

COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN WORKING SESSIONS SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The United Way of Greater Cleveland launched the Social Determinants of Work Initiative to bring the Greater Cleveland community together to strategically advance access to work through a deepened understanding of the barriers facing workers, including the benefits cliffs. Building upon the discussions at the Summit, Community Action Plan Sessions (CAPS) were held across the city and focused on capturing the diverse experiences of different populations.

The following summary was created to provide insight into the working sessions. The CAPS were very content-rich and resulted in 17+ hours of discussion with 120+ people creating 72 pages of notes containing invaluable input and proposed solutions. The following insights will play a critical role in the creation of the final Community Action Plan.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Assets and Gaps

During the nine population-specific Community Action Planning sessions, more than 120 community members participated. From these discussions, four key takeaways pertaining to the assets and gaps were identified from both their frequency of discussion and the emotional intensity in which they were discussed.

1. The Social Determinants are highly intertwined.
2. Hopelessness is the most dominant emotion felt by those affected by the barriers.
3. No single group is responsible for the barriers to work; therefore, no single group is responsible for resolving them.
4. Childcare and transportation are the most significant pain points.

The Social Determinants are highly intertwined.

The discussions were intentionally siloed between each of the determinants to evaluate the specific assets and gaps that relate to each, yet every single CAPS brought up how intertwined the SDoW are. For example, you can't get a job without having an address (having a home), and it is hard to get a lease if you are justice-involved, and you can't even afford rent without a job, but you can't get a job without childcare, and yet you can't get childcare without a job, etc. These "domino effect" stories were the most consistent element between the sessions. While public policies are often created in a silo, the CAPS revealed that, in reality, all of the determinants stack upon each other and leave people feeling stuck with no way out.

Hopelessness is the most dominant emotion felt by those effected by the barriers.

Independent of which community was discussing the barriers to work, the sentiments of hopelessness and being stuck were pervasive. Fueled by the domino effect, individuals are often left with no viable alternative and have little hope of getting out of the hole they have been trapped in.

No single group is responsible for the barriers to work; therefore, no single group is responsible for resolving them.

Cognizant of the potential for sessions like the CAPS to turn into venting sessions, the CAPS were designed to intentionally help individuals think about all drivers of barriers. Interestingly, across all discussions, no single scapegoat or responsible party was blamed for the numerous barriers. Public policy, employers, and on-the-ground support services were mentioned in near parity across all barriers—both as creators of barriers and those who have the potential to solve them. It is worth noting that despite the general sentiment of shared responsibility, there

remains a significant need to educate all parties involved on the experiences of others.

Childcare and transportation are the most significant pain points. This takeaway has come up in other contexts as well. For example, as mentioned in the [Summit Discussion Summary](#), childcare was the second most discussed item at the United Way Benefit Cliffs Summit. As for transportation, it has been dominating the conversation around access to work for years and was the primary topic of the [Paradox Prize](#) hosted by the Fund for Our Economic Future. In our CAPS discussions, childcare was the most-mentioned determinant across all nine sessions. It was also the topic that spurred the most emotional response from participants. Transportation was a close second in frequency of mention.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The Community Action Plan will focus on solutions, but one trend that is worth noting here is that the process of problem-solving proved to be quite challenging for health and human services providers and recipients. Participants were asked to dream big and pitch ideas that might seem impossible in the present day, but the most frequently proposed solutions were either already in existence or small in terms of scale. This was true across all nine discussions, and suggests three potential opportunities:

1. **Educate the community at large** on what resources already exist to help mitigate barriers to work;
2. **Educate policymakers, providers, and employers** on the SDoW and the challenges members of our community are facing; and
3. **Focus on moving the needle even one notch** as it will have a great impact on the community.

INDIVIDUAL COMMUNITY SUMMARIES

While the Key Takeaways will be the primary drivers of the Community Action Plan, it is important to highlight that each population shared challenges that were unique to their community. The following summaries will highlight the distinctive challenges that were identified by each community.

Please note that the two general sessions will not be included in these summaries.

Single Mothers

Unsurprisingly, **childcare** was the most important item of discussion for the single mothers community. But what makes this distinctive is that caring for their child was brought up in every determinant, and very few assets were discussed. Single mothers feel “stuck in a little hole” because existing barriers to work are exacerbated by being a parent:

- “Women are viewed as unreliable because they have children to take care of.”
- “I feel like everything is against me and that I’m made out to be a bad mom for not being able to take care of my son.”
- “I constantly feel overwhelmed. I can’t get a childcare voucher until I get a job, but I can’t find a job without someone to watch my daughter.”

LGBTQ+

The top challenge identified within the LGBTQ+ community revolved around **discrimination and safety**. Whether seeking solutions to transportation barriers, receiving medical treatment, seeking sustained education, or enrolling a child in childcare, participants continually expressed concerns for members of the LGBTQ+ community facing discrimination and threats to safety. This was identified as being a problem at the community level (individuals on the street, at bus stops, fellow students, etc.), the professional level (medical professionals, employers, teachers, childcare providers, etc.), as well as with large scale public policy (don’t say gay bill, conversion therapy, lavender ceiling, etc.):

- “There are currently too many laws and policies that foster violence towards our community. Sometimes it is subtle, and we are deemed not a “culture” fit, and other times it is aggressive, and we face overt violence when simply trying to exist in this city.”
- “Even if a member of our community plays the game perfectly, they still face discrimination from landlords and employers. There are no federal protections currently in place to stop discrimination against LGBTQ+ folks in housing and employment.”
- “Being rejected everywhere they turn; members of the community are forced to resort to whatever they have to in order to survive—even if that is stealing or sleeping on the sidewalk.”

Re-entry

For formerly incarcerated individuals or re-entry, the primary concern was that they **were not given a chance to work and prove themselves**. Even if solutions to the other barriers existed, the community noted that having a record is often a nonstarter, and they have few, if any, viable options for employment. Several employers are second-chance employers, and civic leaders are working to expunge records, but the participants noted that they still face prejudice and barriers for being recently incarcerated. In their words, “The system never really makes a person free!”

Community Experience

A woman in attendance was formerly incarcerated for five years and was released from prison two years ago. She is currently completing her three-year probation period and has worked hard to be a productive member of society through employment and volunteering. She secured a job through a temp agency working at a phone bank. In just a few short months, this individual was excelling at work and was offered full-time employment. The only thing she had to do was complete their standard application, and the promotion was hers. While completing the application, she did not check the box as being convicted of a crime in the last five years, as it was seven years ago, but she did check that

she was currently on probation. Upon disclosing this information, she was not only denied the promotion but was fired from the temp agency. Before disclosing that information, she was a top worker for them, but once they learned of her record, she was never given a chance.

Disabilities

The primary challenge for the Disabled community is that the **barriers to work occur because of two different individuals—the job seeker might have a disability and/or they have a child who has a disability**. While some programs help mitigate barriers, they are often underutilized or only considered if the job seeker themselves is disabled. When a parent has a child with a disability, on top of navigating the general barriers to work, they have to struggle with finding childcare and school systems that will accept and properly support their child. Depending on the level of disability, a child’s situation might make it nearly impossible for their parent to access meaningful work.

- “I look at some of the people we work with and just think it is a missed opportunity for greatness”
- “It is hard enough to find childcare these days, let alone when you have a child with disabilities. And once they are accepted, we see autism and emotional disorders being in the top reasons children are kicked out.”

International Newcomers

For international newcomers, which includes but is not limited to refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and undocumented individuals, the top challenge was **language access**. Mentioned for every single determinant, language access and subsequent barriers make it nearly impossible for international newcomers to access and maintain meaningful work. While great strides are being made by some employers to not require fluency in English, this community has trouble accessing proper transportation, childcare, healthcare, broadband, etc. which makes it more difficult for them to accept these new roles.

- “Across the board, there are not enough interpreters or language supports in place

to help this community. And despite trying to better themselves, many newcomers are becoming hopeless and tired of continually failing to navigate a system they don't understand."

- "The BMV in Ohio makes it incredibly challenging to get a license because of language barriers. We are seeing members of the Afghan community spend the money to fly to Florida to get a driver's license and return to convert it to an Ohio license just to secure the ability to drive and therefore to work."

Recovery

The recovery community had several wonderful things to share about the work Signature Health does in meeting their needs and helping them find employment, but the primary and often pervasive challenge remains is having **basic needs of shelter, food, and safety not met**. Even as individuals in recovery start to heal and build new lives, their past addictions and criminal record generally prevent them from accessing safe housing, reliable transportation, quality childcare options for their children, and jobs. While driven by a wide range of motives, the stereotyping of individuals in recovery as unproductive or dangerous addicts is often what leads to these needs not being met.

- "I can't afford a good car and when my car died and I can't afford to fix it, I lose my job. And now I can't find a new job because I look unreliable."
- "Individuals in recovery feel a sense of hopelessness like they'll never be able to get a good paying job. The general public feels like once someone is a substance user who committed a crime, they are always a criminal."
- "The only place our clients can afford to live has poor transportation options, is unsafe, and is often in a food desert. How can they build a better life without these basic needs?"

Veterans

The Veteran community is quite divided by age and time of service; therefore, the primary challenge for this community is that **the number**

of barriers depends greatly on how long ago an individual served. Participants spoke about the importance of support from the Veterans Affairs (VA), specifically getting the VA's help connecting current physical or mental health challenges to past service. No matter the determinants in discussion, the importance of service connect was raised at least once.

Service connect is the process of having a doctor sign off that health challenges are directly related to an individual's time in the service. This is helpful because it opens up additional resources and supports that help mitigate the various barriers to work. What became apparent during the discussion is that the lack of paper trail for older veterans has made it very challenging to get service connect and, therefore challenging to get help mitigating the barriers to work. Younger veterans, on the other hand, are more readily able to receive the necessary service connect and, therefore, the support needed to secure work.

- "You get hurt a lot in the military, but it doesn't show up until later on. You can be carrying around mental and physical challenges for years and then one day it hits and impacts your ability to work. At this point it's been so long since your service, you are just left behind."
- "I realize at this point in my journey, what part I've played in where I am. I know the role I played to be in the situation I am in. I got out of the military in 1981 and had to step away from my career of ten years because of my addiction. But now that I have owned my mistakes, I'm doing anything I can do to work and contribute."
- "If I have to be at work at 7 am, I'll take a 4:30 am bus. That way, if the bus is late, I will still be on time or early. This is how you can maintain employment. I was never late with this approach."