

Panhandle Communities

Jentry Barrett and Daniel Bennett



NE CARES COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSION

This report documents and summarizes the main themes discussed at the NE CARES Community Listening Session held virtually on August 23rd, 2023.

Participants included representatives from the following areas of expertise:

- Non-profit
- Early Childhood
- Clergy
- Libraries
- Local Government
- Business Owners
- School Administration
- Agriculture
- Support Services

SUMMARY

Participants reported that the communities in the NE panhandle are great places to live, with many resources and people coming together to make important things happen. Participants reported that they have hopes and dreams of creating even more opportunities for people to thrive in the panhandle and want to return.

Participants voiced that the University of Nebraska System is a strong partner in the area through NE Extension, Buffett Early Childhood Institute, Monroe Meyer Institute, and the Juvenile Justice Institute. Continued collaboration could look like more opportunities for distance learning, more opportunities for programming, and more visibility from the university in the panhandle.

THEME ONE: PANHANDLE RESOURCES: AWARENESS AND DEVELOPMENT

Participants reported many bright spots and resources in the panhandle, and many are working hard to ensure everyone can access them. These resources include outdoor amenities, business and entrepreneurial support, career tracks in high schools, opportunities for leadership through library boards, and opportunities for youth.

Participants expressed a desire for more awareness of resources and more access to resources for those marginalized by income, race, sexuality, ability, or geography. Participants expressed a desire for more

coordination of services and “no wrong doors.” To make it easier for people to find the resources that are available to them. Participants also discussed opportunities for hiring marginalized populations that many business leaders do not take advantage of and how that is a missed opportunity. However, participants also explained that high schools are creating innovative opportunities for families by having navigators at the schools to help families get the health and education resources they need.

Participants discussed the need for more resources like specialized para-professionals, early childcare professionals, and workforce development in general. They discussed creating educational pathways for these professionals starting in high school so they can enter the workforce after high school if desired. It was noted that a small number of children and families have the most needs, which can be challenging to meet in the region. The need for better understanding of these families’ situations and devotion of adequate resources was noted.

THEME TWO: BELONGING AND COLLABORATION

Participants in both breakout rooms expressed a desire to create communities that value beauty in culture and belonging. Participants described needing to have difficult conversations surrounding racism and homophobia to create more opportunities for minoritized populations. Participants expressed wanting a “level playing field” for people to thrive and reduction of strains families’ budgets, time, and other barriers which might prevent some from taking advantage of opportunities. These communities that value belonging would also attract residents to the area and encourage young people to return to the panhandle after being away. Participants expressed that young people wanted to return to the panhandle but wanted to be economically stable and have a particular lifestyle, which may or may not be available.

Participants also expressed the unique culture of collaboration in the panhandle and that it is only found in some places in the state. There is a braiding of resources because resources are limited. People are willing to take others under their wing to help them thrive in the community. Participants expressed appreciation for amazing leaders in positions of influence. Participants described opportunities for young people to collaborate with community leaders to get involved in civic life and how to create more pathways for that to happen more often.

THEME THREE: HIGHER ED AS A PARTNER

Participants described how they had partnered with higher education in the region. Many expressed strong relationships with NE Extension, specifically Rural Prosperity Nebraska and 4-H programs. Participants also expressed strong relationships with the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, the Monroe Meyer Institute, and the Juvenile Justice Institute. UNMC has a satellite campus on Western Nebraska Community College’s campus and ties to many in the region.

Participants expressed frustration with the gaps in community college and high school dual credit needing to be accepted at UNL. Many high school students will go to neighboring states because their dual credit is more readily accepted at those schools. Participants also wanted more opportunities for trade schools and pathways to the workforce that do not include higher education.

Participants also expressed a desire for more of a presence from UNL in the panhandle, that when resources or events are only available in Omaha and Lincoln, it is challenging to take advantage of them. Participants would also appreciate more intentional planning of events in coordination with the public school calendar. Participants described wanting activities to be more visible, with better communication channels to reach people before the event happens. Thoughtful incentives to participation could also help ensure equitable opportunities among all residents. Participants also expressed a desire for more programming in the panhandle, like distance learning through the community colleges or practicum placements in the panhandle.

NEXT STEPS

- Maricia Guzman , Faith Mills, Courtney Armstrong, Don Lease, and Evie Blackburn have volunteered to be part of the NE CARES Steering Committee.
- The NE CARES team and NE Extension will continue to act as connectors for ideas from the communities to UNL. Please reach out as you continue to have ideas!

CONTACT INFORMATION

- Jentry Barrett, jbarrett3@unl.edu
- Daniel Bennett, daniel.bennett@civicnebraska.org
- Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel, cburkhartkriesel1@unl.edu
- Sarah Zuckerman, szuckerman2@unl.edu
- Megan Kelley, megan.kelley@unl.edu
- Rob Eirich, reirich2@unl.edu