

# GEO Member Spotlight



Allison Barmann, Vice President of Strategy and Learning at the Bush Foundation

For the Bush Foundation, it was clear — if breakthrough innovation and real change was going to take place through the community-based organizations that it supports, then those organizations are the best places to look to for solutions.

In surveying the nonprofit environment it was a part of, there were two pretty clear observations for the Foundation: 1) There were many organizations with great ideas already trying to do community-power problem-solving, and 2) There was only scarce flexible funding available to these organizations to implement these ideas.

With flexible funding that enables innovation being so rare, the Foundation felt, “That’s exactly what we need to be funding.”

This summer, the Bush Foundation is launching a new set of Community Innovation programs. These programs are reaching out to organizations in the geographic regions the Bush Foundation serves — Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and the 23 Native nations that share the same geography— and asking them to come up with their own ideas of how to boldly take on the challenges they are up against.

The two new programs that are being put to use by the Foundation are new Community Innovation Grants and The Bush Prize for Community Innovation.

## ***Community Innovation Grants***

Put simply by the Foundation, “Community Innovation Grants support innovation through community-powered problem-solving: inclusive, collaborative processes focused on making the most of community assets.”

Even though this is the first time that the Foundation is offering this program, the interest in the nonprofit community is already evident through participation in information sessions that the Bush Foundation held across the region to inform organizations about the program.

“We had a couple hundred people at one meeting and then 50 to 60 at many meetings, and we were just amazed. We were thrilled,” said Allison Barmann, vice president for strategy and learning at the Bush Foundation. Barmann also noted that the organizations that attended came from across an entire spectrum of sizes and issues.



One of the distinguishing components of the [Community Innovation Grants](#) is that there are very few restrictions and limitations not only in what issues an organization might be working on, but also what stage in the problem-solving process the organization is in or even how they might define the community they’re working with.

Barmann said one of the most frequently asked questions the Foundation gets is, “How do you define community?” The answer: a community could be a geographic community (e.g. a neighborhood, town, state or Native nation) and

it could be an affinity or racial/ethnic community; it's really up to the applicants to decide and define it, Barmann said.

Obviously, all of this leads to a considerable amount of flexibility and freedom for organizations to share solutions with the Foundation. Innovation is the key here — not flashiness — so grants could fund a great idea for simply doing work more efficiently, Barmann said.

As to the size of the grants, they range from \$10,000 up to \$200,000, and grantees can work with Bush Foundation staff to agree upon the appropriate grant period for the project.

The second round of applications for the grants will open in December 2013, with two rounds of grants offered each coming year. Plans are also in the works to establish a smaller version of the program for grants consisting of up to \$10,000 that could be distributed through intermediaries in each state.

### ***The Bush Prize for Community Innovation***

In addition to helping organizations in the process of creating innovative solutions, the Bush Foundation wants to empower those who have already established a track record for making great ideas happen. To do so, it's offering [The Bush Prize](#), a flexible grant of 25 percent of a winning organization's current fiscal year program or organization budget, with a \$500,000 cap on the grant — plus the benefits of promotion and recognition by the Foundation.

"It's creative capital," Barmann said. "We believe they will take the flexible funding and put it toward the best use."

The prize money doesn't have to be allocated to a specific project, and the application for the Bush Prize doesn't require organizations to specify how they'd spend the money.

Similar to the Community Innovation Grants, organizations that apply for the Bush Prize should demonstrate that their community innovation is built on community-powered problem-solving approaches that are:

- Inclusive, meaningfully engaging the key stakeholders affected by the problem;
- Collaborative, with partners demonstrating willingness to change to be more effective together; and
- Resourceful, making the most of existing community strengths and resources.

Barmann said that as organizations receive Community Innovation Grants, they will also be setting themselves up to be future recipients of the Bush Prize to continue to move the problem-solving momentum forward even further. The Foundation will also be working with evaluation consultants to evaluate the programs and to share lessons with others who may benefit from the Bush Foundation's experience.

Successful innovation often goes hand-in-hand with quality leadership, and it's not unlikely that the Foundation's leadership development programs — including its [Bush Fellowship Program](#) — will strengthen and be strengthened through the Community Innovation programs, Barmann said. The Community Innovation programs may also expose new opportunities to strengthen the success of the Foundation's other two programs — [Educational Achievement](#) and [Native Nation Building](#) — by inviting new ideas in, through the lens of community innovation.

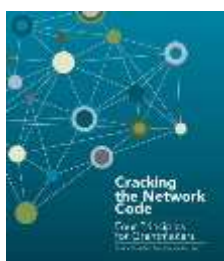
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### **GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight:**

#### [\*Do Nothing About Me Without Me\*](#)



#### [\*Cracking the Network Code\*](#)



#### [\*Building Community Capacity for Participation in Evaluation\*](#)

