



V E R N O N
RESEARCH GROUP

Grand Forks, East Grand Forks Community Needs Assessment In-Depth Interviews Report

*Prepared for
United Way of Grand Forks,
East Grand Forks and Area
www.unitedwaygfegef.org*

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Purpose and Methodology

Vernon Research Group conducted 23 telephone in-depth interviews with community leaders and decision-makers in Grand Forks and East Grand Forks. The respondents were chosen by the staff and board of the United Way of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks and area (UWGFEGF) as people knowledgeable about the community. Although no specific demographic information was gathered, they ranged in age from early 30s to 70s.

Interviews lasted from approximately 20 minutes to one and a half hours. Each respondent was asked to give his or her opinions and perceptions about a variety of community issues, including:

- Race/ethnicity
- Homelessness
- Affordable housing
- Family
- Child care
- Health care
- Substance abuse
- Crime and safety
- Education
- Transportation
- Economic development
- Community cooperation
- Community assets

Interviews were designed to uncover:

- What has changed in the community?
- What are the real and perceived needs of citizens in the area?
- What are the most critical issues?
- What are the emerging issues?
- What are the priorities?
- Where are the gaps in service?

This data is qualitative and directional in nature. It should not be regarded as completely representative of the community.

Summary of In-Depth Interviews

The economy and its effect on social issues

Several interview respondents discussed the Greater Grand Forks area in terms of its economic issues. All respondents mentioned the economy – good and bad. They described low wages, a focus on the service industry and protectionism as the problems and an educated workforce, low unemployment and cooperation as the successes. This dichotomy frames how decision-makers and community leaders interpret community needs in Grand Forks. Respondents used the phrases, “People from here have a strong work ethic” and “We are having a hard time keeping up with Fargo and Bismarck” when discussing the positives and negatives of the economy. Generally, if respondents had a positive feeling that economic issues were being addressed, they also felt that social issues were being addressed or were not an issue. In other words, this group recognizes that there are problems but they do not view them as significant. Conversely, if respondents felt that economic issues were not being addressed at any level, they also felt social problems were a significant issue.

In the same interview, respondents could discuss the emerging economic strength of the area, the prosperity, the new industries, the cultural enhancements, and then talk about the “poverty and hopelessness” that still exists in the Greater Grand Forks area. Surprisingly, there were a number of community leaders and decision-makers who were not very familiar with the specifics of any socio-economic problems. They only knew that they existed somewhere and to some degree, “to people outside of my network.” When probed about this lack of awareness, respondents said, “I am pretty sheltered.” Respondents further explained that when they were made aware of social issues it was usually through non-profit reporting, not because they had not seen it or experienced it firsthand. For example, when asked about domestic violence and its triggers, many respondents answered, “Well, I know it is here because CVIC released a report, but I don’t see it.”

The 1997 flood, and its legacy – both positive and negative – were mentioned by most respondents. The way the area has come back since the flood is a source of pride for the community. The flood not only changed the physical appearance of the cities but the people who experienced it. The cooperation that was seen during the flood, and before, continues today and is a beacon of hope for many community leaders and decision-makers.

There were a few respondents who mentioned that in order to be healthy, the community needs to reach out and embrace the diversity, and that there are many lost opportunities because the community does not capitalize on the diversity of the area. Here, diversity means not only the racial differences but the economic, age and gender differences.

Because the community is viewed as being divided and having such different socio-economic problems depending on race and location, it may be a challenge for United Way to communicate clearly some of the needs that are “hidden” problems in the community. The south side is viewed almost universally as having few problems, and the ones they do have are manageable. If United Way funders come from the entire Grand Forks area, it may require some new strategies to help people throughout the community understand the impact of having parts of the community suffering with significant problems. Additionally, people in prosperous areas of the city are recipients of United Way funds, but people may not be thinking of that when they think of United Way funding.

What has changed in the community in recent years?

The change mentioned most often is the physical growth of the city and the quality of life. Respondents pointed over and over again to the positive economic indicators. Nearly everyone interviewed was hopeful, positive and optimistic about the future of the community. A number of respondents mentioned the Alerus Center and the Ralph as changes to the community. Many also noted that the Grand Forks area was, “a bit more progressive” now and that this benefited the community.

Since the flood, we have had significant growth.

The quality of life in the Grand Forks is better.

When asked which social problems had become more prevalent, most people did not feel any specific issue had increased but more that their own awareness of it had increased.

Agencies mentioned most frequently as doing a good job: (By all respondents)

Community Violence Intervention Center (CVIC)
Northlands Rescue Mission (Mission)
Red Cross
Salvation Army
United Way
University of North Dakota (UND)

Other agencies mentioned less frequently, yet noted as doing a good job: (By all respondents)

Altru Health System
Lutheran Social Services
Northeast Human Services
Red River Action Committee
Third Street Clinic

Other agencies mentioned less frequently, noted as being less effective: (By some respondents)

Business leaders
Chamber of Commerce
City Council
County Commissioners
Non-profit leaders
Regional Economic Development Corporation

What do you consider to be the critical issues facing the community?

The following issues were identified as critical and are listed in order of frequency:

Diversifying economy

There is too much focus on health care, education, government and service industries.

Underemployment

Many residents have difficulties finding and keeping good-paying jobs, which forces many to hold multiple jobs.

Affordable housing

There is a lack of starter homes. Many respondents also believe that there is no affordable housing left because it was destroyed in the flood and its location is undesirable.

Lack of population growth

Retention of youths

Retention of highly educated people

Developing partnerships

This has two components – for-profit and non-profit. Business and city government leaders need to stop protecting their own interests, and the community needs to demand less resistance to outside businesses moving into Grand Forks. The non-profit community needs to analyze its missions and services and address duplication and promote more cooperation.

Downsizing of air force base

Fighting the perception that there is nothing to do in the Grand Forks area

Fighting the perception of North Dakota being backward

Summary of Topic Areas Discussed in the Interviews

Race and ethnicity

These topics were separated into four sections – the respondent’s definition of diversity, the perceived atmosphere for minorities, the perceived atmosphere for non-residents or recent arrivals and the community’s perception. We, again, see the two distinct camps; however, this time, the division is along place of birth. Those respondents who were born in the Grand Forks area tend to feel that the community is a welcoming place, especially compared to other places in the county. This group did admit that for non-residents or recent arrivals, usually white, the community could be “cliquey.” Respondents who were not born in the Grand Forks community tend to believe that Grand Forks residents think they are welcoming of diversity, but this is not the case.

It is great here; look at other parts of the county, Grand Forks is not what people expect. This is a friendly place to live.

The air force base provides a lot of diversity.

New people need to pay their dues.

There is very little overt racism. There is not great openness either.

The city is perceived as being fairly closed off to new people.

I think it would be awful to be a minority in Grand Forks.

It is hard to become close friends if you were not born here.

Everyone stated that the Grand Forks area is homogenous, but they have seen changes over the last few years. The religious community has taken the lead in working with the recent arrival of Somalis and Eastern Europeans. There is also agreement that new people, whether minorities, non-residents or recent arrivals, are good for the longevity of the community. When asked about organizations, groups or agencies that exist around race and ethnicity, those respondents who could identify organizations mentioned those that existed on the UND campus.

Housing: Homelessness

The housing topic was divided into two areas: homelessness and affordable housing. The majority of respondents interviewed had very little to contribute when discussing homelessness in the community.

I have no idea about this. The Mission says it is full every night, but I think that is more of a transient population.

I don't want to see any more of those people downtown.

Homelessness can be invisible to the community.

People assume it's there but don't see it as a widespread problem.

I am not exposed to families that are homeless.

Organizations will help you if you want to work.

The cold weather keeps the riff-raff out.

There were a few respondents who had direct experience in their work or as a volunteer with homeless people and people without adequate housing. These respondents painted a very different picture.

People who don't believe we have a homeless problem need to spend some time at the Mission.

We are across from the Mission; there are 150 people staying there each night; homelessness is a problem.

There is no transitional housing available to people who have lost their homes; they have to go to the Mission.

When asked to explain the community perception of why people are homeless, these two groups offered distinctly different reasons. The respondents for whom homelessness was an invisible issue said that they thought most people perceived the homeless population as a transient population who has come to North Dakota because of the generous social services available or there are people who are "down on their luck." The group who had experience with the homeless felt that the perception was that "stuff happens." People who are barely making ends meet have something happen, and then they are not able to pay their rent and become homeless or near-homeless (living with relatives or friends).

Many respondents agreed that they were confused about, or unaware of, the extent of homelessness in the Grand Forks area. There was a desire for more information from organizations working on the issue – a better profile of the people who stay at the Mission and what has been successful in moving people out of the Mission.

Housing: Affordable housing

Of the 23 respondents, 22 agreed that housing is not affordable in the Grand Forks area. There were two reasons given for this: the 1997 flood and low wages. The flood destroyed most of the moderately priced homes, and building replacements are not profitable. Many people in the Grand Forks area are in the services industry which pays low wages, making it almost impossible to afford a single-family home in the Grand Forks area.

Home values have held.

There are older homes that are available, but young people think they should have a house like their parents.

The Knight Foundation is building a housing development.

We don't have a lot of entry-level housing, but we have an abundance of entry-level jobs.

Developers won't build; it's not worth it.

We are void of the entry-level housing.

It is not that housing is not affordable, it is the taxes that aren't affordable, but that is a state problem.

The City Council and County Commissioners are in denial.

There is a waiting list for subsidized housing.

It's expensive to rent in Grand Forks. It's affordable if you have four to five people sharing.

The city government is not willing to intervene in the market with its own money because they don't think the community will support them.

Family

When asked to describe the “typical” family in the Grand Forks area, over half of respondents said, “white, mother, father and two children.” There was also a significant group who mentioned the increase in female-headed households and the elderly living alone. The number of children who spend time alone because their parent(s) work(s) one or maybe two jobs was also mentioned. Respondents were also split on the social-economic status of families in the Grand Forks area – either professional homeowners or lower-middle-class families struggling to stay in their homes.

There are many single-parent homes – female heads-of-house with two to three kids, probably around 40%.

The family makeup has changed from four kids to maybe two kids.

The presence of domestic violence and violence against children is recognized by a majority of respondents, thanks to the efforts of CVIC. Elder abuse was less recognized, and many respondents felt neglect and the unwillingness of seniors to ask for help are larger concerns.

Domestic violence is more common than people know.

I don't see domestic violence, but it exists.

Children are usually witnesses to parental violence.

For the elderly, it is more neglect than abuse.

The areas of concern for two-parent and more affluent families are that kids grow up faster, they are involved in too many activities and so are their parents. All of these add up to parents spending less time with their children.

Parents care about their children, but they are very busy.

Child care

The majority of respondents believe that child care is expensive and hard to find for infants. Those with experience in child care identified it as an ongoing need. The rate of pay for day care workers and the unwillingness of businesses to offer child care were identified as issues. Everyone agreed that the quality of licensed day care is high.

The continuing need for child care seems to come from “people in the middle”—the people who are working but who do not necessarily have money for day care.

There is a lot of availability, but pricing is too high for many wage earners.

If you have the means, there is some pretty quality care.

I don't see how you could be a single parent and afford day care.

Health care

In general, most respondents interviewed felt that the options for health care were a strong asset in the community. It was perceived that most people who need health care are getting it, even if it is for “free” at the emergency room. A large majority did not see the need for a free clinic because of the charity care done at Altru Health Systems.

Even though most respondents felt that access to health care was good, it was also thought of as an important issue.

Poor health care decreases quality of life.

There is no preventive care.

When people wait until they are really sick, we all pay for it.

Many older residents are too proud to use services.

The most underserved populations were thought to be the uninsured, underinsured, homeless and working poor. The problem with all of these groups is that they often do not seek medical care until they are very ill and then end up in the emergency room with more serious problems.

The working poor are the most underserved.

There is help available for children but not adults.

Many jobs in Grand Forks don't offer health care.

Substance abuse

Everyone agreed that there are no dedicated community services that deal with alcohol and substance abuse issues. However, respondents are again split about whether alcohol and substance abuse are big community problems.

It's a problem; we have parents buying their children alcohol.

It is impossible to change the culture here.

A friend owns a business downtown and the college students leave the bars, throw up on the sidewalks outside his store, and break windows; it's a real problem.

People don't want to change.

Binge drinking; it is embarrassing, but the culture seems to allow it; no one condemns it.

We need more education in the schools about prescription drug abuse. What is the normal kind of drinking?

Kids get 90% of the alcohol from friends and family.

There are no treatment options.

Parents are so grateful their kids aren't on other drugs, alcohol is perceived as okay.

There is a social acceptance.

The greatest threats from drug and alcohol use are the crimes that go along with them; for example burglaries, armed robberies and child and spousal abuse.

Drug use is a threshold act. It leads to other criminal behavior.

We need to have zero tolerance.

Meth, prescription drugs and alcohol abuse are considered the most prevalent and most dangerous drugs in the community, but many feel meth is now under control.

The biggest barriers to people getting treatment are the lack of a detoxification facility, their denial of the problem and that there is a stigma to getting treatment.

Crime and safety

The crime and safety discussion was based almost solely on respondents' perceptions. No one reported ever being a victim of a crime, and most everyone agreed that the area is relatively safe. The crimes that do occur are usually breaking and entering, vandalism and assaults. The causes of crime seem to be illegal drug trafficking, alcohol abuse and teenagers without anything to do. However, respondents' perceptions of the causes and perpetrators of crime may differ from reality. A few business people mentioned there had been an increase in fraud.

We are very fortunate; it is a safe community.

We live in a relatively safe community.

We have seen an increase in people stealing from their employers.

The upper-class feels that there are certain groups who cause all of the crime.

People don't believe that somebody with a job would be committing crimes.

We need to do a better job of reporting what works and what doesn't when it comes to preventing crimes.

Education

Respondents spoke with a certain amount of pride about the education system in the Grand Forks area. Teachers are professionally trained and hold students to high expectations. Two concerns were noted – low teacher pay and decreased monetary

support from the state. Many new graduates from the University's Education Department do not stay because of the low wages. The local colleges (UND, Northland Community and Technical College) are perceived as doing an excellent job of supporting the community.

Higher education in this area is great.

The K-12 education in Grand Forks is great.

The education system is what keeps people in Grand Forks and brings people to Grand Forks.

There wouldn't be a Grand Forks without the University.

Transportation

Buses are the only form of mass transportation in Grand Forks. Respondents are split on whether public transportation is meeting the needs of the community, even though no one interviewed used public transportation. It was noted that most people would prefer to drive a car rather than ride the bus, but that it is cost-prohibitive for some. Because the bus system also serves the school district, there are periods of the day where ridership is higher.

The biggest concern about the lack of public transportation is that it prevents people from getting to work. People who live in the outlying areas must have cars. Most of them do, but they are often not reliable.

The buses are usually empty.

Everyone in Grand Forks drives.

Ridership has gone up since the economic downturn.

We need more bus routes with longer hours.

If you don't have a car, it's a rough life.

The transit system needs to be evaluated to determine where the ridership is so people can get to work and doctors' appointments.

I have heard people complain about the hub system.

We are doing the best we can against the car culture.

The bus only runs from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.; we need to expand the hours.

We are very well served.

Economic development

All respondents feel that economic development is a priority for the Grand Forks area, and most feel it should be the main priority. There needs to be a diversification of the economy, paying higher wages, attracting more manufacturing jobs, and retaining young professionals. Respondents are again divided on whether the organizations that exist around economic development have been successful. Everyone feels that more must be done to promote economic development, but there is little agreement about how this should happen.

The business and city leaders are not business-friendly.

We need to continue to focus on expanding businesses and diversifying the base of business and jobs.

There is revitalization going on.

More public investment will continue to pay off down the line.

Some people are prospering; however, nearly everyone added that there are still places in the community that are not doing well. Respondents referred repeatedly to the “haves and have-nots,” and several stated that the division is growing.

The people that are doing well and moving up are two-income families.

The biggest problem is the single-parent families. They have the hardest time moving up.

The jobs are adequate for shelter and food only. People do jobs that they don't want to do just to provide food and shelter for their families.

Jobs just don't pay enough to make one self-sufficient.

Many more families qualify for free or reduced lunch.

In terms of workforce development, there were several opinions. Some felt that jobs that pay a living wage are available if people want them. Still, others felt that the community needs to continue to attract jobs that are higher-paying. If people are willing to learn a skill, there are more high-skilled and higher-paying jobs out there.

Cooperation and program evaluation

The respondents cited many examples of cooperation in the community:

- The merging of the Grand Forks and East Grand Forks Chambers
- City government and County governments working together
- United police and fire departments working together in a small town

- Agencies came together when the flood hit
- Agencies came together when Somali and Eastern Europeans arrived

At the same time, respondents talked about agency duplication and the fact that everyone is competing in the same pool for the same dollars. A number of respondents felt that non-profits change their missions from day-to-day to qualify for new findings.

What can we do to help some groups be more visible and to discover where the duplications are?

The community needs to understand the distinctions in agencies so they could partner.

We need to foster cooperation between groups working on the same issues.

Respondents felt it was important to have benchmarks and targets and to be able to track outcomes. These program evaluations need to be systematic and ongoing. The agencies that respondents rated the most favorably were the ones doing more with less, providing direct services.

Let's take a look at what works and what is the effectiveness of resources. What really takes us somewhere?

We need to measure the effects of programs, and we need tools to do that. We need to measure outputs and outcomes. Right now, we only have anecdotes.

We need to listen one-on-one to people's stories to see if lives have changed.

Community assets

Everyone loves the Grand Forks community, and they feel that with hard work and cooperation, barriers can be overcome. When asked what the community's greatest assets were, many respondents said the people. The school system and the University are also mentioned frequently, along with the partnerships between non-profits and the cooperation between government, business and non-profits.

People are pretty willing to help. If you can tell a story, people will pitch in; we may not agree or understand, but our hearts are in the right place.

In the words of one of the respondents, a summary:

Grand Forks is a community that is relatively realistic in what it is and what it wishes to be, and that will serve us in the long run.