

GEO Member Story



M&M Fisher
Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation

How Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation fosters collaboration and creates open relationships with its grant partners by approaching its work and the communities it serves with humility.

A family foundation located in Detroit, MI the Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation is no stranger to the complex social challenges facing children and families in need across the globe. In order to create and sustain meaningful impact in the communities served, the foundation does not rely solely on the decades of passion and philanthropic experience the Fisher family brings to the table. Instead, they look for ways to engage members of the community and potential grant partners in honest and genuine dialogue to design programs.

The foundation was formed in 1955, and has granted more than \$100 million across three continents in the last eight years alone. The Fisher family has helped steer the direction of the foundation since its inception; today, multiple generations of the Fisher family make up the foundation's board. According to Cynthia Rowell, program director at the foundation, this has made all the difference: "Our culture of humility is fostered and championed by the board. The foundation may not be unique, but we feel the Fisher family is."

According to Rowell, the Fisher family has worked to deeply ingrain in the foundation staff the idea that those in the community have a much greater understanding of the challenges they are facing than the foundation ever could. "Nothing moves without input from the people affected," said Rowell. "All of the foundation's grantmaking is made stronger for hearing from the people inside the issues."

Consistent with the beliefs of the founders, the family members on the foundation board use their hearts and heads, as well as their hands, in working to fulfill their responsibility of *tzedakah* (Hebrew term for justice). Because all final funding commitments are approved the foundation board, the family works hard to ensure they are not making decisions in a vacuum. Members of the board spend time on the ground in the communities the foundation serves to hear firsthand from those participating in funded programs. The board both schedules site visits to get out into the field and invites grant partners to attend annual board meetings, not only to report on their work but to help give the board a broader lens with which to look at their full portfolio.

Additionally, the foundation engages the community early in the programmatic process. "We take our strategy to some of our closest community partners and get feedback from them, and continue to do that until the program is finished," said Rowell. In fact, there have been many cases where entire grant programs were designed from the ground up in consultation with community partners. Rowell shared one such example of how a grant program developed with input from the community:

One of the foundation's areas of focus is early childhood education in the Brightmoor neighborhood in Detroit. The goal there was to partner with the hard working women who are already on the ground providing quality care to children

[before school age] with very few resources. When the foundation received a proposal from an organization working to raise the quality of early childhood education in the neighborhood, staff took the proposal directly to the women who would be invited to participate in the program and asked for their thoughts about the proposed work. The women suggested the foundation consider creating childcare scholarships tied to high quality ratings to accomplish three objectives: helping low income families stabilize childcare arrangements, incentivizing educators to participate in the quality raising initiatives and helping stabilize childcare businesses in the neighborhood. The women also requested support for summer enrichment opportunities to strengthen programming in alignment with quality ratings. Based on what we learned from the women, the proposal was strengthened and the organization's \$500,000 request became an \$850,000 grant.

By approaching the situation with humility — and not presuming to know what the community needs — the foundation was able to work with potential grant partners to design programs that would have a real impact in the community.

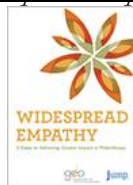
This approach to grantmaking has strengthened ties between the foundation and similar funders across the globe. Though the foundation has worked for many years in communities throughout the world, including Detroit, Israel and Zambia, staff acknowledged the crucial role that collaboration between grantors could play in affecting change. The Foundation came together with the Skillman Foundation, Kresge Foundation and the Colina Family Foundation to form the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative for Southeast Michigan. As Rowell describes it, “[The Collaborative is] a venue for the foundations in the community who support education for children in southeast Michigan to come together.” When the federal government decided to rebid the Headstart program in Detroit, it was this Collaborative under the leadership of the Kresge and W.K. Kellogg Foundations that came together to create a \$5M pooled fund to partially meet the required match to the federal government's Headstart contribution.

The foundation continues to build successful programs by closely partnering with other funders, grant partners and members of the communities being served. “The people on the ground know best. We are grateful to our partners who allow us to be a part of their work. It is the dedication and commitment of those on the ground working to change lives that makes the grants impactful, not just for the foundation, but more importantly for the children and families inside the issues,” said Rowell.

To find out more information on Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation, please visit <http://www.mmfisher.org/>.

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

Widespread Empathy



The Smarter Grantmaking Playbook: Strengthening Relationships



Cracking the Network Code

