REPORT

Statutory Council on Blindness Community Conversations: Qualitative Analysis of Common Themes

1. Introduction

Qualitative data collection is one method commonly used to elevate community voices and ensure that policy, systems, and environmental changes align with the needs and priorities of communities across the state. To gain insight from individuals who are blind or have vision loss   in Wisconsin, the Statutory Council on Blindness sent out a survey and held five community conversations, providing rich qualitative data that will inform the council's priorities. This report serves as a summary of common themes that emerged throughout the community conversations.

2. Method

The Statutory Council on Blindness utilized an online survey and community conversations to gain insight from the populations they serve. The survey was sent to individuals who are blind or have vision loss and organizations they are connected with. The same 5 main questions were asked on the survey and during the community conversations. The questions asked were as follows:

1. What communities do you belong to? Communities may also mean groups or organizations that you belong to or participate in not necessarily just geography.

2. What is the most important or urgent issue your community is facing right now?

3. What would you need to live your best life? What is missing right now that is preventing you or making it harder for you to live your best life?

4. If you could change one thing about your community or neighborhood to make it a better place to live, what would you change?

5. What would your community need to make this change?

Notes from the community conversations and online survey responses were combined. Qualitative responses were first read thoroughly for data immersion purposes prior to analyzing. After becoming familiar with the data, initial themes were identified. Responses to each question were then read again and coded into relevant themes. As new themes were identified throughout the coding process, previously coded responses were re-coded to capture alignment with the newly identified themes. Singular responses were coded into as many themes as were relevant. After all responses were coded, themes were reviewed and consolidated. This report describes the most commonly identified themes across the five questions.

3. Results

A total of 9 respondents completed the survey. Across the five community conversations, there were 28 different attendees. Some attendees participated in multiple community conversations. Attendees were from across different geographic areas and shared diverse perspectives of belonging to different communities beyond geography.

3.1 Community Engagement and Connectedness

This theme had two dominant subthemes: connectedness and civic engagement. Participants spoke of the fundamental need to be connected to others in the community, have more opportunities and places for people to connect, mingle and engage in leisure activities. Accessibility seemed to be the greatest barrier. Civic engagement, including independence at the polls, access to voting and voting information, access to local government, civic groups, advisory bodies, and decision making and representation of people with disabilities in these spaces was also called out as an important need and gap.

Here is how community members spoke of the experience.

- I would love to start or be a part of an advocacy group that works to make full-time employment of the visually disabled easier to obtain. Also, start or be a part of an advocacy group that advised retailers, etc. how to be more inclusive of methods to make their business more visually disabled friendly.

- Access to voting resources and the community to vote independently.

- More involvement from the blind community with local government.

- Access to more information about local city and community surveys to give local input.

- Legislative changes need to happen.

- Having people with disabilities on advisory boards and councils/committees. Continuing with hybrid options for local meetings so that everyone can participate.

- Voice my opinion and help other visually impaired people.

3.2 Information

This theme included the following subthemes: access to internet (physical, internet connectivity missing), better and more accessible technology, more accessible websites and modes of information presentation, appropriateness and timeliness of information, and the need for more assistive technology.

Here is how community members spoke of the experience.

- We need to be on the right side of the digital divide. Need better accessible communications with doctors, websites, email, documents and easy access to resources and education.

- Accessible websites that are easier to maneuver; shopping online for groceries isn't always accessible, issues with purchasing online bus tickets; when you call to ask for assistance, the support system is not there.

- Internet access and telephone access. Broadband barriers.

- Emergency warnings for visual impairments and blindness.

- Lack of signage or ADA standards.

- I need help with computer training so that I'm not so intimidated.

- I have multiple disabilities and need help since a lot of daily tasks are completed online.

- Cannot read mail and need training or assistive technology.

3.3 Transportation and pedestrian safety

Transportation and pedestrian safety were by far the most dominant themes. These themes showed up in many parts of the conversation and survey and in different nuances and manifestations. The most mentioned threads throughout the conversations were around lack of availability, accessibility, and affordability of transportation. Similarly, attendees spoke about pedestrian safety focused on crossings, sidewalks, signage and signals, traffic patterns and technology related to safety for people with impaired vision.

Here is how community members spoke of the experience.

- Transportation is an issue. If I didn't have friends to give me rides, I don't know how I would get around.

- The need or being forced to move away from rural cities to the Madison area or more urban areas to access transportation.

- Public transportation and access to transportation; doesn't go outside the city of Wausau. Limited use at night and no weekends, expensive taxi services.

- Wait times for transportation can be over an hour.

- The need for long distance transportation.

- Not consistent transportation options. Long wait times or unable to get into their schedule.

- Cab services need to be better organized. Everyone seems overworked and underpaid.

- Access to bus stops in urban areas.

- Lack of curb cuts and barriers for physical and visual impairments.

- People are not paying attention to low vision canes and pedestrians due to distractions while driving.

- New cars do not make noise and it's hard to identify where they are coming and going.

- Needs to be universal design for crosswalks. The need for crosswalks to have signals, sounds and verbal signals.

3.4 Supportive environments, systems and programs, and social support

Supportive care, the need for more social support in the home, the quality and appropriateness of services across the lifespan, as well as the need for more training opportunities both for people with disabilities and the people who serve them through programing, were called out as major gaps and needs for the community and people with impaired vision.

Here is how community members spoke of the experience.

- Access to quality services: ensuring that individuals across the lifespan have the ability to access high quality services and remain independent.

- The need for people that are blind or low vision to remain independent and in their communities. The need for an educational program to help with these tasks. Also, the need for after hours and weekend educational programs.

- Lack of supportive care providers and individuals to help with home maintenance.

- Having more help with day-to-day tasks.

- More support in my home.

- In-home support for day-to-day tasks.

- Having more supportive home care workers and personal care workers.

- The need for a rehabilitation program in WI. Provide training for blind adults in the state or making it easier to go outside of the state.

4. Conclusion

The Statutory Council on Blindness undertook this community outreach and qualitative data effort to better understand the needs and examine ways to improve the lives of individuals who are blind or have vision loss.

Across the community conversation and the survey, four dominant themes occurred: community engagement and connectedness, information, transportation and pedestrian safety, and supportive environments and systems. A cross-cutting theme across all these distinct areas was the fundamental need for independence and accessibility. This theme was foundational to all conversations around the physical environment, services and programing, connections and engagement, information, and others.