

# GEO Member Story



## *How The Fannie E. Rippel Foundation uses a systems mindset to make progress on complex challenges.*

The United States spends twice as much per person on health care as other industrialized nations, yet achieves far worse outcomes. Founded in 1953, The Fannie E. Rippel Foundation believes that if we are to see major advances in population health, quality of care, equity in access and increased productivity, we must think and act in fundamentally different ways. Over the last few decades, grantmakers like the Rippel Foundation working to be more proactive, strategic, learning-oriented and inclusive have increasingly recognized that impact does not happen in isolation.

Nearly a decade ago, the staff and trustees of the Fannie E. Rippel Foundation made a decision to move away from traditional grantmaking that supported siloed interventions yielding measurable, but incremental improvements. As part of this shift, they adopted a model that embraced systems thinking and seeks to catalyze transformational systems-level change to improve population health. To actualize this vision, the foundation launched a multifaceted national initiative called ReThink Health. The foundation embarked on this journey based on both its deep historic recognition of the need to transform health and health care, as well as the current perception that forces may finally be converging that can make change happen. “As government and markets are shaping what our health will look like five or ten years from now, we asked ourselves ‘do we let it evolve this way or do we draw from the lessons and successes of the past to do something to shape the path?’ We realized that to get to where we want to be will require looking at health as an ecosystem.” says Laura K. Landy, president and CEO of The Fannie E. Rippel Foundation.

Many grantmakers are coming to realize that in order to be effective, they must see the system as a whole, understand the relationships among the individual parts and the intersecting systems, and proactively work to move beyond isolated interventions. Systems change often focuses on structures, policies and processes, but these are only some of the ways to change systems. Other ways include shifting resources, values, power, mindsets, infrastructure and more. Importantly, it also means making difficult choices and commitments where not everyone individually can win – but we all can win in the long term.

The Rippel Foundation knew it couldn’t do this work alone and so relies extensively on convening “Rethinkers” – thought leaders, peer funders, nonprofits, policy makers, and community leaders to help it see the systems it is a part of and understand what it will take to change. The foundation’s ReThink Health initiative works closely with regional leaders, cross-sector coalitions, and policy makers and influencers to help them develop more active stewardship practices, effectively build critical relationships across the community, create a vision and support it with clear priorities and strategies, and determine how to sustain investments over time. Landy outlines three areas of practice that, when integrated, have proven to make meaningful change:

- **From Leadership to Stewardship** requires stepping outside of your own personal frame as a leader of a special initiative or organization into being a steward of the ecosystem. It starts with recognizing that the decision-making table must expand to include diverse voices,

approaches, resources, and power dynamics with members willing to set priorities that serve the entire community.

- **From Action to Strategy** requires stewards to work with a keen understanding of the options available to them to identify those that will have the greatest impact *over time*. The current scattershot approach will continue to give less than effective outcomes.
- **From Cost to Value to Sustainable Financing** moves to understand the critical role financing plays in the long view. By identifying savings and reinvesting them, changing business models, creating new partnerships, reallocating resources, and more, an environment can be created that will support positive change over the long haul.

In order to help the funders, community leaders and practitioners understand what is possible — and to develop targeted strategies to achieve lasting results — the foundation supported the creation of new frameworks like the Pathway for Health System Transformation and the ReThink Health System Dynamics Model. The pathway helps leaders see where they are on the journey and anticipate predictable pitfalls, as well as how to overcome them. Supporting the pathway, the model offers an empirically-based, analytical computer tool that simulates the behavior of a regional health system and can be customized to reflect differences in regional health systems. It has been used by a number of organizations, regions, and academic programs across the country to help communities and funders to see the various interconnected components of a system and identify what would really make a difference. Both are supported by an emerging toolkit that focuses on the challenging question of how we sustain financing over time.

Contrary to popular belief, systems change interventions don't have to be huge. Pueblo, Colorado was once at the bottom of county health rankings, spending a lot of money on improving population health. The Rippel Foundation worked with the city through the modeling process to create a targeted strategy for their region. Since then, they've received two major grants and the most recent county health rankings show significant improvement. Another example of systems thinking at work is Dartmouth Hitchcock. The ReThink Health model helped this major regional hospital system see that by investing in population health it can get a better return on investment than investing in the stock market. A system's mindset helped the organization see itself not just as the leader of a hospital system but as a steward of its community and assets. Landy says, "This became the mantra for ReThink Health – to identify the hard questions that many people are afraid to ask and to make a long term investments in addressing them with others so we can show transformation in our health system is a reality."

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To find out more information on The Fannie E. Rippel Foundation, please visit <http://www.rippelfoundation.org/>

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

