

GEO Member Story



How Dallas Women's Foundation's commitment to empathy has shaped its approach to learning and grantmaking.

Dallas Women's Foundation was founded on the belief that when you invest in a woman, there is a ripple effect that benefits her family, her community and her world. Similarly, when grantmakers invest in continuous learning and strengthening relationships with grantees and other stakeholders, there is a ripple effect that benefits the foundation, the nonprofit and the community.

Empathy allows grantmakers to shape their decisions and actions through the perspectives of grantees and community members. A starting point for creating empathy is to be more deliberate about how we engage grantees and other relevant stakeholders in our work. By engaging its board in an empathy exercise to advance learning and strengthen relationships, Dallas Women's Foundation was able to develop a better understanding of grantee and community needs and concerns.

The foundation's Economic Security Initiative is a new long-term commitment to strengthening the economic security of 16,000 female heads of households and their children in the North Texas region by 2021. Additionally, the initiative increases public awareness of the importance of women's economic security to the region and the state of Texas. Soon after the launch of the initiative in 2013, the foundation invited board members to embark on the "Underbanked Experience." With economic security becoming a new focus area for the foundation, the staff wanted board members to use alternative financial services such as pawn shops, prepaid debit cards, and check cashing and cash advance establishments in order to give them a better understanding of the communities the foundation serves. On the surface, alternative financial services may not seem like good options because of high fees and indirect costs; however, the empathy exercise helped board members see that these options are actually very logical choices for people who are living paycheck to paycheck or who can't get a checking account or credit card.

The Economic Security Initiative includes multiyear funding, an invitation-only grant application, a learning community for staff and grantees, and an outside evaluator tracking performance metrics and outcomes. This is a departure from annual, reactive grantmaking "The Economic Security Initiative is a significant change from our way of doing business that some of the board were excited about and some were a little nervous about." says Dena L. Jackson, Ph.D., vice president of grants and research at Dallas Women's Foundation. To combat any hesitation to this new approach, staff members elected to use the interactive "Underbanked Experience" to educate board members. "It was important for the board to understand why we were making these changes, why we were focusing in the area of economic security and why sustained multiyear funding in larger dollar amounts is important to greater impact. We wanted them to understand the issue well enough to be

champions in the community as we took on economic security as a focus initiative at the foundation” says Lauren Hradecky Blitzer, economic security director at Dallas Women’s Foundation.

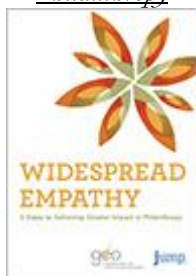
The board members who engaged in the experiment recorded their experiences, and the video served as a board and staff education tool for the foundation. “For those who did not participate in the “Underbanked Experience,” the video was exciting because they got to learn from their peers and it wasn’t just the staff stressing the importance of an initiative. The board member peer participation component of this experience is what made it special and what resonated more than some of our other methods. This was very impactful.” says Jackson.

Both board and staff had a deeper understanding of the issues behind the grants following the experience. There was a significant increase in the board’s comfort level with multiyear and larger grants, and the empathy exercise also dramatically increased the boards trust in the staff’s judgement while providing new opportunities for interactions and relationship building. By meeting the grantees and community stakeholders where they are, both the foundation staff and board were in a better place to learn together. “Continuous learning as an approach has dramatically increased our impact. It makes our board members more confident in being our advocates and it helps our grantees continuously improve their service delivery. It also makes us better grantmakers and helps us better support our grantees and our community as they move forward.” says Blitzer. By being attuned to what is happening with their grantees and in the communities that are the focus of their work, grantmakers build empathy and ultimately strengthen relationships with grantees.

To find out more information on Dallas Women’s Foundation, please visit <http://www.dallaswomensfdn.org>

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

Widespread Empathy: 5 Steps To Achieving Greater Impact In Philanthropy



Learning Together: Actionable Approaches For Grantmakers



Due Diligence Done Well: A Guide For Grantmakers

