

Overview

The Greater Houston Community Foundation is in the midst of building **Understanding Houston**—a collaborative regional indicators initiative that is an outgrowth of the Greater Houston Community Foundation’s most recent strategic plan. With the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University as our strategic research partner, Understanding Houston will result in a new, highly interactive web platform that will be a central resource for data, trends, and tracking progress on eight quality of life issues affecting residents in Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery counties. The Foundation will engage its donors as well as a broad range of stakeholders in using these tools to learn and think together about how we can address issues that need attention to keep Houston a thriving, vibrant community for everyone.

The Greater Houston Community Foundation’s Understanding Houston initiative cannot effectively serve the community without the input of local leaders and residents along the way.

To inform the Understanding Houston website and tools, the Foundation began a series of convenings—the third convening was held in Harris County at and with the support of The United Way of Greater Houston. More than 120 individuals, representing primarily the nonprofit sector, met on August 7, 2019 to share their thoughts.

**“Together is
better – diversity
without unity is
not meaningful.”**

- Harris Focus Group

This brief summarizes the input we received from the community through four engagement activities:

- **Real-Time Polling:** Response by text message to strengths and challenges in the county.
- **Dotmocracy:** Vote by dots for subtopic issues of importance and interest, as well as those worthy of highlighting and where knowledge gaps exist for the community.
- **Focus Groups:** Groups of about six individuals discussing a series of questions.
- **Indicator Surveys:** Individuals reviewing the full indicators list and noting priorities, as well as any notes for missing data.



Real-Time Polling

In one word, describe a great strength in your community.

Each of these was designed to obtain participants’ feedback on the Understanding Houston initiative, the large set of data indicators, and their sense of issues that need focus in their community.

Results

Issue Areas

Dotmocracy

In order to understand which topics and issues are most relevant to Fort Bend County residents, individuals were asked to select **three of the nine** issue areas (*listed to the right*) that they are most knowledgeable about and/or interested in. From there they were given fifteen dots, which were **color coded** according to the list below:

- Most Important (6 red dots)
- Most Interesting (3 blue dots)
- Most In Need of Knowing More About (3 yellow dots)
- Most Worthy of Highlighting for the Community (3 green dots)

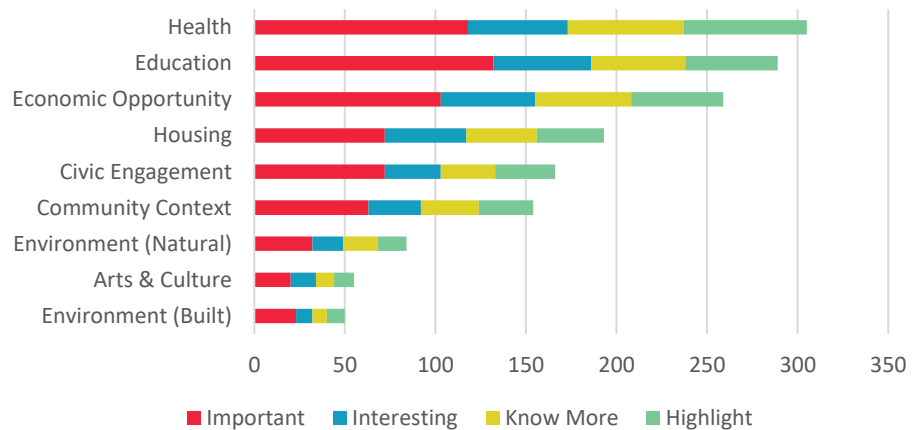
- Arts & Culture
- Civic Engagement
- Community Context
- Economic Opportunity
- Education
- Environment – Built & Natural
- Health
- Housing

With these fifteen dots, participants were asked to place **five** dots (2 red, 1 blue, 1 yellow, 1 green) on subtopics in each of their three issue areas using the color scheme noted above. Each of the nine issue areas has three to six subtopics within them, for a total of forty-six subtopics. For example, in the picture **to the right**, the main issue area is Community Context; the subtopics in this area are Public Safety, Family Formation, Criminal Justice, and so forth.



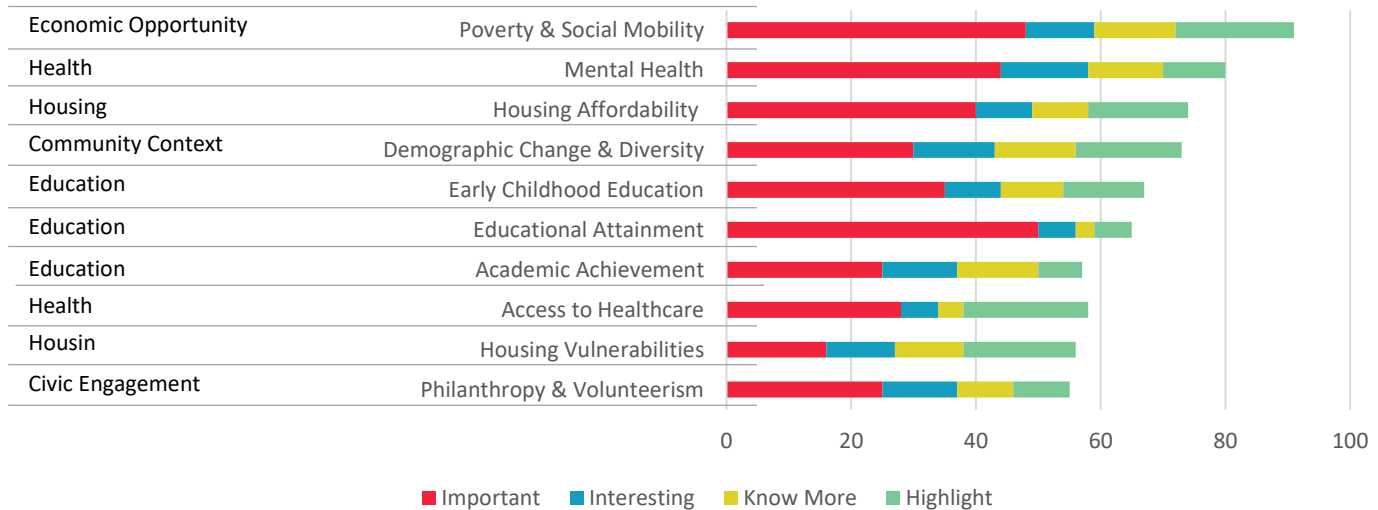
The data given in the bar graph **to the right** presents the nine issue areas by total number of dots as well as the color distribution for each issue area. The chart presented gives a broad sense of participants' engagement with issue areas, with **health, education, and economic opportunity** reflecting the greatest activity overall.

Voter Activity By Issue Area



Below are the top ten subtopics that received the most dots. Attendees were clear that **Poverty & Social Mobility** was a topic of overall community importance. Dotmocracy voters ranked **Educational Attainment** as most important, **Mental Health** and **Demographic Change & Diversity** as most interesting, **Academic Achievement**, **Poverty & Social Mobility**, and **Demographic Change & Diversity** as most in need of knowing more about, and **Access to Healthcare** as the issue most worthy of highlighting.

Top 10 Subtopics



“An all-inclusive, user-friendly one-stop shop data portal that drives impact.” - Harris Focus Group

Subtopics of note that did not make the cut for the top ten most chosen subtopics were:

Industry Dynamics & Job Growth: In the top three subtopics categorized as *“most interesting to you.”*

Health Behaviors (Wellness): In the top three subtopics categorized as *“most interesting to you.”*

Aging: In the top three subtopics categorized as *“need to know more about.”*

Focus Groups

Groups of roughly six individuals were led, by a facilitator, in a thought-provoking conversation about the Understanding Houston initiative. They were also invited to consider and discuss how the data driven platform could best be utilized by their organizations and which issues were most important to keep in mind when considering their community.



What do you think about the initiative?

Many tables expressed excitement about Understanding Houston with one participant remarking **“Outstanding initiative!”** Multiple participants were surprised that a major city like Houston did not already have something like it and expressed that **it is in fact much needed.**

Many individuals said they were happy that this was creating a credible, single **standardized source of data.** They went on to say that this will help inform how best to serve the Houston community.

Participants elaborated that it will be **helpful to query data from one spot** rather than having to go to several different data sources which can often lead to missing data points.

Understanding Houston was seen by attendees as a way to provide everyone the ability to view the issues and initiatives in the Greater Houston region whether they are a long-time Houston resident or new to the area; it will be helpful for nonprofit staff who do not live in the areas they serve to get a better understanding of the individuals in that community. It was communicated that having a **“local data one-stop shop”** with common metrics should spur collaboration among service providers while decreasing duplicated efforts.

“This project will solidify all the change that is happening in Houston.”

- Harris Focus Group

Some qualities of Understanding Houston that individuals expressed enthusiasm about:

- Receiving community members' feedback and input
- Pulling data from areas in the three major counties and not just the city
- Addressing qualitative as well as quantitative information
- Analyzing data over time which can track changes and progress over time
- Tracking certain issues that often get overlooked such as the arts

How will you use the data?

Over half of the tables conveyed the thought that this type of data would be **useful when seeking funding** as service providers can better advocate for their causes with **credible data.** Half of the attendees also vocalized that this data can be **used to reveal the progress** service providers are or are not making and **direct them towards overlooked issues.**

Many were excited at the thought of having data which can assist in **looking at the big picture** and actual needs of the communities to **drive resources to the proper areas.**

Participants conveyed that they will use this data to better inform how to execute their mission, **frame their message to a broader audience,** and build an argument for why a program is the right solution for a given problem. This will also be helpful as a set of facts to present at the legislative session and can have a **big policy implications.**

“Data for data sake is not helpful! Data inspiring transformation is critical!” *- Harris Focus Group*

Who else could use the data and how?

“Everyone. It’s beneficial for nonprofits, donors, policy makers, local government, and school districts.” Other possible users include politicians, churches, religious leaders, social service providers, private companies, business leaders, and more.

If everyone is looking at the same data and using the same metrics then, **in theory, everyone could use this** type of resource in a multitude of different roles **to serve the Houston region.**

What do you see as the greatest opportunity related to the project?

Participants saw opportunities from Understanding Houston consisting of things such as: a means for data interpretation to be made easy, **a platform for discussion**, tracking populations who are invisible in current tracking, and a way to show the **interconnectedness of the data** with one individual observing that **“segmented data does not have the power to show the whole story.”**

This project was also seen as a benefit to outlying communities and a way to “streamline the grant process to get all funders on board and looking at [the issues] in a certain way.”

“Being able to easily access the data will allow nonprofit organizations to be **more strategic with limited resources.**”

What risks/concerns should be avoided?

Attendees warned against the duplication of data and not having sufficient collaboration between this initiative and other data providers. It was expressed that the raw data used should be reliable, accurate, and current.

Individuals also stated that it **should not be a static tool** and **“it is not something that gets created and then just sits on the shelf not being used”.**

It was also mentioned that the **data should be accessible to all** and that you should not need a Ph.D. to understand and use the data; so the data should be provided in an engaging presentation with summaries, visuals, and videos so it is easily digestible for all.



Real-Time Polling

In one word, describe a pressing challenge in your community.

Some concerns expressed included funding for this project taking money away from service providers, grass root organizations not having a seat at the table, ensuring often overlooked populations and data points are included, and that the data points accurately represent the biggest needs and desires of the community.

An attendee wondered, “How do we make sure the individuals being served aren’t reduced to numbers and figures?” and another posed the question, “**How do we make sure we are not making incorrect assumptions as a result of seeing or using the data?**”

There were concerns that funding will be scarce for data points which don’t make the cut as well as the concern that the data may not be specific enough to be useful.

inequality
housing education
gentrification healthcare
transportation flooding

Focus Group Response

What issues do you think are important to shed a light on for your community?

What’s important to keep in mind about Harris County?

It was vocalized that the **ability to get relevant data** considering the size and scope of Harris County is extremely important. Respondents also noted that resources are concentrated in certain areas and that Harris County gets a lot of burden from surrounding counties when individuals come into Harris County to receive services they don’t have in suburban counties.

Another important aspect to keep in mind about Harris County is the diversity as the **needs can vary drastically within different regions** or even between different neighborhoods.



It was noted that it is important to keep in mind the “**Houston vs. Harris County**” mentality that exists for individuals in outlying or unincorporated areas.

Five years out, what kind of impact would you hope to see as a result of this work?

The biggest commentary on the kind of impact participants would like to see was more collaboration. An attendee remarked, “If everyone is looking at the same data then the hope is for different agencies to work together more holistically. A tool that the 23,000 nonprofits in our city are actually using; a centralized, collaborative, well-promoted source of data.”

Indicator Surveys

Participants were given a list of over two hundred indicators that could be part of the Understanding Houston website. By marking the list, individuals were given the opportunity to communicate which indicators should be prioritized, add additional comments about each indicator, and add indicator suggestions. **Sixteen individuals used this list** to mark indicators they personally believed should be prioritized. The information they shared will be used to further inform the Understanding Houston initiative and personalize it to Harris County.

Harris County Residents Have Spoken

The following are indicators which were marked by 7 or more participants to "Prioritize this Indicator"

Food Insecurity	Child Food Insecurity Rate
Working Poor	Income
Access to Pre-K	Concentrated Poverty
Uninsured	Disengaged Youth/Opportunity Youth
Chronic Absenteeism	Access to Parks or Green Space
Daycares	Projected Extreme Precipitation Days
Access to Public Transportation	Access to Healthcare
Frequent Mental Distress	Homelessness

"The right data can unify us to work together and move the community forward." - Harris Focus Group

Conclusion

Some big takeaways the Understanding Houston team received from the convening were that Harris County is very diverse and large, so the ability to get relevant data is extremely important. It was vocalized during the focus groups that inequality in many different realms is a big problem in Harris County. This concern is mirrored in the dotmocracy activity results, with poverty and social mobility being the most voted on subtopic.

We are excited to use the information we've gathered to help refine the indicator list and content for the Understanding Houston website, as well as have an ongoing conversation with the leaders and residents of Harris County to help us all learn, engage, and act to make our region a more vibrant one.

Special thanks to Margaret Oser, VP of Mission and Strategy, and **Mary Vazquez**, VP of Community Outreach, of the United Way of Greater Houston for their partnership of this important conversation and Understanding Houston.

Visit www.understandinghouston.org & follow us on social media!