

OTTO BREMER FOUNDATION

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITY • STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY

Uniting Strategy with Responsive Grantmaking

The Otto Bremer Foundation works tirelessly to address the needs of 79 communities in North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin — the same communities that are served by Bremer Banks.

Ask Otto Bremer Foundation Executive Director Randi Ilyse Roth, and she'll tell you underlying this commitment to service is a very strategic yet responsive approach to funding.

“Being responsive to the people who live in these places is a core value for us,” said Roth, who began her fifth year as executive director with the foundation at the beginning of May. “We have been working for a few years to develop ways of working in which we retain the essential responsive nature of our grantmaking but in which we also act strategically to help the communities move forward in powerful ways.”

Roth said that the foundation has provided several ways to strengthen its staff's capacity for strategic impact, including participating in MDC, Inc.'s Passing Gear Philanthropy program and holding conversations with the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation to compare lessons learned from their similar goals.

The exciting part for Roth comes with applying what she has learned to the foundation's work.

“Our responsive grantmaking is strong and continuing to improve as we refine our grant application questions, our understanding of both evaluation and of evaluative thinking, and as we come to understand better and better what is ‘above or below the line’ for our foundation,” she said. “Our strategic work identifies the themes that we see coming up over and over in our responsive work across our region.”

Roth added that in identifying these themes has also lead to increased stakeholder engagement, exemplified by the Otto Bremer Foundation holding grantee convenings to learn more the issues facing grantees.

“Some of those convenings have led to initiatives that have helped nonprofit efforts move to the next level of effectiveness,” Roth said.



Randi Ilyse Roth, executive director, Otto Bremer Foundation

Otto Bremer Foundation Principles and Practices

Deal respectfully with applicants, grantees and donors, and those seeking information about our programs;

Strive for fairness in a competitive process;

Are accessible and respond clearly and promptly to requests for information and meetings;

Are flexible and open to change;

Make readily available basic information about our programs, funding priorities and application requirements;

Respect confidentiality and use discretion in communicating with others about specific organizations and individuals;

Are thoughtful and purposeful in our grantmaking and periodically review and evaluate our mission, priorities, policies, and practices;

Look to our constituents to educate us on issues and solutions;

Recognize the increasing cultural diversity of the communities we serve and seek to reflect this diversity in our grantmaking and in our organization;

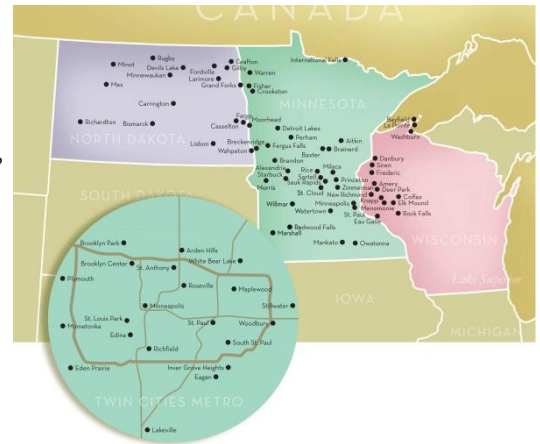
Adhere to the highest standards of ethical behavior and maintain an appropriate conflict of interest policy for staff and board members;

Are aware of and fulfill our fiduciary and legal responsibilities.

Among the foundation’s principles and practices are commitments to respect and engage stakeholders in the grantmaking process.

“Mutual respect should go without saying,” Roth said. “In our convenings we always try to get to know the members of the communities we serve, try to understand what it is to be in their shoes, learn about their opportunities and obstacles, and be clear and honest about what the Foundation can and cannot do to help.”

With this attitude of honesty and transparency, it will come as no surprise when the Otto Bremer Foundation continues to open new doors to opportunity and improvement in the Bremer communities of the upper Midwest.



Map of Otto Bremer Foundation Communities

Created in 1944, the [Otto Bremer Foundation](#) assists people in achieving full economic, civic and social participation in and for the betterment of their communities. This mission is based on the intent of founder Otto Bremer. His vision and longstanding commitment to communities during and after the Great Depression are carried forward today through the Foundation’s work in the places that are homes and neighbors to Bremer banks. The foundation strives to help build healthy, vibrant communities — communities where basic needs are met, mutual regard is prized and opportunities for economic, civic and social participation are within everyone’s reach.

The Otto Bremer Foundation owns 92 percent of Bremer Bank and receives an equivalent share of the bank profits that are paid out as dividends. This means that a large portion of bank profit is invested back in local communities through grants and program-related investments. In 2011, the foundation made approximately \$30 million in grants.

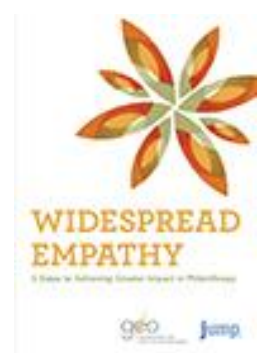
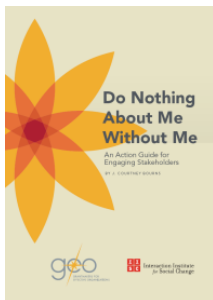
Randi Ilyse Roth is executive director of the Otto Bremer Foundation. She previously served as the independent, court-appointed monitor in a civil rights lawsuit brought by African-American farmers against the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Prior to that, she served as a staff attorney and then as executive director of the Farmers’ Legal Action Group. During her time at FLAG, Roth worked extensively in rural communities nationwide. Additionally, she has served as an adjunct professor of agricultural law at the William Mitchell College of Law and worked as a staff attorney at the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago.

GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight

[*Do Nothing About Me Without Me*](#)

[*GEO Members Address the Economy*](#)

[*Widespread Empathy*](#)



Find these and other resources for grantmakers at www.geofunders.org