

# SPARTANBURG'S WAY TO WELLVILLE LISTENING CAMPAIGN



## Introduction

Spartanburg, SC is one of only five communities nationwide chosen to participate in the Way to Wellville, a national challenge designed to demonstrate the value of investing in health. Spartanburg's Way to Wellville is led by a core team representing the City of Spartanburg, Mary Black Foundation, Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System, and University of South Carolina Upstate. We understand that health is both physical and mental, and that it is determined by individual, family, and community factors. As we seek to involve more people in efforts to improve health, we have been intentional about engaging the community.

One of the original focus areas for Spartanburg's Way to Wellville was Community Pride. Over time, this focus area evolved to become a strategy of neighborhood engagement and we hired a Neighborhood Engagement Coordinator. By definition, neighborhood engagement is a feeling of fellowship with others as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. The definition itself seems simple; however, in reality, attaining genuine neighborhood engagement can be quite challenging. Many attempts have been made to help communities become more engaged using a variety of methods. Often, these methods involve "doing to" communities versus "working with" communities. "Doing to" communities brings an outside perspective of what one thinks a community needs in the hopes of building their engagement.

Spartanburg's Way to Wellville aspired to find a "working with" approach that would involve genuine listening. We were fortunate to work with Dr. Pedja Stojicic, Project Director with ReThink Health, to train resident leaders in a community organizing model for effective listening. ReThink Health's expertise increased our capacity to engage residents in a process and equipped us with the tools needed to get started. Coined the Way to Wellville Listening Campaign, we set out to listen to the voices too often unheard and to set the stage for resident-led change on the issues they defined as most important. We prioritized seven neighborhoods within the City of Spartanburg where we conducted the Listening Campaign: Beaumont Mill Village, Forest Park, Hampton Heights, Highland, Northside, Park Hills, and South Converse.

## Listening Campaign

Spartanburg's Way to Wellville Listening Campaign took place from April 2016 – December 2018. The goals of the Campaign were to:

- Conduct "deep listening" without judgement;
- Gain a better understanding of people's concerns and priorities;
- Identify common ground between individuals and groups with differing or opposing views;
- Identify new, creative, resident-led solutions; and
- Cultivate new neighborhood leaders, organizers, and activists.

The process for conducting the Listening Campaign involved four phases:

## Phase 1: Preparation

While Spartanburg's Way to Wellville Neighborhood Engagement Coordinator organized and managed the Listening Campaign, a support team made up of representatives from grassroots organizations, neighborhood residents, and members of Spartanburg's Way to Wellville core team was created to guide her efforts. The support team gave valuable input and helped with the logistics of the Campaign, including budget development (when applicable). The support team also developed a set of 21 questions from which each neighborhood could choose 3-5 for their individual Listening Sessions and determined a goal for how many residents per neighborhood should participate.[1]

## Phase 2: Recruitment

The Listening Campaign was different from traditional key informant interviews or focus groups in that it was designed to be resident-driven with residents, not outsiders, conducting the listening. During this phase, the support team was tasked with identifying 2-5 resident leaders from each neighborhood who would agree to be trained on how to conduct Listening Sessions in their neighborhood. The goal was to recruit a diverse group of residents, including those who were not already serving leadership roles in their neighborhoods. Once these leaders agreed to participate, they received six hours of training on the process to be used and how to be an effective listener (see Appendix for training guide example).

## Phase 3: Listening

With preparation and recruitment complete, it was time for active listening. Before starting a Listening Session, the resident leaders selected 3-5 questions, from the list of 21 options, which they would ask during their Listening Session. The resident leaders identified someone to serve as the listener and someone to serve as the scribe. The resident leaders also selected one of three ways to conduct the Listening Session: (1) One-on-One: listener + scribe and one resident; (2) House-Style: listener + scribe and no more than 15 residents; or (3) Town Hall Meeting: listener + scribe and 15+ residents.

For Spartanburg's Way to Wellville Listening Campaign, we utilized only One-on-One and House-Style sessions. Resident leaders conducted over 40 Listening Sessions involving over 400 people. Each listening session lasted a maximum of 90 minutes.

## Phase 4: Evaluation

Data gleaned from the Listening Campaign provided rich qualitative information for Spartanburg's Way to Wellville core team to consider. The Neighborhood Engagement Coordinator synthesized all of the raw data (the answers to, and feedback around, the selected questions) from each neighborhood and identified common themes and differences across neighborhoods. Two themes were consistent across all neighborhoods: the desire for additional lighting and lack of consistent resident engagement. Differences were seen in neighborhoods that have lower rates of poverty (concerns about lack of greenspace or the need for neighborhood beautification) versus neighborhoods with higher concentrations of poverty (concerns about lack of transportation and job opportunities). The data was shared with resident leaders, who were tasked with distributing the findings to their neighborhoods. Many used their neighborhood association meetings and upcoming events to share the findings and have continued dialogue.

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[1] We utilized research by Dr. Erica Chenoweth, University of Denver, on nonviolent movements that found if 3.5% of the population is activated then positive change in communities can be seen. For the Listening Campaign, each neighborhood set a goal to engage at least 3.5% of their neighborhood residents.

## Neighborhood Action Grants

About half way through the Listening Campaign, the Mary Black Foundation saw an opportunity to recognize the neighborhoods that had completed their Listening Session goal (3.5% of residents) and to offer an incentive to those that had not yet met the goal. The Foundation offered grants of up to \$5,000 to neighborhood associations, once the resident engagement goal was met, to act on something that was heard during the Listening. The neighborhoods used the grant funding for projects ranging from neighborhood beautification to community engagement events to the purchase of technology devices that would aid in neighborhood association tasks. Resident leaders expressed that the grant process introduced them to the Foundation, helped to build their grant writing capacity, and gave them confidence to seek future funding for their neighborhoods. The grants ended up serving as a strong incentive for neighborhoods to complete their Listening Sessions. All seven neighborhoods met their resident engagement goals and received a \$5,000 grant.

## Reflections & Lessons Learned

**Things are not always as they appear.** An early learning of the Listening Campaign was that we did not have a clear understanding of how our target neighborhoods defined themselves. We had originally identified five neighborhoods within the City of Spartanburg that were our target areas. Once we began outreach to the neighborhoods, we learned one of the neighborhoods that we identified was in fact three distinct neighborhoods. There were seven target neighborhoods, not five, and it was very important for us to work with them as they defined themselves and not the way we saw them from the outside.

**The work takes longer than planned.** The original timeline for project completion of the Listening Campaign was slated to be 6-9 months. We learned very early in the process that the project would not be linear and would require flexibility, if we were to be true to our desire to be resident-driven. Many of the resident leaders who participated had multiple competing responsibilities and didn't have the ability to prioritize recruitment for and implementation of the Listening Sessions. It took an intentional effort on behalf of the Neighborhood Engagement Coordinator to continue encouraging the resident leaders and to allow them to complete the process on their own time. Instead of moving all seven neighborhoods through the process at the same time, the Listening Sessions were completed over the course of two years.

**Structures of neighborhood leadership are deeply ingrained.** We desired to have "unsung heroes" or residents who were not already involved in formal leadership roles to lead the Listening Sessions to empower new leaders. This proved to be more challenging than originally anticipated. In order to move the Listening Campaign forward, in some neighborhoods, we had to reinitiate the process through existing leadership (i.e. neighborhood association or resident council leaders). While we didn't involve as many of the "unsung heroes" as we had initially anticipated, there is evidence that existing leaders see a need to diversify and expand leadership in their neighborhoods.

**Motivations for participation vary.** In a few neighborhoods, the invitation to participate in the Listening Campaign was quickly accepted. In others, the invitation had to be shared on different occasions to spark interest. For a few, the announcement of neighborhood action grants served as a strong incentive to participate. However, despite initial reluctance among some neighborhoods, once it was complete, resident leaders expressed how valuable they found the Listening Campaign to be in helping them identify the needs of their neighborhood and build new relationships among residents.

**Trust must be built and relationships must be developed.** Building trust with communities requires gentle persistence and patience, especially in communities that have historically experienced disinvestment and inequity. In Phase I, we sought members of the support team who had existing relationships within our target neighborhoods to provide an entrée into the community. Still, the Neighborhood Engagement Coordinator spent months visiting neighborhood association meetings and participating in various neighborhood events to get to know people and develop meaningful relationships. The action grants provided another opportunity to build trust. Some resident leaders were skeptical about or intimidated by working with the Foundation and the Foundation's board and staff had to trust new partners that were funded outside its traditional review and approval process.

**The model can be adapted for use by other communities.** As the larger Spartanburg community began to learn of the Listening Campaign, this model of listening encouraged others to look at their approach – or lack of an approach – to listening to the community. Our work has informed and inspired other efforts in Spartanburg that are finding authentic ways to build relationships and trust by listening to and responding to the needs and ideas of youth, pastors, young women of color, and parents interested in kindergarten readiness.

## Closing Thoughts

The Listening Campaign proved to be a successful community engagement process. The development and execution of the Campaign demonstrated the value of a resident-led process versus a process led by outside facilitators. The knowledge and experience gathered through the Campaign will continue to inform the work of Spartanburg's Way to Wellville and has paved the way for future partnership with the City of Spartanburg on efforts to build neighborhood capacity and engagement.

Most exciting, though, is that the Campaign energized residents to find opportunities for additional fellowship and relationship building. Any success achieved through the Campaign would not have been possible without the commitment of the resident leaders. Although the Campaign has ended, we feel confident that neighborhood leaders have accessed the tools and built the skills needed to continue listening in an intentional way to the residents in their neighborhoods. Long term, the additional tools and skills can aid in neighborhood efforts to organize around community needs and solutions, leading to improved health outcomes.

The full results of the Listening Campaign and a copy of the Listening Campaign Volunteers Training Manual can be found at [www.spartanburgwellville.com/initiatives/neighborhood-engagement](http://www.spartanburgwellville.com/initiatives/neighborhood-engagement)