

GEO Member Story



**The Community Foundation
for Greater New Haven**

How the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven found success in evaluating its flexible, long-term support grants by shifting from an accountability focused model to a learning mindset.

The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven has served New Haven County and the lower Naugatuck Valley for more than 85 years. By working in partnership with grantees to define success, using data to guide continuous improvement and investing in grantee evaluative and learning capacity, the foundation is able to better support its grantees in addressing complex social problems.

Over the past several years, the foundation has shifted its evaluation of flexible, long-term support grants from a predominantly accountability model to a learning for improvement model. In the old accountability model, the foundation focused its efforts on collecting reports and evaluating performance based on measures determined by grantees, who in most cases had limited expertise in effective evaluation practices. Additionally, the foundation did not have the ability to understand the impact of its grantees — this directly affected its ability to understand the impact of its grantmaking. The shift in recent years to a learning and evaluation perspective has required a more significant investment in resources, including increases in staffing and capacity-building support.

While both general operating and multiyear grants are subject to annual reviews and assessments, the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven is acutely aware of the fine line it must walk in ensuring these assessments do not impede its grantees' ability to execute on their work. The foundation recognized that though a strong learning and evaluation system was critical in order to understand its own impact, its reporting requirements must not be burdensome to its grantees. The foundation accomplished this by scaling evaluation requirements based on the size and duration of the grant, as well as by making them proportionate to the outcomes they hope to achieve. Instead of relying solely on its own internal expertise, the foundation instead has taken steps to engage potential and existing grantees to create an evaluation process that benefits both partners. This shift has also given the foundation's grantees the freedom to use their own expertise to pursue complex solutions to the challenges facing the region.

As the foundation has moved away from an accountability approach to a learning and evaluation approach, it has sought out ways to ensure that its evaluation requirements provide an opportunity for both itself and its grantees to learn and improve. "We know that when goals, outcomes and measures are developed in partnership between the foundation and its grantees, the reporting process becomes more relevant and useful for grantees and the foundation," said Christina Ciociola, senior vice president of grantmaking and strategy.

In the case of multiyear grants, the foundation focuses its assessment of grantee success from year-to-year on measureable progress, not the achievement of specific targets. In addition to giving grantees more flexibility in executing their programmatic work, working in partnership to develop outcomes and measures ensures that the foundation's grant reporting requirements present an opportunity for grantees to collect data they can use to improve their own work. According to

Ciociola: “We’re really investing in the long-term success of our grantees, and we want to make sure they are making an impact and that they are able to measure that impact.”

This commitment to evaluation for learning and improvement runs throughout the foundation’s entire competitive grantmaking process. While the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven wants its grantees to create measures and outcomes that will be useful to measure their own work, it acknowledges that many nonprofits may not approach the process with a strong knowledge base of effective evaluation practices. During the competitive grant application process, the foundation offers orientations and trainings around evaluation. It also provides one-on-one consultation to grant applicants on their proposed evaluation methods before the grant application is officially submitted. “The success of our grantee’s work is about much more than making progress towards programmatic outcomes and meeting specific targets. We also want to strengthen their capacity to evaluate their work and deliver their services more effectively”, Ciociola said. “This is why the foundation utilizes the Core Capacity Assessment Tool, an organizational assessment created by TCC Group, to assess the capacity of its general operating support grantees. The foundation also offers a comprehensive capacity-building program as well as capacity-building grants.”

For the foundation, the shift from an accountability focused model to a learning mindset has been exceptionally helpful in providing staff with a more effective way to understand the progress its grantees are making. As a foundation that serves a diverse region, this wide-angle lens provides the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven with additional context on the whether and how it is making the region it serves stronger. It has also given the foundation an improved mechanism to engage its board around learning and evaluation processes.

The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven recognizes that making changes to established practices isn’t easy, but it has found success by working closely with grantees to develop a greater understanding of the work and the community it serves. According to Ciociola: “This is not easy work, but it’s a worthwhile process. When we invest in a grantee, we want them to succeed.”

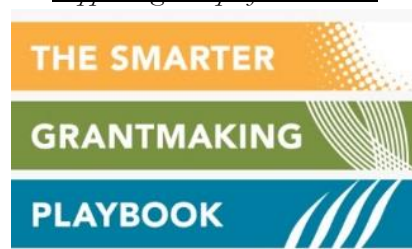
To find out more information on The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, please visit <http://www.cfnh.org/>.

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

*Assessing the Impact:
General Operating Support*



*The Smarter Grantmaking Playbook:
Supporting Nonprofit Resilience*



*Evaluation in Philanthropy:
Perspectives from the Field*

