

GEO Member Story



How First 5 Solano addresses future funding uncertainty by embracing a collaborative mindset and working with intentionality to build community and grantee capacity.

For First 5 Solano, the recession in 2008 and an intentionally declining revenue model led its staff to the conclusion that they must develop a strategic plan to address the real possibility that there may be a day where they can no longer fund at the levels their community has grown to rely on. In addition to dealing with the challenges many foundations face, including working to address the complex issues confronting a demographically diverse population in a distinct geographic area, First 5 Solano has been developing solutions to ensure that Solano County can continue to make progress on the issues facing young children and their families in the future.

First 5 Solano is part of a statewide network of county-level funders created by voters with the passing of Proposition 10 in 1998. Under this plan, the First 5 system is solely focused on addressing the needs of children from ages 0 to 5 and their families in California. Each organization is led by a commission named by the county Board of Supervisors that makes the funding decisions, with a professional staff that makes programmatic recommendations. In Solano County, this commission is a diverse body, with members coming from local health related services, the Board of Supervisors and small businesses, among others. Second, their funding comes exclusively from public funds. To fund the First 5 system, the state of California collects a 50 cent cigarette sales tax to support all of the 58 county-based community foundations. These funds are dispersed based on the birthrate in each county.

First 5 has taken the time to continually recognize and acknowledge the important role it plays in Solano County in supporting services for children and families. Noting the additional pressure placed on its grantees during the recession, First 5 Solano increased its funding levels. As with most First 5 Commissions, First 5 Solano started with a large reserve; however, it made the intentional decision to spend down this reserve to ensure grantees are able to build and expand programs today.

As tobacco sales continue to decline in California, First 5 Solano is taking proactive steps to map out a plan to build grantee capacity and ensure the programs it funds can continue to offer the critical services the community needs in the future. According to Megan Richards, interim executive director, the question facing the foundation is: “How do we make sure that the programs that we fund are able to sustain long term?” Under the auspices of the commission, the First 5 staff set out to address these concerns in a new five year strategic plan.

This plan also necessitated a mindset shift in First 5 Solano’s approach to funding. Instead of focusing on programmatic support, First 5 realized a need to fund instead the kind of systemic projects that would lead to lasting change. In addition to large-scale, evidence-based grantees, this meant looking for ways to develop and build community and grantee capacity. For example, the Co-Sponsorship of Training and Conferences grants look specifically to “improve the capacity of individuals and organizations in Solano County” by providing grantees with opportunities to receive the education and certifications that will make them more effective community partners. While some

of these grantees are those who are also supported with larger programmatic grants, the fund is open for any member of the community. And the Organizational Support Fund — which was started during the recession to offer overhead support — seeks to directly grow grantees’ capacity to secure additional support by directly funding grantwriters for community partners seeking grants from other funders.

As part of the plan, First 5 Solano also sought out opportunities to better organize and connect partners, both to bolster its own funding capabilities and to help identify and develop additional connections for its grantees. In the last four years under this plan, First 5 has brought in nearly \$3 million both directly for its grantees and in order to regrant to the programs it supports. In addition to funding sources, First 5 has worked to build long-term, collaborative relationships with business partners who can help support its grantee programs. For the Pre-Kindergarten Academy — a four week program to help prepare children who have not had preschool for kindergarten — the foundation established a “Business Champions” program, which helped support the tuition for more than 120 children. By acting as a facilitator to collaboration — among grantees, funders and members of the community — First 5 has found success in growing its funding capacity and impact on the community, even as it has faced declining revenue.

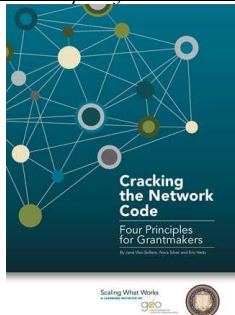
As First 5 Solano nears the end of this five-year strategic plan, its professional staff is taking the opportunity to put together both a new plan for its own funding as well as one for community action. By using this process to put together a collective impact action plan, First 5 Solano hopes to establish a model for future progress in its community.

“We’ve been doing this for fifteen years, and we know that we alone haven’t been able to change community indicators,” Richards said. “So, how can we instead get the community together to decide on some of these indicators? Because maybe then we’ll be able to access other sources of funding and also move the needle.”

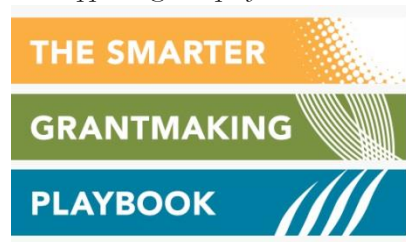
To find out more information on First 5 Solano, please visit <http://www.solanocounty.com/depts/first5>.

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

*Cracking the Network Code:
Four Principles for Grantmakers*



*The Smarter Grantmaking Playbook:
Supporting Nonprofit Resilience*



*Building Community Capacity
for Evaluation*

