

# Building Resident Power *and* Capacity *for* Change

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An 'on-the-ground' reflection about what it takes for funders to  
work effectively with low-income communities



A report by *The Diarist Project*  
For *Grassroots Grantmakers*

April 2009

# Grassroots Grantmakers

**We strengthen and connect funders who strengthen  
and connect residents where they live.**

**Grassroots Grantmakers** is a network of place-based funders in the United States and Canada who are working from a “**we begin with residents**” perspective—supporting active citizenship and building civic capacity at the block level.

The common thread that runs through our network is a belief that healthy, sustainable communities are places where every community resident has the opportunity to participate, make a contribution, and be heard, without being hindered by obstacles that result from disenfranchisement, lack of power, or lack of resources. We believe that communities that are good places to live, nurturing places for children, and places that have the resilience and strength to deal with challenges that de-stabilize and eventually undermine communities are communities where residents are connected and actively engaged.

Funders who are engaged in grassroots grantmaking employ a range of tools, including scale-appropriate grants (typically \$500–\$5,000), capacity-building opportunities and a highly relational style of grantmaking that supports resident-initiated and led work in urban neighborhoods and rural communities.

**Grassroots Grantmakers** serves as a locus of learning about grassroots grantmaking and as an advocate for the practice of grassroots grantmaking as an essential component of place-based philanthropy.

## **We Connect**

We create pathways for sharing learning within and across funding disciplines to promote practice that is more effective and to build organizational capacity and commitment for long-term investments in citizen-centered work.

## **We Expand**

We provide accessible on-ramps to information and practical experience that facilitate the development of new grassroots grantmaking programs, and expand the number of place-based funders who are engaged in grassroots grantmaking.

## **We Demonstrate**

The stories and research that we generate, capture and share demonstrate the value of grassroots grantmaking and legitimize grassroots grantmaking as an essential practice for place-based funders.

## **We Advocate**

We share our belief that place-based change and community resilience cannot be accomplished without the full engagement of all people who live in that place.

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*By Tim Saasta and Kristin Senty*



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**REFLECTIONS**  
about Grassroots Grantmaking

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## Introduction

In September 2008, more than 50 people who work in struggling, low-income neighborhoods or who support this work gathered in Chicago. Brought together by Grassroots Grantmakers, their goal was to learn more about building the power and capacity of residents.

They spent a day “on the ground” in two Chicago neighborhoods, learning more about these neighborhoods, the work that resident groups were doing there and the support that two funders—Steans Family Foundation and the Woods Fund of Chicago—were providing.

They spent a second day reflecting on the work they and others are doing in similar neighborhoods in their cities. They asked big questions: Why are we doing this work? What does it require? What are we learning? Is it possible to create change at the community level? How do you build trusting relationships between funders and residents?

For many people, these conversations were extremely helpful, and not just in relation to specific things that they learned. As one person put it, “It is comforting to hear that even people who have been in this work for 10 to 12 years say that it is still slow going and that often things don’t work. Resident-led change is not a fast process.”

The goal was to “get real” about this process. “Funders think we have to have the answers,” said the Woods Fund’s **Consuella Brown**. “But I am more interested in the gray

*“Learning starts with the difficult process of honestly assessing what didn’t work. How do you admit the difficulty of change and then share that with others?”*

—David Portillo

areas or the conundrums.” She thinks that it’s critical to learn what others are doing and to be able to “just be honest” with peers.

The conversation in Chicago seemed very helpful and stimulating to many who were there. “Steans offered candidness,” said **David Portillo** of The Denver Foundation. “Learning starts with the difficult process of honestly assessing what didn’t work. How do you come to grips with the difficulty of change and then talk about that with others?”

The gathering “gave us opportunities to look at things we have never looked at before and consider doing things that we don’t often voice aloud,” Portillo added.

Creating a space where funders can grapple with the difficulty of change” and learn from the experiences of others is precisely the goal of these ‘on-the-ground’ meetings, says Grassroots Grantmakers’ Executive Director Janis Foster. The idea was not just to talk about the work, Foster explains, but to see the work in context and hear from

the people who are doing it — what they are learning and what dilemmas they are facing. “Our goal was to create a space where funders can use the work of one of their peers as a platform of learning — a space to reflect together on what we are learning as a community of practice and individually on how to advance work ‘back-home.’

“What’s challenging is that this work seems so simple—in many cases, awarding small amounts of money for relatively simple projects. But it is so much deeper than it appears. For this work to be powerful, funders need to talk about how to do this work effectively, how to take it deeper, what it takes to build the types of relationships you need to be effective without getting in the way.

“Sometimes it is about getting information. But often it is also about how our organizations work and think. There isn’t much opportunity for funders to talk about that—the baggage that we all have to work around.”

Foster said that the time this group spent discussing these internal issues surprised her. “The conversation kept coming back to issues that are internal, more about the funder and the funding process. The conversation was around race, class and power—yes, in the community—but also about the power differential between the funder and community and how race, class and power shows up in the funder’s relationship with the community. Those conversations were powerful.”

At the meeting, people talked about how to be supportive of community people coming together to create change while at the same time getting out of the way. They talked about the need for “patient money”—the idea that

## People interviewed for this report

**Consuella Brown** is a program director for the **Woods Fund of Chicago**.

**Andy Helmboldt** is a resident volunteer on a neighborhood grants program committee at the **The Battle Creek Community Foundation**.

**Alison Janus** is a program officer for the **Steans Family Foundation**.

**Lisa Leverette** is Coordinator of the Community Connections Grant Program, intermediary for **The Skillman Foundation’s** Good Neighborhoods Program with Prevention Network.

**David Portillo** is a program officer for **The Denver Foundation’s** Strengthening Neighborhoods program.

**Jennifer Roller** is a program officer for Urban Affairs and Neighborhoods at **The Raymond John Wean Foundation**.

“community change work takes time and is never really done,” in Foster’s words.

People also talked about how you measure success, how you build support for this work within the foundation itself, how you “discourage people from measuring the value of the work by the relatively small amount of money that it takes.” And, Foster adds, people asked, “How do you justify the time that this work requires?”

**H**ow do you justify this time that the work requires? Why do this work if it is so challenging? The answer is quite simple: people believe that building the capacity of individuals and communities to create change is essential if that change is going to happen in a way that is sustainable. Foster thinks that is why so many people came to participate in this site visit and conversation.

During the discussion, one funder put it this way: “Our foundation’s mission has been to improve the lives of kids. But after 30 years

The funders who come to the “on-the-ground” meetings are “innovators who are not doing business the usual way, who are willing to look at hard questions, including questions about their own behavior as funders,” says Janis Foster.



of funding and data, we saw that kids were no better off. So we moved to a more grassroots approach.”

Foster says something very similar. “I can point to the millions of dollars that I’ve seen invested and very little evidence of change. It’s not about the amount of money you invest—it’s about where you invest the money.” Investing in nonprofits providing services is needed, she thinks, “but that work isn’t driving change.”

Grassroots Grantmakers believe that the key is investing in people who are coming together to work over time on issues that impact their communities. “In Chicago when we went out, we didn’t see one grant but a combination of work over time,” Foster explains. “It is important to see how it all adds up, hopefully to some movement toward change.

“The missing part of the community change picture is how to support active citizens, promote local democracy and expand the number of people who are working from a position of power.”

Foster says that she thinks of the people who came together in Chicago to talk about

the work they do as “innovators who are interested in people, not programs, who are not doing business the usual way, who are willing to look at hard questions, including questions about their own behavior as funders.”

One key to helping these people succeed is the opportunity to learn from each other, Foster believes. “Peer-to-peer relationships can be really powerful, important vehicles that not only promote learning but also help people over the rough spots. Sometimes you can get burned out if you don’t see the difference you are making. All you see is what hasn’t happened.”

The on-the-ground gatherings allow people to “expand and deepen their community of peers—people who turn to each other as resources and as colleagues who help each other learn and maintain the momentum in their work.”

**T**o deepen what people learned from each other in Chicago—and to extend that learning to those who weren’t there—Grassroots Grantmakers asked The Diarist Project to put together a reflection about

**the issues that surfaced at this gathering.**

The diarist work—which came out of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its *Making Connections* initiative—is also committed to the value of learning from the people who are doing the work every day.

The diarist approach involves interviewing people in-depth about their work—over time if possible, hence the idea of maintaining a “diary”—and then communicating as directly as possible what they have to say. Diarist reports use direct quotes as a form of data that helps ground ideas and theories in the reality of what people doing the work “on the ground” are experiencing and thinking.

To apply this approach in Chicago, diarists recorded the discussion, identified the main themes and developed a series of questions around each theme. Six people who attended the conference were interviewed in depth. This report combines their thinking with comments made during the meeting.

The themes that emerged from this discussion reflect principles about how funders can work most effectively in low-income neighborhoods. They include:

- ✦ Build deep relationships within these communities.
- ✦ Understand that the goal is to build these communities’ capacity to bring about change.
- ✦ Build the capacity of your foundation as well as of the broader funder community to do this work.
- ✦ Find new approaches to insuring accountability.

- ✦ Find ways that this work in communities can add up to broader social change.

## Learning from two funders working in two low-income Chicago neighborhoods

To get real about what it takes for funders to help communities develop the capacity for change, the Grassroots Grantmakers gathering focused on the work of two local foundations—the Woods Fund of Chicago and the Steans Family Foundation—in two Chicago communities—the South Side and North Lawndale.

**The Woods Fund** supports community organizing throughout Chicago. But after examining who receives its support in 1995 and 2003, it realized that very few of its grants were going to the South Side. It created the South Side Initiative to change this.

“We had helped build the capacity of organizing in areas of the city that had more infrastructure and sophistication in policy analysis,” explained **Deborah Harrington**, the Woods Fund’s president. “But we weren’t hitting the poorest communities. How could we get into communities that didn’t have a Starbucks?”

Why weren’t more of its grants going to the South Side, which clearly had many issues that needed to be addressed? The Fund asked the Center for Impact Research to assess organizing capacity on the South Side. It found very little capacity and few groups that understood the importance and potential of community organizing.



*“We went out and met people. We wanted to be proactive and not wait for proposals to come in on their own—we needed to talk about our idea of community organizing and demystify the process.”*

—Deborah Harrington

In response, the Woods Fund began a process to identify and support emerging groups on the South Side. This process started with a request for proposals, one that was discussed at two forums in the community, forums that gave the Fund an opportunity to discuss organizing and better understand how local residents and organizations defined community organizing.

“Woods wasn’t getting a lot of grant applications from the South Side,” explained Harrington, “and so we had to ask why? Foundations are a mystery for many organizations—a lot of it is relational, so what was the way to address that and be more proactive?”

“We went out and met people. We wanted to be proactive and not wait for proposals to come in on their own—we needed to talk about our idea of community organizing and demystify the process.”

The Fund also surveyed South Side residents, asking how they define organizing. “People said it was getting people together to run government programs. They were really talking about social services. It was understandable because these communities

were in crisis. It created a huge opportunity for us to go in and talk about how we define organizing.”

Doing this gave the Fund “a chance to engage at the community level and gave people a chance to get to know us,” Harrington says. “They also came to know that we were sincere in making an investment. It was a process of building relationships.”

After going through this process, the Fund made a series of grants intended to help these emerging groups build their capacity. The grants required them to participate in workshops and peer-learning activities.

Over two years the Woods Fund awarded \$222,000 to eight South Side organizations. Of these eight, four groups built their capacity so well that they began receiving support from other funders and the Fund’s core Community Organizing grants program. The Grassroots Grantmakers’ site visit included conversations with three of these organizations.

**F**or the Steans Family Foundation, the focus on a particular neighborhood—North Lawndale—occurred over time. Initially this foundation focused on building leadership and capacity around broad areas of need—health and human services, youth development, education, employment. But given the limits of its size, Steans eventually changed course.

“We use a place-based strategy because we determined that concentrating resources in one community would likely have a more dy-



More than 50 grassroots grantmakers spent a day “on the ground” in Chicago neighborhoods that have received support from two local foundations, learning more about work that local groups are doing and the impact these funders have had on this work.

namic impact,” explained **Reginald Jones**, the foundation’s president.

Interestingly in relation to the Woods Fund’s emphasis on building capacity, Jones says that his foundation chose North Lawndale *because* “there was a good human service and community-based organization infrastructure there to partner with and a strong resident base.”

Jones sees a danger in a foundation trying to do too much. “We can’t necessarily do it. We can provide resources that enable leadership, but one of the biggest challenges is that it has to be from the inside out.

“The foundation has its ideas about change. However, it is most successful when generated from the inside.”

**D**eveloping these perspectives about a foundation’s appropriate role in a low-income community came after an intense internal examination, Jones said. “We wanted to learn if our strategies were the right ones, and what options we had for continuing and making our work more effective.

“We thought about the foundation’s place in this community. How well did we really connect with the community? There was some interesting learning there.

“At the end of the day, we decided to build on areas where we had the best success, and not be holistic and broad, but to go deep.” The foundation stopped working on a broad range of program areas and focused on two: education and early childhood development.

The foundation also decided to take a step back from the work it was funding. “We have a hallmark statement that we have direct, personal involvement with the community on the ground. But that can be challenging because it means the foundation could get overly involved with a group and potentially lead the mission rather than letting the group do it.”

So how does the foundation balance that? “We don’t have to be at the table. That is a tension we struggle with in our foundation.”

Another aspect of place-based work can make evaluation challenging, Jones said. “When you establish yourself in one com-

munity, you fund a limited number of organizations over time. These organizations can become complacent and lose their accountability to the foundation.

## Snapshots of community change

While Jones and Harrington talked about their foundation's work on the second day of the Grassroots Grantmakers' gathering, on the first day they brought participants to the two neighborhoods and introduced them to some of the groups they've supported. The goal was to give people a chance "to understand the neighborhood context—politically, economically, socially," in the words of Alison Janus, a program officer at the Steans Foundation. "These are all really important."

A core message from funders like Steans that have been working in struggling neighborhoods for years is that taking the time to understand the neighborhoods you are supporting is critical. "You have to understand what is happening to people," says Janus. "What is happening on the street."

To help provide that context, the tours were guided by South Side resident Dr. Arvis Arvette, who teaches economics at Columbia College, and North Lawndale resident Dr. Charles Leeks, Director of Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago. Each has lived and worked in his neighborhood for many years.

Participants met with groups in each community that had received small grants from these two funders. The recipients talked about their work, why each foundation's approach had worked for them, and how they were trying to change their communities.

*"Be wary of the business model and hyper-scientific ways of measuring community. Be willing to fund something that may not get an immediate return, but you can sense you're barking up the right tree."*

—Rey Lopez-Calderon

## South Side—small grants for community organizing

At the **Gary Comer Youth Center**, participants met with the Woods Fund Southside Initiative grantees, whose work centered on community organizing.

**Rey Lopez-Calderon**, executive director of the **Alianza Leadership Institute**, received support to organize the Latino community on the South Side by using a culturally sensitive leadership curriculum that his group developed.

He spoke about the history of community organizing and suggested a definition for organizing that comes from science fiction writer Octavio Butler. "A leader is an ordinary person who ends up doing extraordinary things—who then teaches other ordinary people to do extraordinary things."

Lopez-Calderon urged funders to consider the idea that society today is taking shape in unexpected ways—and that funding requires a flexibility and sense of "imagination" that matches these broader possibilities. "Be wary

of the business model” and “hyper-scientific ways of measuring community,” he said. “Be willing to fund something that may not get an immediate return, but you can sense you’re barking up the right tree.”

**M**etropolitan Area Group for Igniting Civilization, Inc. (MAGIC) organizes low- to moderate-income families—especially youth—in the Woodlawn neighborhood on the South Side. MAGIC brings diverse populations together to change perceptions and promote greater understanding, according to Bryan Echols, the group’s executive director. He likened their work to a kind of “connective tissue.”

He said that 20 percent of Woodlawn’s youth has had some kind of altercation with law enforcement, so MAGIC brought African-American teens and the police together for a dialogue. Police officers educated youth about their general approach and reactions during altercations, and the youth showed a personal side of themselves that was often not seen by the police. “They said, ‘We are artists, students, athletes.’ We demystified each other through the process,” Echols explained.

Echols talked about MAGIC’s work to shift perceptions of African American men and boys in the media by changing the way information is presented. “We need to talk about three out of 10 graduating rather than saying, ‘There were only three.’ Our strategy is to look at the good things we see rather than focusing on things that aren’t working.... We have to look at black men and boys from a different perspective...and allow them to tell their own story.”

**R**ami Nashashibi and Taqi Thomas of the Inner City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) have also worked to change perceptions and eliminate barriers between people on the South Side. IMAN offers a range of social services, promotes arts and culture, and organizes around social justice issues.

In response to ongoing drug-related community violence, IMAN set up block parties in neighborhoods with problems. They then knocked on doors to connect neighbors, lessen fear and open a broader dialogue for problem solving. Their actions were successful and other blocks have asked for these interventions.

Nashashibi described it as an “unorthodox” approach to violence prevention. He said, “The space and time to do this in is critical, because it takes awhile before something tangible can coalesce.” He praised the Woods Fund for “taking a serious risk and setting aside some of the quantifiable issues to look more at the context.”

“To fund community is to play an important role in fostering diamonds,” he added.

### North Lawndale—Supporting projects without too much intervention

At the Union Baptist Church in North Lawndale, **Aquil Charlton** talked about how the **CRIB Collective** started as a “safe space” or “pathway” for North Lawndale youth to learn how to collaborate with adults and other populations.

To involve these young people in their community, the Steans Foundation helped

*“We don’t put limits on their ideas, but we take time to work with them to deepen their social impact. Having these kinds of conversations is an important part of this.”*

*—Aquil Charlton*

CRIB establish a youth-led “re-granting” program that supports teen-led projects. Participants are trained in how to award and manage grants, then they use those skills to identify and select projects for small grant funding.

This small grants program prioritized engagement with North Lawndale teens, who need more constructive outlets in the community. “The project is only a means to an end, to find a way to gain some skills—like doing a budget, getting a bank account, sustainability,” explained Mariama Kaba, a Steans program officer. “These are things that our youth don’t have.”

Projects that received support included the development of a youth football league and an entrepreneurial group that produced T-shirts and did job training for other teens.

“We don’t put limits on their ideas, but we take time to work with them to deepen their social impact,” said Charlton of the CRIB Collective. “Having these kinds of conversations is an important part of this.”

Finally, a group of women in North Lawndale received support through Steans for a project to help integrate youths with a felony back into the community.

The majority of these young people had been arrested for fighting in school. Volunteer lawyers were able to expunge their records, making it easier for them to find a decent job after high school. The women also provided informal counseling.

“This can become a way of life,” said Frances Wolley, Coordinator of **North Lawndale Juvenile Justice Initiative**. “We want to take some steps to make sure that the law is not a thing our youths are progressively involved in.”

# 1. Build strong relationships with communities

*"If we share what we don't know and want to learn together with leaders in the neighborhood, perhaps there is the possibility of an authentic relationship in the communities."*

—David Portillo

One of the easiest things to say about many aspects of foundation work is that relationships are critical. But while many people recognize the importance of building strong relationships, they also report that the reality is that relationships often break down or never really develop.

In Chicago, many people talked about the importance of relationships and the need to build the trust that underlies strong relationships. And many talked about how hard it is to build these relationships between funders and people who live in struggling communities. Those interviewed for this report also had a lot to say about relationships between funders and community people.

Their basic messages were pretty straightforward. While it's hard for funders to build honest relationships with anyone they are funding, it is particularly hard to do so with

people who live in low-income communities, for reasons that go beyond the disparity in income and power.

But while it isn't easy, it is critical to invest the time and personal capital to forge as good of relationships as you can with people who live in the communities you are supporting. People spoke quite passionately about why these relationships are so critical. They talked about the need to build trust and overcome a history of disappointment and skepticism, the knowledge that these relationships can bring (both to the funders and to a community's leaders) and the important roles relationships can play in bringing about system change. Some people also emphasized the importance of funders nurturing relationships *within* these communities.

In relation to how to build relationships, people also had a lot to say. They talked about the need to devote time and to make a long-term commitment. Many emphasized the need to develop the capacity to simply listen to people, even when they are expressing frustration. Others talked about the reality that, as with any relationship, you have to keep at it, working through the inevitable differences.

A few people talked about the importance of who represents the funder and whether they live in the community or have other connections to that community. Several people

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talked about the barrier that can be created by the complex language that funders often use. Finally, the challenge of honesty in these relationships came up frequently, with people offering several suggestions for achieving more honesty between funders and community people.

### Why is it so hard to build strong relationships with residents of struggling communities?

The reality that all funders face is that they start every relationship with a grantee from a place of inequality. They control money. The grantees need that money to run their programs. As someone put it in Chicago, “The foundation always will have the money and the agency is always down here. There will be no level relationship. You have to be realistic about that.”

But this inequality is particularly pronounced when funders work in very low-income communities. “There is the wealth of the foundation vs. the need of the community,” explained Jones. As someone else put it in Chicago: “We are a welcome dollar sign in a neighborhood.”

The Steans Foundation’s **Alison Janus** says, “There is the power differential. There are race and class issues....a whole host of things. They are there and they’re not going away, so let’s deal with them.”

Others pointed out that another reason it is hard for a funder to build relationships with low-income communities is history. Most of these communities have seen funders and initiatives before.

## Lisa Leverette

**The Skillman Foundation of Detroit: small grant program coordinator contracted through the Prevention Network (the intermediary), Lansing, Michigan**



An intermediary and Coordinator of Skillman’s Community Connections Grant Program, Lisa Leverette considers herself a “translator” between two worlds. It’s a role that goes beyond understanding the languages of both community and foundation. It also involves building relationships, a process that requires her not only to connect verbally but also through her physical presence.

Educating the community about grant opportunities through Skillman is “not as simple as a workshop every three months,” says Leverette. “I’m literally in people’s living rooms, talking to applicants of the grant program before, throughout and beyond their project.”

She’s conscious of the role that physical presence—particularly in relation to space—plays in making grassroots grants effective. During “On the Ground” in Chicago, she reflected on the “use of space” and how the “physical layout” of a neighborhood and “blight” can affect a community.

The importance of having space in which to congregate and plan “and have some control over” was even more obvious to her. “Being able to find a space like a church basement has value to it.”

“I’m not working with a blank slate,” explained **Lisa Leverette** who works with The Skillman Foundation. “It’s very difficult to build a relationship with someone who has been through this before. They often feel jaded and suspicious, which makes it much harder for me to prove myself. And then I have to speak for something bigger than me, which is the foundation. You are constantly reassuring folks. You must come in and offer something and be able to deliver it.”

Sometimes the skepticism goes beyond one prior disappointing initiative by a funder, a point that the Wean Founda-

tion's **Jennifer Roller** made. Her foundation focuses on what many refer to as the "rust belt" Ohio communities of Warren and Youngstown, where the economy collapsed more than a generation ago.

"For years as a community we were looking for the next big industry. You had politicians promising the next big thing. They promised prisons, government administration, air freight, etc. Then the plans would fall through and folks became less hopeful.

"People then didn't believe the city could make a turnaround or that even a notable foundation could make a difference."

### Why it's so important to build strong relationships

Youngstown and Warren are similar in ways to nearly every struggling, low-income community in the country: their economic base collapsed at least a generation ago and, while many people and institutions have promised many things, no one has been able to really do something about this core problem. The result is often a high level of skepticism and a very low level of trust.

Which is the key reason why building relationships is where you have to start, Roller believes. "It is so important to develop trust." You start to develop that trust by "helping people feel that they have access," Roller says. In the past, she says, "Folks haven't had access to develop relationships."

Roller's Neighborhood Success program is not simply about supporting residents to address neighborhood concerns. It is also about developing leaders. She believes you do that by developing relationships with leaders as well

as encouraging relationships among leaders. "With our grant-making committee, we build relationships and nurture those relationships across communities.

"With them on the committees, they bring experiences to the table that we do not have. They bring new programs onto our radar. They are ambassadors for the program, making referrals and encouraging groups to submit applications." These leaders begin to influence how resources are used and shape what is going on in their communities in concrete ways. Over time this kind of access builds trust and overcomes skepticism, Roller believes.

At The Denver Foundation, leaders developed through its small grants program have gained access to many other parts of the foundation, according to Program Officer David Portillo. A few joined the foundation's Oversight Committee. Their contributions were so significant that the foundation decided that half the people on that committee would not be from the foundation.

"Community leaders have attracted the attention of the foundation as a whole," Portillo

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—Lisa Leverette



says, with several sitting on other foundation committees. One leader eventually became the foundation's board chair.

For a community foundation like this one, these kinds of relationships with community members are essential, Portillo believes. "Community foundations have been seen as funding work in communities. So it's important to be in the community to listen and ask questions and build relationships over multiple years. That accessibility and engagement are keys to this work."

**N**early everyone interviewed testified to the necessity of building relationships with community people. "You can't do anything of value without them," said the Steans Foundation's Alison Janus. "It is everything. It is about trust, about understanding where people are coming from. You are the guest coming from outside. You have to gain that person's trust and respect before you can realistically expect to gain something."

Leverette says that building relationships with people living in the communities you are supporting is "tremendously important." She explains, "This is ground zero for kids and communities. It is where they are spending time. Their relationships are here. People who care for them are here."

By being in these communities, by building relationships with the people who live in these communities, a funder's understanding grows exponentially, according to those who have been doing this work for years.

Leverette offered a simple example of why this level of understanding is important. "A grassroots applicant might need a grant and

*"We live in the same world, supposedly with access to the same things. So why is it working for me and not for this other person? I get the feeling that taking part in this committee is helping people feel we are all in the same boat."*

—Andy Helmboldt

one third of the budget is for food. Someone without knowledge of the nutritional needs of youth in this community might balk at such an expense. But in actuality it is fundamental to impacting the nutrition needs of a child and is culturally significant."

Having good relationships in a community can also be critically important in relation to communications, helping counter misinformation, Leverette believes. "Someone in the community can say something negative and once that starts it spreads like wildfire. This can shut down a process. When misinformation is out, I have to get down on the ground and correct it."

**Andy Helmboldt**, a volunteer for The Battle Creek Foundation's neighborhood grants program, also talks about the importance of a funder having "a more direct connection to the problem and the people working on it." He says that the key is what you learn. "You learn about problems you may not have known existed." You also get "a small glimpse into what life is like for others in different situations."

This glimpse not only increases understanding, it can also create a sense of connection, Helmboldt believes. “We live in the same world, supposedly with access to the same things. So why is it working for me and not for this other person? I get the feeling that taking part in this committee is helping people feel we are all in the same boat.”

**T**hese connections with community people not only give foundations more knowledge, they also can transform how community people see a funder. “As we build relationships, the face of the foundation transforms in people’s minds,” Leverette thinks. The foundation is seen as an individual with whom a community person can have a relationship. While a foundation can make many people very anxious, an individual with whom a community person has a relationship can change this. “We are not intimidating,” Leverette adds.

These relationships also have a very practical impact, helping community people plan their work, write proposals and run their projects, Leverette believes. She says that a workshop every three months won’t get it done. “I’m literally in people’s living rooms, talking to applicants before, throughout and beyond their project.” She helps people understand “how to move within the structure and the bureaucracy.”

By engaging with people at this level, a funder is doing more than improving the odds that a specific project will succeed. That funder is also helping community people develop the capacity to change their own communities, which is what many funders think matters the most.

**W**oods Fund’s Consuella Brown goes even further, saying that, “Without relationships, you cannot create system change.”

“I think relationships are at the foundation of anything that might be moved forward because you are building an avenue for dialogue and the possibility of trust.” Brown says that, for her, foundation work is about advancing ideas that “can make a tangible difference for people.” You advance ideas by building credibility and developing one-on-one relationships. Through these relationships, you can create understanding and work on ideas together.

When a funder builds relationships with community people, these relationships become first steps. People can then build other relationships with people outside their communities, people who can help change the policies and systems that aren’t working for these communities.

Plus, without relationships with communities, funders have no hope of creating change, Brown believes. “I am under no illusion that my sitting in the offices of the Woods Fund

*“I am under no illusion that my sitting in the offices of the Woods Fund creates change. But I do buy into the idea that others can do that. I provide a resource. I am part of the circle, but I am not necessarily the broker of the actual change.”*

—Consuella Brown



Rey Lopez-Calderon of Alianza Leadership Institute urged foundations to “be wary hyper-scientific ways of measuring community.”

creates change. But I do buy into the idea that others can do that. I provide a resource. I am part of the circle, but I am not necessarily the broker of the actual change.

“Anyone who understands this business knows that foundations are only as good as the work of their grantees. Without the grantees, we have no voice.”

It is not just the relationships that a funder may nurture between community people and policymakers that can lead to change, it is also the relationships a funder can stimulate *within* a community, believes The Battle Creek Foundation’s Helmboldt. He says that these “incredibly important” relationships are “the focus of our neighborhood grant program.” Why?

“What holds people back is the anonymity of being alone. They see the obvious problems but they don’t see anyone else caring about fixing them.” Pulling together people who want to fix these problems becomes critical, Helmboldt believes. “If you are going to be doing any kind of grassroots change, the more roots you have the better.”

Over time, he says the idea is to “bring neighbors together to empower them to take responsibility to take control of their own neighborhood. But no one will do it if they feel they are the only one who feels that way.”

### How can you build strong relationships with communities?

One of the encouraging aspects of the Chicago meeting, according to many participants, was the amount of knowledge that many funders now have about how to build relationships in these communities, the result of the fact that people have now been doing this work for many years. People had many ideas about how to overcome the barriers to building strong relationships between funders and community people.

One idea is simply to understand that building these relationships takes time and a long-term commitment. Indeed, this is why understanding the importance of relationships is critical: only if funders understand this will they be willing to make the commitment needed to build these relationships.

As one person said in Chicago, “You can’t think that just going to a church meeting one time is enough for them to ‘get’ you and you to ‘get’ them. It will take time. But it seems like people want something right now...like they are microwaving a meal. You need six months to even get to some of this trust.”

“You need to really, really take your time,” says Janus, who has been working in North Lawndale for three years. She says you need to build a space where there is trust. “You have to work hard at it. You have to protect that space and listen.”

And like any relationship, the building process never really stops. “The relationships are definitely possible,” Janus believes. “But it’s never this perfect thing. You can get some honest interactions, but you will step on toes and there will be hurt feelings. There is a lot to negotiate.”

Leverette agrees about the time it takes. She also thinks that relationships between funders and community are possible “if everyone is committed and accountable” and “if you’re not on a timeline with a specific agenda to get somewhere.

“These timetables just kill people. The relationship has to evolve organically with its bruises and bumps along the way. You will have difficulties and disagreement. That is part of the process. When that happens, we have to be patient in getting back on the road.

“It’s a lot of work.... But foundations are used to a straight line with a plan and strategy to get there. If it’s not doing what they think it needs to be doing, they often want to pull up stakes or change the direction. Or they want to put people into the straight line. But you can’t do it that way.”

Roller believes that the time it takes to build relationships needs to be seen as a key part of the funder’s job. She believes that going to potluck dinners, block watch meetings or other community functions “is part of my workday. I place as much emphasis on these gatherings as going to meetings where one would believe there is more ‘influence.’”

**O**ne reason it takes time to build these relationships is that a critical part of the process is taking time to listen to people, an idea that came up often. The need to listen is certainly true of any relationship. But in a relationship involving so much disparity, several people said that listening becomes even more important.

As one person put it in Chicago, “What you think we need is not always what we do need. You have to listen to us and not have your own agenda. You have to be patient and not expect things to get done quickly.”

Another person said something very similar in Chicago. “Funders need to seek to understand first rather than come with their own agenda because of the power dynamic. Every group wants you just to listen to them. Because you have the power, you need to understand them first, with them understanding you later.”

It’s also important to listen not just for the problems that exist in a community, but also for the assets and abilities that all communities possess. “Many funders convene people to hear their complaints. But you also want to listen for what is good and what they can do,” is how one person put this in Chicago. “Anytime a foundation comes in with a deficit

attitude, that is not good,” said another participant. “Their attitude needs to change.”

Once again, listening to people requires time, another point made in Chicago. “People in our neighborhood are not used to being listened to. To begin to speak up and say what they want is going to be really challenging.”

How can you encourage people to speak up? A big part of it, several people said, is being there over a long enough period of time that people begin to feel comfortable with you. Part of it is simply being willing to be in the community.

**P**art of it is who represents the foundation. Foundations “need translators who bridge the divide between people in the community and the foundation,” is how one person put it in Chicago. Another person said that, “You have to send people who look like us or who live here.”

Roller has lived in Ohio’s Mahoning Valley her whole life. “My presence here at the foundation is a prime example of putting your money where your mouth is when it comes to building the capacity of the Mahoning Valley. People know my family. I follow through and I have maintained good relationships. People can count on me being part of this community.”

Through her, they have access to the foundation. “I think access is very important. Our board president will be the first to say that, at one time, we were not very accessible. A small but telling example was the lack of our address on our letterhead. However, be it grant-seeker orientations, meetings or workshops, now we are very much a part of this community.”

*“Funders need to seek to understand first rather than come with their own agenda because of the power dynamic. Because you have the power, you need to understand them first, with them understanding you later.”*

—Comment at Chicago meeting

Brown also lives in the community in which her foundation is working. “For me, it’s important to really be in the community. I live there, so it’s as simple as taking public transportation and taking in what I see and hear or striking up a conversation with a taxi driver or talking with someone behind the counter at a fast food restaurant. Being in places where I am hearing disadvantaged people and what is of greatest concern to them.”

Portillo says that his foundation’s staff “is beginning to look like the make-up of the neighborhood,” which is primarily Latino and African-American.

He also says that the foundation has become more aware of the differences between its way of working and the communities it is supporting. “When I was first hired, we had a policy that I must always wear a tie when I met with a grantee, but we have grown more flexible. These are barriers to inclusivity that you don’t always think about.”

A person at the Chicago meeting said something similar: “Our staff is not corporate and is less traditional. People come in and don’t have an appointment and just sit down and talk about an idea.”

Helmholtz says that when his committee interviews people requesting grants, they recognize that, “This experience can be intimidating. But once people get in the room, it is a pretty informal environment. The people on the committee are not white guys with suits. We really have a diverse group and are regular people doing regular jobs. We’ve done about as good a job as possible in having people who are just like you.”

**O**ne of the big barriers between communities and foundations is language, a point many people made. As one person put it in Chicago: “Let’s limit the ‘foundation-speak.’ It doesn’t connect with our grantees. We need translation. Can residents help us write things that make sense in their own language?”

Another person said, “It’s a different culture, using a different language. Don’t diminish that.”

Brown in particular does not diminish this. She says that she felt this gap even in Chicago. “It feels like community leaders and foundation people are not speaking the same language. They’re not even on the same page. We are missing each other.

“Even though the foundation staff in the room generally have strong commitments to civic engagement at the community level, I think we were still missing each other. Is there a possibility of a shared language that is accessible to both?”

Brown believes this “common accessible language” is critical if foundation and community people are going to “reach some agreement about common purpose and vision.”

*“It feels like community leaders and foundation people are not speaking the same language. They’re not even on the same page. We are missing each other.”*

—Consuella Brown

She says that simply telling community people that they will lead the work isn’t enough if the work isn’t based on a joint effort to come up with this common vision.

**B**rown thinks the problem is a lack of candor in the relationships, another theme that came up a lot in Chicago and in the follow-up interviews. “We tell community people to be in the lead even when we are not sure they are on the right path. There is a fear of saying, ‘We think you may be wrong,’ because we want to support community leadership. But is holding back really helpful? Are we creating false expectations?”

One person said something similar in Chicago, calling for candor among both foundation people and community leaders. “We have to have honest conversations, but there is a level of candor that isn’t taking place. It doesn’t work to just sit back and let us do what we want. And it doesn’t work if residents don’t call foundations when they make mistakes.”

Janus says something similar: “You have to have hard conversations when we tell people that something won’t work.”

How do you achieve this level of candor? Again, many people think it will only come

over time, as relationships develop a certain amount of trust. With that trust, said another person in Chicago, there can be more candor. “In my experience, most funders are not trying to avoid the truth. The challenge is being comfortable with being candid.”

“The difficulty,” explains Portillo, “is that there is always a funder relationship with anyone the foundation supports, so all of your ideas as a program officer are ‘great.’ A grantee is unlikely to challenge you.”

He thinks the foundation needs to work at “making space for that sort of listening.” This may mean “admitting our own faults first before we ask a grantee about what they need to work on. We have to be more candid about our foibles.

“It is difficult to approach a conversation if the group thinks you will be cutting them off once they become candid enough to mention their problems. That is a normal barrier between a funder and a grantee.

“As your relationships mature you can sometimes get around this barrier.”

Brown believes that her foundation has overcome this barrier. “I think we are doing a good job when our partner organizations push back, and they do so a lot. I can’t remember a site visit with a grantee who didn’t do that.” She thinks this shows that “the power balance is right” and indicates that “we let people have the freedom to disagree with our approach or analysis.”

How did she get to this point? The key is that both the community and the foundation “come to this with a really honest spirit and a deep commitment to creating system change.”

Roller believes the key is to “recognize that there is this disparity of power. We have to keep that real and admit it first and foremost and get that out of the way.”

One of the Chicago participants thinks it’s critical to establish a clear grantor/grantee relationship, with parameters up front. “What do you want from me and what do I want from you? Maybe it’s that I want you to answer my calls in a timely way. Once you do that, you build something early on.”

Another key is simply to recognize that, in the words of a person in Chicago, “the work is driven by people’s passions.” That passion produces energy. It can also produce anger. Listening to and accepting that anger can be an important step to building a more honest relationship.

But listening has another benefit, according to someone else in Chicago. “One of the most important things we do is pay attention. These groups are often doing work that is not easy and can be thankless. To have someone there to say that we believe in you and to put up some money behind that...groups are extremely appreciative of this moral support.”

*“One of the most important things we do is pay attention. These groups are often doing work that is not easy and can be thankless. To have someone there to say that we believe in you... groups are extremely appreciative of this moral support.”*

*—Comment at Chicago meeting*

## 2. Build the capacity of these communities

*“I don’t think we put nearly enough money into capacity building. People deserve the right to choose and that takes capacity. They need to be able to say, ‘I want a park for the kids. I don’t want that drug house at the end of the street.’ And then they need to have the capacity to make these changes.”*

—Alison Janus

For many grassroots funders, this work must involve much more than giving residents the relatively small amount of money they need to accomplish something—an after-school computer lab, a block-watch program, a clean-up campaign. These funders believe this work ultimately can and should be about building the capacity of a community’s residents to change their lives and their communities.

Both the people who spoke in Chicago and those interviewed for this report talked quite a bit about why funders should care about building the capacity of the communities they support. The main reason is simply that greater capacity means that these communities can achieve more change.

People also talked about how they’ve helped communities build their capacity as well as which capacities they think are needed.

But a few people raised caveats, saying there is a fine line between encouraging communities to develop their capacities and pushing communities to do things that they don’t necessarily think are important.

**A**t the Chicago meeting, the Woods Fund of Chicago’s *Deborah Harrington* talked extensively about what her foundation had done to build capacity on Chicago’s **South Side**. “Building capacity for us was to identify emerging leaders because a lot of community organizing is leadership development.

“We provided emerging groups with mentors—pairing people with experience with those who needed to learn how to navigate the landscape. We offered mini-grants—a pot of money for training, dollars for strategic planning and leadership development.

“We instituted a learning table—a safe space where groups could come together to build relationships and trust and talk about their organizing campaigns.” To keep it safe, the Woods Fund wasn’t at this table.

“They talked about how to connect community organizing to public policy development, and did a power analysis to find out

## REFLECTIONS

about Grassroots Grantmaking



who they should be holding accountable in the community.

“They also did a budget analysis because the communities don’t have a sense of where the funding is.... It gave them a basis for creating some targets.” The groups at this learning table also got involved in other coalitions, Harrington added. “The learning table has empowered them.”

**S**everal of the people who were interviewed agreed with Harrington about the importance of building capacity. **Andy Helmboldt**, the resident volunteer for The Battle Creek Foundation, thinks building capacity is “the whole ball game.” He adds, “Building their capacity is another way of empowering them to feel like they have control over their own neighborhood. That they can make their neighborhood the way they want it to be and that there isn’t simply this ‘force’ over them that they can’t control.”

Indeed, **Jennifer Roller** says that The Wean Foundation has become so convinced of the need to build capacity that it changed its mission statement to reflect the fact that, “We are more than grantmakers.”

**Consuella Brown** of the Woods Fund of Chicago said that it is “extremely important to build capacity, to build institutions that are anchored in the community and are responsive to the needs of the people.”

**Alison Janus** of the Steans Foundation agrees, saying that funders need to make a long-term commitment to building capacity. “I don’t think we put nearly enough money into capacity building.” Too often, she says, funders will make a small, short-term grant to help a

## Alison Janus

**Program Officer,  
Steans Family Foundation**



Janus has worked in philanthropy for 13 years and been with Steans for the past three. She says that her work with Steans has been “appealing” because it was “hands on and not just a typical review of proposals.”

Janus says that only about 25% of her time is spent reviewing grants, which makes her current role “different than a traditional program officer.” Most of her time now is devoted to developing relationships and building capacity directly in the community, a shift she says “has really rejuvenated me.”

But community work comes with its own challenges. That’s why Janus found the “On the Ground” event in Chicago useful, because she had the chance to talk with others who share similar day-to-day struggles. “We could trade ideas and shore each other up,” she says. “I was inspired by the possibilities.”

group get training in a specific area. But the need is “more holistic and long-term. It is not solved in one grant.”

Janus thinks the goal is for community leaders and groups to build the level of knowledge and skills that will allow them to effectively push for the changes their communities need over the long period of time that change requires. Building this level of capacity in a community “is really important,” she believes.

“People deserve the right to choose and that takes capacity. They need to be able to say, ‘I want a park for the kids. I don’t want that drug house at the end of the street.’ And then they need to have the capacity to make these changes.”

The Denver Foundation’s **David Portillo** also agrees about the need to invest in capacity building, but he says his Strengthening Neigh-



Bryan Echols explains how MAGIC—Metropolitan Area Group for Igniting Civilization—brought together African American youth and police to “demystify each other.”

borhoods program didn’t see this broader objective at first. “This has been a sea change for us. Originally we didn’t see the need to build the capacities of neighborhood leaders or groups in any way.”

Why the change? Portillo says it was an early evaluation of the Strengthening Neighborhoods program. The evaluation found that some people who received the small grants did fine. But many others “did not appear to have the skills to successfully engage others or carry through a project. The foundation decided that we needed to build skills in leaders who wanted help.”

**W**hich skills should foundations try to build? How? Portillo says that The Denver Foundation developed a training program that could meet a broad range of needs. “Sometimes people want to know more than how to run a meeting. They want to know how they can impact policy at a city level. A short class in facilitation is not always enough. There is a hunger for more, and so we started providing it.”

Part of The Denver Foundation’s training involved bringing leaders together to learn from each other. “A leader’s capacity to imagine change is propelled when they can learn from other neighborhood leaders about what they have accomplished,” Portillo explains.

The foundation hired consultants to conduct a lot of this training, though Portillo thinks that a foundation should hire staff “with an eye to providing capacity building. The more in-house training you can do, the better you will be able to weather future recessions.” Portillo thinks that the fact that some community foundations are hiring former organizers

*“The burning issue is inclusion. We can identify people who are the exception and are involved in things. But we forget there are many others who need to get involved.”*

—Jennifer Roller

The on-the-ground meetings are kept small so that “people could get to know each other as peers, partners on the journey,” explained Janis Foster.



to run their neighborhood programs is a good thing since they usually have experience building the capacity of neighborhood residents.

In relation to which skills, the Woods Fund’s Brown agrees with Portillo about the need to think beyond simply teaching people how to facilitate a meeting. She thinks building the capacity to analyze is critical. “Organizations and communities need the ability to assess what is going on politically. Who holds the power strings or the purse strings?”

Brown thinks organizations also need the ability to raise money and to tell their stories effectively. And they need to evaluate their work, not so much in the traditional sense of evaluating how many people they served and what outcomes they achieved, but evaluating their thinking and their process for achieving change. “That is far more informative than the outcome.”

Groups also need the capacity to “build their base by cultivating and training leaders,” Brown thinks. Roller agrees: “The burning issue is inclusion. We can identify people who are the exception and are involved in things. But we forget there are many others who need

to get involved.” For her, “giving opportunities to younger people to get involved” is especially important.

For **Lisa Leverette**, who works with The Skillman Foundation, the key capacity is the ability of “residents to work together.” She explains, “It’s very important to build capacity in the community to work together because that is where the kids spend their time. The goal is to improve the lives of youth. Communities need to be able to organize themselves around their children and advocate for them.”

**B**ut can funders be too prescriptive about which capacities communities need to develop? **Reginald Jones** of the Steans Foundation thinks the answer is yes. “We are the majority foundation in this community, so capacity by whose standards? If we impose our own definition, there can be a certain amount of tension.

Instead, Steans focuses on identifying capacity that already exists in a community like North Lawndale. “We can’t necessarily build capacity. We have strategies to promote re-

sources that enable leadership, but one of the biggest challenges is that it has to be from the inside out.

Jones thinks that groups receiving Steans' grants can build their capacity and develop other sources of funding.

"If you are being successful in building capacity, you would see that groups become savvier in managing their operations, diversifying their funding base and not relying on one funder."

While the Woods Fund does more to build capacity, Harrington also recognizes the limits of what foundations can and should do in these communities. "It's about ownership. We're talking about people owning their own change. The best thing for a funder is to identify talent and see their theory of change and help them articulate that. They have the idea. But maybe they haven't thought it through in terms of what will work.

"We need to provide them with the tools they need and then get out of their way. There is so much deep and abiding wisdom at the community level and we need to see

## Jennifer Roller

**Program Officer for Urban Affairs and Neighborhoods, The Raymond John Wean Foundation, Warren, Ohio**



Jennifer Roller says that her hiring is "a prime example of building capacity." A lifelong resident of Youngstown—one of the communities where Wean targets its work—she says her "presence at the foundation is an example of putting your money where your mouth is."

"I grew up in Youngstown and have seen the community change. What is relevant to me is that the foundation is putting people behind its message. It's good to be a part of that in an area where people feel disenfranchised. I'm a part of something really positive."

Fairly new to her work with Wean, Roller anticipated the "On the Ground" gathering in Chicago as a time when she could "meet others... and hear about practical things like lessons learned and best practices from development to implementation."

While her expectations were met, she also came away with an unexpected awareness—that many of the programs she was learning about "were modeled after ones influenced by individuals who now work at Wean."

them as the experts. We just shepherd and support them and then use our ability as a convener."

### 3. Build the capacity of your foundation to do this work and of the funder community to support this work

*“A small grants program can affect a foundation as a whole—or it could be ignored and kept in its niche. If grassroots grantmaking is taken seriously, it provides examples and possibilities that may move you to look at your institution differently. It could be a catalyst for changes within your institution.”*

—David Portillo

To say that many people at the Chicago meeting thought that the need to “build capacity” also applies to funders is to state the obvious: funders came to the meeting specifically to build their capacity by learning from both their peers and residents working in other communities.

People at the meeting and in the follow-up interviews had many ideas about which capacities funders need to build. Many emphasized the capacity to develop a deeper understanding of these communities, one that comes from knowing more than data. Once again, several people talked about the need for funders to become better listeners. They en-

couraged funders to spend more time in these communities as well as to expose their staff and board to community people.

Several people also talked about the issue of control, saying that funders need to get better at letting go of some of their control and embracing the role of being a partner in the work, not just a funder.

Several also talked about the need for broader changes within the institution. As one person put it in Chicago, “You’d better be ready to move the entire institution closer to the work to really capture the trust and hope of people and then deliver on it.”

Others emphasized the need to reach out to the broader funder community to develop more support for this work.

**P**robably the most-mentioned capacity that funders need to develop involves the ability to develop a deeper understanding of the communities that funders are trying to help.

Funders need “the ability to connect directly to the residents affected by the problems they are trying to solve, rather than running the funds through some intermediary,” said **Andy Helmboldt**, the resident volunteer for The Battle Creek Foundation.

“They need to have a more direct connection to the problem and the people who are working on that problem.”

When a funder does this, “You learn about problems you may not have known existed. You learn that there are people really dedicated to solving these problems.”

**Alison Janus** of Steans agrees. “It’s about taking the time to understand the neighborhood context—politically, economically, socially. These are all really important. You have to understand what is happening to people. What is happening on the street.”

You learn this by building your own capacity to listen, Janus believes. “I have a pretty good idea how to listen, but this job taught me how much more important it is. The trust helps you have the conversation.”

Janus says that she has also learned that, “It’s about so much more than having expertise in an area like education or employment.” She adds that “it’s nice to know best practices,” but to work in communities effectively, knowing best practices in a field like education is not enough.

For the Woods Fund of Chicago’s **Consuella Brown**, the key is that funders learn “best practices” for working in and with communities. “What is the most logical way to move from the stop sign on the corner to getting an off-ramp regulated on a major highway? How do you foster growth? Is it by asking questions or networking grantees together? That is the technical assistance that foundations need—the mechanics of progression or evolution.”

## David Portillo

### Program Officer for The Denver Foundation’s Strengthening Neighborhoods program



Nine years with the Strengthening Neighborhoods program in Denver has given David Portillo a good chance to see how deeply small grants can influence the community. The most rewarding part, he says, is “working with neighborhood leaders through a process of their own transformation.

“You help a group identify a problem, and then a few years later you see they have been able to change their community,” he says. “Being a part of that in any way always renews your commitment to the work.”

Even after so many years, Portillo realizes there’s still much to learn. During “On the Ground” in Chicago, he appreciated the way that new ideas were paired with “candidness” about the struggles. “It gave us an opportunity to look at things we’ve never looked at before, and consider doing things we can’t often voice aloud. That’s something.”

**L**isa Leverette, who works with The Skillman Foundation, also emphasized the importance of listening. “The funder must change their culture to listen and to be a partner at the table.” But she says, “That is harder to do because they have the power.”

She thinks funders must build their capacity “to resist the urge to control every nuance” and to trust their partners—both community groups and intermediaries. She thinks Skillman has learned to do this well, “respecting the process of those who have experience with grassroots groups” and trusting the decisions of its community-based review panel. “These folks have evolved to push back on the foundation because they own the process.” She says her foundation is trying hard to adjust to this dynamic.

“It’s about all the parties being willing to balance and check their power at different times.”

If a funder can't check its power and truly be a partner, then Leverette says many "community people are willing to walk away." This reflects the fact that "a lot of community people are jaded and have been used as tokens."

"Funders are often caught off guard when a community resists or pushes back based on its own self-interest. It's even hard as an intermediary. There is a fine line to walk as the players learn the give-and-take of the relationship."

Janus agrees that funders that want to work in communities must accept that it will "get called to account for things, more so than in other foundations. Here you are forced to really connect with the community and it is unique."

**F**or The Denver Foundation's *David Portillo*, ultimately the connection needs to be a two-way street. He thinks the funder must be willing to get into the neighborhood. "Physically locating our committee meetings in the neighborhood is important. It usually includes a tour and a time to understand what is happening there."

But the other side is "having community leaders on your board and committees." Portillo says that his foundation has been working to be more inclusive. He says his Strengthening Neighborhoods program introduces neighborhood leaders to the foundation's nominating committee. As a result, "the foundation's board and committees look much more like the community than they did before."

What helped catalyze change at The Denver Foundation was the process of evaluating its Strengthening Neighborhoods program.

*"A big part of capacity building is not just the grantee but also the funder—how do we amplify the work? We need to expose others to these concepts and needs."*

—Deborah Harrington

The consultant hired to do this evaluation—David Scheie of Rainbow Research—emphasized the need to take the time to do analysis and reflection, Portillo says.

"They helped us evaluate what we were doing, what we could learn and what perhaps we should stop doing." The process also "provided an opportunity to revisit our goals."

He says one result of this process was a new grassroots leadership program. Another result was a deeper commitment to the goal of social change.

Scheie also tied the evaluation to an intentional way to listen. "He urged us to transform our relationship with the community, and to think of ourselves as working at a place of learning, instead of continuing to pretend we know everything."

To connect this learning to the foundation's board, Portillo says that, "We often invite grantees to tell a story about their work. Whenever small grants leaders get profiled and get to tell their story, it provides an emotional jolt for our larger board and grantmaking committee.

"Not only do they hear a great narrative about a community coming together, but

Rami Nashashibi and Taqi Thomas thanked the Woods Fund of Chicago for “taking a serious risk” and supporting the Inner City Muslim Action Network’s “unorthodox” approach to violence prevention, which involves connecting neighbors and reducing fear.



many board and committee members approach me afterward to let me know how they were touched and inspired and feel the energy to continue doing the philanthropic work they are doing. You can never stop telling stories—you can always be re-inspired.”

**O**nce a funder’s board understands and embraces this work, the next step can be engaging other funders. As one person put it at the Chicago meeting: “How can we partner with other funders? Funders often don’t play well together.”

**Deborah Harrington** said that the Woods Fund saw this need: “We focused on working with other funders because the complexity of issues requires a collaborative approach to have impact.

She thinks that the responsibility of a funder “is to provide access—not being a gatekeeper but a door opener. We introduce our groups to colleagues to leverage other grants, and then they have introduced themselves to other funders.”

Part of the problem, Harrington said, is few foundations support community organizing. “I believe that less than 3% of all domestic private grantmaking is distributed to social change causes like community organizing, social activism and policy advocacy. So a big part of capacity building is not just the grantee but also the funder—how do we amplify the work? We need to expose others to these concepts and needs.”

Brown explains why it’s so important for funders to reach out to their peers. “Funders have access to people in power. It is very important for us to use these relationships to broker changes in low-income communities.”

Portillo agrees. “It’s important to play constructive roles with our peers. Sometimes staff at other institutions won’t open up or listen unless the foundation plays a convening role.”

Indeed, as Portillo and others explain in the final section of this report, the many roles that foundations can play in addition to providing money can be critical in helping community work add up to broader social change.



## 4. Build new approaches to insuring accountability

*“Foundations must do a paradigm shift in terms of how we measure outcomes.*

*These things are very slow and long term and we have to be patient.”*

*—Deborah Harrington*

Many people in Chicago raised questions about how to appropriately evaluate the work their foundations were doing in neighborhoods through tools like small grants programs. “How do you evaluate this work that people are doing?” asked one person. “We need to be willing to look at outcomes differently.”

“We need better ways to identify change,” said another person. “We need to better understand the pathways for seeing how things happen and indicators that show that progress is happening.”

The six people interviewed for this report also talked extensively about evaluation. Several noted the relatively small amounts of money that most funders invest in these communities and pointed out that it isn’t enough money to produce changes in community-wide indicators like third-grade reading scores. Several people also emphasized

that change in these communities take time, which makes short-term outcomes very difficult to measure.

Many people said that, given these limitations, evaluation needs to focus on things that can be measured, especially things that involve the process of change, such as how many new connections a community group has made during the period of a grant. Are new relationships developing? Are community groups working together more? Are more residents developing leadership abilities? Are they deepening their understanding of the forces that affect their community and how to impact these forces? As individuals, are their lives changing?

**A**t the Chicago meeting, both the Woods Fund of Chicago’s *Deborah Harrington* and the Steans Family Foundation’s *Reginald Jones* talked extensively about the issue of how funders can evaluate this work.

Harrington said that trying to use more traditional approaches to quantifying outcomes doesn’t work well for community organizing.

“So we need to not just look at concrete outcomes, but also see the process as an outcome. Are more people engaged in the com-

munity? Are more people door knocking? When a group sends in a report of activities at the end of the year, is 200 doors knocks an outcome? Yes it is.”

Harrington believes that the indicators used in evaluating this work need to relate to the process of building power. “There are certain variables to look at to measure this. Is the group really reaching out and creating relationships? Are more people becoming members?”

She thinks these indicators are useful because, “Organizing is very relational work. It takes a great deal of time to build trust.” It starts with knocking on doors and engaging with residents one at a time.

“Foundations must do a paradigm shift in terms of how we measure outcomes,” Harrington adds. “These things are very slow and long term and we have to be patient.”

**W**hat should a foundation expect given the amount of support it is providing is an issue several people raised. They asked whether a funder that is investing a relatively small amount of money compared to a community’s challenges can push too hard for outcomes. “How hard should funders push to get system change out of a small grants program?” is how one person put this concern. “What if funders push too hard and it stops looking resident-led?”

One resident warned that this is exactly what can happen. “What you think we need is not always what we need. You have to let residents lead change and listen to us and not have your own agenda.”

## Consuella Brown

**Program Director,  
Woods Fund of Chicago**



As Program Director, Consuella Brown sees her role as a fairly practical one. “I help get the money out the door.”

Eight years working in philanthropy—the first five with a corporate foundation—Brown admits that to some, her approach may seem fairly cut and dry. But her fascination with the work comes less from the details, and more from the possibilities. Says Brown, “To enter, frame or populate the world with ideas that can make a tangible difference for a lot of people—this is the most rewarding part of the job for me.”

While Brown sees philanthropy as a “marketplace of ideas,” during “On the Ground” in Chicago she noticed that the individual voices “may not speak the same language, or even be on the same page.”

“Is there a possibility of a shared language that is accessible to everyone?” she says. “This would be important...we may be missing each other.”

Later this person added, “You have to be patient and not expect things to get done quickly.” This theme came up a lot. “We need to set a realistic time frame for change,” said one participant. “Groups are working really hard to get this work done. But we need to be realistic about the time frame.”

Still another person made a similar point. “Funders might want something in a time frame that doesn’t acknowledge what is taking place on the ground. Funders might want certain things done in a year. But I can’t go to my neighborhood association and say, ‘This has to be done in a year,’ because that might not be on their agenda. So we need to ask what the groups want to do and what is important to them.”

Given all the perspectives about accountability in this work, a few people think the key again is the relationships that develop between foundations and communities. “We have to have honest conversations with people about what we want to see built by the time we take the money away,” said one funder. “Is there something here that will keep this work going?”

“We come to these tables from such different places. There is a level of honesty that isn’t taking place. Foundations will make mistakes and residents need to call them on it. But that level of honesty doesn’t happen.”

Funders need to “be prepared to frame resident progress differently,” said another person. “It’s a different culture, using a different language. Don’t diminish that.”

Part of the challenge of measuring this work, said another person, is that the investment is not in things that are relatively easy to measure, like job training. Instead it is about “investing in individuals to create change in their neighborhoods. We’re afraid to make investments in people because how do you measure that?”

For program officers this approach can entail risk because the investment is not in something that can produce straightforward numbers, such as the number of people trained or the number who get jobs, the kinds of quantifiable results that can reassure a funder’s board. “We have to be as vulnerable as the people we invest in,” is how this participant put it.

**A**lison Janus of the Steans Foundation is of two minds about insuring accountability. On the one hand she thinks it’s

essential. “You have to decide what you want to measure and what you can measure. To say you can’t measure things is a disservice to you and those you work with.”

But she acknowledges that one “casualty” of a small grants investment of, say, \$5,000, is that “there will not be a direct result in numbers.”

“As a funder, what is it that we can affect? What can we measure and be responsible for? Probably not a lot and we need to accept that.”

She adds: “We don’t have the resources to answer the question of, ‘Did we make a difference?’ Five thousand dollars won’t change literacy scores in a school.

“But we do changes the odds. You can measure some things.” You decide what can be measured and then “keep it simple and stick to it.”

She thinks that things that can be measured are the overall effectiveness of a program being funded: How many people are attending? How many people are volunteering? How many people are staying with it?

*“We come to these tables from such different places. There is a level of honesty that isn’t taking place. Foundations will make mistakes and residents need to call them on it. But that level of honesty doesn’t happen.”*

*—Funder at Chicago meeting*

**Jennifer Roller** of The Wean Foundation also senses this tension between the need and the challenge of measuring results. “I come from a federally-funded program [Upward Bound] so I tend to be very strict with measurable goals. But in this work it is not always so cut and dry. Nor does it need to be.”

Roller thinks one key is whether the information you are gathering is meaningful. “Can I do something with that information? Can I extract something from this—lessons learned, best practices, best conditions under which they can do the work?”

“My goal is for our evaluation to be more about the people and what they learned from the experience. I want to have some flexibility. Some projects won’t fit into strict measures of goals and objectives.”

Simply focusing on the number of girls served by a mentoring program is not enough, she thinks. “Some of those girls may get ignited, but we might not capture that. These are the kinds of transformational changes we want to capture, but that is hard to do. Some things we may never be able to measure.”

Roller uses her own experiences as an example. When she was part of Upward Bound, she went on many cultural trips to plays and museums. Later, on another trip, she found herself on a campus in Chicago with time on her hands. She toured a Frank Lloyd Wright home, something she wouldn’t have ventured to do before.

“Through my experiences with the program, I saw myself transform, but that is not something the program measured or even intended.”

*“Some of those girls may get ignited, but we might not capture that. These are the kinds of transformational changes we want to capture, but that is hard to do. Some things we may never be able to measure.”*

—Jennifer Roller

**Lisa Leverette**, who works with The Skillman Foundation, also thinks that an important result of this work is the change that happens in individuals, but that this is very hard to measure. “I think there is a way to measure process, but I don’t know how that is done.”

Leverette says that, as she interacts more with applicants, “it does appear that they are more confident and effective advocates for themselves and the youth they serve.” But she’s not sure how you measure “quality of interactions or trust or the particular skills gained during those interactions. The quality of the programming and of the applicants’ advocacy is all I have as a measuring stick.”

**Consuella Brown** of the Woods Fund agrees that the key element to measure is the growth in a neighborhood’s leaders. She looks at this growth mostly “through the lens of mobilization.”

She asks questions such as, “How deep is their analysis? Are they collaborating more? With whom? Have they expanded

beyond their communities? Did they take a leadership role in a campaign about a policy change?”

Brown is also looking for what she calls “process changes.” The key is not whether a leader got involved in a particular issue campaign, but “whether all of their training could be translated to another issue.”

In essence she is asking whether a leader’s advocacy around a particular issue can be continued around other issues. “If you train on the interconnectedness of issues, you can keep people engaged on a variety of issues. You may have a school win. But in order to keep the schools open, you have to have a stable neighborhood. So then you have to figure out how to also work on affordable housing and jobs. It’s a continuum rather than a focus on one issue.” So the evaluation question, she thinks, is whether people are seeing these connections among issues.

But Brown also says that she sees the importance of personal change as well; that it’s not just about developing a deeper political understanding. She talked about a leader of a local homeless coalition who not only became an advocate on homeless issues but also experienced changes in the rest of her life.

This leader’s ability to get politicians to listen to her “translated into her seeing that she could get a different job, and then she felt she could have an interpersonal relationship and ended up getting married. As an individual, she has mushroomed. I don’t see how you couldn’t have a sense of self after you do this work, and it must translate into all areas of your life.”

Brown says she hears about changes like this from a lot of people. “We put some stock in that, because it is about growing people to feel empowered in whatever they choose to ultimately undertake.”

However a funder measures impact, one key is not to overwhelm grantees with paperwork. “You want to hold them accountable without requiring this to be so staff intensive.”

Reporting can get staff intensive when a neighborhood organization needs to respond to several funders. She urges “a more streamlined approach to funding decisions and interactions with foundations.”

**F**or *Andy Helmboldt*, the resident volunteer for The Battle Creek Foundation, any evaluation must focus on the “point” of their small grants program, which is “to build relationships in the community.”

He explains: “These are the first building blocks for longer-term results. The idea is that people won’t change their neighborhood if they don’t feel connected to others. So the relationship building is very important.” The

*“How deep is their analysis? Are they collaborating more? With whom? Have they expanded beyond their communities? Did they take a leadership role in a campaign about a policy change?”*

—*Consuella Brown*

evaluation question is simple: has the small grant caused a group's leaders to develop more relationships?

Over time, if the foundation continues to support a group, "We look for more specific signs of change and more tangible outcomes." Helmboldt notes that Battle Creek's program is still new, which is why it focuses on building relationships and capacity. "But at some point, I think they will want to see evidence that people are living better and have more opportunity. Simply giving away money is not enough. What did you buy?"

As a resident on a small grants committee that is regularly making grant decisions, Helmboldt would like more feedback about the impact of those grants. "A lot of times I feel I am taking a test every month but I never get graded on it." He says that grantees file evaluation reports but that committee members haven't been receiving them, something he says the foundation is working on improving.

**D**avid Portillo of the Strengthening Neighborhoods program of The Denver Foundation agrees that more and deeper relationships are key outcomes, though it took some work to establish this principle. "The first board we had really wanted to see hard outcomes, like a reduction in teen pregnancy. But we couldn't expect these kinds of outcomes with a \$500 grant. That wasn't realistic."

Instead, the foundation's staff suggested asking neighborhood leaders what they wanted to measure. "They wanted to know if more people in the neighborhood were getting

*"These relationships are the first building blocks for longer-term results.*

*The idea is that people won't change their neighborhood if they don't feel connected to others. So the relationship building is very important."*

—Andy Helmboldt

involved and if more people were taking on leadership roles. You *could* gather this information."

The program now has goals about the increase in relationships in a neighborhood, goals it tries to measure both quantitatively *and* qualitatively. To get the numbers, people are asked for a final report that includes quantitative information about leadership.

They are also asked to describe the *qualitative* changes they've experienced, with consultants being hired to listen to these stories. "You would not know relationships were strengthened unless you heard the story," Portillo explains.

Knowing that not everyone will do a final report, the program invites recipients to a party to "come and talk with others while we record their reflections as their final report." While there, those who didn't finish their reports are asked to fill out the quantitative information about their work. The program also asks the group to provide recommendations for how to improve the work.

"These are things we wouldn't have tried at all before," Portillo says. "There are different

ways of listening, like watching a video taken of the evaluation meeting. Often program officers learn more from these discussions than by checking off when a final report has arrived.”

How did Portillo get the foundation’s board to accept a qualitative evaluation? “You need to bring someone from outside to say, ‘Qualitative responses matter too.’” Strengthening Neighborhoods brought in an evaluator from the MacArthur Foundation, which had spent a lot of money to find out if qualitative evaluation was effective. It was.

“Our committee was quite impressed by this,” Portillo says. The lesson from this ex-

*“The first board we had really wanted to see hard outcomes, like a reduction in teen pregnancy. But we couldn’t expect these kinds of outcomes with a \$500 grant. That wasn’t realistic.”*

—David Portillo

perience? “Bring in the man in the blue suit to say that your evaluation plan has a good strategy.” He adds: “I think every small grants program goes through this struggle.”

## 5. Look for ways that this work can add up to broader social change

*“My view is that turning neighborhoods from helpless to empowered is in itself a major system change—when residents feel they have control over their lives.”*

*—Andy Helmboldt*

A concern voiced by many people in Chicago involves how working in specific low-income communities can bring about change in systems and political and economic forces that impact these communities.

“Sometimes a place-based strategy is not effective when broader forces are affecting an area,” is how one person put this. “How do you understand that organizing is local but, if it’s not connected to something larger, it can miss the mark?”

“Small grants can isolate or work against larger systemic change if they simply stay small and don’t link to the issues that drive what is happening in that community.”

Another person had a similar concern. “I’ve been doing this work for 12 years and have not seen progress—people are getting farther behind. More people are poor today.

Neighborhoods and schools are more segregated than ever.

“There is a problem if our work is not thoughtful about who is poor and how systems dictate who is poor. It’s not just about individuals choosing to be poor. Grassroots grantmakers need to be careful about funding these little block clubs.”

The six people interviewed for this report shared this concern about how this work in communities adds up to larger social change. But they all thought that it could. And while there were similarities in their thinking about how this work leads to change, people also had very distinct perspectives about this issue.

One person thought that change in individual residents was in itself system change because these individuals will now function differently within the systems that affect their lives.

Another person’s perspective was that big picture policy changes only matter if they actually change the lives of people living in these communities: in essence, all change is local.

Still another person focused on the need for the funder to expand its role in order for social change to happen, doing things like engaging other funders in this work and facilitat-



ing relationships between community people and, say, city agencies.

**W**hat roles should a funder play in helping this work in communities add up to broader social change? This question generated a lot of discussion at the Chicago meeting.

One funder said that foundations should push community groups to think about larger system change. “We need to fund groups that we can envision will produce some potential policy change later as they mature. We want to see policies change, so one measure of success if when we see this. We don’t fund a group that doesn’t have the intent for larger policy change. We want to see groups move their work to the next level.”

Another person thought the role of the funder is to *educate* people about system change. “Telling people what to do is different than educating them. One of the strongest barriers to system change is that people don’t know what it is. If we could educate rather than being directive or pushy, then people could theoretically make their own decisions. People don’t get energized about systems change unless they understand what it is for.”

Another participant said something similar: “Our role is to train people to look at power. It’s political education.”

But, another person asked, can a funder push communities too hard to focus on system changes? “What if we push too hard and it stops looking resident-led? Our support for community organizing and small grants doesn’t always match up. If the small

## Andy Helmboldt

**Resident volunteer on a neighborhood grants program committee, funded through The Battle Creek Foundation**



Battle Creek, a city of 50,000 in Michigan, is small enough for people to gain a good sense of the community as a whole. Yet Andy Helmboldt says that serving on the resident grants program committee has given him a “stronger feeling” of how the city is “connected.”

“I get a small glimpse into what life is like for others in different situations—yet we’re all trying to live within the same system,” he says. While Helmboldt realizes that all residents supposedly have access to the same resources, he questions “why it’s working for me and not this other person?” Grassroots grants, he concludes, have the potential to even the odds—“It’s helping people feel we are all in the same boat.”

While fairly new to grantmaking, Helmboldt could relate to the struggles that participants shared at the “On the Ground” gathering in Chicago. “The scale might be different, but these are struggles that everyone has,” he says. “Going and seeing what others are doing is empowering and confidence building.”

grants strategy is just to support resident-led projects, but those projects aren’t focused on systems change, what should a funder do? At what point does it stop looking like resident-led change and more about foundation-led change?”

**B**ut what exactly is “system change?” Several people raised variations of this question, suggesting that the kinds of changes that individual leaders experience are part of a process of system change. “System change is a process and not an outcome or a destination,” said one person. “We can’t get there quickly. We arrive with every step we take...every single deliberate act to say we’re going to go about it in a different way.”

Fran Wolley of the North Lawndale Juvenile Justice Initiative works to integrate back into the community young people who have been convicted of a felony so that crime “doesn’t become a way of life.”



“System change is about people feeling they have personal control over their lives,” explained another participant. “Ultimately it’s to help people feel they have more control. If people are taking control over their lives, they are creating system change.”

**Andy Helmboldt**, the resident volunteer for The Battle Creek Foundation, agrees that the process of empowering residents of struggling neighborhoods *is* system change. “My view is that turning neighborhoods from helpless to empowered is in itself a major system change—when residents feel they have control over their lives.”

Helmboldt doubts that neighborhood funders and organizations can do much to achieve big picture changes in economic and political systems. But they can build the capacity of individuals and neighborhoods to feel they have some control in the systems that affect their lives. “You are accomplishing a system change if people behave differently in that system.”

**Jennifer Roller** of The Wean Foundation also thinks that building the capacity of in-

dividuals is a critical part of this work. “I am realizing that developing folks is part of the process of getting to capacity. As one of the presenters in Chicago pointed out, the capacity exists, but they are under the radar. Part of my role is to identify these people.

“Incremental changes in people over time may have to be enough. So maybe this year they are a member of the block watch, then next year they are speaking on behalf of the block watch at a public meeting.”

**T**his is exactly the process through which this work leads to larger changes, believes the Woods Fund’s *Consuella Brown*. She offers one example that reflects the long period of time that the Woods Fund has been doing this work in neighborhoods.

“We had a group whose only goal was to get a new playground at a school. Then you fast forward ten years later and they went up against the Chicago Transit Authority to get a train line restored and are now moving into affordable housing, getting parents engaged in local school councils and joining a coalition of

other community organizations on TIF (tax increment financing) accountability.

“They have moved on to different issues, but it takes time. Funders keep asking organizations about their plans for getting into a broader movement and broader coalitions. But you can’t take it to the next level until that organization sees the connection between the community level and the federal level.”

Brown finds the journey of President Obama to be very interesting. When he was doing community organizing in Chicago, she says the project he was working on—Developing Communities Project—received a grant from the Woods Fund to cover his salary as an organizer. When he eventually ran for President, he used much of what he learned as a community organizer. His ability to win big in caucus states—which involved classic turn-out organizing—produced the small but critical difference in delegates that allowed him to win the nomination.

“Maybe his campaign is the answer to how things get scaled up. This may offer some interesting insights. It was basic community organizing that he learned on the south side of Chicago. So it can be done.”

One key, Brown believes, is to get people to use the power of organizing to initiate change, not just respond to change. “The sad thing is that community building by its nature is reactive as opposed to proactive. If you are responding to forces outside of the community, how can you control the pace at which it happens? You are always responding.

“The key is how you get people involved in 10- to 15-year plans. We’re trying to experiment with that ourselves.”

One focus of such a long-term plan, Brown believes, is to better “frame” poverty. She regrets that, even with a former community organizer running, the issue of poverty disappeared from the presidential election. “We were not talking about poor people but about Main Street and middle class America. How did that happen?”

**A**lison Janus of Steans has a different perspective about the potential for work on a neighborhood level to create social change, one that reflects her former job working on policy for the mayor. “As I’ve gone through my career, while most people go more global, I got more specific. I think what happens in the community is where change starts.”

She explains: “You could dream up programs, but if they weren’t implemented, then what is the point? And if they don’t solve community problems, what is the point? Work and daily connection in the community is what anchors us in meaning.”

The very fact that residents of very low-income communities continue to work to improve their communities has an impact on funders like Janus, who says she sometimes struggles to not get too discouraged by the persistence of poverty in America.

“I see people who live in the community and do this work and it keeps me inspired—if they all left, I think it would be much worse.”

**F**or The Denver Foundation’s David Portillo, this work can add up to broader social change if funders expand their role. The most important way funders can do

this is by building the capacity of community leaders to bring about change. He says that his foundation didn't do that at the beginning.

"When we originally provided no leadership training at all, we shouldn't have expected broad systems change, nor would we be able to capture it if it did happen."

Over time, however, the foundation began "to move more resources to fund learning and skill development and organizational development that might give people the power to impact systems." He says both the leaders and the staff of community groups needed to learn how systems worked and how to "talk to people in power."

This in turn has "sometimes added up to significant changes." One example involves a group of parents that the foundation has supported over several years. These parents have convinced Denver's school system to put more money into special education and English language programs. "We've been intentionally funding and supporting this level of grassroots capacity for several years."

Not only has the foundation helped this group build its capacity, it also paid a national consultant to produce a position paper on these school funding issues, a paper which "helped credential" the parents' group, Portillo explains.

"At first we thought we probably shouldn't fund this, that it was moving beyond the neighborhood and not likely to have an impact. But we were wrong; we realized it did have a great impact."

The foundation has also played an intermediary role, using its connections and credibility to set up meetings with the lead-

*"Strengthening Neighborhoods was initially a five-year initiative of the foundation, but had the plug been pulled then, there might have been some resentment or backlash in the neighborhood. We needed to be in this for the long haul."*

—David Portillo

ers of an institution such as the local school district.

At other times, the foundation has helped maintain existing relationships between a city agency and an organizing group. When there is disagreement or tension—perhaps even a protest action—Portillo explains to city staff that this reflects "the dynamics of authentic relationship with the community. You can prepare them that this is not peaches-and-cream all of the time. To achieve social change, there must be some passion." This kind of passion, Portillo says, can make for very "complex relationships."

**F**or this work to add up to change, funders must not only be willing to play different roles, they must also make a long-term commitment to it, Portillo believes. "Strengthening Neighborhoods was initially a five-year initiative of the foundation, but had the plug been pulled then, there might have been some resentment or backlash in the neighborhood. We needed to be in this for the long haul, so after five years the board de-

cided this was part of the foundation's ongoing work.

"That is an important message to the community. 'We're here to have an impact.' Again, if you are only staffing this with a revolving door of junior staff and only funding block parties, you shouldn't expect your groups to have a social change impact. But if you are serious about these projects, then there is a chance for change.

"Some initiatives can create resentment when they are done. With a community foundation, there is the chance to be a permanent resource and partner in the community. We won't go away just because we don't see social change within the first year."

**L**isa Leverette, who works with The Skillman Foundation, also thinks that this seemingly "little work" can add up to system change and that, "We have to get better at recognizing and evaluating this progress."

Again the key is the changes that happen to a community's residents, Leverette believes. "As community interacts more and becomes more organized, their voice can be used to affect change on a number of systems."

Another key is to not have grandiose expectations: that suddenly these neighborhoods will be cured of poverty.

"We can kill the life out of something when we set too many expectations," Leverette

says. She compares work in these communities to work you do on an old house. "I think there are ways to make progress even if other things around you are falling apart. If I fix a plumbing leak in my house, then there will be another problem. That is the nature of life. We need to measure our successes as we accomplish them."

The problem is when people who don't understand the nature of change get impatient, Leverette believes. "You mean we haven't improved the lives of people yet?!" That sets up people for failure.

"They think it doesn't work because they are jumping to the gigantic goal at the end. But you now have 24 people at your meetings when before it was only three. That is wonderful progress, but we diminish that.

"This is not about creating utopia. It's more like a series of little battles, not a big war. You win some and lose others."

*"They think it doesn't work because they are jumping to the gigantic goal at the end. But you now have 24 people at your meetings when before it was only three. That is wonderful progress, but we diminish that."*

—Lisa Leverette

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Neighborhoods  
The Denver Foundation  
Denver, CO

#### *Treasurer*

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Warren, OH

Sharnita Johnson, Program  
Officer  
The Skillman Foundation  
Detroit, MI

Audrey Jordan, Senior Research  
Associate  
Annie E. Casey Foundation  
Baltimore, MD

Tony Macklin  
Independent Consultant  
Pittsburgh, PA

Tom O'Brien  
Manager, Neighborhood  
Connections  
The Cleveland Foundation  
Cleveland, OH

Frank Wideman, President  
Self Family Foundation  
Greenwood, SC

### Staff

Janis Foster, Executive Director  
[janis@grassrootsgrantmakers.org](mailto:janis@grassrootsgrantmakers.org)

Kristin Senty, Knowledge  
Coordinator  
[kristin@grassrootsgrantmakers.org](mailto:kristin@grassrootsgrantmakers.org)

## The Diarist Project

*A new approach to documenting and learning from change initiatives*

Over the past several years, The Diarist Project has been exploring a new way to learn from efforts to create change—primarily the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s ambitious *Making Connections* initiative—and to communicate what it is learning to people who can use these insights.

The diarist approach is a mix of journalism, oral history, process documentation, “journaling,” reflective practice and communications strategies. It has developed several guiding principles:

- ♦ Learn from those who are doing the day-to-day work.
- ♦ Learn as the work unfolds.
- ♦ Learn about the process of implementing an initiative.

- ♦ Communicate what you learn in a way that reflects people’s experiences and insights.
- ♦ Don’t oversimplify. Acknowledge that people often have very different perspectives about what happened and what can be learned.
- ♦ Communicate in a way that the people doing this work will actually read and learn from it.

To learn more about the diarist work and to read other diarist publications, please go to [www.DiaristProject.org](http://www.DiaristProject.org). If you have questions, contact Tim Saasta at [Tim@CharityChoices.com](mailto:Tim@CharityChoices.com) or 240-683-7100.

## REFLECTIONS

On the process of change



**Grassroots Grantmakers**

PO Box G

Hallettsville, TX 77964

T: 361-798-1808

F: 361-798-1809

[info@grassrootsgrantmakers.org](mailto:info@grassrootsgrantmakers.org)

[www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org](http://www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org)