

## Women in Leadership Subcommittee

### “Women Helping Others Lead Effectively (W.H.O.L.E.)”

#### Final Recommendations & Report

##### I. Challenge

Across our community, there are broad discrepancies between males and females in leadership positions. This exists as early as the middle school years where girls begin to lose confidence and do not actively seek leadership roles.<sup>1</sup> This extends through adulthood and exists at the highest levels of business and civic engagement.

Many organizations and institutions are working to address this issue, and we applaud them. In our subcommittee, Women Helping Others Lead Effectively (W.H.O.L.E.), we set out to identify: (1) key barriers to women and girls engaging in leadership roles, and (2) areas that women and girls believe are not currently being addressed in our communities. After compiling our findings, we outline recommendations that would advance women and girls' leadership in Hamilton County.

Our findings indicate that challenges for females start early. From our initial interviews with stakeholders, including teenage girls and adults who work with adolescents, we learned that the critical period when girls retreat from leadership begins around the middle school years, and this sets the tone for the high school years and adulthood. Girls' not pursuing leadership stems from a lack of confidence, and a system that does not encourage girls' leadership. From our interviews, we heard stories of girls and boys being treated differently by teachers and coaches and a lack of female role models and mentors, which contributes to a decrease in confidence. It is critical to begin to address this challenge and bolster confidence early in life.

Women and girls' needs vary throughout different stages of life, and mentorship opportunities do not readily exist. While there are several respected initiatives across the community that address women's professional development and leadership, such as programs run by the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber, the YWCA Greater Cincinnati, and the Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio, we did not identify any large-scale program focused on multi-age, direct female-to-female mentorship.

In addition to identifying the challenge of girls and women in leadership roles from a community perspective, we also examined this issue within County government, in particular on government-appointed boards and commissions. Currently, women comprise 52% of the population in Hamilton County, but hold only 30% of County board and commission seats.<sup>2</sup> Further, 35% of County boards and commissions have no female representation at all.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Student and Teacher Interviews, Walnut Hills High School (2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Appointed Board and Commission List*, Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation (2018).

<sup>3</sup> This represents County appointees to the board only (if the County had 2 or more designated “seats”). Full board lists were not available for all boards.

Research shows that having women and increased diversity in groups and on boards matters. Diverse boards and groups function better and achieve greater financial performance than non-diverse groups. In addition, organizations with increased board diversity have a better overall reputation and increased engagement and diversity within the organization.<sup>4</sup>

Although diverse leadership is important, women do not always raise their hands. They are less likely to seek leadership positions than men. When considering civic engagement, women believe they are missing the knowledge and expertise to serve, do not feel like they understand the process, and are less confident in their ability to lead.<sup>5</sup>

Civic boards should reflect the populations they serve. Hamilton County is a diverse community, and it is important that this be reflected in our civic leadership. A lack of confidence, few role models and mentors, and fewer women seeking leadership roles are just a few barriers to female leadership, which begins in girls' early development and continues through adulthood. We must be intentional to make change.

## **II. Community Input**

Our interviews and conversations with the community confirmed and supplemented our findings in Section I. We interviewed several teenage girls, two high school teachers, a young woman at the beginning of her career, several non-profit organization executives, and a corporate executive. Additionally, we collected feedback from participants of the community listening session in July.

From our students and teachers, we heard repeatedly that confidence building is critical. One teacher observed that, in her experience, when a girl demonstrates strong leadership skills in a group, it actually spreads and inspires increased leadership from other girls in the group.

When considering mentorship, our stakeholders noted that having mentors closer in age and experience is important. They indicated that this strengthens the relationship and makes the mentor more relatable. In addition, it is important to our stakeholders that there be strong role models to look up to. We heard this feedback from both girls and women.

From the community impact session, we heard validating stories from others. Several people shared their stories, stated they agreed with our findings, and provided support with ideas, suggestions, and willingness to help further this effort.

At the forefront of our thinking about this issue is the desire to not duplicate existing programs or initiatives. We seek to identify an unmet need within the current landscape,

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<sup>4</sup> PULSE Briefing: Gender Diversity on Boards and Commissions, Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Women's Foundation / University of Kansas Study (2014).

and work within existing systems to address it collaboratively. To this end, we recommend partnering with organizations already working to mentor girls and young women, such as the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative, Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Cincinnati, Girl Scouts of Western Ohio, local school districts, and local leadership development programs, as well as our Commission colleagues in the Spring Squad. We also recommend partnering with the Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, which is working to address women's leadership on civic boards and commissions.

### III. **Recommendations**

Based on our research and community input, we have developed the following recommendations.

#### **Recommendation**

2. Hamilton County should create formalized policies to increase the number of women serving on boards and commissions, which can be replicated by other jurisdictions.

We recommend that Hamilton County, including the Administration and elected leadership, as well as the 49 independent political jurisdictions within the County, develop formalized policies of inclusive practices designed to increase the number of women serving on civic boards and commissions.

Our policy recommendations include:

1. Formalize a partnership with *Appointed*, an initiative of the Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, to increase the pool of female candidates on civic boards and commissions.
2. Update and streamline the current appointment process, including developing a centralized board website with clear board descriptions, position requirements, board member expectations, time commitments and vacancies; creating a simple and straightforward application form and easy submission process; standardizing the interview process and questions; and publicly outlining the entire application process including key dates.
3. Develop a working group comprised of key County departments and outside partners, including the Women's Fund and Hamilton County Commission on Women and Girls, to study and implement best practices for inclusive boards and commissions (e.g., standardized board orientation and training and providing child care during board meetings).

4. Educate the community, strategic partners and current and potential board members on the importance of diversity and inclusion.
5. Collect and track data on board and commission appointments.

### **Recommendation**

6. Our community would benefit from a multi-age mentoring alliance, which includes peer-to-peer support, in order to build confidence in young girls during middle and high school.

We recommend that the Hamilton County Commission on Women and Girls, together with County leadership and other strategic partners, work toward the development of a multi-age mentoring alliance, designed to provide a support system for girls and young women at critical transition periods between youth and adulthood.

This Multi-Age Mentoring Alliance (M.A.M.A.) should match girls and women with age-appropriate peer-to-peer mentors to help guide and support them through important life transitions. Two key transition points of focus are the middle school years (with high school mentors) and young adulthood/women entering the workforce (matched with mentors with 5-10 years of experience). This Alliance will foster a supportive environment for females and develop confidence by connecting girls and women with mentors who have had similar life experiences.

Some next steps to developing this alliance include convening existing youth mentoring organizations, schools and universities, and leadership organizations to develop the program framework, developing a marketing and communication strategy, and educating the community on the importance of confidence-building and mentorship. Finally, we recommend that this work be led by our Commission colleagues in the Spring Squad.

Respectfully Submitted,

Women Helping Others Lead Effectively (W.H.O.L.E.) Subcommittee

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