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.
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
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.
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.
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 participated 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.
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We are moving the needle in terms of the big view about poverty. We're becoming smarter on these topics, but are we becoming friendly with our neighbors who are in different circumstances at the moment in life?

Are we creating a sense of change for the people who are developing empathy? For the most part, people want the big issues to be resolved. But we're expanding the pool of people who are being exposed to these issues.

Sometimes I'm completely surprised by what people will say after the session - "the casual conversation" for example after a pop-up about criminal justice.

It is hard to put data on what were perceptions before Big View? I want to help data in a way to look at the change that has happened.

The small connections between people who don't necessarily think and work in the same area of the community. How do we foster these types of connections? The more we have one another, the more we appreciate each other.

Blandin leadership program can be a vehicle for action.

Feeling of importance you get from learning the information and not being able to act on it. After program about racism, an ed ed group got together (Native American) Diversity Alliance, but its pretty much replicated after a year or so. What did come out of it was a new movement that continues to work, and has worked to produce a short film, but then that's just about coding awareness.

(Previous conversations were somewhat fruitless at trying to learn that I had engaged in how far along we might be collectively in our understanding of racism and its effects. I thought we would be further along in understanding racism as a systemic issue - much of the conversation revolved around individual racism.

All our feelings came from low or fear, attraction or aversion.

There is such polarisation of people on this issue and others. We hope to continue to provide information in a factual way, but this gets harder and harder.

People put negative spin on what Big View is doing, instead of using a listening tool.

Sometimes a challenge is safety for the people who are presenting. I think there is a challenge to make sure they are in their car and have left before I do. Once a speaker was harassed after the program. When there is a new people, I need to draw attention to the safety issue. It can create a real anxiety issue to keep up with all this.

If I have to have law enforcement know about our programs.

The greater purpose and challenge to get people to move away from an "us" versus "them" mentality and to think about all of us. Then you can have a safe, decent conversation instead of yelling at each other.

I also encountered when we were talking about marriage amendment.

We used to have OK meetings at campgrounds. People used to run for office on a Klan ticket. At that time, the most hated groups were Irish Catholics and Jews.

Because we are in a smaller community, we can see impurities for easily, and we have an opportunity to keep having an impact.

We could plant roses of trees, do gardens. We attended. We need to find out what we can do as a community.

With climate change, we need to start addressing Big issues for our planet. That would be pipelines -- the issues close to us and is connected to people's relationships to land.

I'd like to see a series about fear, 'fear of being gay', 'fear of being mentally ill', 'fear of Native Americans', people are so afraid of climate change that they don't know how to talk about it, brain science behind the fear.

Looking at restorative justice and not criminalizing addiction - there is more research showing that addiction comes from trauma - instead of asking people who are coping with them, solutions happen to them. On the issue of trauma - there are excellent speakers on this.

Generational trauma -- there are excellent speakers on this.

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Criminal justice -- there are incremental steps being taken across the country to move away from racism on people rather than helping them. I'd like to see more programs in this area.

Rural food sovereignty and how it ties into climate change.

Could use virtual reality to simulate the life of someone in poverty.

Water use - do we want to drink water or do we drink for non-diversified vehicles - that would be interesting.

In so many different areas, the "poor kids" should have another way, but the system always says that way.

I wonder about having an event at the gun club. It might be a different crowd.

The gun club is a great idea where things, but I don't know how to talk about it. Those not showing up are probably still the same people, so they might get a different crowd.

Also need to engage Native American people -- engage with them, talk to them, to show them what they're doing.

What was your session about? After talking about the fact that we got 200 people there? CC had students there -- it was education in entertainment in a theatrical setting.

Big School, other schools get new students. Different villages might be helping new audiences.

Could students get credit for coming to these programs? Could work with HS social studies teachers -- those kids are going to be voting. How do we get them?

Always say everything is not in the book.

There is a whole audience that uses these programs on ICTV and that isn't getting captured in our discussion tonight.

KOOTASCA does a great job after things, but I don't know how to talk about it. Those not showing up are probably still the same people, so they might get a different crowd.

Challenge is to get the messages to people who need to hear it.

Need to stay engaged with students. CC has been open, but not sure about the high schools, intergenerational bridge building -- let's connect older people with younger people.

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It is really hard to target youth and think they can do everything. Millennials have to be on board as well. Need to invent our own story. On that note, we should have younger people here for this discussion.

I need to be involved when programs happen during daycare work hours. Both getting to the Big View and taking action.

We have 1000 students at CC -- Big View work lies in what they are learning, the high school social studies students.

We have programs at the high school and college and get kids at a younger age to get awareness of these issues.

There is only a small segment that would want to go to these programs. Engaging the police chief is a great idea, working with people within organizations that wouldn't normally be part of this.

There are people who become interested after they talk with you.

There is a need for people in the community to get to know each other. There are at least three organizations working on this. For example, Peach Jar is the electronic holder for students.

We are working on some personal contact -- whether forming a team of organizations working together but you do need someone to do the organizing to make it happen.

Getting work out -- if we cross people and ask them to have a meeting and find people to grow, we don't think we're solving the problem of getting work out to the broader community.

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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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