The social sector’s prime concern is for people, improving their daily lives, and creating vibrant communities in which they live. In spite of our good intentions, our work sometimes resembles attending meetings repeatedly without real purpose, unclear plans of action, and limited ways to measure results consistently. In 2017 Ohio State University (OSU) Extension-Marion applied for and received funding from the Connect and Collaborate Grants Program at The Ohio State University to establish and evaluate the Collective Impact framework. Since the Stanford Social Innovation Review article introduced the concept, Collective Impact has been widely adopted as an effective form of cross-sector collaboration to address complex social problems. The authors of the article identified five key elements distinguishing Collective Impact from other forms of collaboration:

i. All participants have a common agenda for change including a shared understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed-upon actions.

ii. Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all the participants ensures shared measurement for alignment and accountability.

iii. A plan of action that outlines and coordinates mutually reinforcing activities for each participant.

iv. Open and continuous communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.

v. A backbone organization(s) with staff and specific set of skills to serve the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies.

OSU Extension adopted the framework with the United Way of Marion County and the Center for Public Health Practice (CPHP) within The Ohio State University College of Public Health (CPHP). OSU Extension was selected to be the backbone organization to the initiative because of our position as a neutral convener, a subject matter expert on several issue areas, our ability to marshal sufficient financial resources, and our experience in group facilitation, data analysis, and community advocacy. In the first year, Marion County Extension guided the overall vision and strategy, co-created a shared measurement system, built public will for the framework, mobilized funding from the university, and facilitated community engagement to ensure the initiative reflected the diversity of the community. United Way played an equally important role. As a funder, they used their convening power to attract cross-sector stakeholders to the framework, aligned grantee funding to a collaborative model, and supported trainings to increase community knowledge of Collective Impact principles. Meanwhile, CPHP conducted assessments to evaluate current collaborative relationships and organizations’ readiness and response to Collective Impact concepts such as a common agenda, leadership support, mutually reinforcing activities, communication, shared measurement systems, equity, and policy and systems change.

The 78 respondents from the survey represented city and county schools, nonprofit organizations, businesses, government agencies, and foundations. More than 75% of respondents indicated a moderate to great extent of agreement that their current collaborative
had a common agenda, overarching vision, and respective leadership. However, rates of agreement were lower (65% or below) for the other concepts such as having an action plan or a common set of indicators. And, even lower rates of agreement were seen for topics such as having a data and reporting infrastructure, representation from disenfranchised groups, or organizational policy changes that aligned with initiative goals.

In response to CPHP’s evaluation, and other feedback solicited during a five-week Collective Impact Lunch and Learn series, the project team developed goals that would be met by March 31, 2019: (1) Develop a shared measurement system for Collective Impact; (2) Align the United Way grant application to the Results Based Accountability (RBA) framework; (3) Pilot the Collective Impact framework on a priority identified by the survey; and (4) Host a statewide event to reinforce the principles of Collective Impact.

**Goal 1: Develop a shared measurement system for Collective Impact**

A key condition for Collective Impact is the use of a shared measurement system for multiple organizations to evaluate performance and track progress toward goals. Before 2019, many nonprofit organizations were not tracking their outcomes let alone using a common set of measures with other organization working on the same issues. This started to change when OSU Extension offered to cover the purchase of Clear Impact software using funds from the university’s Connect and Collaborate Grants program. Beginning in December 2018, United Way used Clear Impact scorecards to help effectively manage and aggregate performance measures across all of their funded programs. Using the scorecard supported greater alignment among the goals of different organizations, more collaborative problem solving, and the formation of an ongoing learning community that increased the effectiveness of all participants. In some cases, simply the process of defining shared measures has led to significant changes in the way that organizations do their work.

**Goal 2: Align the United Way grant application to the Results Based Accountability (RBA)**

The Results-Based Accountability™ (RBA) framework is used by community, state, national and foreign organizations working towards Collective Impact. The RBA framework, the theory in which the Clear Impact software is based, has fostered a data-driven, decision making progress to help organizations work toward a common agenda or “end result”. Integrating this framework with the United Way application has helped partners systematically implement Collective Impact principles and understand how RBA’s disciplined Turn the Curve process can support community-wide strategies. During the most recent funding cycle, United Way required applicants use the scorecard template to receive funding and the advisory committee used Clear Impact to score applicants for potential investments. This requirement is intentional, not just to help partners report on funding outcomes, but if the application matches the RBA Framework and Clear Impact, then funded partners will start to use a simple, common language during local community partnership meetings with greater transparency, trust, action, and alignment.
Goal 3: Pilot the Collective Impact framework on a community priority identified in the survey

As development of a shared measurement system was been underway, OSU Extension has convened government agencies, elected officials, nonprofits, businesses, and ordinary residents to develop a common agenda to address rural blight, an issue identified from CPHP’s survey. Like many Ohio’s cities, Marion is facing challenges of sustained population and job loss and subsequent abandonment and tax-delinquent properties. A report by the Marion County Auditor’s Office estimated over 7 million dollars in tax delinquencies from over 2,000 parcels. In response, OSU Extension identified and brought together key stakeholders in Marion and initiated the Collective Impact framework to define blight and deploy effective policies and programs to address its community impacts. More information about the workgroup can be found at go.osu.edu/blight

Goal 4: Host a statewide event to reinforce the principles of Collective Impact

To showcase the success of the project statewide and beyond, OSU Extension and United Way organized a statewide Impact Assembly. The first annual event featured national subject matter experts including the eXtension Foundation, the Collective Impact Forum, and Clear Impact. Their expertise provided technical assistance to the five principles of Collective Impact as well as results-based accountability, equity and diversity in coalitions, and the role land grant universities can have in Collective Impact.

As we move to growth years of Collective Impact, the project will rely on open and continuous communication to share lessons learned and refine strategies. OSU Extension intends to host monthly conference calls and continue co-hosting the annual summit to update participants on local developments, share lessons, and strategize. To support learning between the live events, OSU Extension is building virtual interactive learning features on their website. Additionally, the initiative will distribute a quarterly electronic newspaper with stories of inspiration, innovative ideas, and new resources for subscribers.

The implications for this work in Extension are great. Universities are feeling pressure to more clearly demonstrate their social value to their host cities. For too long we have “co-existed alongside communities rather than collaborated with them” and given priority to “knowledge creation over solving social problems”. Collective Impact is a paradigm shift. OSU Extension, Marion seeks to be a case study for land grant universities nationwide to increase their intentionality through Collective Impact and tackle complex, social issues to improve lives of the individual, the family, and community. We invite you to review the attached documents to learn more and to contact us with any questions.