

# Who is Having Success with Learning?

## Mile High United Way

*Denver-area United Way embraces need to strengthen the capacity of organizations and communities to measure impact and learn from results.*

### Quick Grantmaker Stats

Type of funder	501(c)(3) Grantmaking Organization
Geography/Issue Area	Metropolitan Denver, Colorado
When founded	1887
Total assets (as of FY 2013)	\$43,757,557
Annual giving (as of FY 2013)	\$34,637,751
Number of staff	102
Website	<a href="http://www.unitedwaydenver.org">www.unitedwaydenver.org</a>
Brief description of the program/ practice being discussed	Two programs aimed at supporting organizational and community capacity for evaluation.

### 1. Describe the situation or practice.

As a grantmaking intermediary with the federal government’s Social Innovation Fund, Mile High United Way is supporting a portfolio of Colorado organizations that are working to build early literacy skills and improve reading among children. Getting involved in the Social Innovation Fund, with its emphasis on rigorous evaluation of results, convinced Mile High United Way’s leaders of the need to strengthen the capacity of nonprofits in the state to measure impact and learn from their continuing work.

“As we began working more intensely with this group of stellar, high-performing organizations, we saw very quickly that they still needed help and support in improving practice around impact measurement and evaluation,” said Cindy Eby, senior director of evaluation. Eby joined Mile High United Way three years ago to oversee its growing evaluation program and now has a full-time staff of four working with her.

Mile High United Way’s intensified focus on evaluation has led to the launch of two new initiatives intended to support organizations and communities to get smarter about measuring impact and learning.

## 2. What have you tried to do differently?

### *The Performance Collaborative*

As a SIF intermediary since 2011, Mile High United Way has been working with nine subgrantee organizations in Colorado — from school districts to local and statewide nonprofits — to broaden the impact of their early learning and literacy work. Based on its partnership with these organizations to improve their ability to measure impact, Mile High United Way recently launched a comprehensive effort aimed at strengthening the use of evaluative practice among a broader swath of grantees and other organizations.

The Performance Collaborative combines evaluation capacity building with the fundamentals of organizational development to try to bring about what the grantmaker refers to as “deep and genuine integration of evaluative practice within organizations.”

Nonprofits and other organizations can participate in The Performance Collaborative at a variety of levels. At the most basic level, Mile High United Way offers a one-day course on evaluation essentials for leaders and evaluation and program staff who want to integrate evaluation more deeply into the continuing work of their organizations. Next, Mile High United Way offers deep dives into specific areas of evaluation such as evaluation design, data collection and analysis. These sessions are held throughout the year and run from a few hours to two days.

At the next level, called The Performance Collaborative Complete, Mile High United Way recently started working more intensively with a small group of five youth-focused programs for a two-year program to help strengthen their evaluation capacity. Participants in this program gather for milestone meetings quarterly and receive one-on-one coaching to implement evaluative practice within their organizations. With each organization committing a team of two or more staff to the program, participants work together to refine their theory of change and implement new performance measurement and learning processes in their organizations. The first Performance Collaborative Complete group kicked off in July 2014.

“We have found that we need to provide a range of opportunities from light touch to more intensive learning opportunities about evaluation and performance measurement for organizations,” said Eby. “That way, people can engage with us at the right level for them right now and hopefully move along the continuum as they learn more and start to see the work take hold in their organizations.”

## **Mobilize Mile High**

Mile High United Way launched The Performance Collaborative program to help strengthen evaluative practice at the organizational level. To measure progress on Mile High United Way's broader goals of communitywide change, the grantmaker also recognized a need to invest in the community's capacity for evaluation. Mobilize Mile High is a collective effort to identify shared goals and measures to improve education, economic well-being and health throughout the Denver Metro area.

In 2014, Mile High United Way issued a set of community indicators that are the result of a two-year process of engagement involving outreach to nonprofit and foundation partners, the mayor's office and the general public. The indicators will enable Mile High United Way and its community partners to identify and track population-level changes in areas from school readiness to student reading. People will be able to see where the community stands on the various indicators via a dedicated website, and individual schools and neighborhoods will be able to benchmark their results against the broader results for the community as a whole.

*“Measurement is becoming a prominent driver in the social sector, as funders want to know exactly how their money is being used and communities want to know where and how to prioritize their efforts. Organizations and communities that prioritize measurement are finding that they are able to better adapt their programs to changing circumstances.”*  
– Cindy Eby, Senior Director of Evaluation

### **3. What has been the result?**

Mile High United Way's The Performance Collaborative is a new initiative, so results will become clearer over time. That said, there is strong interest in the program among nonprofits and other organizations in the community, which affirms the grantmaker's belief that there is an urgent need for organizational capacity building in evaluation.

Mobilize Mile High also is a newer initiative, but Mile High United Way is already seeing how the availability of community-level data on key indicators can lead to change. For example, in the course of collecting initial data on school readiness, Mile High United Way and its partners found that nearly 60 percent of Colorado's children do not have access to formal childcare centers.

This has prompted action on how to improve the quality of care among informal childcare providers.

In addition, the Mobilize Mile High effort has inspired neighborhoods and communities to get smarter about tracking specific outcomes for their children. For example, Eby said one initiative in northeast Denver looked at the broader set of Mobilize Mile High indicators, selected some that community members felt were particularly important and began community conversations about how to improve performance on those indicators.

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

Eby said Mile High United Way has identified a couple of important takeaways for philanthropy as the grantmaker set out to strengthen organizational and community capacity for evaluation. The first is simply that grantmakers should pay more attention to this topic. “We keep hearing and seeing that nonprofits have a great interest in evaluation but that funders are not funding this work, nor are they providing capacity-building support so organizations can get up to speed on how to do this,” said Eby.

And not only are funders hesitant to support evaluation, but some of the prevailing practices in philanthropy actually encourage nonprofits to adopt approaches to measuring and analyzing impact that do not improve results. “Different foundations ask their grantees to report separately about what they are doing and the impact they are having, but we aren’t getting together to figure out how to help them use data not just to report to us but to improve their programs,” Eby said.

Last but not least, Eby said Mile High United Way has designed many of its evaluation programs to create opportunities for nonprofits to get early wins in using data to improve performance. “We really focus on helping these organizations walk through the practical application of evaluation in their everyday work so they can see immediately how this will help them do a better job.”