

We Are Concord

*Building Trust ~ Strengthening Relationships ~
Increasing Understanding*

A NH Listens Summary Report

March 16, 2016



We Heard You!

In February 2016, over 250 people attended one of three ***We Are Concord*** conversations to share their concerns and priorities for promoting collaboration and healthy problem solving across differences. These conversations provided an opportunity for the Concord community to:

- Strengthen relationships in a changing economy and a changing community
- Build trust and positive places for learning and reflection about our differences
- Create an opportunity for cross-cultural understanding and connection

How can we best work together to strengthen relationships across our community? What do we need to know as we begin? How can we improve communication and decrease stereotyping? These were the kinds of questions at the heart of the conversations. The following information highlights the themes and ideas that rose to the top. These ideas will inform next steps for individuals, organizations, and coalitions in Concord.

Things We Talked About...

Throughout the conversations, three themes were discussed repeatedly across small groups at each event. Those themes are 1) building relationships to reduce discord and misunderstandings, 2) improving communication across cultures and languages, and 3) removing barriers to independence and opportunity. In addition, participants mentioned many positive aspects of the Concord community. These include Concord being a great place to raise children, a community with strong nonprofit and faith organizations, and positive energy in Concord High School, especially the efforts of the *Be the Change Club*.

Building Relationships to Reduce Discord and Misunderstanding

Many participants expressed appreciation for Concord but emphasized the need for proactive approaches to build community and create opportunities for people to work and play together. The changes in the racial and ethnic makeup of the city in recent years stand out. Those changes as well as the increasingly uncivil, polarized national public discourse on social issues provide an important context for these conversations on differences. Participants discussed the need to address fear and discrimination, build on common values, and focus on youth as ways to reduce discord and misunderstanding.

Proactive Approaches to Address Fear and Discrimination

The majority of groups spent time discussing issues of racism and other forms of discrimination. Some of these issues stemmed from fears of difference or a misunderstanding or lack of information about different groups. Participants also mentioned fears and misunderstanding based on mental illness, homelessness, and reactions based on unfamiliarity of ethnic clothing and customs. Several groups talked about how unfamiliarity can breed discomfort. This unfamiliarity was expressed across concerns including mental illness, homelessness, poverty, and connecting with people from other cultures and countries. Participants spoke of feeling unsafe and afraid because of these differences.

One of the concerns voiced was that newcomers or special populations such as people who are mentally ill or homeless are draining the community's resources and funds. This was discussed as something that people reacted against or stereotyped. Some admitted to reacting and hurting people's feelings even though they "know better." While many participants felt the Concord Police take racial harassment seriously, some also felt that misunderstandings can get worse when non-police issues are put in the hands of the police (such as neighbors disagreeing or needing to work out a conflict, or untreated mental illness, or homelessness).

Build on Common Values

In terms of opportunities for change, groups talked about how identifying common values despite cultural differences could be a way to connect. Coming together around youth-centered efforts (addressed below), religion or spirituality, or the arts were seen as areas for discovering potential common ground. Groups talked about building compassion, respect, and empathy.

Some values that were mentioned included being respectful, time for family and family dinner, respect for elders, and care for all children in a community (not just one's own). In addition, many participants talked about excitement over increased diversity in the community and the value of children growing up in a multicultural context. Groups discussed the importance of education, accurate information, and being more curious. Self-education was also discussed. There was a sense that people need to be patient when explaining differences to others.

A majority of the small groups specifically commented on the importance of activities that provide opportunities for groups from different experiences and cultures to engage with each other. These ranged from sports to festivals to neighborhood events. Many emphasized casual opportunities to interact. Half of all groups discussed the need for more educational opportunities about various cultural groups as a means to educate public leaders like city councilors or the police as well as for people in communities to just learn more about their neighbors. Storytelling was emphasized as a key way to do this. A quarter of the small groups specifically mentioned the role of public media. There was a sense that the media could do a better job in creating positivity and educating others.

A Focus on Youth

Efforts to provide opportunities and a safe community for youth received attention in most groups. For instance, children's well-being was seen as a concern where people might be able to bond since all parents and communities care about their children. Within refugee and immigrant populations, young people were seen as bridge builders, who could learn the new culture and act as translators and connectors to their parent's cultures. People also talked about a lack of resources for refugee students in the schools. There was value expressed by many groups in creating safe environments for youth to be able to learn and grow. The value placed on children was seen as common ground, and that people can bond around their children even if they don't speak the same language. Some also saw how attending to young people in the community could help retain more youth in Concord and that we could learn from the resiliency of young people to learn about and appreciate different cultures.

In general, addressing fears, building on common values, and focusing on youth were seen as opportunities for increased education (for everyone, from all groups) about differences, as well as the value of intermixing with each other. Populations who were in the minority in Concord talked about the challenge of feeling different and like they don't fit in. However, it was recognized that there may be some work that needs to be done before people feel comfortable interacting with each other.

Communication Across Cultures and Languages

Communicating during times of conflict is often difficult and the addition of language barriers and cultural differences can add to those difficulties. The majority of groups specifically talked about the challenges of different languages and language barriers. There was discussion about the need for more translators/interpreters and resources for translators/interpreters. More opportunities for people to learn English, formal and informal, were also mentioned. Many talked about the high expectation that refugees learn English, which is sometimes overwhelming and difficult. Sign Language was also talked about as a language requiring translation until newcomers can learn American Sign Language. Language barriers were specifically emphasized as an aspect of youth experiences in the high school and for adults in the business community. Some mentioned the assumption that people aren't trying hard enough. Others discussed the limited opportunities to learn English that fit into work schedules.

However, language was not the only communication challenge; there were also challenges of cultural communication—such as the way and manner in which we communicate, which can be different among cultures. Regarding cultural differences, half of the groups discussed refugee populations. There was talk from the refugee perspective of the challenge of being new and navigating unfamiliar systems and cultural norms, often when language was also contributing to misunderstanding or confusion. There was also talk about how refugees feel isolated from the community. This isolation can also be misperceived by long-time community members as intentional rather than simply a difficult transition.

Barriers to Independence and Opportunity

Throughout the conversations, participants discussed a variety of barriers to independence and opportunity. These barriers were both specific to newcomers, including immigrants and refugees, as well as applicable to all community members who are experiencing difficulty economically. Participants discussed the divisions that can be caused by economic challenges and ways these divisions impact participation in one's neighborhood and community. In other words, struggling to make ends meet leaves little room for the kinds of community involvement that can strengthen relationships and problem solving more broadly.

A Community Divide

Economic independence and opportunity were mentioned specifically in most groups. Some commented on the challenges of poverty, such as depression and inability to plan long term. Others mentioned the assumptions and misinformation of what it is like to need public assistance (food stamps, assistance with rent, etc.) even while working full time. There were feelings that people did not understand how difficult it is to live in poverty. People also spoke of the need for more resources and supports, including public transportation, opportunities for jobs that offer decent wages and benefits, and food pantries. Several participants felt there are misconceptions about working class people and poor people, including the perception that poor people are more likely to discriminate or the perception of competition that “others are getting more than me.”

Jobs, Transportation, Housing, and Health

When discussing the barriers to independence, access to jobs, transportation, affordable housing, and treatment for mental health and substance misuse were all mentioned. Several groups communicated concerns about people who are homeless. The importance of being employed and being able to be productive was discussed. Some participants conveyed the sense that it is difficult to feel valued when good jobs (not just menial labor) are not available, especially for refugees. Many newcomers mentioned the high priority of getting a job and a driver's license. About a quarter of all small groups talked about the need for more affordable housing.

Conclusion

Just like couples, families, and organizations, our communities also need opportunities to keep learning about each other and chances to look ahead at changes to come. In these conversations, Concord community members had the chance to talk together and shape solutions for the future. While these conversations were a way of taking action, more can be done by individuals, community organizations, and leaders in the civic, education, and business sectors to address the themes above. This report of the recurring themes in the conversations is intended to serve as a catalyst for further discussion, planning, and action by all those concerned with Concord's future.

Appendices for the We Are Concord flyer, discussion guide, small group notes, and data summary can be found at www.NHListens.org.

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**Carsey School of Public Policy
University of New Hampshire
NH.listens@unh.edu
www.nhlistens.org
603 862-2821**