

# Omaha Community Foundation Launches Website and Initiative to Help Assess Local Needs

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People thinking about giving to Omaha-area charities can turn to a new website that identifies local issues needing the most attention.

Called [The Landscape](#), the initiative is a data-driven look at community life in six categories: health, neighborhoods, safety, transportation, workforce and education.

Pulling from existing public data, the website breaks down the topics to create a snapshot of the issues. It also compares local data with national numbers.

The health and neighborhoods indicators were released in October. The safety and transportation information will be released this week and indicators for workforce and education will be added to the site in mid-February.

Sara Boyd, president of the Omaha Community Foundation, said pulling the information together will create a single location for community information, putting donors, advocates, nonprofit groups and policymakers “in a position of power” to better identify problems.

This kind of information is everywhere, Boyd said — several publicly available studies already point to specific local needs. But that doesn’t mean the community can easily access those findings or understand their broader meaning, she said.

For example, under the health category, the health care coverage section breaks down the information into a few short paragraphs. It explains that in and around Omaha, nearly a quarter of adults living under the poverty line lack such coverage. A simple graph shows that the rate is higher among Hispanic and black adults.

To illustrate one of the stories behind that number, the website features Karen, a black woman living in Omaha who lost her job and health insurance. Unable to pay out-of-pocket medical costs, she went to a community health center for an exam. There, a mammogram detected breast cancer, and the center helped her apply for Medicare to help cover her surgery and radiation.

“We want this project to show the reality for our community and our neighbors,” Boyd said. She added that she hopes The Landscape provides the human factor to what’s often seen as academic information. “We have to remember these are not numbers, these are people.”

The Landscape is meant to be a resource for more than just donors working with the foundation. Nonprofits can use the data in marketing or grant applications. Citizens and community leaders can use the website to identify key needs and disparities to better plan programs and policy.

“This is hopefully going to help us all coalesce around some focused issues so we can coordinate and align with other work being done,” Boyd said. “Formulating a shared vision is the heart and soul of this work.”

The origin of The Landscape stems from the foundation’s 2010 strategic plan, which called for community research to better direct donor dollars.

Over the next two years, the foundation reviewed local and national studies and reports, identifying 10 themes for a community assessment. The assessment then was conducted in partnership with the United Way of the Midlands and the Iowa West Foundation.

In 2013, a steering committee reviewed the feedback from the community and identified what it considered the six key issues. Organizers spent 2015 mining information in those areas, identifying holes in the data and searching for annual or repeated studies that could help track progress over the years.

Members of the steering committee include leaders from the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, various local charitable foundations, the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency and the United Way of the Midlands. Including Greg Youell from MAPA and Shawna Forsberg from the United Way was important, Boyd said, as The Landscape can build on work from MAPA’s Heartland 2050 project and the United Way’s 2025 strategic goals.

In 2017, the project’s focus will turn to community engagement, seeking personal stories and feedback.

“We want to know where the momentum and the initial traction is,” Boyd said. “It’s about where the community itself identifies as the place we should start.”

Parts of The Landscape were modeled after community indicator projects in other U.S. cities and in Canada and the United Kingdom.