

LIVABILITY LAB

MUSKEGON COUNTY CHALLENGE: LL 2.0

**Holding strong to the community's audacious vision:
Creating a system that ensures livability for all Muskegon County residents.**

Livability Lab Participant Survey Phone Interview Results

Interviews conducted May 29 through June 6, 2020

TEAM 1 & 2

Neighborhood Association Council & Partnership Charter

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- In the Heights specifically, our completely broken down infrastructure has to be addressed. The dust and danger from the broken streets is becoming an additional health hazard for our community.
- Testing! Contact tracing! How can we ever safely reconnect the way we want/need to if people won't follow safety precautions? How can we survive until a vaccine finally becomes available (in the NOT near future)?
- We need to educate and increase knowledge about Covid and other community issues. Social media is so full of inaccurate, misleading and simply WRONG information. We need to get the right information into the hands of community members.
- If we don't deal with the ugly racism right in our faces, we aren't going to be able to get anything lasting and worthwhile accomplished.
- Once again our community (people of color) are getting hit the worst, with the Covid and the economy. People keep wanting to believe that progress is happening, but that is not the truth. When will there be justice for all in Muskegon Heights?
- Communication and connection to find out if everyone is okay!

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- After spending months trying to come up with ways to create a sense of community and bringing people together, this pandemic has removed nearly every strategy and opportunity we have created so far. We need to find more and new ways to connect our people to each other and the services they want and need.
- How do we help educate/convince people to stay safe and refrain from unsafe things? Especially younger people, who seem to think they are immune?.
- Figuring out the best ways to get necessary reliable information to the community, so they can better make informed decisions about their own lives and their community.
- Our team dealing with youth is standing ready to go inot action now that the orders have been lifted!
- Keeping folks willing to keep showing up and trying to make things better for our community. Can you really blame folks for thinking nothing will change? Look around Muskegon Heights.
- We need to review our charter and priorities to make sure we are still on track with our goals for the community.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- My biggest challenge was not going to church, seeing people, hugging people, shaking hands. So much isolation for so many people.
- Two things have been very hard. Making even grandchildren who are not social distancing understand why they are not allowed in my house. Trying to take care of my 86 year old mother who does not live with me. Trying to keep her safe.

- Even folks that HAVE been practicing social distancing and such are getting tired of it. How can we convince people to keep up the good work and fight the urge to just quit???
- Staying in my house. With a small child. Wanting to hug my grandma or help my great-grandma. Having to keep my distance from people I love.
- Trying to convince folks that staying home keeps us all safe. I am tired of trying to convince people to wear a mask and keep a distance.
- Dealing with the daily uncertainty.

TEAM 3

Muskegon Heights Youth Initiative

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Covid has more broadly exposed the social inequities that were already there. We urgently need to address the housing crisis and continue to advocate for a “living” wage.
- Making sure that everyone has a safe place to live and enough food to eat. And oh, also access to healthcare?
- More education, testing and contact tracing to get a handle.

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- If it was not clear before, Covid revealed just how great the inequities are in our community and in our state. Right now we are desperately trying to hold everything together. Where are the resources we need to step up to the plate and do the “more” that is now required?
- Where are we going to put the people who are now becoming homeless every day? We didn’t have enough affordable and safe housing before the pandemic hit!
- Equitable access to resources for our most vulnerable populations.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- My greatest challenge continues to be balancing the demands of my job with childcare and schooling my children at home.
- If we can’t even agree that wearing a face covering would be good for ourselves and others, how are we going to solve even the bigger problems?
- Seeing 30% of my staff furloughed when I need them more desperately than ever.

TEAM 4

Aligning Economic Opportunity Resources and Supports

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Trust and hope. So many folks in Muskegon area are devastated by the multiple problems we are facing. How do we restore hope?
- I cannot believe I am in my sixties and having to be outraged and take action on things I raged against in my twenties. We have to do better for all aspects of equity and intolerance of racism.
- More education, testing and contact tracing to get a handle

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- So many challenges just for people to meet and have conversation, We have to learn how to get better at this and make sure everyone has equitable access to technology as a way to participate and receive access to services.
- I want our team to reorganize and reinvest in the work.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Trying to keep it all together with work and home. Many of my colleagues are furloughed. I am forced to work from home with three kids.
- Being isolated from the world around me.

TEAM 5

Coordinating Local Food Advocacy and Access Efforts

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- If people didn't understand how something as basic as food was a problem for Muskegon County, they do now as more hungry people have been added to the crisis list. No one should be hungry.

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- Our team has made a lot of gains and we need to continue to keep our eye on the ball.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Knowing that I have food every day, even as I sheltered in place, and yet many people in our community still do not.

TEAM 6

Strengthening Childcare Opportunities

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Systemic racism that is amplified in every problem and crisis we encounter!

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- Literacy deficits at every level (from pre-K to adult) continue to be not only a barrier to employment, but to being able to fully participate in society and get basic needs met.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Staying home with a small family unit. I am a highly social person. I have had to become a master of Zoom and learn how to make contributions to our community remotely.

TEAM 7

Improving Intergenerational Literacy

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Contact tracing and more health education. No one is going to be truly safe as we open back up unless we get a handle on who is positive!!!
- Education in the broadest sense. Education to empower people and demand equity at all levels of community engagement. Until we seriously step up to address the equity problem in Muskegon, we won't change anything.
- I want equitable access to technology for our most underserved families to be a priority.
- Our community needs to focus on getting people back on the job and our children back in school. Until that happens, no one is going to feel "okay."

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- The virus is the root problem so we must deal with it aggressively so we can get back to meeting with children and youth in person.
- We developed a childcare action team as a result of Livability Lab. We meet monthly and although Covid has slowed our timeline, we are now on track to open our community childcare center in January 2021 at the former Goodwill building using a partnership with the national YMCA childcare template!
- We could reach so many more families with literacy support if they had useable technology at their end.
- This team needs to keep focused on the work they have started and keep going. Some progress is being made.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- I had to immediately lay off 40% of my staff when the schools were closed.
- I'm a people person and I desperately miss the direct human contact.
- Knowing that there were families who were isolated and could have used the support our organization could provide for them while they were at home and not attending school.
- Being laid off indefinitely. How will I continue to keep my family okay?

TEAM 8

Assess Housing Stock/Needs To Identify And Address Gaps

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- We must re-establish a common vision to bring together our disrupted economy and social systems.
- Are you kidding me? The racism and insensitivity displayed by our own president has to be dealt with before our communities implode or explode in violence and despair.
- Getting people back to work as soon as possible.

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- We need to re-start our economy and make sure no one gets left behind.
- Diversity and inclusion has to be an integral part of every conversation we have going forward. Period.
- We need to look around and immediately take note of the lessons learned from this crisis and figure out now how to deal with it when the next spike strikes. We are far from past this!

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Watching everything we have worked so hard for get de-railed.
- Yesterday my answer would have been different. Today I am simply embarrassed to be a white person in America.
- Work. Trying to be productive while my industry was closed. Worrying about how I will be able to earn a living in our now broken economy,

TEAM 9

Increase Financial Literacy to Promote Homeownership

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- How do we begin to re-start our economy in Muskegon. How can we prevent more people from losing jobs and more businesses from going under?
- We absolutely have to clean up and repair the City of Muskegon Heights. People will not be able to believe in a new vision for our community unless they can see it really happening.
- Affordable housing! I am shocked to learn the high cost of renting in Muskegon County.
- Safe and affordable housing right now. We have too many people in Muskegon County who have nowhere to go and we have nowhere to send them!

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- I don't know how we can address jobs/work, children not in school, childcare unavailable, renters being evicted and so many other crisis issues all at the same time. We are living in an apocalypse of problems.
- Our financial literacy group needs to re-convene and find out where people are coming out of lockdown. It is complicated. Some people are actually better off for the short term and others are in trouble. This is a pivot point for many folks.!
- Our team leader was let go by his employer. We would need new leadership to move forward again.
- Team 9 needs to double down on this area and make change happen in Muskegon County. First, they need to begin meeting again and get more people to sign on.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Seeing the way what is actually a public health crisis be used as a political tool on a 24/7 basis. It is mentally and emotionally exhausting.
- The lockdown has kept us from traveling in our community and beyond, which we would do frequently.
- Being unable to connect face to face with the large number of groups I interact with on a daily basis. Zoom isn't the same.
- Blessed to go to work every day. Feeling guilty about my friends and neighbors who are unemployed and afraid.

TEAM 10

Identify, Promote, and Support Minority-Owned Businesses

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Finding the financial resources to serve the desperate needs faced by Muskegon County. Great ideas don't put food on people's tables, get them back to work or help them find a place to live.

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- Minority owned businesses were challenged before the Covid crisis and collapse of our economy. They need our help and support now more than ever. Our group needs to re-group.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Trying to balance work and the needs of my children and my older relatives while trying to keep everyone safe from the virus!

TEAM 11

Foster Unity and Literacy with a New Reading Buddy Program

Team update:

- This Challenge Team successfully transferred the new Reading Buddy program to the United Way of the Lakeshore, where the program will continue to expand.

TEAM 12

Understand and Address Local Workforce Development Gaps

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Helping with economic recovery how can we get people back to work? Some people may be able to go back to work, but not the same job. Some people won't have a job to go back to at all. Not like the last recession, many people went back to work and many got their same jobs back when the economic downturn was over!
- People need to get back to work as soon as possible. There are now unemployed people in the system who have never been unemployed before and may not have a job (or the same job) to return to as the economy starts to recover.
- Jobs! Finding them, creating them, getting workers ready for them! Now!

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- Disparities in employment, education and food insecurity in the region. Our team needs to focus on new employment opportunities (connecting displaced community members to jobs) in emerging sectors such as healthcare, technology, and manufacturing. It is pretty clear that the number of unemployed and furloughed adults is going to be a challenge as we come out of this pandemic. The equity gap will be further exacerbated based on the COVID-19 impact.
- There simply aren't enough resources to handle the number of people in the workforce who find themselves furloughed, underemployed or unemployed, there is much to be done.
- We have more than workforce gaps right now, we have a workforce crisis.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- My wife and I are retired so have not been as harshly affected by the economic downturn, but have been challenged by the isolation of social distancing.
- I am furloughed until October.

TEAM 13

Create Affordable Transit with Wheels to Work program

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Injustice at every turn. It has to be addressed now. Social injustice, racial injustice, economic injustice. We think we make headway and then find out it doesn't last.
- We have to get people back to work as quickly as possible!

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- The sharp lens is now focused on these problems. How do we make lasting changes to improve the lives of all citizens?
- The team worked hard to remove barriers for people needing transportation to work, but they have to have jobs to go to!!!

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- As a health compromised person married to a spouse who experienced a life threatening health crisis at the beginning of the pandemic, we are simply home together alone. We miss family and friends.
- Trying to take care of all of the folks in my family circle while still doing all of the stuff to try and keep everyone safe.

TEAM 14

Prenatal Support

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Is it possible to make real and sustainable change to our broken systems? We need to look at how we can collaborate at all levels to have honest conversations about where everyone is right now.
- It is sad that the entire crisis has once again impacted the most vulnerable of our people the hardest. We need to step up action to make sure whatever is done next takes these people into all decisions and actions.

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- Not everyone has access to technology and are able to attend a Zoom meeting or a Zoom class for school, or file online for unemployment. We need to make sure there is access for everyone.
- Our work never stopped, it just became more difficult because of social distancing and social service workers being furloughed.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Managing my four school age children and all of their school obligations with one laptop and one iPad!
- Wanting to visit/hug my elderly mother, being unable to visit her in the nursing home and she really didn't understand.

TEAM 15

Create a Safe Space for Youth in Muskegon Heights

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Figure out how we can safely bring students and staff back to school in September.
- Not only do we have to find a way to have public schools back in session and still be safe, how are

we going to pay for them? The almost complete crash of our economy means almost guaranteed cuts in education funding at the local, state and federal level. How do we fund education going forward?

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- School will never just go back to the ways things were before the pandemic. We must work on developing new ways for education to take place at every level. This crisis has really exposed the great inequities in access to technology outside of the school building, which has left many of our most needy students behind (again).
- Our team needs to continue to work on making more opportunities for children and youth throughout Muskegon County for when school is not in session.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Worrying about all of my students. Are they safe, do they have enough to eat. Why can't they attend our Zoom meetings?
- I am currently reduced to half-time and not even sure I will have a job to return to this fall.

TEAM 16

Increase Employment Opportunities via Expungement

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Testing and equitable access to healthcare so we can know what needs to be done to help keep everyone healthy.

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- Covid has deeply impacted the court system, many people have been furloughed. The entire system needs to be re-built if expungement continues to move forward.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- My personal greatest challenge by far was facing the fact that I have become health-vulnerable in so many ways and not wanting to be afraid of working in my community.

TEAM 17

Create a Safe Space for Youth in Muskegon Heights

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- The economic crisis brought on by Covid will continue to harshly impact our community for months and years to come. We need to take a hard look at how we can re-think many of our broken systems and not just try and go back to the way we were doing things before. This could be an opportunity to make meaningful change if we are up to the challenge.
- The economic impact of the current crisis affects every level of business, industry, services and individuals. The impact of a now greatly reduced tax income stream means we will have to try and do more with even less.

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- We need to re-double efforts to educate people on how to get access to healthcare.
- Who knew how much we were going to need 211? They are working overtime. They are a critical need. Will funding follow?

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Being furloughed from my job, which I love.
- Being forced to work remotely from home. All of our seniors are not online so we are challenged in how to check on them and connect with them.

TEAM 18

Discharge Procedures to Reduce Release into Homelessness

What do you think is the most important issue facing our local community right now?

- Affordable housing and food for the most vulnerable in our community! We have no place to put people.
- Diversity, equity and inclusion needs to be at the top of the list for everything we do go forward in our community. I'm absolutely fed up with all the talk, there needs to be commitment and action!
- Creating safe and affordable housing for greater Muskegon. We didn't have enough in January and the Covid/economic crisis has just multiplied the problem.

What work/issues do you think your Livability Lab team should be focused upon?

- We need affordable housing inventory distributed throughout Muskegon County, not just "downtown" so that people don't have to be displaced from their community (for example Whitehall) if they become homeless.

What has been your greatest challenge amid the Covid 19 pandemic?

- Right now my biggest challenge during this crisis continues to be having more work than I can possibly get done in a day, while the need here in Muskegon County is so urgent and so great and half of my agency staff has been furloughed.
- Knowing I have a safe place to shelter in place, but knowing the names and faces of people I am trying to serve who don't.
- Seeing homeless people on our streets as I return to my own home each evening.

TEAM 19

Reduce Inequities in the Distribution of K-12 Funding

Team update:

- This Challenge Team paused, pending policy decisions at state level.