# Focus Group Highlights

## Background

Incourage Community Foundation is one of 24 foundations in the United States to be selected as a **Knight Community Information Challenge** grantee. This allows Incourage to fund local information/news projects, including the focus groups described below. Projects are focused on building a stronger community through:

- Access to relevant and credible local information
- Opportunity and capacity of individuals to engage and be involved.

Grant support comes from John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

## Focus Group Objective

Information is as vital to a healthy community as clean air, safe streets, good schools and public health. Overall objective of the focus groups was to gain a better understanding of:

- Where and how local individuals get their community information
- What gaps exist in greater south Wood County in terms of access to relevant and credible information

## Participant Profile

In total, nine focus groups were conducted with eighty residents, February – March 2011. Two were "targeted" focus groups comprised of low-income families from Wisconsin Rapids East/Biron/Grand Rapids with young children, conducted at Head Start in Biron. Seven were "community-based" focus groups comprised of a random sample of participants; each group represented one of the following areas:

- Nekoosa/Rome
- Pittsville
- Port Edwards
- Rudolph
- Vesper
- Wisconsin Rapids East/Biron/Grand Rapids
- Wisconsin Rapids West

## Key Findings

### ■ Libraries are Fundamental

Libraries are a main source of access and education to many individuals in the community. The demands on library services are higher than ever. Computer stations are filled to capacity and often controlled by time slots. Librarians are being asked to help individuals with anything from job applications to basic computer skills.

### ■ Digital Knowledge/Access Vital for Youth

Access to a computer and the Internet is essential for students to complete homework assignments. Opportunities for learning, constructive entertainment and even social growth for children in terms of digital media were recognized across groups with the primary focus being on educational needs. Concerns included: youth losing the art of verbal conversation, spelling, the proper English language, and other life essential skills. Participants also expressed concerns about youth exposure to uncensored material on the Internet.

### ■ Rethinking the Digital Divide

The term "digital divide" is often considered only the gap between those with computer access and those without; however, it is much more serious and encompassing. The degree in which people have access to new information technology was found to be one of the most influencing factors; here are others:

- Cost
- Lack of Need or Interest
- Lack of Necessary Skills
- Privacy and Security Fears
- Time Investment Required
- Poor/Unreliable Connectivity

## ◼ Bridging the Gap

When participants were asked directly about what could be done to bridge the information gap in their communities, their responses fell into two basic categories: access and education.

### *Access*

There was consensus among the groups that libraries needed additional computer stations and laptops/netbooks to be used more freely throughout the building.  Initiatives such as the "Open Schoolhouse Program" and "Family Nights" were also mentioned; these provide school computer labs to the public on certain days of the week.  Participants in Port Edwards and Rudolph, where there is no public access, wished there was a location for residents.  Other groups mentioned a computer lab at Biron Head Start or Nekoosa Community Center would be a good way to increase access for all. Many participants mentioned the Job Center as a resource to assist with online job applications.

Awareness of **Nixle** Community Information Service was low across focus groups.  Nixle serves as an information bridge by keeping residents informed and connected to 24/7 emergency alerts, important advisories and community updates via text messages and emails.  Local organizations feeding the system include Wood County Dispatch, police, emergency service agencies, schools, community outreach organizations and others.  It is free, and users can tailor the information to their interests and geographic area.  This service is seen as a bridge builder because it eliminates some contributing factors to the digital divide.

### *Education*

Overwhelmingly, participants thought that residents, especially older individuals, would greatly benefit from "Basic" and "Next Step" computer and Internet literacy classes.  They also felt that classes in Microsoft Word and Excel would be beneficial to those unemployed.  Educational workshops could lead to greater PC and Internet adoption.  Creating print material such as PC cheat sheets or brochures on how to fix common computer problems was also suggested.

## *Need for Action*

Participant engagement in the focus groups was remarkable. A common thread that ran through the groups of individuals chosen through random sampling was that it was the first time they had been asked for their personal opinions, and the first time that they felt like they were being listened to and valued.  Residents are willing to become involved in their community, but they don't always have the knowledge or access to become active.

Focus group findings confirm that there is a need in greater south Wood County for better access to computers and the skills to fully use information technology.  The digital divide is due to more than cost only.  Many individuals are afraid or do not have the proper skills to engage with the Internet.

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**For more information:**

incourage
community foundation

**Liz Everson**
Incourage Community Foundation
478 E Grand Ave
Wisconsin Rapids WI 54494
715.423.3863
leverson@incouragecf.org

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INFORMATION NEEDS OF COMMUNITIES
IN A DEMOCRACY

Incourage Community Foundation is a
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