



Stakeholder Meetings Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

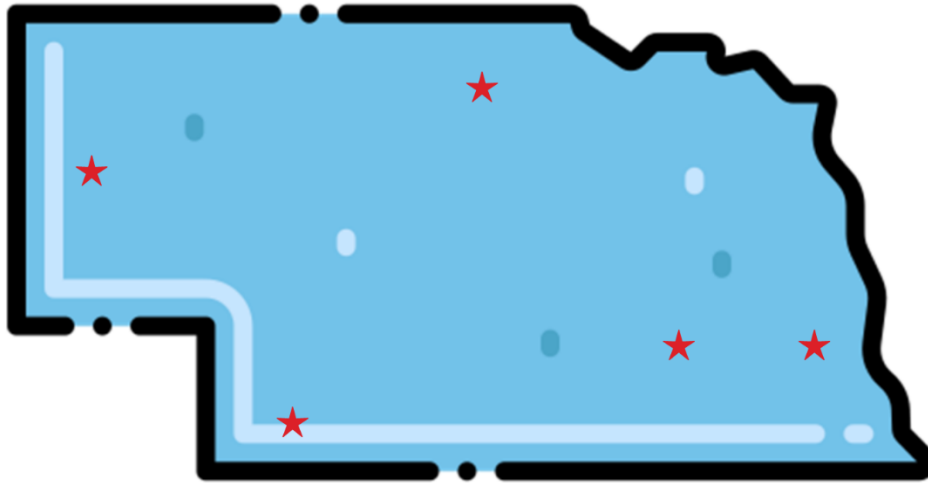
This report serves to document and summarize the main themes discussed at the NE CARES Community Listening Sessions, held across six sessions in five communities in Nebraska in the summer and fall of 2023. Listening sessions happened in person in York, McCook, Lincoln and Ainsworth. Listening sessions happened via Zoom for the Panhandle communities and another session in Lincoln. Hub leadership facilitated the discussion and Hub members and colleagues from Nebraska Extension took notes to capture the conversation. A report was then created from the notes and returned to the participants. This report is a summary of those conversations.

Key takeaways from those conversations include participants being proud of their communities. There are bright spots in every community, and people love living there. Hospitals, schools, fine and performing arts, and outdoor recreation bring and keep people in the community. Participants reported wanting every child to succeed in their community, and for families to have what they needed. Participants described wanting main street's shops to be full of entrepreneurs, restaurants to eat at, and for kids to return home after post-secondary experiences.

Across listening sessions, participants reported several interrelated challenges to economic growth and positive change. Most notable, is that the lack of affordable and appropriate housing is the lynchpin keeping the community from growing in ways that participants desired. Participants in several listening sessions discussed that there are not enough resources for those who work with young families and parents, including early intervention services, afterschool care, and therapists in school buildings.

Finally, we asked participants about their interactions and partnerships with UNL. Many expressed positive interactions with Nebraska Extension and various grant projects. When asked how UNL could benefit their community, they reported that they would welcome help with evaluation research for grant application purposes, grant writing, and grant management, service learning and internships, more dual credit and transfer credits counting at UNL, and training for city and county officials.

NE CARES COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSIONS



Listening sessions were held with the following communities

- York and surrounding communities
- Panhandle communities
- McCook and surrounding communities
- Lincoln and surrounding communities
- Ainsworth and surrounding communities

Participants included representatives from the following organizations and agencies

- Agriculture
- Business Owners
- Clergy
- City and County Officials
- Community Foundations
- Community Hospitals, Clinics, and Foundations
- Non-profit Organizations
- Public and Private Schools, Early Childhood, and Education Service Units
- Public Health Districts
- Support Services
- UNL and Nebraska Extension

The following are highlights of the listening sessions grouped by themes.

BRIGHT SPOTS IN COMMUNITIES

NECARES takes an assets-based approach to work with communities. Each session started by asking participants to identify what was going well and what they were proud of in their communities. Across our listening sessions, participants stated that their communities were warm, family-friendly, and full of people who want communities to succeed. Schools and hospitals were also seen as bright spots in their community that serve as a hub for the community and serve many purposes beyond education and healthcare. Participants in rural communities expressed an “all in this together” attitude where people showed up for one another, and people willing to take others under their wing.

In York, they mentioned that there is a lot of infrastructure being developed in the upcoming years including the new Seward Health Center and the expansion of walking trails. In the Panhandle they reported outdoor amenities, business and entrepreneurial support, and leadership opportunities. Participants in the Panhandle 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.

In McCook, bright spots included the arts culture, and the coordinating efforts of their Philanthropy Council. Ainsworth participants reported a rich agricultural tradition where students are hardworking and polite. The residents of Ainsworth had also been able to raise the funds for a new childcare center because they decided they needed it. In Lincoln, participants listed food pantry trucks, public libraries and “third spaces”, and non-profits being bright spots that was helping the community thrive.

HOPES AND DREAMS

We then asked participants about their hopes and dreams for young people and families in their communities.

Responses from York included a dream for each child in the community to have something to excel at, a safe place to be physically active, having enough adversity to teach persistence, and enough great learning experiences to ignite their passions. In McCook, participants described a similar desire, for every family to have what they needed to raise their family, to decrease Adverse Childhood Events, and to have mental health, dental care, and eye care for uninsured children and the population in general, and to stay in the McCook area, leading to stability in the region.

Participants in the Panhandle 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 also 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. For

example, 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.

NEEDS

Next, we asked participants about what they needed in their community to achieve the hopes and dreams they previously identified.

BELONGING

In McCook, participants expressed a desire to recruit more international doctors and teachers and to create cultural bridges that would help these individuals stay in the community. Embracing diversity was also mentioned as a way to provide young people with experiences that would support development to navigate opportunities beyond Southwest Nebraska. Participants also identified the need to embrace cultural diversity as a strategy for attracting and retaining immigrants. In Ainsworth, they mentioned that the community has a progressive mindset and would be open to having new opportunities, like the new hog confinement operation that also brought in a new immigrant population.

In Lincoln, participants reported that non-white Lincolmites experience discrimination and barriers. For immigrants and refugees, different expectations around parenting, family, healthcare system and schooling can cause problems. The pressure on children, whether from translating for parents, or from school, has created mental health needs that youth are trying to self-medicate through nicotine and other substance use.

EVERY CHILD NEEDS CARING ADULTS

Participants reported that many youth in York spend their afterschool hours and summertime in proxy-childcare settings like the library, city pools, and community center. The staff at these public places do not have all the training that might be necessary to care for large groups of youth. Participants also voiced the importance of diverse adults being in mentoring and leadership roles (like TeamMates) so the diverse youth in York can see them in these positions.

Participants in several listening sessions discussed that there are not enough resources for those who work with young families and parents, including early intervention services, afterschool care, and therapists in school buildings. They noted that the work is intensive and the adults who work with children do not have access to the mental, emotional, financial, and health resources they need. CASA is also experiencing higher than normal volumes and do not have the volunteers to meet the demand.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

Across listening sessions, participants reported several interrelated challenges to economic growth and positive change. Most notable is that the lack of housing is the lynchpin keeping the community from growing in ways that participants desired. Participants described wanting main street's shops to be full of entrepreneurs, restaurants to eat at, and for kids to return home after post-secondary experiences.

However, for any of these things to happen, affordable and appropriate housing had to be available to families. In addition to housing participants reported a lack of resources including:

- Childcare
- Screening for children
- Parent education
- Access to healthy food
- Broadband
- Workforce
- More jobs that are open for high school students after school
- College courses closer to home
- Lack of healthcare for uninsured families
- Mental health care, especially for youth
- Transportation to healthcare
- Expanded public transportation
- Cultural competency education for service providers

Participants in the western part of the state reported that young adults with trade skills are often “poached” by employers in eastern Nebraska who can pay more than those in smaller communities. To remedy this challenge, participants collectively identified the need for career pathways that include trades, as well as education and medical fields, including mentoring and apprenticeships during high school so these professionals can enter the workforce after high school if desired. In the Panhandle, the 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. In Lincoln, participants expressed that although housing costs may be lower than in other cities, wages remain low and utility costs are high. This makes it difficult for young people to stay because they cannot find housing they can afford and creates challenges for students who move from school to school as their families seek affordable, safe, housing.

In Ainsworth, participants expressed a profound desire for Ainsworth to succeed, and they believed that the people in the community would be the key in making progress in the community. Participants noted, nobody is going to care about our community more than us, so we need to come together to solve these challenges.

UNL AS A PARTNER

Lastly, we asked participants if they had worked with UNL in the past and how they thought UNL could partner with the communities in the area. Participants identified a variety of ways UNL could be a partner in working with communities, including:

- Evaluation research to show program effectiveness for planning, funding, and grant application purposes.

- Help them consider changing models of operation, moving towards more digital workflows and processes.
- Training for evaluation, grant writing, grant management
- Building capacity in the adult population to become volunteers for CASA and TeamMates
- Projections of school enrollment.
- Research about brain drain, why do people leave, why do people stay?
- Science communication, how does the school district present school data to parents?
- De-escalation training for city employees that work directly with youth (such as librarians).
- Service learning and internships
- Credits from international universities count, so it is easier for new Nebraskans to finish their college education.
- More dual credit and transfer credits counting at UNL
- More intentional planning of events in coordination of the public-school calendar.
- Distance learning through community colleges
- Training for city and county professionals
- Placemaking
- Youth leadership
- Youth participatory action research
- Training on how to access UNL's resources

NEXT STEPS FOR NE CARES

Based on the information participants provided, NE CARES is taking the following steps to connect the resources of UNL to the community needs, we would ask you to join us!

- Development of pilot projects
- Finding funding for projects
- Increase participation in the hub

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