

GEO Member Spotlight

GRAND VICTORIA FOUNDATION

Making a difference in a big, complex place like Illinois is no simple task. But Grand Victoria Foundation has found a way

Nine years ago, Grand Victoria Foundation began looking for partners among Illinois community foundations to collaborate on education, workforce development, and land use and protection. Outside Chicago, they found, there weren't all that many with the capacity to collaborate. So they began laying the groundwork for what is now Communityworks, a network of active foundations in communities around the state that works together on shared interests.

A few years after that, rethinking their land conservation work, Grand Victoria surveyed people in the field to understand the critical issues and where they could have the most impact. They heard a common lament: the conservation system is too fragmented to protect the state's remaining prairies and other threatened ecosystems. It became clear that what was most crucially needed was a forum to coordinate work and resources, both human and financial. So they set in motion the creation of another statewide network, Vital Lands Illinois.

Both initiatives are examples of Grand Victoria Foundation's recipe for statewide change: Start at scale, network like crazy, engage those people in the field you're hoping to affect, and follow their lead.

Building Local Philanthropy

"With Communityworks we set out to create a robust philanthropic landscape in Illinois," said Nancy Fishman, executive director of Grand Victoria Foundation.

Through providing multi-year, general operating support, the Foundation was able to build up inactive or fledgling community foundations that previously had no connections to each other. However, as Ms. Fishman will attest, the secret to Communityworks' success wasn't funding. Credit is due to ample learning opportunities and technical support provided to partner foundations.

The Learning Support Network, a network of partner foundations, held monthly gatherings to learn about a field of interest that foundations were working on.

"We started to see a multiplier effect," Ms. Fishman said of the partners. "Foundations were able to take lessons learned and develop further



network map



Nancy Fishman, Executive Director of Grand Victoria Foundation

6 Tips for Scaling and Networking

- Start with as much of a sector as can be identified as currently active
"Achieving scale means starting at scale," says Ms. Fishman.
- Be prepared to spend a significant amount of time at the front end of network building to ensure that shared goals are established.
"By 'a lot of time' I mean sometimes it can take a year before there really is a shared understanding of goals," says Ms. Fishman.
- Be vigilant to communicate clearly and often
This will ensure that there isn't a dynamic of grantees guessing what a funder wants.
- Find ways to help partners do work for themselves; don't do the work for partners
Strengthening partners means helping them build their own capacity.
- Pick partner organizations that have strong staff leaders
Strong leadership ensures that a foundation won't struggle with issues that do not serve the goals of the network
- Participate in conversations as a partner; not an observer; not a project director
Hiring independent network facilitators helps create healthier partner dynamics.

networks in their communities.”

One example of networking taking hold at a deeper level occurred when foundations working on early childhood education began convening individuals in their communities to help establish kindergarten readiness camps. The individuals who were brought together included representatives from school districts, child care providers and university education programs.

“Networks within networks added much broader and deeper capabilities to devise good, community-based solutions,” Ms. Fishman said.

Saving Illinois’ Vital Lands

With Grand Victoria Foundation’s land conservation work, as with local philanthropy, one critical insight was that money was only part of the equation. In fact, Ms. Fishman said, “It’s noteworthy here that nobody said, ‘If somebody could give us more money we could do more work.’”

In 2008, after Grand Victoria Foundation had already engaged the conservation community online to establish priorities, they convened a statewide summit of about 70 practitioners to kick off the network and refine the vision. Out of this came a 12-member working group that took up as its first task the development of guidelines for land conservation — guidelines that the Foundation adopted for its grantmaking.

“It’s an unusual example of a foundation turning to the practitioner community and saying, ‘articulate what’s important to protect, what the criteria needs to be, and how this grantmaking process should be designed to help you do your work better. Then, we’ll honor that and make our grants according to your guidelines,” Ms. Fishman said.

Those guidelines changed the relationships between the Foundation and its grantees dramatically.

“Folks felt that we listened to them and we followed through on what we said we were interested in,” Ms. Fishman said. “That reassured them that we were committed to being their partner, and it created the right conditions to establish a high-functioning network.”

Today, Illinois conservation leaders have a shared vision and dynamic network through Vital Lands Illinois and are actively partnering with each other to pursue that vision.

To find out more about Grand Victoria Foundation, the only statewide, multi-issue grantmaker in Illinois, or Communityworks and Vial Land Illinois, visit www.grandvictoriafdn.org