



THE CENTER FOR EST. 1913
COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

Strategic Plan
Draft

February 2026

STRATEGY
DESIGNPARTNERS

CONTEXT / PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

The Center for Community Solutions (Community Solutions) issued a Request for Proposals to strategic planning consultants in the fall of 2024. When the planning process began in late March of 2025, Community Solutions was facing a host of challenges it could not have anticipated six months earlier. The realities of the dramatic shift in the national political environment and the impact on local issues were mounting, causing chaos and uncertainty in the health and social services sector. Having completed its last strategic plan in February of 2020, Community Solutions knows well the importance of remaining flexible in turbulent times.

In addition to external challenges, Community Solutions had just completed what has been noted by partners as an extremely effective executive leadership transition in late 2023 / early 2024. Having the benefit of more than a year at the helm of the organization, CEO Emily Campbell had a firm grasp on the key issues that the plan needed to address. At the top of this list was the need to respond to the realities of the current political environment without having the organization's voice or future vision limited by present circumstances. There was also an acknowledgement of the need to manage community expectations, as partners are never short on ideas for work the organization could lead. For that reason, it is crucial that organizational leadership set priorities and limits that allow it to focus its efforts. It was also noted how crucial it would be for the plan to reaffirm the organization's nonpartisan position and its role as an honest broker– an increasingly complex challenge given a political landscape that is redefining norms. A desire for staff engagement at several levels throughout the plan process was also noted, as a majority of staff are relatively new and had not participated in previous planning efforts. As a result, the strategic plan process shifted to accommodate each of these considerations.

The unique role Community Solutions plays as an independent research and advocacy organization working to create systemic change through data, research and policy, separates it from other nonprofits. The funding model for its annual \$4 million budget is supported primarily through endowment with trust income as well as philanthropic grants and earned revenue generated by its consulting practice. This model provides a level of stability not enjoyed by many nonprofits within the sector who are more dependent on philanthropy and public support. As such, it is a leader in the community and a critical partner to those both helping shape and fund priorities as well as those working at the grassroots level.

During the course of the planning process, cultural challenges within the organization were noted through one-on-one interviews with staff as well as other means that were brought to the attention of the Board. The current environment and its impact on organizational positioning, the necessity to shift language use and the reality of working within a toxic external environment certainly contributed to these challenges. Importantly, Board leadership acted immediately to begin a long-term engagement with Erica Merritt of Equius Group, a consultant specializing in diversity and belonging to work with the staff, as described in the plan.

PROCESS OVERVIEW

Community Solutions engaged the local consulting firm Strategy Design Partners (SDP) to facilitate the process. SDP has led numerous strategic plan initiatives for nonprofits throughout the region. Ann Zoller and Brant Duda led this effort for SDP. An advisory team of Community Solutions staff worked with SDP to shape the process, helping to identify key issues and providing extensive expertise reflected in plan recommendations. A Strategic Plan Steering Committee, comprised of Staff advisors and Board members, was engaged in all aspects of the process.

The Community Solutions staff actively participated throughout the planning process. All staff were offered an opportunity to participate in individual interviews and an anonymous survey was conducted. Additionally, several process updates were included as part of regular staff meetings.

An extensive environmental scan was conducted that engaged more than 143 stakeholders including funders, partners, community members, staff and board members and others in a combination of individual interviews, focus groups and surveys.

The Board was involved in the planning process in a variety of ways. Interviews with select Board members were conducted at the onset and were instrumental in identifying key issues that shaped and informed the process. Several Board members participated with advisory staff on the Steering Committee, which kicked off the process with an intensive workshop exploring key issues and defining plan priorities. The Steering Committee met several times throughout the process. Following the collection and analysis of the environmental scan, a full Board workshop took place that allowed for Board deliberations on foundational issues facing the organization. The retreat provided opportunities for the staff to lead discussions on key program issues that allowed for engaged and lively discussions that helped shape the recommendations that comprise this plan.

MISSION

Community Solutions improves health, social and economic conditions through nonpartisan research, policy analysis, communications and advocacy.

KEY THEMES

The environmental scan provided a wealth of inputs and detailed feedback on a multitude of issues. In assessing the organization's overall reputation and impact, the following key themes were underscored.

- Community Solutions plays a unique and critically important role in the region. The data analysis and research capacity is seen as crucial to strengthening the resilience of residents and helping to influence decision making with public partners.
- Community Solutions has a perch that allows the organization to consider issues more broadly than providers and is vital to the health and future of the health and social services sector.
- Community Solutions has earned its reputation. The trust is there— and the organization is an important and respected voice.
- Partners believe the leadership transition was handled very well. There is also a desire to see more relationship building with external partners for team members. This lends to the perception of capacity and the organization's depth of expertise
- Community Solutions is seen as having an opportunity to grow and “punch above its weight” as it seeks greater impact in Northeast Ohio and throughout the State of Ohio.

GOALS

GOAL: Continue to strategically respond to external challenges and an evolving political climate in a way that aligns with organizational focus areas, supports the health and social services sector and emphasizes the organization's nonpartisan position

GOAL: To uplift organizational culture and build the organization's capacity at the Board and staff level

GOAL: To maintain focus on the residents of Cuyahoga County while exploring opportunities to expand our reach and maximize resources and capacity

GOAL: To strengthen Community Solutions' portfolio of work to maximize impact and leverage relationships and expertise

GOALS / STRATEGIES / TACTICS

GOAL: Continue to strategically respond to external challenges and an evolving political climate in a way that aligns with organizational focus areas, supports the health and social services sector and emphasizes the organization's nonpartisan position

Strategy: Support local nonprofits in the health and social services sector and philanthropic partners navigating the current climate in a way that is appropriate to Community Solutions' role and does not compromise capacity

- Lead and participate in appropriate sector convenings around relevant topics and issues providing a forum for sharing of data and learnings where and when the Community Solutions voice can have the most impact
- Take on appropriate mission aligned research and analysis, aligned with Community Solution's capacity and in response to timely issues, that can be used effectively by partners working at the community and grassroots levels
- Conduct outreach to partners to assess most pressing issues and impact where Community Solutions can provide value
- Create opportunities for staff beyond the CEO to help lead community efforts, to help safeguard executive leadership commitments and focus
- Leverage engagement with Cuyahoga Human Services Chamber to help lead evolving sector issues where appropriate

Strategy: Educate partners about the meaning and reality of operating within a nonpartisan framework

- Develop and employ specific messaging to reframe and reinforce what it means to be nonpartisan and to deliver the mission within this framework
- Explore and elevate how common ground can be found with unlikely partners through data, research, analysis, and shared experience without compromising foundational principles
- Specifically speak to the difference between advocacy and activism, demonstrating how the research and data provided by advocates such as Community Solutions can benefit organizations with an activist role
- Develop curriculum and a training program about how to engage and be effective in nonpartisan advocacy

Strategy: Ensure focus areas remain relevant and align with organizational mission

- Conduct a review of focus areas every two years, to be led by designated staff and adopted by the Board
- Develop a communications/outreach plan to share any changes with partners
- Evolve the work appropriately based on the recommended outcomes

GOAL: To uplift organizational culture and build the organization's capacity at the Board and staff level

Strategy: Prioritize the health of the organization's internal culture through the engagement of Equius Group through its Strengthen Culture and Belonging work with the goal to build trust; enhance a sense of belonging; elevate accountability; and create an environment that allows all members of Community Solutions to feel valued and thrive

- Assess current situation and recent history through conversations and interviews
- Engage staff in honest conversations that may include staff retreats and ongoing dialogue sessions designed to rebuild trust and connection
- Generate principles and agreements on how the staff can and will work together
- Provide coaching to the leadership team to assess the current environment and develop strategies to create a culture of belonging that can be sustained
- Develop recommendations for the current North Star statement and potentially proposing changes and / or a different approach to expressing the organization's commitment to those values

Strategy: Evolve the organizational structure at both the Board / staff level to ensure positions and capacities align with values, focus areas and future growth

- Ensure value alignment with the organizational culture and belonging work when assessing current and proposed structures
- Evolve the overall organizational structure including roles and structure of the leadership team to mirror organizational focus areas, allow for greater staff support and responsiveness at the executive level, create effective business practices and increase efficiency
- Conduct a review of the current Board committee structure, making necessary changes to reflect organizational priorities
- Evaluate communications capacity to reflect shifting communications strategy and related enhancements in the approach to advocacy work and a desire to more proactively market the consulting practice

Strategy: Evolve organizational policies and procedures for accountability, clarity and best practice

- Conduct a compensation study to ensure compensation bands are merit based, clearly defined and in line with market norms
- Clearly define the process for advancement and promotion throughout the organization in a way that promotes clarity and uniformity between and among different departments within the organization

GOAL: To maintain focus on the residents of Cuyahoga County while exploring opportunities to expand our reach and maximize resources and capacity

Strategy: Emphasize a leadership voice, build partnerships and focus on priority needs within Northeast Ohio, particularly Cuyahoga County

- Position Community Solutions with philanthropic, nonprofit and public stakeholders as a trusted partner that fills a unique role in the health and social services sector
- Highlight the extensive expertise of staff, underscoring the staff's fluency, integration with the community, and work as a leader and expert in critical subjects
- Work with community, public and philanthropic partners to identify key issues facing the health and social services sector and consensus driven strategic approaches aligned with Community Solutions stated focus areas
- Expand the audience of those receiving Community Solutions regular educational and outreach efforts

Strategy: Explore packaging of Community Solutions data and research as a valuable tool for secondary markets throughout Ohio, as a means of expanding allies, enhancing State advocacy efforts and attracting consulting work

- Identify commonalities in urban/rural economic and social challenges where Community Solutions capacity for influence and expertise can be leveraged
- Explore how Community Solutions data, research and messaging can be of value and benefit other regions, considering ways to package and potentially monetize access to this information
- Shift approach of communications strategies to expand the reach and impact of Community Solutions' work to non-traditional partners and geographies, emphasizing shared narratives and individual and communal impacts that appeal to a broader audience