



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

CENTER FOR COMMUNITY VITALITY

Big View
Community Engagement
KOOTASCA Community Action

RIPPLE EFFECTS MAPPING REPORT
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BACKGROUND

The Big View Community Engagement series is an initiative of KOOTASCA Community Action that began in 2008 and has continued to the present. The goal of Big View is to change the narrative that shapes community responses to social issues that impact people in poverty. Big View consists of educational meetings and events held to discuss personal experiences, systemic barriers, and policy implications that have the potential to alleviate or worsen conditions for the poor. A variety of formats are used to express both social and systemic concerns including films, individual speakers, panel presentations, community projects, and facilitated audience discussions.

In contrast to the “blame the victim” mindset that so often enters into public attitudes about poverty, Big View programming emphasizes the historical and systemic barriers that low-income people experience. In addition, Big View recognizes and explores the intricate connection between poverty and race. Big View addresses the historic narrative that has shaped present day beliefs that continue to result in disproportionate resources and opportunities for people of color.

With an interest in documenting the impacts of the Big View series and the financial support of the Blandin Foundation, KOOTASCA Community Action engaged the Extension Center for Community Vitality to facilitate two Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) sessions on November 20 and 21, 2019. During the REM sessions, participants familiar with Big View reported information on the impacts of the effort to date, as well as the challenges moving forward. This report outlines the process and findings from this REM activity.

RIPPLE EFFECTS MAPPING PROCESS

Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) is an evaluation method that engages program stakeholders to retrospectively and visually map the chain of effects resulting from a program or complex collaboration. The REM process combines elements of Appreciative Inquiry, mind mapping, group interviewing, and qualitative data analysis. More information about the process can be found at www.z.umn.edu/rembook.

The REM process involves a face-to-face group session in which participants interview each other using Appreciative Inquiry questions, report out their interview findings, and the facilitator creates a mind map with the data. The Appreciative Inquiry questions used during the session were:

- Which Big View event really stuck with you, and why?
- What is a highlight or success you have experienced or observed based on your participation with Big View?
- What unexpected things have happened as a result of your involvement with Big View?

- What connections with others – new and/or deepened – have you made as a result of Big View? What have those connections led to?
- In what ways have the Big View events helped people think differently about poverty and/or people in poverty in Itasca County?

KOOTASCA staff invited a wide range of community members and agency staff to attend Ripple Effects Mapping sessions, held on November 20 and 21 at the Blandin Foundation. Thirteen participants attended the November 20 session and 17 attended the November 21 session. The sessions were facilitated by Scott Chazdon from Extension Center for Community Vitality, and Malissa Bahr and Jaci David from the Blandin Foundation.

A draft of the ripple effects map was provided in December, 2019 and final edits to the Ripple Effects Map were made in February, 2020.

THEMES

The following five themes emerged from the Ripple Effects Mapping process:

- Deepening connections
- Creative brave spaces to discuss race and poverty
- Promoting historical and contextual understanding
- Tapping into empathy
- Sparking individual and systemic change
- A sixth thematic focus was on “Challenges moving forward,” based on group discussion towards the end of the REM session about challenges associated with the initiative.

The ripple map sections for each theme are pasted beneath each theme narrative below.

Deepening connections

Session participants reported new and deepened connections both on a personal level and an organizational level. Several spoke about meeting people they otherwise would not meet from socio-economic or racial groups different from themselves. Participants also described the importance of connecting with others working on the same issues in the community. Beyond the new connections, participants described the importance of Big View in creating opportunities to stay connected beyond single events. Some of these deeper connections have even become friendships. Finally, participants noted that the programs are broadcast locally through Itasca Community Television, which reaches many more people in Grand Rapids and beyond.

When they participated as a presenter, it deepened connections to others working in the field.

Collaboration brings people together and also brings a wide variety of people from different sectors.

Especially impressed with the program on suicides and information about veterans. Appreciated learning about what is relevant today. Made friendships and understanding, increased awareness. As a result, now a volunteer at the Kiesler Wellness Center.

Minn. Commission to End Poverty -- connections made with other people in the community who are working on the same programs to address that problem.

As a result of attending Big Views, she was exposed to people she otherwise would not have contact with -- people not part of her community group.

Communication with other folks in the community -- learning more about poverty -- new friends as a result of programs -- better understanding of how many people live in poverty in Itasca County

Being involved led to making more friends, getting to know others, more people in GR that are in poverty -- realizing that there are others going through what I'm going through -- feeling less isolated.

We should take note of the variety of ages of people in the community that are exposed to this information -- ICC students aren't all from here so they take their information to other communities.

Discovering a bond and seeing what you have in common with the new friends you've made by attending Big View

Convenes beyond class lines -- people come because they are interested in the topics.

Many of our neighbors have watched Big View on TV. I worked in home health care and sometimes my clients say they saw me on TV.

Connection you get while at Big View is so valuable, and then you gain the willingness to stay connected to the issues. If someone is doing a Big View and there are 13 people in the audience, it is important to remember the value of being connected to the information and choose to stay connected.

Deepening connections

Creative brave spaces to discuss race and poverty

Participants described the importance of having a non-judgmental space to learn from each other and openly discuss issues of poverty and race. A session on the abuse of opioids was described as a “powerful, honest, visceral exchange for people in the room.” In a program on criminal justice, one participated noted “I got to have conversations with people I otherwise

How these sit with community -- organizing events issues came up about bullying a gay man happened in a Catholic Church. Voter registration session got hijacked by people who wanted more voter limitation, voter ID. How to have healthy, respectful conversation on hot topics without name calling.

Several sessions on opioids -- a gripping issue that was life and death for people in the room -- having many different perspectives there was important -- having police in the room. There was powerful, honest, visceral exchange for people in the room.

Big View has stepped in to fill a gap where other groups used to work -- like Citizens League -- it has been brave about the issues. Not every organization is able to do this.

[Acting Black] was a powerful event and the community conversation that followed was particularly moving and somewhat frustrating. Moving in that it really helped create space where white people like me could talk about racism...and it helped strengthen the idea that having a conversation about racism is something we [white people] can do, want to do, and do need to talk about. After the even 2 students from ICC approached me to talk about racism and we had a very good conversation. One began to realize he might naturally fit in because society naturally fits him and he was always part of what's "in."

KOOTASCA Community Action as an organization is more willing and able to engage conversations and help our community on difficult issues. It has helped energize parts of our community that want to change the conversation on numerous topics

Encouraged that Kootasca has to have these conversations -- other organizations won't do it -- Alice has taken on these difficult conversations -- we went to churches and showed the Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination code about indigenous people and how land was taken from them. Several events flowed from this Big View in different towns - GR, Bemidji, Mille Lacs Indian Museum, shown a second time in GR at ICC with a much larger audience.

Acting Black -- really stood out and the fact that we got 200 people in GR to show up for a spirited discussion about racism. This was extraordinary.

I've been to a lot of Big Views, and beyond the topics, kudos to Alice for framing the issues in a way that allows respectful dialogue and conversation. Non-judgmental, authentic space is created each time. She's the Everready Rabbit of Authenticity

You can waste time with banter, not all conversations are worthwhile

I have presented at Big View -- focusing on Indian mascots -- we used to be the Grand Rapids Indians -- as part of panel we have a class of 76 Facebook group and I polled my fellow classmates about their perceptions of the mascot. It gave me an opportunity to engage them on an edgy topic. I learned that the majority of people didn't care anymore, but there were some who still did care. I felt very well supported in being on that panel.

Big View is ongoing -- the conversations build upon each other. There is momentum to keep going.

There is always the opportunity for everyone to speak up. We want to hear what people are thinking. It isn't one-sided. Also the programs are free, cost is not a barrier.

Second Chances meeting focused on criminal justice, program on domestic violence, Big View on slavery and Jim Crow laws, as well as voter id. They gave voice to important issues and the counter-voice was important to hear as well. Got to have conversations with people I otherwise would not engage, and not sure they changed their thinking, but at least we were in the same room having a conversation.

Creating brave spaces to discuss race and poverty

would not engage, and not sure they changed their thinking, but at least we were in the same room having a conversation.” Participants consistently reported how important it was to keep lines of communication open and make it possible for multiple perspectives to be heard. In an increasingly polarized world, convening this type of dialogue is crucial, and several participants expressed deep appreciation that KOOTASCA has stepped into this role in the community.

Promoting historical and contextual understanding

Participants highlighted several ways that Big View programming had deepened their understanding of the historical roots of injustice. One participant noted, “It isn’t just about how we treat each other. This stuff is baked into society.” Several participants talked about systemic patterns of injustice that are often hidden from view because they are part of everyday practices. For example, a participant noted the example of housing segregation with its roots in specific redlining policies and practices. People also appreciated the depth of information presented, including statistics, rather than just opinions, that can inform their work. Another strength of the programming was its ability to get people “outside of their bubbles” to learn other perspectives. This new knowledge then leads people to talk to others and this in turn can lead to others changing their perceptions. Another theme was that “everything is connected,” and learning about one area of injustice can often lead to better understanding of other forms of injustice.

Promoting historical and contextual understanding

- Fundamentally, learning that these problems are systemic, historical issues. It isn't just about how we treat each other. This stuff is baked into society. This is something I've appreciated about Big View. For example, the film about redlining. Recognizing how the policies of the 1950s play out still in a huge way to create physically ghettos and segregated cities, and the lack of distribution of wealth.
- More understanding of poverty and politics going on in this world is what we're trying to do. We've got a long ways to go.
- Poverty in schools -- learned about how kids are "stamped" or labeled if they receive free or reduced lunch and treated differently.
- Issue of kids not having enough money in their lunch accounts -- there was handstamping going on. Kids were literally getting stamped and it was causing them problems. At least now they don't stamp kids anymore.
- America Divided series -- gained concern about building of too many high rises when there is a lack of investment in affordable housing.
- Big View provides historical context -- you can learn about laws, ordinances that have create the systemic barriers that cause problems today.
- The hidden injustice in our socioeconomic systems is highlighted in so many of the Big View presentations
- Focusing one one topic leads to concerns about other topics -- everything is interconnected.
- There have been instances where you are on track on a particular issue, but you realize you are stepping into something much better. For example, bullying in schools was a hot topic, but our program was specifically about a gay man being bullied and it was held at a Catholic Church. So a focus on one issue can lead to other issues arising.
- 54 shares of Big View videos on DVD The opioid sessions are the most requested -- from several different angles Over the years we keep making copies of that.
- Better understanding of race issues and poverty issues in the community
- Program on poverty -- explained how our community works and how we can make changes
- Continuous learning -- even when you think you know things -- for example being an ally -- you find out that you have more to learn
- Knowledge is power
- Informing -- average people hunger for information -- Big View brings it to us. You get that in college. When you get knowledge, you start talking to others and this can lead them to change their perceptions. It is information you can stand behind.
- Greater perspective on the challenges people face daily
- America Divided -- program about poverty -- it was a whole series that provided a lot of new information
- I feel proud of our community for doing these. In many of these conversations we learned statistics that can inform our work on homelessness, mental illness, drug addiction and recover -- it's not just opinions floating around and has been really helpful
- Really surprised that people weren't aware of the issues that were being talked about -- topic was Acting Black Sees people from this program again after Big View and building ongoing friendships.
- Listening to Affinity Bank that came and talked about how to repair credit, and how that impacts people chances of being successful. This information can give people hope about moving forward.
- Gave her better perspective about the community -- got her outside her bubble.

Tapping into empathy

Big View events often include personal stories, and several participants described the importance of these stories in changing their perspective. A participant in a session on heroin abuse reported feeling touched by hearing success stories of people who were able to overcome addiction. A community member reported being moved by the diversity she saw at the Big View events she attended. She appreciated being able to hear personal stories rather than theoretical lectures. Another participant noted that the “most powerful things are where you have people speaking from their own experience. That is hard to dispute.” Several people described how the Big View events “humanize” people and their problems. As noted by one participant, “There is a need for this to continue -- I wonder about the impact on people who show up and the impact beyond those of us in the room. It is opening our capacity to be compassionate toward people who have experiences we have not gone through. It opens your heart.”



Sparking individual and systemic change

Participants reported a range of ways that Big View is making a difference at individual and organizational levels. The programs spurred the local newspaper to change the way they handle online comments about articles because many of these comments were hostile and uninformed. A local grocery store owner was courageous in addressing mistreatment of low-income customers in his store. Several participants in Big View events have built upon their learning in Big View events to increase their leadership activity on local boards and committees. One participant began to volunteer at a local mental health center after attending a program on suicides and mental health concerns for veterans.



After a Big View event on racism, several community members kept meeting and formed a Community Action Team, which produced a film called Colored Lines about the experiences of people of color in Grand Rapids. People also reported spreading the knowledge they have gained through Big View in a variety of ways. For example, one participant shared information with neighbors whom she knew had negative attitudes about American Indians, the homeless, and the poor. She noted that these neighbors have “come around in some of their thinking -- for example that Native Americans were here before we were.” Another participant reported that “Big View helps to create an atmosphere of civic engagement and to create the idea that



individuals in our community can go and change things. Thousands of slight nudges can slowly change the big picture.”

An important effect of Big View has been reduction of stigma and fear. For example, at a Big View event on mental illness, attendees received information about the real experiences of people: “There was discussion about people with mental illness being dangerous, but we discovered that people with mental illness are actually more likely to be victims of violence.” As noted by one participant, “Big View is a great way to cure people of prejudice.”

Finally, KOOTASCA staff reported that Big View had promoted change within the agency, leading to more staff training on topics of race, inequity, and sexuality, and keeping the agency grounded in its work.

Challenges moving forward

Towards the end of the REM session, facilitators asked participants about challenges facing Big View in the future. We grouped the challenges into five sub-themes: measuring progress, sustaining action, political polarization, diversifying offerings, and engaging new participants.

The challenge of measuring progress is the challenge of knowing if the Big View events are “moving the needle” about attitudes regarding poverty and race. One participant wondered if Big View is reaching beyond those who have not attended specific events, and how this type of impact might be measured.

The second challenge is moving beyond sharing of information to local action. Participants described the efforts of an action team working on racism after a Big View event and noted that this smaller group was able to produce a film together, yet the energy of the group waned after about a year.

The third challenge was political polarization. One participant noted that it is getting harder and harder to present factual information with it being challenged. At the same time, participants noted the progress that has been made in Grand Rapids in terms of being able to have open dialogue about race, when years ago the Ku Klux Klan would meet at the fairgrounds and Klan members would run for local office espousing hate for Irish Catholics and Finns.



A fourth theme was a more practical concern about the need to diversify offerings in Big View. Environmental topics, such as climate change and water quality, came up as crucial topics to address, as well as local food sovereignty.

Perhaps the biggest area of discussion was engaging new audiences. Participants identified the need to reach younger audiences through the community college, and perhaps with a range of venues that would be more accessible to different demographic groups. Participants noted the importance of having many organizations supporting the programming, including the Chamber and the police department. Participants noted the success of the Acting Black program, which was a theatrical performance held at the community college that attracted over 200 people.

DISCUSSION

The Ripple Effects Mapping process highlighted noteworthy successes of the Big View community engagement effort. The effort has had strong impacts in the Grand Rapids community and beyond. While participants were concerned that there are not clear ways of measuring whether the “needle has moved” in terms of people thinking differently about poverty and race, there was strong supporting evidence that Big View has changed the narrative by deepening connections, creating brave spaces to discuss race and poverty, promoting historical and contextual understanding, tapping into empathy, and sparking individual and systemic change.

This Ripple Effects Mapping report may be useful for strengthening Big View moving forward, not only in responding to the specific challenges identified, but also in building upon the initiative’s successes.



CONCLUDING COMMENTS FROM ALICE MOREN OF KOOTASCA COMMUNITY ACTION

Big View programming is a product of Community Action. The Community Action movement was born from President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and from the advocacy work of Dr. Martin Luther King in the 1960's. Community level advocacy for the poor was part of the original design in this effort to end poverty.

KOOTASCA was established more than 50 years ago as a local poverty relief agency and source of empowerment for low-income people. Through a long history of relationships with people in poverty and a myriad of services designed to provide basic needs and alleviate poverty's devastating effects, we understand that community mindset towards poverty and the poor is a factor that we cannot ignore. Attitudinal barriers towards people who struggle with poverty related issues impede the long-term success of the people we serve and create community divisions that promote shame, intolerance, and racism.

Ending poverty requires addressing both the causes and conditions of poverty. The causes reach far beyond individual decisions and assumed deficits around financial literacy or other intellectual abilities. Big View programming intentionally works to broaden community perspectives around the causes of poverty rather than allowing low income people to continue to carry the burden of blame for generations of systemic failures that have contributed to keeping people poor.

This Ripple Effect Mapping process has helped illustrate the value of a platform for respectful community conversations around topics that are sometimes uncomfortable and may stretch the boundaries of our current beliefs. In addition, the process highlights a critical mass of local residents who truly care about how poverty impacts our community as well as the people who navigate systems and local resources every day to survive.

Information collected through the Ripple Effect Mapping process will assist KOOTASCA in the development of future Big View programming that will continue to uphold the voice and dignity of the poor, and gently nudge audiences towards a better understanding of the systemic implications of poverty.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS

Send a message to:

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