



Studying Multisite Place-Based Grantmaking

Supporting an evaluation and learning community of practice

SUMMARY

Grantmakers are increasingly funding multisite, “place-based” initiatives in order to catalyze long-term, community-wide improvements. An example is the effort to improve high school graduation rates by funding a package of projects that include providing health and nutrition services in schools, after-school activities, and leadership programs.

“They are funding different kinds of interventions that together, comprehensively, will have an impact,” said Heather Peeler, project director and vice president of programs at [Grantmakers for Effective Organizations](#). The Washington-based coalition has a membership of more than 400 grantmakers committed to building strong and effective nonprofit organizations and promoting philanthropic practices that lead to better results.

Establishing a Community of Practice

Private and public funders face similar challenges as they look beyond the results of individual grants to measure the overall success of these large-scale initiatives. Between March 2011 and November 2012, staff at Grantmakers for Effective Organizations established a community of practice—which is “essentially an opportunity for peers to come together to learn from one another,” says Peeler—to explore evaluation practices.

“It seemed like a great opportunity to sit in a room and share with other colleagues, not only in the private philanthropic sector but also at the federal level,” said RWJF senior program officer Brenda Henry, PhD, MPH. “We don’t have a lot of venues that allow for information sharing between the public and the private.”

An advisory committee (See [Appendix 1](#) for members.), and a facilitator, Jessica Bearman of Bearman Consulting, supported the project.

Twenty-five representatives of 12 private foundations and government agencies (See [Appendix 2](#) for a list of participating organizations.) participated in the community of practice. During the early phases of the grant, they identified these questions to explore:

- How do we collect data in a participatory manner, such that the data is consistent and useful to grantees and to the grantmaker?

- How do we share data in ways that help grantees with continuous improvement and allow the funder to determine whether implementation outcomes have been met?
- How do we build the capacity of communities to collect data and evaluate progress?
- How do we measure things that are difficult to quantify, like community engagement?
- How might we develop shared indicators and metrics that will allow us to draw conclusions across different sites and projects?
- What do funders need to know/do to make data collection systems most effective and helpful for their own and their grantees' purposes?

Key Results

In reports to RWJF, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations staff reported the following results:

- **The community of practice created an opportunity for funders facing similar issues to gain insight from one another.** “I think the primary goal was to provide an opportunity for folks who are really struggling with issues related to their work to have their struggle validated by their peers,” said Peeler. “That sharing, gaining insight from peers was a huge part of it.”

A midcourse survey of participants conducted by the facilitator found that:

- All respondents agreed (50%) or strongly agreed (50%) that they had a better understanding or new perspectives on their work as a result of the community of practice.
- All respondents agreed (40%) or strongly agreed (60%) they will be able to apply what they learned to their place-based evaluation work.
- **Meetings, webinars, and other activities promoted learning and information sharing about evaluation within the community of practice.** These included:
 - An initial meeting in June 2011, held in conjunction with the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations' Learning Conference in Baltimore, which brought participants together to start their conversation
 - Four two-day meetings in Washington, which provided opportunities for dialogue and presentations by experts. Among the presenters were representatives of the Harvard Center for the Study of Social Policy, the Network Center for Community Change, and the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership.
 - A private website, which allowed community of practice members to exchange information

- Nine webinars, which covered topics that included: strategies for building civic engagement; collecting data across sites, grantees, and organizations; data visualization; and tools to measure community collaboration
- Topic groups—which allowed members to continue their dialog outside community of practice events—included these: collecting data, sharing data, measuring civic engagement, building community evaluation capacity, and common indicators
- **The community of practice created *Building Community Capacity for Participation in Evaluation: Why It Matters and What Works*.** This e-publication lists five core principles for engaging meaningfully with communities in order to enhance the evaluation process. Says RWJF’s Brenda Henry, “Often our focus is so much on the technical aspects of evaluation that the communities are left out of the conversation, so I think that was a great value add to the field.”

The five core principles are:

- Create value for community residents.
- Illuminate, don’t intimidate.
- Tailor technical assistance and training.
- Support community capacity for learning.
- Model transparency, accountability, and consistency.

Lessons Learned

1. **Understand the constraints of government partners.** A community of practice flourishes on open communication, but public-sector funders are prohibited from sharing many details about their funding processes. “I don’t think a lot of us knew all the constraints the federal agencies have,” said Heather Peeler. “That was a big insight.”
2. **Keep participants engaged and stay attuned to their interests.** Project staff learned to structure events to engage participants, including through small group work, online conversations, speaker presentations, readings, and informal networking. At various times, staff asked participants to choose the direction in which they wanted to proceed, given that the number of topics relevant to place-based evaluation exceeded the available time in which to pursue them. (Project report to RWJF)
3. **Take time to build relationships.** Relationship-building methods such as regular check-in phone calls and group dinners were “essential” tools for building the trust required for deep and honest sharing, project staff reported to RWJF.

Funding

RWJF supported this project with a \$65,000 grant from March 2011 to November 2012. Other contributors included the Annie E. Casey Foundation (\$35,000), the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (\$25,000), and participation fees from other organizations that took part in the community of practice (\$27,500).

Afterward

With additional funding from RWJF in 2013,¹ the community of practice will continue its work for at least a year, with an expanded membership list that includes 68 individuals representing 24 organizations.

A second e-publication, *Common Measurement Indicators for Place-Based Evaluation*, is being developed, with the assistance of the research and development organization, [Community Science](#) in Gaithersburg, Md. The report will compile specific indicators and performance measures for place-based initiatives. Peeler describes it as “an emerging framework” that will offer a “theory of change” for funder investments in place-based initiatives.

Adds RWJF’s Henry, “The group is trying to come up with a general, almost a meta-logic, theory of change around place-based initiatives. And then, building on that, we are trying to determine if we, as a field, can agree on some standard indicators that folks can track and measure as it pertains to these complex initiatives.”

Prepared by: **Doug Hill**

Reviewed by: Karyn Feiden and Molly McKaughan

Program Officer: Brenda L. Henry

Program Area: Vulnerable Populations

Grant ID#: 68768

Project Director: Heather Peeler (202) 355-9537; peeler@geofunders.org

¹ ID #70840, \$25,000 (April 1, 2013 to March 31, 2014)

APPENDIX 1

Advisory Committee

(Current as of the time of the grant; provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

Jessica Bearman, MSOD

Bearman Consulting
Moscow, Idaho

Melissa Brodowski, PhD, MSW, MPH

Senior Child Welfare Program Specialist
Office on Child Abuse and Neglect
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services
Washington, D.C.

Marie Colombo

Senior Officer
Knowledge Management
Chief of Staff
Program
The Skillman Foundation
Detroit, Mich.

Katherine Dawes, MPA, MA

Director
Evaluation Support Division
United States Environmental Protection
Agency
Washington, D.C.

Brenda L. Henry, PhD, MPH

Senior Program Officer
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Princeton, N.J.

Tom Kelly, MPH

Associate Director for Evaluation
Annie E. Casey Foundation
Baltimore, Md.

APPENDIX 2

Participating Organizations

(Current as of the time of the grant; provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

- Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- California Endowment
- John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
- Kansas Health Foundation
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Skillman Foundation
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- U.S. Department of Education
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Reports

Building Community Capacity for Participation in Evaluation: Why it Matters and What Works. Washington: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2013. Available [online](#).

Common Measurement Indicators for Place-Based Evaluation. Washington: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2013. (To be released mid-2013.)