



Minnesota Faith in Action Project's Long Hours and Struggles Pay Off—For Now

Pam Determan, the executive director of [VINE Faith in Action](#) in Mankato, Minn., had all the right qualifications to lead the project—and it was still a struggle to establish and build the organization.

It was a struggle, though, that eventually paid off.

Determan, who started the *Faith in Action* project in 1995 as part of her master's degree thesis project in gerontology, brought a wealth of experience to the job. She had lived in the community for more than 15 years and was well-connected; she had run a volunteer program at a local hospital and worked in nonprofit organizations for more than 10 years.

Long Hours, Limited Staff

Mankato was in dire need of services for people who were homebound, disabled or struggling in other ways. At that time, state and local services for elderly people and people with disabilities were largely uncoordinated and had eligibility requirements that, from Determan's perspective, seemed arbitrary.

Some programs limited their eligibility to people 65 and older. Determan thought it was unfair that those who were younger—and just as needy—could not receive services.

Determan saw *Faith in Action*, Phase 2 as the perfect opportunity to fill unmet needs in her community. She organized the application for nonprofit status and funding from RWJF sitting around a kitchen table with people from her community. The coalition eventually included 17 different congregations, health care agencies, nonprofit organizations and businesses.

The project received \$25,000 in funding from RWJF between 1995 and 1997 (ID# 024925).

During the first 18 months of the project, Determan had to manage without adequate office equipment or supplies.

"I was the only staff person for the first year and a half and it just about killed me," Determan said. "I was working crazy hours." In an interview in 2008, Determan said that

she had averaged a 60-hour work week ever since the organization had begun 12 years earlier.

Early on, members the board of directors decided to create an independent 501(c)3 organization, rather than affiliate with a larger organization. While that had worked out for the organization, it also meant that it would have no financial cushion to fall back on during difficult times.

Open Eligibility for All People in Need

From the start, organizing members decided to serve anyone in need—they would not impose an age limitation. Because Determan had previous experience running a volunteer program and was familiar with local resources, VINE started offered assistance to people in need the first month it was open.

Volunteers served in various roles:

- Friendly visitors who visited care recipients at least one hour every other week.
- Volunteer drivers who provided transportation for care recipients.
- Respite volunteers who provided family caregivers with time off.
- Handy persons who helped older householders with minor home repairs.
- Lawn care helpers/snow shovelers who helped elderly people with seasonal tasks.

At the end of RWJF funding in 1997, the VINE project reported the following results:

- Approximately 250 volunteers provided direct assistance to care recipients. An additional 200 people assisted the project in governance, publicity, fundraising and group service efforts.
- VINE volunteers provided practical, non-medical assistance to a total of 386 elderly individuals and people with disabilities who needed help with their physical, social and spiritual needs. Some 14 percent of the people assisted had a mental illness; 24 percent had no congregational affiliation.

A VINE Story

A couple years ago, volunteers at VINE responded to a phone call from a woman who had moved to Mankato to be near her adult son. But her son had lost his job and moved away, and she couldn't afford to follow him.

When volunteers went to visit, they learned that she suffered from asthma, heart disease, severe depression and alcoholism. Living in a fourth floor apartment, she was unable to carry her groceries upstairs or her trash down the stairs, and she had not brushed her teeth for a month.

VINE volunteers made a referral to county services. She qualified for mental health case management and began receiving home nursing assistance and counseling.

A volunteer who is an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous now provides her with regular transportation to AA meetings. Other volunteers helped her clean up her kitchen after a grease fire in her apartment, and they now regularly deliver her groceries and take out her trash.

Hiring Professional Staff

VINE began to attract other funding after RWJF support ended, including state grants and United Way funding. As it did, Determan hired only staffers with appropriate experience, including a registered nurse and a licensed social worker. Determan, who has worked as a mentor to other *Faith in Action* projects, said that that decision was critical.

"In order to be recognized by the community, we have to be credible and have the background to do this work," she said. "Many *Faith in Action* projects in Minnesota had no background in this work. They'd have the church secretary or someone who worked part time at a business. But when it came down to making practical decisions, they weren't respected by the community or did not enjoy public support."

Branching Out

In 2003, RWJF provided a 30-month, \$35,000 grant for VINE to establish a *Faith in Action* branch in neighboring Nicollet County (ID# 047554). The project had to confront long-simmering issues from the start. In 1998, a tornado had devastated Nicollet County. Organizations from Mankato and elsewhere came to help and ended up fighting among one another for turf. Eventually, Nicollet officials told the organizations to leave.

With that experience still fresh, establishing a new project was not easy. Staff at the new project established a separate governing board, which quickly put it in conflict with the board of directors at the VINE project, which had fiscal oversight over the new project.

"There was still this perception [in Nicollet] that Mankato was the big brother," Determan said. "The [project] desperately wanted to be free and independent but did not have the background to do so."

After the RWJF grant ended, VINE Faith in Action brought the project back in-house. It is now running a small operation in Nicollet with one of its staff members working there 15 hours a week.

VINE Threatened by Huge Loss of State Funds

The VINE Faith in Action project began in 1995 as a one-person, \$25,000 per year outfit operated out of donated church space serving around 200 people. It grew to an

organization with 24 staff members and a 2007 budget of \$1 million serving 2,500 people. The organization now owns its own building, runs the local senior center and schedules and provides 180 rides each day through a sophisticated computer software program.

However, in May 2008, VINE Faith in Action learned that one of its major state grants was not being renewed. The grant, for \$239,000 from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, accounted for 24 percent of the project's funding. It was a huge blow to the organization.

In October 2008, Determan said the organization had raised enough funds to keep its doors open for a year. After that, though, she was unsure what would happen.

"I think VINE will look very different a year from now," she said. "We will probably move more toward charging people for services, we will be serving fewer people and we will probably be providing a few less services."

She added that she was unsure that the *Faith in Action* model could be sustained at the level that VINE grew to. "*Faith in Action* works fine if you are going to have one or one-and-a-half staff people serving a couple of hundred people a year," she said. "But when you grow it to our size, unless there are a lot of different funding sources, it's not sustainable just on contributions or bake sales."