

Member Spotlight

Collaboration is an important component of learning, growing and making an impact in the philanthropic field. Sharing experiences and expertise allows for collective knowledge among foundations, which results in smarter choices and better results. As discussed at The Learning Conference 2011, this collective intelligence can enable funders to better support grantees. However, at the St. Louis County Children's Service Fund, another level of networked intelligence is being employed: a network among their grantees to enhance practice on the ground.

A few years ago, the fund began a community campaign to add a quarter cent sales tax to fund children's mental health and substance abuse services in St. Louis County. This campaign, known as Putting Kids First, required a lot of community involvement: canvassing, collecting signatures and volunteering on teams, among other duties. "Nonprofit organizations were able to work together and build the relationships they normally would not have made," says Kate Tansey, the fund's executive director. "After the fund was established, the organizations wanted an opportunity to continue to collaborate on projects together and, as a funder, we were able to provide a way for them to continue this cohesiveness." Realizing how a shared effort can lead to a successful end goal, the fund decided to use this networked approach in supporting their grantees.

To foster these relationships, the fund hosts Learning Workgroups, small collaborative groups that meet to discuss issues, services and tools in certain areas of work. The first group focused on the clinical level of work. Participants were asked what they wanted to learn, what their interests were and how they wanted the discussions to be conducted with one another. This group continued to meet for six to eight weeks after, while other interest-specific groups were created, focusing on such topics as finances and performance management. The fund has also used a network approach to offer trainings that are relevant to their work such as specialized training in evidence-based practices, including Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Grantees learn side-by-side with their peers, building capacity and relationships simultaneously.

The fund saw this "cohesiveness" as an opportunity to truly offer integrated care to the community. If the nonprofits they funded were attuned to each others' work, they would be able to offer the best care for patients throughout the area. For instance, if a patient went to an organization for one type of care, the organization could use its network to ensure the patient receives the best treatment available, even if it is not at their facility. "We believe collaboration is achieved when organizations are engaging with information, sharing resources and enhancing the capacity of one another to achieve the best outcome for the client," says Tansey. Rather than creating competition, the organizations understand the importance of their network and know that sharing knowledge and resources is for the betterment of the community overall.

"Creating this pipeline of services for our grantees helps achieve the outcomes we all share for the community. Increasing the capacity of our grantees' network allows them to deliver services with certainty and impact," Tansey says. In this way, the fund shows that it truly lives its mission of "keeping kids first"; guaranteeing quality care, no matter the provider, is the collective goal of the fund and its grantees.