

GEO Member Story



How the four participants in GEO's Change Incubator will tackle some of their thorniest problems by finding new ways to engage grantees in their grantmaking programs.

GEO's Change Incubator is an 18-month intensive, selective cohort program designed to help grantmakers address complex challenges and accelerate the pace of change within their own organizations. [Our research shows](#) that grantmakers who are more connected to their grantees are more likely to provide the support that nonprofits need to be successful. Members of the GEO community understand this approach, but there are barriers that prevent us from building productive and authentic relationships with grantees. In partnership with leadership development expert Cambridge Leadership Associates, this pilot program will help grantmakers strengthen relationships with their grantees ways that lead to better impact.

This piece profiles each of the four participants in the first Change Incubator cohort and shares some of the challenges they are hoping to address during their time in the program. Over the full length of the program, they will refine their goals and approaches and share what they learn with the GEO community along the way.

The **Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation** has worked for years to find a system that allows it to better understand its grantees and the communities it serves. It has tried many different approaches, including creating grantee learning collaboratives to support information sharing and implementing standardized outcomes to allow for aggregation of impact data. Though the foundation has a reputation for creating strong relationships with its grantees, it is now looking for new ways to engage nonprofits in the knowledge and learning process. As Danielle Breslin, vice president at the foundation, noted, evaluation has the ability to serve the nonprofits it funds as much as it does the foundation itself. "I think the issue is that the data we collect or the knowledge we gather, it's not for our benefit. Ultimately, it does nobody any good if it just lives with us." By participating in Change Incubator, the BCBSNC Foundation will engage its grantees and stakeholders to design a learning and evaluation plan that is responsive, fosters the timely and actionable exchange of information, and maximizes impact in North Carolina and across the field.

Founded in 2013, the **Episcopal Health Foundation** has joined the philanthropic community at a time of rapid change. As a new organization, it faces many challenges as it begins its work, yet also have the advantage of developing work in line with "new" philanthropy without having to devote resources to the "old" ways of doing business. EHF is not just a grant-making organization. As a supporting organization of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, it has the ability to devote resources to other kinds of work, including direct community engagement through their 153 congregations in 57 counties — home to 10 million people. The foundation's theory of change is predicated on the idea that the communities it serves are critical to solving the challenges they face, and it therefore views its grantees and congregations not just as organizations it funds but as true partners in its work to advance community health. Nonprofit and community voices have been a priority for the

foundation since its inception, and as it further develops its approach to working with partners, the foundation wants to focus specifically on how those voices can be incorporated into its ongoing work. According to Lexi Nolen, vice president for impact, the foundation hopes to use Change Incubator as a way to turn its vision into action: “We have a vision and we expect this program to help us ensure that community engagement is integrated throughout the work.”

The Heinz Endowments will participate in Change Incubator to support and enhance the work being done through one of its experimental initiatives. The Endowments has long engaged grantees in both the design and implementation of its funding programs, and its Transformative Arts Process (TAP) goes a step further in order to achieve its goal of supporting the arts in African American and distressed neighborhoods. TAP’s innovative strategy was developed following a series of convenings and gatherings with grantees and members of the community. The endowments will look to work with peers in the Change Incubator cohort to find new ways to evaluate how being inclusive helps it and its grantees improve distressed neighborhoods. Participants from Heinz will also be looking to find the right balance when pursuing the benefits of engagement may necessitate a slower process than runs counter to the urgency Heinz feels in its work. As Justin Laing, Senior Program Officer at the foundation, noted: “We are experimenting with grantee engagement in program design and grantmaking in a deeper way than we have done before — we are actively engaging grantees in such activities as program and process design and fund distribution. Learning to evaluate the impact of this program is critical so that we can understand the positive changes that occur, to inform our decision-making and the work of our grantees, as well as any pitfalls where the process may not perform as we had hoped.”

Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation views its grantees as critical partners in achieving its “Moving the Needle” goals for Arkansas. These goals – to increase prosperity, increase graduation rates, strengthen communities, and build nonprofit infrastructure – were designed with input from grantees and partners. Through learning and evaluation processes, WRF seeks to help its grantees understand their individual impact as well as how they fit into work being done to address broad social challenges. The Change Incubator is an opportunity for WRF to refine its assessment tools to ensure grantees are getting the information they need to improve and to learn from other grantees. Xochitl Delgado, program associate at the Foundation, describes the challenge: “I think one of our struggles in the past has been that grantees give us reports that evaluate a particular grant, but this information isn’t in a format that is helpful for themselves or for other grantees. So whatever we develop, we want it to be useful to the Foundation, obviously, but also something that’s easy for our grantees to use to communicate their own story and share learnings with others.”

To find out more information on the Change Incubator and stay updated on the progress of the participants in the first cohort, please visit <http://www.geofunders.org/changeincubator>.

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

Learning Together: Actionable Approaches for Grantmakers

The Smarter Grantmaking Playbook: Strengthening Relationships with Grantees

Do Nothing About Me Without Me: An Action Guide for Engaging Stakeholders