

CREATING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

**Sun Health Virtual Community Town Hall
September 30, 2020 – Online via Zoom**

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Arizona as a state has an extraordinarily rich history and heritage that unites all of us. That includes rural and urban areas as well as reservations. We could leverage that rich heritage by using it in design of the built environment to create greater vibrancy within our communities.

Some of Arizona's other strengths include its population of young people, who are stepping up to take responsibility for their future and are taking action to improve conditions in the state. However, there is concern about a thread of ageism that has emerged in the wake of COVID-19, and we should also value the many contributions by and wisdom of seniors.

Arizona's education system could be a strength but is not universally excellent. Some parts of education system are excellent, others are not. There are some bright spots (there are some excellent charter schools, public schools, and universities) but the K-12 system is not universally excellent. It needs to be excellent throughout so that the benefits can be leveraged for everyone.

Where excellent education is available it is a powerful tool for community vibrancy. For example, Yuma is a border community with high poverty, under-employment, and an agricultural economy. But students who want post-secondary education to have great opportunities. There is a low dropout rate and high success rate, with all three state universities offering programs. This is part of a system that could be leveraged to improve the community.

Access to care is an important issue for Arizonans, but care is not equally accessible for all. In the southwest valley access to health care is exceptional. Sun Health knows what the community needs because it has been involved in providing health care from all sides. There are some challenges because some people do not have access to, or are not comfortable with, new technologies through which care is being provided. Mental health care is far less accessible than other forms of health care, and is relatively unavailable to certain populations, such as people in prisons.

Arizona communities strongly value and support public safety, public works and infrastructure, parks and recreation, the arts, and the natural beauty of the surrounding environment. It is important that Arizonans get involved in efforts to protect the environment, including parks, trails, and recreational amenities, which promote health and social cohesion.

Throughout Arizona affordability of housing is becoming a real issue. The lack of affordable housing has contributed to the problem of homelessness and poverty. Increasingly, landlords are refusing to rent to low-income persons. When the eviction moratorium ends this problem will likely get worse. We need to do more to provide for the construction of affordable housing and to assure that people who are experiencing poverty and homelessness get the help they need to find suitable housing.

There is a big difference between rural Arizona and urban Arizona for all the attributes on the wheel. In these times broadband infrastructure is critical for access to all the things that people need, including education and health care. We may need to find a way to fund satellite dishes for people living in rural areas to give them access to these amenities.

CURRENT EVENTS AND VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

Our society will be reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, both for good and for ill.

COVID-19 has acted like a huge magnifying glass bringing attention to and exacerbating inequities already existing in our communities. Tribal and lower-income communities and communities of color were harder hit than other communities. The disproportionate impact reflects the relative lack of investment over the years in the things that contribute to community health.

COVID-19 has created incredible stress on the innermost ring of the wheel. It demonstrates that everything is linked; we can't separate the facets of community health into separate topics. Shocks like the global pandemic will likely come more frequently, and we need to look to the experts and prepare to respond.

COVID-19 had huge impacts on the mental health of the community. There were insufficient mental health resources to begin with. Add to that the incredible stress of COVID-19-caused stress and uncertainty, people struggling with lack of access to health care, trying to work from home, struggling to help their children with homework, worrying about their jobs and their health. The result has been an increase in mental health issues and trauma, depression, suicide, and abuse. Schools are important sources of referrals for help for homelessness and abuse, but DCS referrals are down 90%. There is concern about domestic violence and child abuse that is occurring in the home while people are isolating. Among the homeless families at UMOM there have been ten deaths attributed to COVID-19-related trauma, including two youths aging out of foster care.

The isolation and loneliness associated with COVID-19 have also taken a toll, particularly on the elderly population. Many older individuals are tech-challenged, less able to connect with others via technologies such as Zoom, and thus may not have the ability to maintain social connections. This has caused widespread suffering for that population.

Other impacts of the pandemic have included a lack of access to quality and affordable food. Information should have been made more widely available in Spanish. There is a sense that the connection between people has eroded, and the bonds that tether our civil society have frayed. There is growing uncertainty about the reliability of information we receive from government, the media, and one another.

During the pandemic racial disparities have become more apparent. Seventy-five percent of homeless families are people of color. The scarcity of ventilators and other medical supplies and equipment on the reservation during the pandemic highlighted the pre-existing gap in access to health care resources. Once again rural areas were hurt worse because they have fewer financial resources.

COVID-19 has highlighted where there are gaps and weaknesses, but it has also allowed us to find ways to find new ways of doing things. The shift to online technologies for meetings and events has had some benefits, promoting easier connection for people who otherwise might lack access. COVID-19 has caused some organizations to revisit their missions and resulted in companies reinventing their service models and delivery methods and finding new ways of doing things. People are spending more time outdoors, for recreation and exercise. Some groups have created new rituals to connect people and lift their spirits, and some people have found new ways to volunteer to help their neighbors. COVID-19 has created an opportunity for us to do the work of examining systemic racism and offers the hope that we will spend the time and energy required to make the changes that are needed to address that problem.

WHAT I WOULD TELL ARIZONA'S ELECTED LEADERS

Establish broadband access across Arizona. The digital divide cuts across many issues. It impacts schools, economic development, and even things like food access. Yet there are parts of Arizona where there is NO internet access.

Expand resources for development of affordable housing. At the local level, identify, address, and mitigate barriers to affordable housing. Streamlining the process would expedite development considerably. The state should add more resources to the pot for development of affordable housing. One way to do this would be to restore the Housing Trust Fund, which was swept by the Legislature in 2008. At the federal level encourage the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to bring more resources than the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) to development of affordable housing.

Restore funding to the Arizona State Parks Heritage Fund (\$10 million per year). This would provide a source of revenues for communities that want to invest in their heritage through restoration of historic buildings.

Realign funding for education and training at the state level so that everyone in Arizona has the tools they need for economic opportunity and self-sufficiency.

Fully fund our education system, including counselors. Schools are vital societal hubs as well as centers of learning.

Address the issue of childhood poverty through the lens of the wheel. Every meeting room at every level of government should have a poster of the wheel and come to understand the concepts involved in getting out of silos and addressing problems holistically.

Take what we have learned from the COVID-19 crisis and use the information to prepare for future challenges. Engage the public in conversations about the issue of community health to apply these lessons and make decisions in context.

TAKING ACTION

Recognizing that the power to change the future begins with each individual, participants committed to take personal actions based on their experience and discussions during the Sun Health Virtual Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Go to boards that I am part of and raise these issues (and the wheel) to be discussed.
- Encourage the State Land Department to be more active in working with communities on annexation of land, specifically in Oro Valley.
- Work to bring Arizona Town Hall to the community of Oro Valley
- Be very loud with Arizona legislators about the need for internet accessibility.
- Continue working with leadership at ADOH to find ways we can leverage Historic Tax Credits with LITC to adaptively reuse significant heritage assets in our communities to address the affordable housing crisis.
- Align state funding to metrics that require school districts that require higher level off graduates that are job or college ready. Continue to work to create those pathways within the curriculum.
- Add the topics discussed today on every non-profit board I serve on, and to encourage my fellow board members to review and update their bylaws, policies, and procedures to effect needed change.
- Print out an 8-1/2 by 11 copy of the wheel and send it out to mayor, council members, and school board members with a letter educating them about the issues.
- Commit to raising awareness on these issues.
- Use my school platforms and programs to have healthy dialogue and debate.
- Commit to promoting this wheel with my community and school programs as well.
- As a volunteer, I will work with partners in Pima, Cochise, and Santa Cruz Counties to hold Community Town Hall meetings on Creating Vibrant Communities.
- Continue to advocate for additional resources and strategies to increase affordable housing.
- Reach out periodically to older people who are isolated and help them get up to speed on Zoom.

- Engage with fellow board members on the foundation I am part of in Flagstaff to use the Healthy Communities wheel to direct our funds to the greatest needs.
- Become more aware of the needs in my community which might be addressed by working with Arizona Town Hall.
- Focus more on the gaps limiting our town's success, particularly those that have become more acute do to COVID-19!
- Periodically reach out to isolated seniors and try to assist them in accessing technology and knowledge for zoom video communications so they can connect with family, friends, religious services, healthcare, etc.
- Print out the wheel and send it, with a cover letter, to my state legislators, my city council person, and perhaps school board members.
- Share what I learned during the Sun Health Town Hall with others in my community.