



APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY WORKSHOP REPORT

BEYOND COVID: UNMASKING A COLLABORATIVE
WAY FORWARD IN THE OUTER EAST



THEchangeLAB
A MICHELLEMQUAID PROGRAM

Photo by Shane Rounce on Unsplash

OVERVIEW

In December of 2020 service providers working across local government in Melbourne's Outer East came together to explore how we could unmask collaborative ways forward - beyond COVID.

Our aim was to:

- **Discover** when, how and why we are able to collaborate together during COVID (a time of disruption and challenge).
- **Dream** of how we can build on these success factors to find collaborate ways forward together.

This report reflects on the strengths and hopes recorded during the workshop. What follows is what surfaced in our participants' own words. Links for a deeper dive exploration into the data gathered on the day are also provided throughout.

WHAT DID WE DISCOVER?



We heard stories of what makes it possible for us to collaborate in the Outer East. A story that we marvelled over was one that two participants from Eastern Health, who had never met before, both knew and were able to share:

There had been a COVID-19 outbreak at an SRS in the Outer East; almost all residents tested positive for the virus. They required a quick response and GPs were not able to attend to them. As staff left there was an urgent need for a medical response. To meet this need collaboration formed between the ambulatory team, mental health programme, and EACH who provided psycho-social support. Health professionals from these groups went well outside of their brief to work together to support these people, who were unwilling to leave their homes even when critically unwell, and the hospital was able to manage their care in their homes. It was an incredible feat and all those affected recovered from the virus. As a result a great collaborative working relationship has been formed between the physical health and mental health programmes at Eastern Health, along with other stakeholders, including a church who delivered food regularly to those affected. This was a remarkable example of collaboration and a story that has been shared across Eastern Health.

To explore each of the stories recorded during the discover conversations, visit the raw data file [here](#).

We collaborate better in the Outer East when...

“...we come together and put the community need at the forefront to provide responsive services.”

“...we keep our focus on the community and clients first and foremost in our minds and work together with a common purpose.”

“...people try things that they haven’t tried before. Everyone works together to get the job done. Stay in good communication. Good communication, learning what others are doing in the area you are involved in. Build on existing relationships and trust each other.”

“...we are able to focus on outcomes (rather than the how), be open minded and flexible in our approach and have a genuine will to collaborate, respect and leverage strengths of each partner.”

“...engage and activate existing relationships and our good will with agility and have processes that allow us to identify and involve the perspectives of stakeholders.”

“...we remove the barriers to participation, promote flexibility for participation and when we have a common purpose to unite us.”

“...we meet the needs of the community, have trust, good relationships and good communication.”

We struggle to collaborate as well as we can in the Outer East when we...

"...are not able to be agile or creative for a range of reasons."

"...are not able to plan due to continuous changes."

"...don't think of the greater good ,but stay in our silos."

"...work in Silos. Cross council collaboration was difficult. Not being able to meet in person and loss of incidental relationship building to build good will and trust."

"...focus on our own organisations plans and strategies, work in silos and stick to existing ways of working."

"...don't have strong and positive leadership and when we don't communicate openly. Knowing which organisations to reach out to and avoid duplications was also challenging. Onboarding new people in a remote environment has also been very challenging to build positive and fruitful relationships. Timelags between announcements and organisations responses posed problems as well."

"...don't have the space, time and resources."

Amongst all of the stories shared, we found these common success factors:





BEING PURPOSEFUL AND MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY.

- Emergency / crisis - everyone doing something new
- Common intent
- Common goal and purpose
- Immediacy - relevance to context and community need
- Meets the needs of the community



RECOGNISING AND LEVERAGING EXISTING STRENGTHS

- Recognition and leveraging of strengths across partners
- Playing to strengths - providing resources and support as necessary.
- Expertise in their own experiences
- Recognising the skills and expertise in the region



BEING INNOVATIVE AND WILLING TO GO OUTSIDE THE BRIEF TO BE OF SERVICE

- Innovative
- Creativity - thinking outside the box
- Opportunity
- Agility and flexibility
- Trying new things (e.g. new ways of engaging/working)/ challenging yourself
- Creativity and thinking about doing things differently



BUILDING TRUST AND STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS

- Trust
- Goodwill
- Building on existing relationships
- Personal relationships
- Strengthened partnerships - technology seemed to help bring more people together.
It also gave access to those who normally wouldn't connect.
- Willingness and good will to collaborate



BEING WILLING TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER TO DO THE WORK

- Willingness
- Supportive team
- Community
- Connection
- Willingness to work together for the shared outcomes
- Relationships
- Being kind to each other - permission to try new things and it not always being perfect
- Understanding and acceptance
- Having the right collaborative culture is key



STAYING AGILE AND ADAPTABLE

- Adaptability
- Agility
- Speed of action



INVITING MORE VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

- Listening to others' perspectives: people/community and other agencies/depts identifying and involving the key stakeholders in that
- Identifying the shared issues and choosing action
- Recognising differences



LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY AND STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATION

- Use of technology to support practice
- Technology has increased collaboration by taking away travel and time constraints. Way more access to people and more time without travelling to meetings.
- Good communication



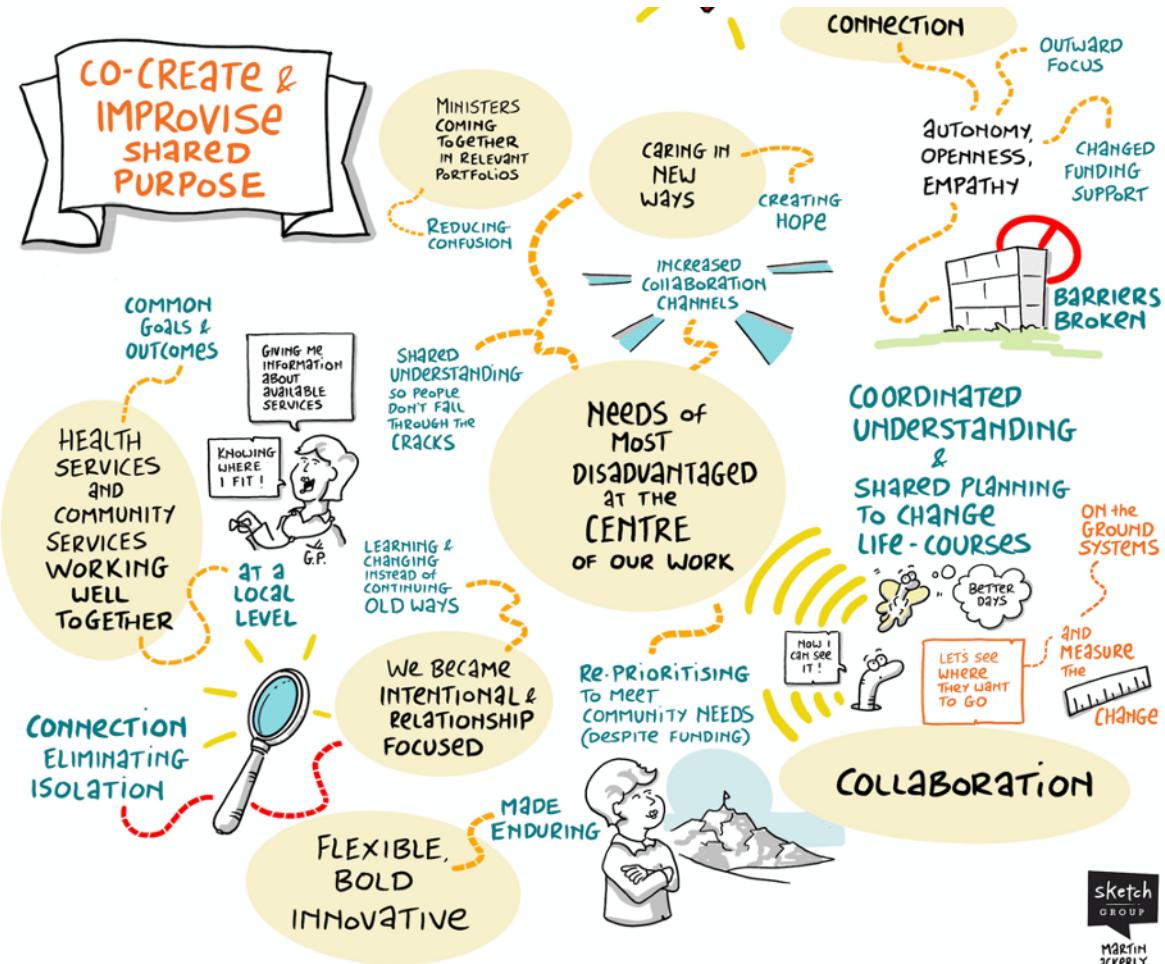
OTHER

- Working commitment
- Outcome focused - less bureaucracy
- New stakeholders have been enabled to become involved with the removal of participation barriers. Cut through the barriers and hierarchy

*The above statements are in participants own words then grouped by The Change Lab into overarching themes.

To explore in depth the stories, success factors and insights recorded during the discover conversations, visit the raw data file [here](#).

WHAT DID WE DREAM OF CREATING?



Workshop participants put themselves two years into the future, visualised what they might be able to achieve, and how they might make changes to help us collaborate in the Outer East. These visualisations were translated into stories of hope and possibilities. These were the stories:

Once upon a time there was a health crisis haunting many parts of the world that posed an opportunity for the world to evolve. **Every day**, people struggled with fear and isolation, and the needs of the most vulnerable still went unanswered. In the beginning people focused inward and mourned their losses, they only had time and energy for themselves and their struggles. **One day** people realised that we could only succeed as a community by coming together and looking out for each other. **Because of that**, neighbours started talking to each other and people looked beyond their normal circles. Community organisations banded together. Everyday people were humbled by being put in the position of needing the support of services, sometimes for the first time. **Because of that**, barriers tumbled and people felt less alone. Funding bodies recognised the importance of what was happening and they allowed funds to be allocated where needed. The system evolved until the community needs were truly at the core of all services and people felt seen and heard. **Until Finally** the knowledge of local organisations was acknowledged and embraced, which enabled long term planning and success.

Once upon a time there were a whole lot of rules and ways of working that were very hard to stretch and break. **Every day**, thousands of people turned up to work in the Outer East wanting to find solutions to pervasive problems and instead were faced with numerous barriers, working in silos, inflexibility and a change and risk paralysis. **One day**, the world changed and we were hit by a global pandemic that changed everything. **Because of that**, we had no choice but to adapt the way we were currently doing things. **Because of that**, we experienced new possibilities in the way we worked, the way we worked together and how we delivered services. **Until finally**, our collective potential was unleashed, generating new possibilities for collaboration and solving old problems in new creative ways which made a real difference in the lives of the people we serve.

Once upon time there was an unexpected crisis that came out of nowhere. **Every day**, things got worse and worse and people in our community got sick and died and we had to rethink, adjust and adapt the way we worked. **One day** we all put our thinking caps on, stepped outside our comfort zone and decided to collaborate more than ever. **Because of that** we became flexible, bold and innovative. **Because of that** we threw the old ways out the door and focussed more on our collective community needs and collective service delivery than our own organisational priorities. **Until finally** we achieved more effective systems and processes (and double donut days). The systems now in place are embedded in the way we work, that foster collaboration for the benefit of all and endure over time. And we all lived happily ever after (as much as we could).

Once upon a time agencies in the outer East were going about their ways supporting their communities. Lo and behold, a widespread disease came through which changed the way in which people lived, worked and socialised. The community was not completely prepared for this pandemic called Covid-19, but the mobilisation that took place was remarkable whereby local government, community health and specialised organisations banded together to support their community in ways we had not seen before. Although it was an extremely challenging time, local communities felt empowered and supported and there was a real sense of connection. **One day**, we realised that doing things differently isn't always a bad thing, we realised the power of the people and the capacity of individuals to respond to a new and strange situation that affected everyone. Life has never gone back to the way it was, but community members in the Outer East felt a sense of collective responsibility, more empowered and ready take on the next challenge!

Once upon a time organisations didn't share information and resources. **Every day** organisations worked in competition, in silos and for funding. **One day** we started to talk to each other, plan for more efficient use of resources, to meet the needs of client and communities. **Because of that**, organisations were better able to work together. **Because of that**, clients were supported with responsive, timely, accessible and inclusive services. **Until finally** organisations can work together to share resources and provide flexible services.

Once upon a time there was a global pandemic called COVID-19 that rocked the world. **Every day**, people thought about how they could get together like they were used to doing and support each other. **One day** some people in the Far East got together and approached some local organisations with suggestions about how they could support the community to reconnect and stay connected. Their idea was so amazing! **Because of that**, their local organisations ensured that there were lots of ongoing conversations with those community members where everyone had a voice and were encouraged to play a leadership role. **Because of that**, within 12 months, no one in the community felt isolated anymore and felt they could connect with others. **Until finally** the community was so strong that they shared their wisdom and experience with other communities so it spread across the world and all communities were able to thrive and flourish.

Once upon a time many people were living with many challenges, and didn't know how to find and access the right supports. **Every day**, supports workers would sit in their silos trying to understand each person's complexity with the lens of their own sector. **One day** the ministers of various portfolios decided to come together with a shared vision. **Because of that**, incentives were offered for various providers to collaborate with resourcing and expertise. **Because of that**, there was less confusion and more understanding as everyone knew their role and the roles of others. **Until finally**, people with many challenges with the right supports were able to live as the best version of themselves, individually and collectively.

Once upon a time, there was an organisation full of people with rigid ideas about the way we worked. People didn't really think about what it meant to be a worker and go to work - they just worked this way because it was what they had always done. **Every day**, they went to work in the same way, for the same hours. It was hard, and it didn't always make sense. **One day**, a global pandemic changed everything. **Because of that**, the way we worked turned upside down, and we simply couldn't do things the way we had always done them. **Because of that**, the workers had more autonomy, choice and flexibility and also had to find different ways to do things. We learnt a lot about our own prejudices and opened up to other people's experiences and circumstances - sharing our own and hearing other people's. **Until finally**, we were able to connect more with people on a human level through our shared empathy, and create more adaptable and flexible workplaces.

Once upon a time there were many people working in the Outer East trying to support our most vulnerable populations. **Every day**, we worked together to implement our great ideas and coordinate our systems. **One day** we developed shared plans and coordinated our efforts.

Because of that our vulnerable families and individuals could see where they wanted to go.

Because of that they experienced better days. **Until finally** we could measure and evaluate the change in their trajectory and some of us could retire.

Once upon a time...there were lots of organisations doing their best providing services in the Outer East. **Every day**... people were busy. **One day**... a pandemic hit. **Because of that**... people had to stop and learn to care for each other in new ways, connect with their community & do things differently. They built their capacity to grow, share & co-operate for the good of each individual's uniqueness. **Because of that**... the services were able to appropriately collaborate with skills, knowledge & resources. **Until finally**... no individual was "left behind".

The groups shared their hopes and captured those they shared. These *dreams* included a future where:

WE SEE BEYOND THE WAY THINGS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN

- We're not having to conform to existing practice and 'rules'.
- We realise the box is not a box - there are different ways to fit in it.
- We do not go back to old ways if there are better, new ways of doing things.
- We don't lose all the learnings - identify successes and leverage them going forward.
- We are embracing the adaptability that we have seen to make work more flexible.

WE DO MEANINGFUL AND PURPOSEFUL WORK FOR THE COMMUNITY

- We do meaningful work that contributes to the community. Recognising and harnessing community in the broad sense - participation. Acknowledge importance and welfare of the staff in the variety of their roles.
- We have shared purpose and agreement across the region.

WE KEEP COMMUNITY NEEDS AT THE HEART OF INITIATIVES

- The community need is at the forefront when designing and delivering initiatives.
- We keep the community at the centre - individual purpose and as a collective for the communities we're working with.

WE TAP INTO AND EMPOWER LOCAL POTENTIAL

- We unearth potential - existing and untapped skills and expertise.
- We have local empowerment and capacity building.
- There is acknowledgement of the strengths of the way in which we are working moving forward.

WE ARE CONNECTED, ENGAGED, STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS, AND CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

- We stay connected and continue to evolve our collaboration around a shared set of priorities, based on the true needs of the community groups as opposed to previous agendas or prescribed goals from funding bodies.
- We have trusting relationships, a common cause, goodwill and shared intent.
- We have more opportunities to engage and collaborate.

WE INVEST IN PREVENTION, SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMES, AND ARE DRIVEN BY DATA AND SCIENCE

- We are focussed on prevention rather than being reactive during emergency and response phase.
- We have better investment and sustainability of programmes and projects.
- We are driven by data and science.

WE SEEK FUNDING, ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT FOR LOCAL COLLABORATION

- There is allocation of funding for collaboration. The way funding is designed - needs to support collaboration and partnership work.
- We have successful advocacy to state and federal governments.

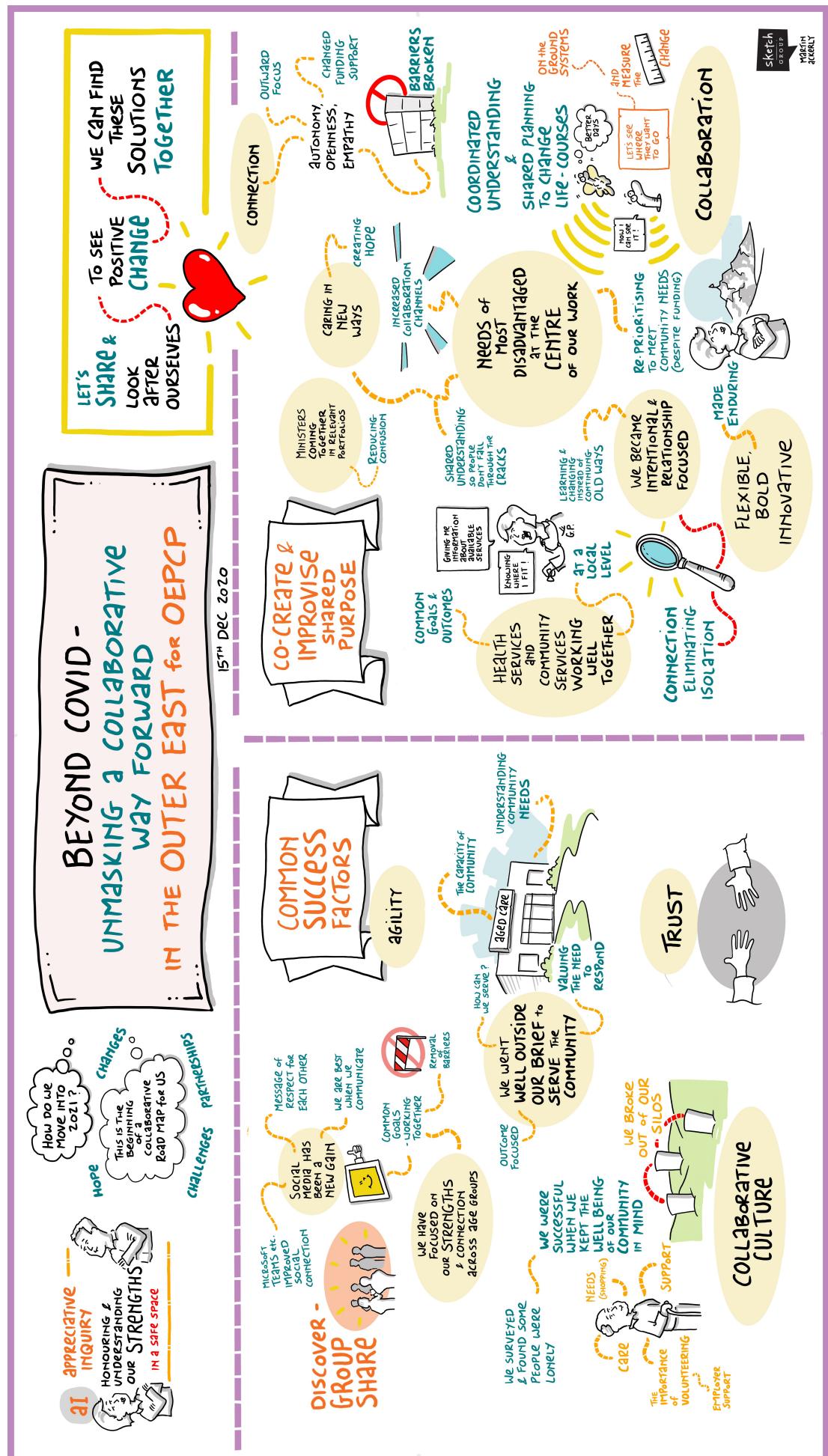
WE EXPRESS VULNERABILITY AND EMPATHY

- There is strength in the vulnerability that has come out of this - not being afraid to leverage it, and continue to build on what we've learnt rather than let it go.
- We are having greater empathy in the workplace, and with our clients and community - and using it to be better individually and collectively.

WE WORK TOGETHER, UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER'S PART, AND EXERCISE GENEROSITY

- We understand what we all do
- We work together better and create better pathways for clients.
- We see generosity multiplies return.

To explore in depth each participant's dreams and ideas for the future, visit the raw data file [here](#).



NEXT STEPS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Outer East workshop was an incredible opportunity to connect and discover the strengths we can leverage and the hopes we share going forward.

It is essential now that we find ways to maintain the interest and momentum generated by our group. We recommend that you:

- Share forward a version of this report with people who couldn't attend the workshop so they can draw from the learnings and insights.
- Stay tuned for the upcoming second workshop to explore how these dreams will be realised. Encourage your colleagues to join you for the next workshop.
- Keep reaching out to each other in the new year to seek opportunities for local collaboration.
- Re-connect as a group with these dreams in 2021 to spark hope and rekindle energy for this change.

With our heartfelt appreciation for all of the time and energy all participants poured into this conversation.

Michelle & Michelle

Michelle McQuaid & Michelle Etheve