Resident-led grassroots grants programs
a genuine democratization and engagement strategy

WHAT ARE WE DOING TO INVEST IN THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN - THE HUMAN SIDE - TO COMPLEMENT THE BRICKS AND MORTAR?

The Cleveland Foundation has a long history of investing in Cleveland’s neighborhoods. As the oldest and one of the largest community foundations in the United States, the foundation has an impressive track record in bricks and mortar community development and community economic development grantmaking that has made a difference in Cleveland’s neighborhoods.

Their success in this area, however, suggested a new set of questions that the foundation began to explore nearly ten years ago. As the community organizations that had been their partners became more sophisticated, the foundation realized that they needed another strategy to reach deeper.

They realized that a missing piece of their overall strategy had to do with neighborhood residents themselves. Joel Ratner, President of the Raymond John Wean Foundation and former Director of Neighborhood Connections, The Cleveland Foundation’s grassroots grantmaking program, says that the Foundation began asking “what are we doing to invest in the other side of the coin – the human side – to complement the bricks and mortar?”

Tom O’Brien, current Neighborhood Connections Program Director, knows that “you can have a lot of beautiful new buildings in a neighborhood, but the physical redevelopment of a neighborhood won’t be successful unless you have active and engaged citizens who live in those communities who are driving these changes. People want to and need to be valued for contributions to the community. Unfortunately, in many neighborhood revitalization efforts community members are given token opportunities for input and to contribute. Work that doesn’t include and value community members in a meaningful way will fail”.

Ratner recalls that the foundation was particularly inspired by work in Chicago where residents could apply for grants to improve the community. They looked at various small grants programs in other cities as well. But to take it one step further, they decided that their approach would have residents make the decisions about who received the grant awards.

Grassroots grants are an effective ways to get residents engaged and invested in their own communities. Now a number of funders are taking the idea one step further, turning the grantmaking decisions over to the residents who in live and work in the community.

This publication shares insights on this emerging practice from two funders – The Cleveland Foundation and The Skillman Foundation - who utilize resident-led decision-making as a core component of their grassroots grantmaking work.

Visit Grassroots Grantmakers’ website for additional resources on resident-led grantmaking.

gcfo.org
He says the foundation knew this step would “create a genuine democratization and engagement strategy,” where residents in their own neighborhoods would receive funding and have the “power and decision making” around it as well. To hand over this level of control was a strategy that “truly put ‘community’ into the community foundation.”

**THE SEARCH FOR THE NEEDLE IN THE HAYSTACK**

Ratner was hired in 2002 as Neighborhood Connections was just getting off the ground. One of his first tasks was to identify the first group of resident grant makers. He began by developing a list of potential candidates who could represent Cleveland’s 24 neighborhoods. He admits that he “didn’t know the neighborhoods very well,” so started logically with the “existing neighborhood infrastructure” as a source for recommendations.

He also wanted to broaden the list of candidates to include individuals working “under the radar.” Says Ratner, “We consciously decided we weren’t looking for the usual suspects or the first person everyone named — not the neighborhood power broker — but people with a lot of leadership potential and ability to focus and accomplish to make a difference.”

To get to this deeper layer of residents and activists, he asked community organizers through area CDC’s — people who worked directly in the neighborhood - for their recommendations, and compiled a list of potential candidates. It was a process that took time, and Ratner says it was important to slow down and “dig to find those who might not be the first to surface.”

“There’s always pressure to move something new along quickly,” he says. “But we needed to be sure we found the right people.”

Ratner prepared a letter of inquiry to tell prospects about the committee, why they were nominated, and to invite people to fill out a short application if they were interested in serving. He felt he made an error in judgment initially, asking candidates to disclose their level of education. A foundation colleague pointed out that they were looking for “raw intelligence and neighborhood wisdom, rather than credentials,” he says. “We didn’t want this to become a factor that would intimidate some people who were really right for this work.”

Over fifty individuals responded with interest, and Ratner, neighborhood consultants, and several others from the foundation began to interview candidates. Like a process of looking for a needle in the haystack, he says what they found were “eighteen wonderful needles – people who really knew their neighborhood, and had accomplished something, often quietly.”

**FIRST STEPS AND GROWING PAINS**

Ratner started the group out with some training that included background on city issues and infrastructure, role playing interviews for choosing grantees, and general principles for reviewing proposals. The latter, he says, is more “art than science,” and wanted committee members to work more from their instincts and sound judgment about community.

There weren’t a lot of “serious stumbling blocks,” and he was impressed with how well the process went as committee members took on the decision making role. Occasionally a member would lose interest or “get distracted by their own life,” so there was work to “re-inspire and reintegrate” them or find a new participant.

Ratner noticed that some new members occasionally worried they would make poor decisions, believing they could create a failsafe by establishing more guiding rules for the Grantmaking. It was a “good instinct,” he says, but he felt “the gist of the committee was bringing in people with very good judgment about neighborhoods.”

“There’s a temptation to make more and more and more rules, which foundations do too much of already,” he jokes. Instead, he counseled members to trust their own judgment as a way to “avoid slippage.”

But the committee did want to create a conflict of interest policy, which impressed Ratner. It was one that “separated them from the conflicts and difficult situations that are always an issue in community work.”

Finding the needles in the haystack

- Begin by building a list of possible candidates.
- Find potential candidates through existing neighborhood infrastructure, and those who work directly with people — e.g. community organizers, neighborhood organizations, block clubs, CBO’s, and CDC’s.
- Look beyond the “usual suspects” — instead, look for people working under the radar.
- If your Grantmaking represents specific geographic regions, make sure that committee members are drawn equally from those areas.
- Don’t rush – take extra time to dig for new participants – the pay off will be a new and authentic energy to community work that comes from these new leaders.
After 5 years, Ratner made a move to Warren, Ohio to work with The Raymond John Wean Foundation to build their own resident-led grassroots grants program. Tom O’Brien, a former community organizer in Cleveland, took on the work at Neighborhood Connections, moving into its next stages.

Initial stumbling blocks in the program had been ironed out. This made it easy for O’Brien to take stock of its strengths and move the committee to its next stages.

He says it was clear to him that he was working with people on the Grantmaking Committee who had “profound wisdom and expertise about their community” – people who “understand what works and what doesn’t because they live and work there.” He says by this time the grassroots perspective was a tangible asset to the foundation, who had gained a more nuanced view of what it takes to build community.

The foundation’s capacity to do more work was also enhanced by the addition of the grants committee. Nearly 400 grant applications were received annually, which exceeded the staff’s capacity.

The manpower committee members added to the work of the foundation in terms of reviewing proposals and conducting outreach in the community about Neighborhood Connections was invaluable. “The Grantmaking Committee is the backbone of this grants program”, says O’Brien.

The work of the committee also had an interesting way of shifting the perception of the community to see the “hundreds of positive things that go on here every day.” O’Brien says it’s easy for anyone to “read the news and think the city is going to hell in a handbag,” but with committee members’ hands touching positive outcomes each day, a constructive message about community in Cleveland was spreading.

Evidence of the committee’s influence came recently when their advice and involvement was sought out on a city/non-profit collaboration designed to transform vacant land into public gardens and parks. Committee members and staff assisted in the design of the program, and three residents from the Grantmaking Committee served on the grant review panel of this initiative.

“I think it’s a project where the city knows they can’t do it on their own and really need residents,” says O’Brien. He viewed it as an “important sign of success” for the committee, who had clearly made an impression on the community that grassroots work had value.

“The message that everyone has something to contribute is sinking in,” says O’Brien, “though there’s still much work to be done. It’s bringing a different feeling to Cleveland neighborhoods.”

The application and selection process

- Send out a letter of inquiry and application to all potential candidates on your list.
- Develop an application that gauges tangible assets, but also shows care for community.
- Credentials may be one way to measure, but they don’t reflect a candidate’s caring or ability for community work.
- Include a variety of people to interview candidates in the first round.

Getting your committee ready for their new role

- Start finalists out with some general training in city issues, interviewing, and grant review.
- Rely on the good judgment of committee members, rather than excessive rule-making.
- Do create basic rules that maintain a good process, like a conflict of interest policy.
- Be prepared for some committee members to lose interest – reinvigorate their interest or seek new candidates.
Refining your role as facilitator:
- Approach the work as a facilitator, not a decision maker.
- Trust committee members and never override their decisions.
- Let members work out conflicts and decisions themselves – as well as who comes on board next.
- Encourage members not to get too nitpicky with rules – encourage good judgment.
- Use sound questioning as a way to guide the group through conflicts, but don’t drive them in one direction.
- Don’t take upsets personally.
- Remember, it’s a process and not an exact science - keep reminding your committee members of this.

The message that everyone has something to contribute is sinking in.

What do foundations gain?
- High quality, nuanced decisions about community, because they’re made by people who live and work there.
- Greater capacity to tend to other grant decisions, because more people are engaged in the process.
- Time to engage potential grantees who might not yet be ready for a grant – yet who show potential.
- A whole new crop of leaders, by steering away from the “usual suspects.”
- The potential to shift perception in a community to the positive.

Refining the work through good facilitation
As the work of the committee matures, O’Brien continues to see it as a work in progress that requires fine tuning.

The committee needs very little “deliberate” changing by him. Instead, he says his role is to “listen and be responsive to their observations, like a facilitator.”

The committee’s observations have yielded some important changes in the work. One was a recent change to the application for grant seekers. While Committee members were okay with the original application, they felt important information was missing from questions asked and that the application was too problem-focused. Staff formed a sub-committee of current and former committee members, and they revised the application to ask questions that they felt better reflected the goals of the program and that really encouraged groups to identify assets in their neighborhoods that they could build upon.

Committee members also wanted to develop clarity and consistency about what they fund. For example, some felt that funding an equipment need wasn’t a good decision, while others felt it was alright in some circumstances. Instead of setting a rule, the committee decided to add separate questions should an applicant want to make such a request.

Turn-over is a natural process that takes place on any committee. But instead of O’Brien or foundation staff making the decision about a new member, the committee decides. He says his role is to encourage members to look for candidates who have “grassroots experience, are dependable, well trusted, connected to community – and can see the glass as half full.”

O’Brien says he does need to enforce things like terms limits, and facilitates trainings for new committee members. “It’s good to have some guidelines so people know how to approach their role,” he says. “But I also need to be flexible, patient, and willing to challenge people.”

Those challenges come at times when members can get “nitpicky” on the details, so he tries to remind them of “the spirit of the program and what guides it.”

But O’Brien also says “the biggest challenge is really coming to consensus in the end. With only so much money to spend and
many good applications to review, “members are passionate and can be contentious as they defend their funding decisions with other members of the committee.”

He encourages Committee members to be thoughtful about what they are doing - to focus on the goals of the program in making funding decision, but to remain open-minded and flexible in their decision making. “We encourage Committee members to try to leave their personal biases at the door when they come to Committee meetings – to focus on the proposal and if it meets the goals and criteria of Neighborhood connections.

It’s not a perfect journey, and I try to remind people that this is a process and not an exact science”, says O’Brien.

A FOUNDATION CHANGES THE WAY IT’S “WIRED”

Meaningful resident engagement is now an integral part of the Cleveland Foundation’s community investment strategy. But to arrive there required a significant shift in the way a foundation normally approaches the work, which wasn’t particularly easy.

Ratner explains it this way: “Decision making about community investment is a foundation’s power, and we’re trained to do this. That’s how we’re wired - so turning over that power to people who we might first view as ‘untrained’ can be scary. That’s a big change for a foundation, and that’s hard.”

He says that foundations can “get stuck in old ways of Grantmaking and can miss an opportunity to do something really different, new, and empowering.”

“I think a lot of foundations may not see the importance of engagement and are not looking at it as a strategy,” he says.

And O’Brien acknowledges that “some foundations may just be more open to doing this than others because of the messiness.”

But Ratner concludes that no matter how much a foundation may want to support community change, “you really can’t do it without engaging the people in that community.”

Adds O’Brien, “If people aren’t valued or contributing, grassroots engagement really won’t work. The community is really an untapped resource in most communities where we can find some valuable solutions.”

In spite of the foundation’s natural fears, the outcomes were worth the risk. Says Ratner, “It created a powerful set of relationships, and if foundations are interested in changing communities, this is what’s needed.”

Who utilizes resident-led grantmaking?

• Battle Creek Community Foundation
• Mabel Louise Riley Foundation
• The Cleveland Foundation
• Raymond John Wean Foundation
• Hamilton Community Foundation
• The Skillman Foundation
• Incarnate Word Foundation
• The Vancouver Foundation
• Neighborhood Unity Foundation

“There’s a quality of decision making of residents when it comes to their own neighborhood that is more expert. What the foundation gains is a more informed kind of decision making.”
Developing a resident grants committee isn’t just the nuts and bolts of putting it together. As Tom O’Brien relates, it’s also about setting the tone and tending the relationships in ways that support the work at hand.

Lisa Leverette provides a solid echo to this idea. She’s worked for the past four years through the Prevention Network - an intermediary for the Skillman Foundation’s Good Neighborhoods Program in Detroit, Michigan - to coordinate their Community Connections Grant Program. Like O’Brien, she believes that setting the right tone for the work is critical, but that it’s also important to let a grants committee “evolve organically.” The result in Detroit, she says, is a group of individuals who are branding a new style of community leadership as powerful “stewards” of community and grant funds.

**AGREEING TO DISAGREE**

“Four years and over one million dollars later, I think our resident grants committee members see that this isn’t just a nice thing to do in the community,” says Lisa Leverette.

When she first started to work with a resident grants committee in six struggling neighborhoods of Detroit, she says she wanted them to see that this wasn’t an ordinary volunteer role in the community. “I wanted the group to understand that they were truly grant makers. They’re stewards over quite a bit of money, and while each of the requests they get is small in one sense, each is powerful and transformational.”

She emphasizes “professionalism” in the work, or a tone which helps the committee to know that their role is as critical as “someone sitting over a multi-million dollar endowment.”

“I wanted them to really see that they are there to do a very important job and to take it seriously,” she says. “It isn’t just a nice thing they’re doing, but it’s a moment for them to really value their own voice.”

Relationships are important, but for Leverette, it isn’t about the touchy feely interactions. Instead, it’s about the ability of committee members to “develop their own voice” and to “say what they like or need in their own community.” When members don’t see eye to eye with the foundation and “push back,” she sees it as a positive sign that they’ve “built confidence.”

“Group think” is something she’s never been interested in, and views “internal dissent” in committee discussions as a “dynamic that usually leads to some very good decisions.”

“It’s a diverse group. I look for people who can agree to disagree, but at the end of the day still share a mutual respect and a ferocious sense of advocacy for young people,” says Leverette. Over a six neighborhood area, she says that the funding for grants have come out “fairly even over the past four years” - evidence that those sometimes contentious conversations have served their purpose.
PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS EVOLVE

Leverette says it’s “serious work” when committee members meet each month, sorting through and debating grants for up to four hours a stretch. She says there’s a “slowly evolving mutual respect” between committee members, but “when they’re in committee, they grasp onto their work and take it seriously like a job.”

The time together and the business-like nature hasn’t allowed much time for personal relationships between members to develop. But this changed when Leverette and committee members traveled to a Grassroots Grantmakers “On the Ground” gathering held in Warren and Youngstown, Ohio, to explore the work of The Raymond John Wean Foundation.

It was a time when the committee stepped out of their business-like approach, and took time to explore the work of others. In response to what they saw there, Leverette says they started to express their “true love of community” with each other. The sharing “allowed them to see that they were linked in the same chain, where they could identify each others’ mutual passion.”

Leverette knew that members often saw themselves as “lone crusaders plucked from the community.” What they hadn’t yet seen was the common bond they each shared - that “others were selected for that same reason.”

Committee members became “cheerleaders for each other,” looking for ways to better “coordinate the work across neighborhoods,” she says. Leverette also witnessed new “growth and leadership”, and greater involvement in the community in other forums. One even made the decision to run for a neighborhood office while on the trip, because the experience had peaked a greater sense of community passion.

“When you have this force of individuals and synergy of ideas and passion, all working in concert to improve the lives of kids and communities, you get results,” concludes Leverette.

“You get improvement and movement that is relevant to that community. It’s not something imported in that someone says ‘this is what you need.’

“Instead, it’s folks who know what the problems are, who have committed to improving them. It’s local, often times more immediate, and they have a commitment to sustain that improvement. There is ownership to the problem and the solution.”

“It’s a diverse group. I look for people who can agree to disagree, but at the end of the day still share a mutual respect and a ferocious sense of advocacy for young people.”
RESIDENT WISDOM: KNOWING “WHO’S WHO AND WHAT’S WHAT”

Dawn Wilson knows that she’s “gained a voice” in her three years as a grant committee member for the Skillman Foundation’s Community Connections Grant Program.

Wilson - a professional clown - relishes bringing positive messages and enrichment opportunities to young people. Yet she was often frustrated when she encountered roadblocks as she tried to implement new ideas for youth in her community. Her role on the panel has helped her to change that, developing skills, relationships, and the power to support quality programs in her neighborhood.

But it’s more than the chance to lift up her own visions of community - she also feels that resident grants members are a critical conduit for a foundation in making sound investments.

Wilson says the “first-hand experience of committee members being here and living in the community” makes grant-making much more effective in several ways.

First, it’s the perspective of members knowing “who’s who and what’s what.” Wilson says that often a committee member will have knowledge of or connection to each applicant, which can provide a useful “insight and balance” for expanding opportunities and making informed decisions.

On one occasion, a committee member knew an applicant who’d had some questionable financial dealings in the past. “Spotting” that kind of personal history, says Wilson, “is helpful in making good decisions.”

Wilson’s visibility in the community has allowed her to form relationships with previously unsupported and unnoticed grassroots groups working with youth. Wilson says panelists serve as “bridges”, that connect the foundation with partners who would otherwise be invisible.

It’s also committee members’ knowledge of the community’s culture which helps foundations make informed decisions.

Wilson tells the story of one organization who for ten years at Christmas gave away food to residents-in-need in her own neighborhood. Because she understood the culture there and what residents typically ate, she knew that some of the food wasn’t being utilized and was going to waste. Her ability to talk to the organization and explain the resident perspective helped result in a more informed investment.

Wilson concludes, “Foundations and organizations need someone to relate to the people in the community, and the only way they can is to have someone in touch with that community.”

Grassroots Grantmakers is a network of place-based funders in the United States and Canada who are working from a “we begin with residents” perspective – supporting active citizenship to build social capital, civic capacity and community resilience among residents at the block level in their communities.

How does Grassroots Grantmakers help?

Our network provides:

- A touchstone for funders who share an interest in resident-led approaches, and who recognize that these approaches are central to the effectiveness of place-based philanthropy.

- A proactive connector for leaders of grassroots grantmaking programs (staff, board, committee members) who want to engage with their peers in a spirit of mutual learning and discovery.

- A central resource where program practitioners can easily check out tools others have developed to save time and avoid reinventing the wheel locally.

- An active observer of grassroots grantmaking as it takes shape in communities—noting and reporting common themes and tensions, new paths of development, and promising practices.

- A safe place for reflection and hard conversation about what it takes for funders to work deeply and effectively with people who feel marginalized and/or who live in communities that are at the margins.

- A collective statement, made by the funders doing the work and seeing the results of grassroots grantmaking, that resident-led approaches belong in the mainstream of philanthropy.