

Who is Working Well Together?

Bush Foundation

Foundation launches new initiative to support and encourage collaborative approaches to community problem solving.

Quick Grantmaker Stats

Type of funder	Private foundation
Geography/Issue Area	Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, and 23 Native nations that share the same geography
When founded	1953
Total assets (as of FY 2013)	\$844 million
Annual giving (as of FY 2013)	\$28.6 million
Number of staff	42
Website	www.bushfoundation.org
Brief description of the program/ practice being discussed	Grants and a prize program aimed at supporting and encouraging collaborative community innovations.

1. Describe the situation or practice.

The Bush Foundation focuses its grantmaking on Minnesota and North and South Dakota. In 2008, the foundation embarked on an effort to increase the region’s capacity for community problem solving as one of three strategic priorities; the others are education and community building in Native nations. Through its community innovation work, the foundation works to identify and support good ideas for making communities better and stronger, regardless of the issue.

As it first set out to do this work, the Bush Foundation established itself as a “convener and matchmaker,” in the words of Allison Barmann, vice president for strategy and learning. “We were bringing groups together and providing training and facilitation so they could work together more effectively,” Barmann said. The foundation even created a dedicated website intended to serve as a hub for organizations in the region working on issues of community change.

After three to four years of working in this way, however, the Bush Foundation came to the conclusion that it was trying to do too much on its own. Under the leadership of a new president, Jennifer Ford Reedy, who joined the foundation in 2012, the foundation decided it could play a more productive role if, instead of trying to be in the middle of solving community problems, it could provide organizations with a higher level of support and encouragement to shape collaborative solutions from the bottom up.

This decision was the spark for two new initiatives launched by the Bush Foundation in 2013: the Community Innovation Grants program, which supports organizations to pursue innovative solutions to community challenges with grants of anywhere from \$500 to \$200,000; and the Bush Prize for Community Innovation, which recognizes model efforts to bring people and organizations together to “make great ideas happen.”

2. What have you tried to do differently?

The Bush Foundation’s Community Innovation Grants program supports organizations and communities to come together to solve problems. The foundation describes the goals of the program on its website in this way:

“There’s a lot of work that happens in between identifying a community problem and implementing a new ‘break-through’ solution, especially if you want to engage your community, make the most of existing assets and work collaboratively with other organizations along the way. Our Community Innovation Grants fund that process — they fund the work that it takes to create a Community Innovation.”

The foundation advertises the Community Innovation Grants as “civic R&D.” The Bush Foundation provides Community Innovation Grants between \$10,000 and \$200,000, with the majority of grantees receiving support for two years. The foundation also works with intermediary partners in the three states in its geographic area to make Community Innovation Grants between \$500 and \$10,000.

The foundation accepts online applications for Community Innovation Grants during two two-month periods each year. “We have tried to make the application process as simple and as short as possible,” Barmann said. The grants are open to 501(c)(3) public charity organizations working in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and the 23 Native nations that share the same geography. The Bush Foundation does not prioritize specific issues for the grants. Rather, it looks for projects that are intentional about using specific problem-solving processes, such as building community understanding of an issue or problem, generating ideas for solutions and testing and implementing those solutions.

“The idea is to support the process of creating breakthrough solutions where you are involving people who are affected by a problem, where you are bringing together the stakeholders who can work together to make change happen, and all the while making the most of existing community strengths and resources” Barmann said.

To recognize organizations and initiatives that have a proven record of doing this kind of work, the Bush Foundation also launched the Bush Prize for Community Innovation in 2013. Bush Prize winners receive a flexible grant of 25 percent of the organization’s budget for the most recent fiscal year, up to \$500,000.

3. What has been the result?

In December 2013, the Bush Foundation awarded more than \$4 million in Community Innovation Grants to 34 organizations across its three-state region, including Native nation communities. Sample grants in the inaugural round included \$50,000 to African Immigrant Services for a project aimed at supporting African immigrants to become active in community and civic affairs in the northwest suburbs of Hennepin County, which includes Minneapolis. Another grant of \$73,721 went to South Dakota State University, the hospital system and chamber of commerce in the city of Brookings to engage the public to identify ways to support breastfeeding women in the community.

When the application period for the inaugural round of Community Innovation Grants closed, the Bush Foundation had received 618 proposals requesting more than \$76 million. The response was a testament both to the deep interest among organizations and communities in working collaboratively to solve problems, as well as the foundation’s determined effort to spread the word about this new program.

“We hit the road to promote the availability of these grants and it became a great opportunity to learn from organizations and communities about their interests and needs,” said the foundation’s community innovation manager, Molly Matheson Gruen. She added that she and her colleagues held more than 30 information sessions about the program throughout the region. The Bush Foundation opened a new application period for Community Innovation Grants in 2014.

For the Bush Prize, the foundation announced its first group of winners in December 2013. Prizes went to nine organizations, three each in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. The foundation received nearly 300 applications for the inaugural Bush Prize. Awardees included the Community Violence Intervention Center, for its efforts to bring the people of South Forks, South Dakota, together to create a plan for moving the community closer to

ending violence; and the Four Bands Community Fund, Inc., for its record of developing innovative approaches to improve the economic status of members of the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe in North Dakota.

The program is just now starting the second year, with its second group of Community Innovation grantees and Bush Prize winners to be announced later this year. The foundation is working with Wilder Research to evaluate the program's impact — and will share what Community Innovation grantees are learning about effective community problem solving and community innovation.

4. What are your key insights from doing the work?

The Bush Foundation has worked with a St. Paul-based evaluation consultant, Wilder Research, to develop a theory of change about how community innovation happens. The [theory of change](#) posits that there are three key steps on the pathway from identifying a community need to creating a community innovation. The steps include increasing collective understanding of the issue, generating ideas, and testing and implementing solutions. The theory of change explicitly states that this is not a linear process and that some initiatives will skip or repeat steps along the way. To create a “culture of innovation,” an organization or community creates systems for going through the process repeatedly.

The foundation does not require that applicants for its Community Innovation Grants and the Bush Prize adhere to the steps outlined in its theory of change. However, Matheson Gruen said the theory of change provides a “good screen” for identifying projects that are doing what’s needed to achieve breakthrough solutions.

“Community innovation occurs when people come together to think bigger and think differently about what is possible for their communities. Our inaugural Community Innovation Grant recipients are tackling a range of issues impacting quality of life in their communities. And they are doing it in a way that ensures all voices are heard and that the solutions will endure.”

— Molly Matheson Gruen, Community Innovation Manager