United Way for Southeastern Michigan Philosophy of Data Visualization

We believe data visualization should tell a story. Analysts and visualization designers make meaning from trends and insights in the data and use charts and other visuals to bring out the story for others to understand and act on. To ensure we are responsible, accountable, and compelling storytellers,

We are transparent with our data. We are open and honest about the limitations and outliers of our datasets and keep our data stories within those bounds. When appropriate, we use visualization to aid audience exploration of and meaning-making from the full dataset, not just the data highlighted by our stories. Our commitment to transparency works alongside our commitment to privacy and protection of an individual's sensitive information.

We are culturally responsive. In our efforts to transform data into actionable information through visualization, we consider and respect the individuals represented by the numbers and those we are telling the story to. We engage with diverse stakeholders to include cultural and contextual dimensions important to the analysis and representation of the data. We know data visuals can be interpreted differently based on cultural background, and, as a result, individuals can react differently to the same chart or graphic.

We design with the audience in mind. We acknowledge that individuals engage with visualizations from varying starting points of power and influence and various levels of investment, interest, and commitment. To honor those starting points, the design process should answer why the target audience matters to us and what matters most to the audience. The visualization and story should reflect those answers.

We create accessible visualization. The design process and final product should consider and honor the data literacy level of target users and strive to build understanding not confusion. It should also acknowledge known and unknown audience limitations related to general literacy, technical jargon, physical disability, and access to communication mediums and seek to remove barriers whenever possible.

We believe data visualization is one of several strategic levers that support efforts to make mission- and vision-aligned decisions. United Way for Southeastern Michigan has a responsibility to thoughtfully consider data collected by staff and provided by partners as we move our work forward. Visualizations can help make insights and patterns in data more easily recognizable and understandable for decision-makers, but to support missional decision-making with integrity the process of visualization and the end products must reflect United Way for Southeastern Michigan's values.

We put people first. The data we work with represent real people, and the individuals behind the numbers should be treated with respect and dignity in our design and storytelling choices. Our design choices should also reflect and honor the diversity of the communities we serve.

We build visualizations through an equity and inclusion mindset. We undertake analysis and design critically, acknowledging who might be included or excluded from the data, maintaining awareness of how our decisions around language, color, and imagery impact historically marginalized groups and accessibility, and building historical context and shared understanding behind the numbers through narrative and annotation.

We build collaborative visualizations and believe the process must honor the idea of "nothing about us without us." Program teams, external partners, and especially community members with lived experience will be brought to the table with their unique perspectives and abilities to verify that information represented is accurate and not misleading.

We innovate to enhance understanding. Data visualization and storytelling is a continually shifting field. We are committed to continuous learning that will grow and stretch our skills and knowledge of tools so we can display data in the most effective way to aid storytelling and decision making. When introducing new chart types and tools, though, we must be sure that the risk of confusion is outweighed by benefits of greater insights, more intuitive design, and clearer, more actionable information.