



Listening Campaign Report

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Background

When I became CEO of Metro Caring last August, I knew I was joining a community with remarkable gifts—a community that includes a smart, forward-thinking Board; an energetic, talented staff; dedicated volunteers; loyal donors; strong partner organizations; and nearly 30,000 participants. Together we possess a depth and breadth of institutional knowledge and community wisdom—knowledge and wisdom that inspired me to conduct a year-long campaign of listening. This campaign has allowed me to meet with and hear from many of our members and, along the way, to advance and deepen my own knowledge and understanding of Metro Caring, its history, and our work. This is my report from the listening campaign. I offer it in the hope that it will assist the community to be well-positioned as we undertake strategic planning and the other work required to maximize our impact.

To everyone who met with me, thank you. I gained important insights about Metro Caring, the larger community, and where people see potential. I have been harvesting the ideas, feedback, and perspectives. Some of them we've already been able to put to work. Much more of them will be informing my perspectives and thinking as we move into a season of strategic planning.

Methodology

The listening campaign comprised hour-long, one-on-one interviews in addition to facilitated small-group discussions. They were organized as open-ended conversations around the SWOT categories (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). I also delved into how folks became connected to Metro Caring and solicited ideas and advice. The SWOT analyses began with every staff member and Board director. I later approached donors, partners, participants, and volunteers (many of whom wield multiple roles). The meetings were so rich, I extended my original timeline of six to nine months to a full year. By the end of the campaign, I had engaged in more than 75 interviews and several small-group conversations.

Results

What follows sums up what I heard during this past year, organized into the SWOT buckets of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. In the report, when items were mentioned multiple times, this has been noted; I have also identified common themes. More confidential feedback has been redacted. I have shared that information in contexts appropriate for follow-up and action.

Throughout the campaign a trend emerged: for the first four to six months of listening, I heard many remarks about previous decisions and about policy, organizational culture, and so on—including areas of dissatisfaction or difficulty. The ups and downs (and uncertainty) of the transition period were also visited at length. But then the conversation shifted, as it will during transitions. In the final six months of the year-long campaign, many interviewees noted and expressed their appreciation for the new leadership team and the changes they had seen us make.

Strengths

Metro Caring possesses significant strengths—the top three strengths include, first, our volunteer program; second, the compassion and respect that staff members show to participants; and, third, our array of programs and services. I would note that our community was repeatedly noted as a strength. Often this was described as, “the people”. When asked for clarification, interviewees gushed about how rich and diverse our community was- sometimes about a specific group or two- volunteers, staff, participants, Board- and sometimes about the sum of its parts. It’s clear Metro Caring is seen by most as a welcoming, community-oriented organization. In addition, Metro Caring is viewed as an organization that strives to provide its services in a dignified manner and setting, actively seeking to reduce the stigma many feel when they visit an aid-based organization. Nearly everyone with whom I spoke, indicated that they were glad that we offered (and were adding and strengthening) services beyond the market that build longer-term well-being and stability.

Strengths

- Volunteers
- Staff members
- Hospitality
- Programs
- Healthy food
- Mission driven

During the second six months of the campaign, participants said they were noticing shifts in practice and organizational culture. For example, in our communication styles and newsletters, we introduced a new lens (and mirror)—one of equity— for viewing the organization’s work (and ourselves), and we reemphasized our goal to “End Hunger at Its Roots.” Said one church partner, “While giving out food is a necessary response to need, we’ve been studying things like *Toxic Charity*¹ [in our congregation], and are quite aware of the damage that traditional aid can cause. We’re really excited about your efforts to do with instead of for and get at root causes.” Similarly, quite a few faith partners, Board members, staff, and institutional funders, along with a handful of volunteers, were motivated by this focus on inclusion and shortening the line.

Healthy food standards emerged as yet another of the organization’s key strength in the SWOT analysis. The Metro Caring community understands how expensive and unattainable healthy food can be for families or seniors struggling with limited incomes. One participant echoed what I heard from many, “It’s the vegetables and healthy stuff that is the most expensive at the store. Typically, when I go to a food pantry, I get mostly bread and pasta, which isn’t good for my diabetes. When I come to the market here, I can get the things I need to stay healthy.” Said one staff member, “The opposite of hungry is not full, it’s nourished,” and went on to highlight what many noted: when our food standards are coupled with our cooking classes, families are empowered to prepare meals that will help them address diet-related diseases so often linked to lack of access to nutritious food. Our capital campaign, completed in 2015, and our new building were also noted as strengths.

Weaknesses

The high rate of turnover among the staff between 2014-2016 was seen as significant by nearly 100% of staff and Board with whom I spoke, and a number of volunteers also expressed concern. “This revolving door is a threat,” said one staff member, “we need retention to build team and trust and advance.” “I didn’t know what was going on. I know people often leave after a capital campaign, but it felt like a lot, and I was worried what was behind it,” said one weekly volunteer. Several interviewees noted weaknesses in organizational structure and roles. Those close to the Finance Department, such

¹ Lupton, Robert D. *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)*. New York: HarperOne, 2012.

as members of the Finance Committee and departmental volunteers noted that staff could have benefited from more knowledge and experience, especially for an organization this size.

Similarly, I spoke with a number of donors who said they had felt forgotten after the capital campaign or during the transition; said one couple, “we were just waiting to see who they would hire and if they would call us.” Some donors expressed admiration and affection for the former CEO and felt “dumped” during the transition period; said one couple, “I got a thank you note with my name spelled wrong. It felt like they didn’t even know me”. Others said the previous development director could have benefited from greater training or experience in the role. Said one couple, “We hosted a party in our house to introduce our friends to Metro Caring, because we just think you guys are awesome, but no one ever called them or followed up afterward.” For their part, institutional funders (such as foundations and government) said they wanted to see the organization provide hard outcomes (and an outcomes-and-evaluation orientation) on proposals and reports instead of the simpler outputs focused on pounds-in and pounds-out or numbers served. During one site visit, a new funder shared, “we are glad to hear you talk about outcomes. We want to know that we are actually making a difference beyond just numbers served. What is the impact? We’ve never given a grant to Metro Caring before because we aren’t interested in outputs.”

An overwhelming majority of Board and staff members (and two foundations, a handful of partners, volunteers and participants) noted that the staff lacked needed diversity, so that it could better mirror the diversity of our participants, staff and community, as well as needed more cultural competency. Said one partner who serves refugees nearby, “We referred a bunch of our clients here, but they told us that they didn’t recognize the food, and that no one spoke their language. The forms were all in English. So we started referring them to other places.” A Spanish-speaking community leader shared that we should offer more chilies, tomatoes and “real tortillas, not the sprouted whole wheat ones” (that aren’t recognizable in her community); she also indicated that she always walks people through the first time, because everything was in English, and “sometimes the volunteers don’t understand how to interact with our culture”. One foundation found the practice of asking for IDs and a piece of mail disconcerting, “that’s an insensitive barrier to basic needs and services,” she said, “and something that I think would make many immigrant or unhoused households feel uncomfortable.” One staff member expressed discomfort at the dynamic of “being mostly white ‘givers’ to low-income people of color.”

Nearly all participants and market volunteers expressed concern about the scarcity of “complete” proteins (like beef, chicken, and other meats) in the Fresh Foods Market. Several noted that the availability of eggs, dairy and even peanut butter, can be inconsistent. Nearly every participant with whom I spoke described how difficult it was to get through on the phone lines and to schedule an appointment. A couple of volunteers felt that we should offer birthday cakes or other treats. One participant felt that our nutrition standards should be higher, noting trans-fats and high sodium levels in certain canned foods.

During the first six months of these meetings interviewees called for a more unified vision and clearer strategy; both staff and stakeholders alike were unaware of or unclear about the organization’s messaging/branding and its direction. Said one staff member, “It’s felt really chaotic for a while, we really need clear direction.” I saw a strong consensus for the need for a strategic-planning process that would focus on Metro Caring’s work and messaging. During the second half of the

Weaknesses

- Concerns with previous leadership
- High staff turnover
- Limited language accessibility/cultural – competency
- Insufficient meat (along with dairy, eggs, and other proteins in some instances)
- Difficult to get through on phones and get appointments

year, nearly everyone with whom I spoke was aware of a clear direction toward with not, for, and addressing root causes. Many noted improving diversity and cultural competency and expressed an eagerness for the strategic planning process to spell out more details on how we would do that.

Threats

Nearly everyone interviewed who works or volunteers in the building spoke of the threat posed by the lack of space in the new building and its parking lot. We are in fact already outgrowing the new and widely appreciated building. Nearly every staff person who works in the common work space expressed dissatisfaction with communal work life, noting that it was loud, cold in certain parts of the room, and that it was hard to concentrate. Several noted that conducting meetings or calls with participants about ID voucher applications or utility assistance in the common space didn't feel respectful of their confidentiality, but noted that the meeting spaces (the Seeds room, navigation rooms and conference room) were nearly always in use for programming and meetings. Volunteers and staff who work most closely with participants frequently expressed a need for a space for nursing moms to pump or breastfeed. This group also noted that children tend to run away or run amok, and asked if we could put a wall around the kids' room that would contain the children to prevent them from potential injury from running into the market or the street. Several ideas for additional programming,

partnerships and classes were shared by numerous staff, partners, volunteers and participants, but followed with, "but I don't know where we could do it." Nearly all participants, volunteers and staff plus a handful of others cited parking as problematic, indicating that even with staff required to park off site, it was difficult to find a spot during market hours. Metro Caring should explore ways to make the best use of our available spaces and discuss space solutions in strategic planning so we can support the vision and growth identified in the next strategic plan.

In addition, many expressed fear that the organization's growth could itself manifest a threat. There were two primary lines of concern: (1) a lack of strategic direction; and (2) a looming lack of capacity to deliver given the rate and manner of growth. Nearly everyone on staff and the Board who'd been with the organization over a year shared that Metro Caring, after moving into the new building, took on growth and programs without an overarching strategy or theory of change. Metro Caring, they said, seemed to want to

serve more people than was organizationally possible or a clear plan. Nearly everyone on staff as well as several on the Board, and a handful of foundations and partners noted that without focus and a strong why behind its recent growth, Metro Caring could lose relevance and credibility or dissipate its impact. The mobile market idea had detractors as well. "If Metro Caring's goal is to "End Hunger at Its Roots,"" said one Board member, "then shouldn't we be focused on shortening the line instead of spending our time and resources trying to serve an ever-increasing need?" In particular with a mobile satellite, would we have enough food when we already had shortages of meat, eggs, dairy, and culturally relevant foods at headquarters. Would we be able to staff a mobile unit? One member of the mobile task force asked for an update, sharing that the Board had told him the notion was on hold until I was in my role some time, when I indicated that it was on pause for at least a year until I got my feet on me and we launched into strategic planning, he said, "Good! I really didn't see how we had the capacity to do it, and it seemed like we went about it backwards, bringing it to the community, rather than hearing from the community that they wanted us; and it seemed like we couldn't find a partner to host it." Said one foundation staff, "We're so relieved to hear that the mobile idea is on hold. We were concerned that there



seemed to be growth, growth, growth with no strategy. What is your theory of change? What outcomes do you seek?” Several volunteers also mentioned that the growth coupled with the turn-over made them feel less connected.

Another bucket of threats identified during the listening campaign includes trends in the food-waste and food-access realms. Interviewees close to the food-rescue world (including nearly all Board members, a majority of staff, several partners and at least one foundation) noted that retail food waste is on the decline, trending toward even steeper decreases as grocery retailers fine-tune inventory modeling and near-time shelf stocking. A few noted that these trends are likely to accelerate with Amazon’s acquisition of Whole Foods. Several interviewees noted Feeding America’s grip on partnerships with national chain retailers for food rescue and fretted about the implications for Metro Caring, which is losing its ability to negotiate with individual stores. Likewise, among a majority of Board, staff, partners, a couple volunteers, and at least one foundation, Feeding America’s prominence in the charitable food-distribution realm was singled out as a threat for its de-emphasis of healthy food and disinterest in advocacy, which one interview said, “would tamp down the need for its services”. There was dismay expressed by a handful that one problem (food waste) was construed as the answer to a second problem (hunger). “We should be outraged,” one exasperated former employee offered, “that [corporations] pay their workers so little, that they have to come to a food pantry to feed their family. Then, those same corporations get a big tax write off for donating to us or Food Bank of the Rockies... By the time it gets to us, almost half of it is rotten, and not only do they get a tax deduction for their donation, they save on their waste disposal costs.”

Finally, we heard of overall trends in the economy, the country, society, and our city that are impacting our participants. We have more participants who need to come to Metro Caring monthly over longer periods of time, or even permanently. I learned that we are giving out more food to more participants than ever and that we are still turning many people away. I encountered various degrees of understanding, as I listened, about the trends at play with wages, housing, and the cost of living, all of them leading to greater demand for services. One person said it succinctly, “to really address hunger at its root, we need to address income inequality.” As I listened, nearly every participant described that it was becoming harder and harder to make ends meet—harder to find affordable housing, harder to put healthy food on the table. They expressed a sense that they were increasingly behind. Said one, “My husband and I just work harder and harder, but it seems like every year, housing costs more, our car breaks down, health care costs more and we just get more and more behind. We can’t ever get ahead.” Many interviewees, especially volunteers and Board members, noted the gentrification and displacement underway in the neighborhoods surrounding Metro Caring and wondered if we’d remain relevant or accessible in Uptown.

Opportunities

A number of opportunities were highlighted. With our shift toward working with vs. working for participants, Metro Caring is seeing new potential to better understand the issues participants face, the impact Metro Caring has on their lives, and their own ability to advance ideas and solutions. Nearly all the Board and staff and quite a few others are excited about expanding our impact on root causes by moving into the policy and advocacy realm as well as increasing our civic engagement. A handful of experts pointed out that we offer a unique value add in the advocacy realm with our large engaged community of diverse participants and volunteers that care and can be mobilized to address root causes through policy work or systems change. Nearly a third noted a need for community organizing in order to harness the potential of participants and volunteers alike to create a more equitable system.

A majority of Board and staff, in addition to a handful of volunteers, participants and donors noted the possibilities of adding child care while a participant receives service and/or programs for kids and families. Several participants noted that it can be hard to attend a class at Metro Caring without childcare. A handful of interviewees were excited about “Kidz in the Kitchen” and the idea of more child/youth/family/two-generation approaches.

Several volunteers and Board members along with a smattering of others shared that they liked that we were open on Tuesday evenings and wondered if we could explore an opportunity to open additional evenings or on Saturdays. Some noted the tension between the desire to shorten the line and grow the root cause work, and throwing more resources into serving more participants in the market. A few proposed that Metro Caring could shift its operations later one or two days a week, foregoing the morning shift and offering an evening shift in its stead or offer other programs and opportunities in the evenings such as Zumba/yoga/wellness, or more cooking clubs, or leadership development or civic engagement classes, or even more frequent community nights.

Others suggested opportunities through various partnerships. Specific ideas given include partnerships with corporations for sponsorships and food donations, engaging with other organizations expanding our network for more bilingual volunteers, and partnering with the community to get more volunteers, complementary services or building coalitions to address root causes. There was also a strong consensus that more bilingual volunteers and resource handouts (in Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin in particular) are necessary and could be available if we lean into and expand our network.

Internally, many saw raw talent in the staff that could be developed, as well as a need and desire for more equity training for volunteers, staff, and Board. Several participants, volunteers and staff felt that the front-end team could benefit from some customer-service training.

Conclusion

The Metro Caring community is diverse, rich and engaged. As we move into strategic planning as a team, I feel confident that we’ll accomplish tremendous impact together. Though there are weaknesses and threats to address, there’s also an abundance of strengths, ideas, passion, creativity and engagement to build upon. I am honored to have been welcomed into this community and trusted with facilitating the advancement of our mission. I look forward to convening together to get to work, to working with our staff, Board, participants, volunteers, supporters and partners to take Metro Caring to the next level to end hunger at its root in Colorado.



Opportunities

- Policy and Advocacy
- Community Organizing/Civic Engagement
- Family or Children’s programming (two-generation lens)
- Equity training/lens
- Partnerships
- Staff Development
- Expanded hours