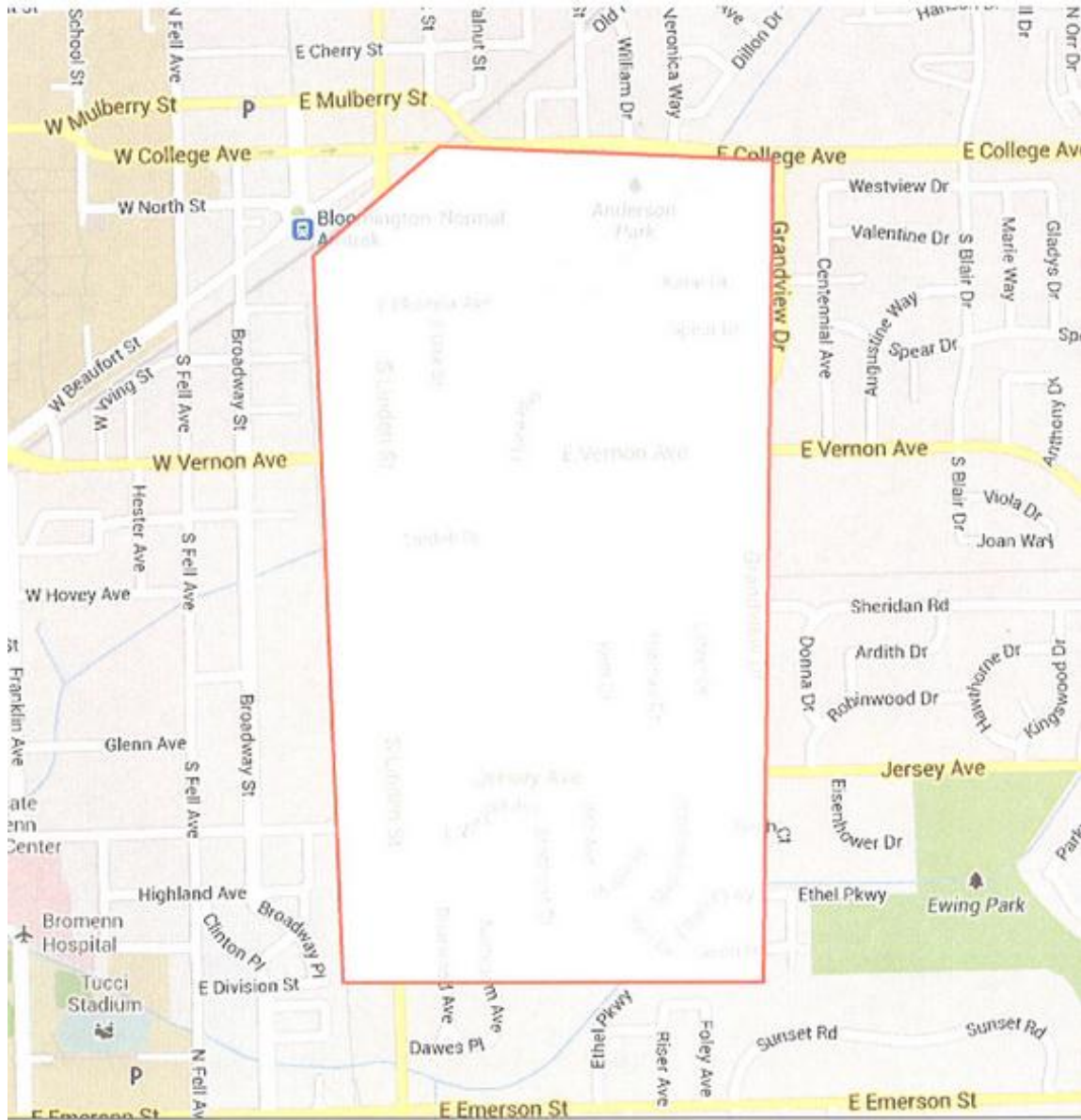
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Appendix H-West Bloomington—map powered by Google and Scribble Maps



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Appendix I- Normal-map powered by Google and Scribble Maps



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Appendix K- Targeted Advisory Council Members

Advocate BroMenn Medical Center

<http://www.advocatehealth.com/bromenn/mission>

Mission: “Advocate BroMenn Medical Center, a 221-bed full service, not-for-profit hospital located in Normal, IL, is one of the most advanced acute care facilities in central Illinois. The medical center’s services encompass a wide range of acute, outpatient, rehabilitative and preventative health care. The mission of Advocate Health Care is to serve the health needs of individuals, families, communities through a wholistic philosophy rooted in our fundamental understanding of human beings as created in the image of God.”

Bloomington Township

www.townships.toi.org/CITYOFBLOOMINGTONTOWNSHIP

The Bloomington Township is responsible for General Assistance, Property Assessment, Road and Bridge Maintenance.

Bloomington Public School District 87

http://www.district87.org/pages/Bloomington_School_District_87

Mission: “The educational mission of Bloomington Public Schools is to challenge, support, and inspire students to learn and achieve in their highest potential in order to become productive citizens constructive citizen and lifelong learners. The emphasis of the educational program is the individual student.”

Busey Bank

<http://www.busey.com/home/buseypromise/heritage>

History and Heritage: “At Busey, a community organization, committed to helping customers’ and communities’ dreams come true. Since we first opened our doors in 1868, we have built on a tradition of close relationships and broad financial capabilities. Looking back, we’ve come a long way in 145years, yet the core values-dedicated associates, strong customer partnerships and thriving communities-instilled years ago are still the cornerstones of Busey. “

City of Bloomington

<http://www.cityblm.org/index.aspx?page=241>

“The City government is a respected agency dedicated to serving the public. The City has a commitment to excellence. The City of Bloomington, originally named “Blooming Grove” represents a community that is friendly and safe and values progress and growth.”

Commerce Bank

<http://www.commercebank.com/about/social-responsibility/involvement.asp>

Community Involvement: “At Commerce Bank, giving back to the community is ingrained in our culture. We are only as strong as the community in which we do business. In everything we do, we strive to be a good corporate citizen and encourage all employees to volunteer for the charities of their choice. Our commitment to the community is evident in a variety of ways: Charitable Giving, Employee Volunteer Efforts, Community Recognition Awards, Commerce Commendations, and Management Involvement.”

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COUNTRY Financial

<http://www.countryfinancial.com/SiteController?url=/whyChooseCountry/countryInYourCommunity>

COUNTRY in your community: “COUNTRY strengthens communities by supporting local agriculture through Farmers Markets and hosting sporting events for youth and family to enjoy. From financial education programs to Relay for Life, we support non-profit organizations that help communities thrive. Building houses, serving dinners at shelters and helping in an emergency are a few of the we volunteer alongside our neighbors.”

East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging

www.eciaaa.org

Mission: "We are dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for Older Americans and their families by providing information about and access to a variety of services in their community in the 16 counties of East Central Illinois"

Economic Development Council

<http://www.bnbiz.org/Home.aspx>

Mission: “The EDC of Bloomington-Normal grows the local economy by assisting with local business expansion, recruiting new businesses and companies to the area, and encouraging the next wave of entrepreneurs to establish their business here.”

Heartland Bank and Trust Company

<http://www.hbtbank.com/about-heartland-bank>

About: “Heartland Bank and Trust is widely recognized as one of the strongest and most progressive banks in the area. We're a locally owned community bank whose roots are right here in the heartland. The Drake family, who came to Central Illinois in 1852, has been in banking for over 80 years. With the third generation of the family taking an active role in the banking business, we continue this tradition.”

Illinois Prairie Community Foundation

<http://www.ilprairiecf.org/vision-mission/>

Mission: “To engage and assist individuals in sharing their charitable gifts .To receive, invest and manage contributions, building permanent funds for the needs of our area (McLean, Livingston, DeWitt, and Logan Counties and adjacent areas in Tazewell, Woodford, LaSalle, Ford and Piatt Counties). To provide donors flexible, convenient giving option.To be a voice in identifying community needs and concerns. To be a trusted resource and catalyst for positive change.”

McLean County Government

<http://www.mcleancountyil.gov/>

McLean County Health Department

<http://health.mcleancountyil.gov/>

Purpose: “The purpose of the McLean County Health Department is to fulfill the public interest in assuring conditions conducive to good health and providing leadership in promoting and protecting the health of county respondents. In pursuit of our mission, we (1)assess and analyze health conditions, (2)assure access to personal health care services, (3)conduct programs in accordance with

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Illinois Department of Public Health certification standards for local health departments, (4)coordinate and plan with other entities for a comprehensive community health system,(5)develop local health policies , (6)enforce state laws and local ordinances pertaining to health where applicable, (7)minimize the adverse impact of diseases and disabilities, and (8)prevent and control disease through health promotion, early intervention, and health protection.”

Multicultural Leadership Program

<http://public.bn-mclp.org/>

Mission: “To develop diverse leaders.” They aim: (1) to prepare skilled, informed individuals for leadership positions in public, private, educational, political and non-profit sectors; (2) to foster leadership diversity through community welfare and civic participation; (3)to promote inter-community unity.

Normal Township

<http://www.normaltownship.org/index.php>

Mission: “There are three main functions of township government; the assessment function, the Township supervisor's function, and the road and highway function are all directed by elected officials. In addition, the Supervisor's office, in conjunction with the Town of Normal, has established a Seniors' Program that serves that portion of our population with many programs and activities.”

OSF St. Joseph Medical Center

<http://www.osfstjoseph.org/>

Since 1880, OSF St. Joseph Medical Center has provided comprehensive health care services to the Bloomington-Normal community. As part of OSF Healthcare System, OSF St. Joseph Medical Center staff strives to serve every patient, every time with the greatest care and love.

PATH

<http://www.pathcrisis.org/>

“Our agency began in 1971 and has grown as a community resource people turn to when they are seeking help in human services. We answer over 90,000 calls annually through our 24/7 2-1-1/crisis hotline. PATH also provides critical services for people age 60 and older and their caregivers, and intervention for people who are experiencing homelessness.”

Regional Office of Education

<http://www.roe17.org/home>

An advocate for education by providing positive leadership, coordinating and delivering state and local services, and disseminating information for educators, school districts, and the community.

State Farm Insurance Companies

<http://www.statefarm.com/aboutus/community/development/development.asp>

Strong neighborhoods are the foundation of a strong society. We’re committed to maintaining the vibrancy of our communities by assisting nonprofits that support: Affordable housing, First time homeowners, Community revitalization, & Economic development.

Town of Normal

<https://www.normal.org/>

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The Town of Normal: “Today, Normal spans 17.04 square miles and has a population of 52,497. It consists of three colleges and universities and 17 parks spanning 370 acres. The Town of Normal employs more than 350 full-time individuals who strive to provide a quality environment in which to live, work and play.”

University of Illinois Extension

<http://web.extension.illinois.edu/state/whatwedo.html>

What we do: “University of Illinois Extension is the flagship outreach effort of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, offering educational programs to respondents of all of Illinois’ 102 counties – and far beyond. Through learning partnerships that put knowledge to work, U of I Extension’s programs are aimed at making life better, healthier, safer and more profitable for individuals and their communities. U of I Extension offers educational programs in five broad areas:

- Healthy society
- Food security and safety
- Environmental stewardship
- Sustainable and profitable food production and marketing systems
- Enhancing youth, family and community well-being”

Unit 5 School District

<http://www.unit5.org/u5>

About us: “McLean County Unit District No. 5 employs 1,830 full and part time staff members to educate over 13,600 students. The district consists of more than 214 square miles, with 16 elementary, 4 junior high and 2 high school buildings, 1 early learning center, and 1 vocational training site. The district has 156 Illinois Department of Transportation-approved buses in its fleet. Buses travel 1.9 million miles a year delivering more than 10,000 students to 23 schools.”

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Appendix L– About the Stevenson Center

In the spirit of its namesake, Adlai E. Stevenson II, Illinois State University's Stevenson Center is dedicated to public service and global understanding. The Center serves communities and organizations around the world, students as they seek the tools for careers in community and economic development, the related fields of study, and Illinois State University.

Beginning in 1994 as a Peace Corps Fellows Program, the Stevenson Center continues to administer an interdisciplinary graduate sequence for students pursuing careers in community and economic development. We facilitate the curriculum, including the required, year-long internship experience and off-campus graduate assistantships.

Additionally, the Center provides direct service to communities in the form of economic impact analyses and forecasting, brownfields redevelopment, grant-writing training, and geographic information systems analysis. Affiliated faculty are active in the scholarship of community and economic development (e.g., local economic development policy, community supported agriculture, and rural school closure). Faculty research projects make their way into the classroom, reinforcing the quality of the educational experience.

Our Mission and Goals, adopted through a strategic planning process in 2006 including faculty, students, and Advisory Board members, accurately reflect an enlarged spirit of service and attention to scholarship brought on by a new staff.

<http://stevensoncenter.org/about/>

Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development
Illinois State University
Campus Box 4200
Normal, IL 61790-4200
Phone: (309) 438-7090
Email: StevensonCenter@IllinoisState.edu

