

Who is Engaging Stakeholders Well?

The Gifford Foundation

Foundation embraces community engagement, mobilizes residents and grantees to help make mini-grant decisions.

Quick Grantmaker Stats

Type of funder	Private Foundation
Geography/Issue Area	Syracuse, New York
When founded	1954
Total assets (as of FY 2013)	\$22,169,262
Annual giving (as of FY 2013)	\$741,291
Number of staff	6
Website	www.giffordfoundation.org
Brief description of the program/ practice being discussed	Mini-grant program engages residents to review applications and make decisions.

1. Describe the situation or practice.

The Gifford Foundation has invested approximately \$42 million in a three-county area surrounding its hometown of Syracuse, New York. Between the 1950s and the 1990s, the foundation's grants provided critical support for educational and cultural institutions in the community. However, starting in the late 1990s, the board and staff decided they wanted to explore new approaches to community impact.

The process of change began with an effort to diversify the board of the Gifford Foundation, Director of Research and Projects Heidi Holtz noted, since it had traditionally not reflected the diversity of the communities the foundation serves. But, when Syracuse University official Robert Dewey took over as president of the board in 1997, he worked with the other trustees to increase the size of the board and bring in new voices and perspectives. By 2005, a board that had included just five members grew to a 14-person group including white, Latino, African American, physically challenged and LGBT trustees and representatives spanning a range of socioeconomic classes.

Another big change for the Gifford Foundation at this time was the hiring of a new executive director who was passionate about social justice and community transformation. Kathy Goldfarb-Findling came to Gifford as executive director in 2000 and immediately began exploring with the board how the foundation could play a bigger role in helping struggling neighborhoods turn things around.

“The foundation had done a lot of great work in the community, but we wanted to look at how to be more effective beyond the bricks-and-mortar types of investments we had been making,” Holtz explained.

Goldfarb-Findling retired in 2010, but the Gifford Foundation’s commitment to community engagement continues today under Executive Director Dirk Sonneborn.

2. What have you tried to do differently?

In the early 2000s, the Gifford Foundation launched a focused program of investments in two Syracuse neighborhoods with significant populations of low-income residents. For seven years, Gifford operated in these neighborhoods as what Holtz called “an embedded funder,” investing a total of more than \$3.5 million in community organizations and employing a community organizer to liaise with residents and local nonprofits. In its work in the neighborhoods, the Gifford Foundation embraced the work of Henry Moore, the author and consultant who advanced the theory of asset-based community development. The foundation even hired Moore as a consultant for its work.

Over time, however, the foundation realized it would be difficult to sustain the heavy financial and staff load that comes with working as an embedded funder. Intent on maintaining its connection to neighborhoods and sticking with the asset-based approach, Gifford once again shifted gears. Its new focus was a mini-grant program that would enable the foundation to support residents and organizations as they work to develop and strengthen neighborhood assets.

The What If mini-grant program supports projects with a total budget of \$5,000 or less for neighborhoods within the city limits. The foundation uses a fiscal sponsor to support non-501(c)(3) organizations and projects. To ensure that the program is anchored in community engagement, Gifford established a Resident Review Committee to review applications and recommend grants to the foundation’s board. The committee meets 11 times a year, and the foundation holds a monthly meeting for people and organizations interested in applying for the grants.

Mini-grants have gone to a wide range of community needs and interests including arts projects, community engagement initiatives, recreation and sports, summer camps and other youth projects, and health and wellness programs. The mini-grant program is overseen by Sheena Solomon, director of neighborhood initiatives with the foundation. A Syracuse resident, Solomon joined Gifford in 2007 and immediately became a key contact at the foundation for residents and community organizations. “Early on, my job was to be in these communities and to try and build those connections that would help people come together to make good things happen,” Solomon said. In keeping with the asset-building approach, however, Solomon said she has tried to pull back in recent years from playing such an active role, so that residents and local organizations can arrive at solutions on their own.

Between 2011 and the end of 2013, the Gifford Foundation made 60 mini-grants averaging about \$3,000 per grant. The mini-grants comprise about 20 - 25 percent of the foundation’s grantmaking. At the same time that it embraced the mini-grants, the foundation shifted the majority of its grantmaking to capacity-building support for community nonprofits.

“Community engagement and involvement is a part of our organizational culture — in every aspect of our grantmaking.”

— Sheena Solomon, Director of Neighborhood Initiatives

3. What has been the result?

Holtz and Solomon said it is hard to measure the precise impact of the work that Gifford has done at the grassroots level. Homes are in better shape, and the foundation’s grants have created new opportunities for neighbors to help neighbors and for people to come together in formal and informal ways. But Holtz said the crux of asset-based community development, as it is now practiced by Gifford, is to provide resources and tools for residents to make things better and then to step out of the way.

“This is not really about us coming in with answers that we can then evaluate down the line,” she said. “It’s about the people and what they can do for themselves and their neighborhoods when they are given the chance.”

Lou Vinciguerra, whose neighborhood soccer organization received a Gifford mini-grant for its soccer program in 2012, now serves on the Resident Review Committee for the mini-grants program. He said he is particularly impressed by the creativity that people bring to addressing neighborhood priorities. “I’m amazed by the different approaches people have to projects, and that Gifford

is willing to listen to different viewpoints. This has been an amazing experience for me,” he said.

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

The Gifford Foundation had to shift over time from being an embedded funder in two targeted communities to becoming a less visible presence that still offers support for community-designed solutions. Solomon said this shift, while necessary, was difficult. “It’s hard to explain to people why you are stepping back, but it became very time intensive and expensive for us to continue the work we were doing and we’ve always believed more in ‘doing with’ than ‘doing for,’” she said.

In retrospect, she and Holtz indicated the foundation could have been more transparent about its intentions to be deeply involved in the communities for a limited time. They said that if the foundation were going to do it again, it would likely go into the communities with a clearer exit strategy. The idea would be to make clear from the start that over time the foundation would be shifting to a different model of grassroots grantmaking with residents in the driver’s seat.