

Social Connectedness and Health: A Fresh Approach to Community-Driven Grantmaking

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The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation (Blue Cross Foundation) sought to engage the public in learning about social connectedness and the impact those connections can have on health. In an experiment that broke from traditional grantmaking processes, the Blue Cross Foundation piloted an open, community-driven grantmaking “Challenge” designed to fund projects that strengthen social connections in low-income Minnesota communities.

Research shows that when people are more socially connected, they are more involved in their communities; perform better in school; and live happier, healthier lives. Given that successful engagement is all about creating relationships, it only seemed natural to involve the community in this grantmaking initiative. The foundation sought to:

- expand the base of organizations that participate in the foundation’s grantmaking opportunities, especially those in low-income and greater Minnesota communities;
- encourage learning and sharing about the link between social connectedness and health;
- uncover common themes and new approaches to building social connectedness;
- raise awareness about and access to grantee organizations and draw attention to their work; and
- initiate a new level of transparency by experimenting with community involvement and decisionmaking in grantmaking.

To accomplish this, the Blue Cross Foundation introduced the Connect for Health Challenge, a statewide grantmaking competition inviting nonprofits, schools, and local units of government to submit projects that aimed to strengthen social connectedness in low-income Minnesota communities.

INVITING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

In a departure from traditional grantmaking methods, the community was heavily involved in all aspects of the Connect for Health Challenge. With support from engagement consultants Grassroots Solutions, the foundation identified more than 30 natural allies for the Challenge and invited them to be

outreach partners. The networking power of the partners was invaluable; this was especially important because the partners were a trusted voice for community members who may not have been familiar with the foundation.

In addition to helping promote the Challenge, community members also were directly involved in the grantee selection process. A team of volunteer reviewers read all 386 entries and narrowed them down to the semifinalists. Then a panel of community and expert judges determined the grant recipients for grants up to \$20,000. The panel also announced three finalists for the top grant, and the public was then invited to vote for their favorite project to win a \$100,000 grant.

SUCCEEDING BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

Public voting generated more than 5,000 votes for the Challenge finalists. A strong emphasis was placed on providing voting opportunities in the finalists’ communities, all of which had large low-income populations. Voting was a means to educate the public about efforts happening in local communities to improve social connectedness. As such, there was keen interest in making voting as accessible as possible. Barriers to voting were reduced by offering many voting methods, including voting via e-mail, by phone, via text message, on the Web site, and at select in-person events in the finalists’ communities. Providing a variety of voting methods helped ensure that people could vote in a way that was accessible and familiar to them. The finalists themselves also were equipped with promotional toolkits that included marketing materials, talking points, ballots, news release templates, and a stipend to help promote voting in their communities. Community partners also helped bring the issue to their networks across the state.

Through the Challenge, the foundation ultimately awarded 22 grants totaling \$510,000. The Challenge garnered 386 entries, and 5,266 public votes were cast to determine the \$100,000 grant recipient. The winning grantee was The Family Partnership for its Native American Somali Peacemakers project, which addressed growing intercultural tension between the Native American and Somali communities by building community through collaboration.

CONNECT FOR HEALTH CHALLENGE WINNING GRANTEE: THE FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

A young Somali refugee woman tells the story of sitting across the table from a Native American man who told her how much he resented that she was able to come to the community and get help with housing and other services while his family had lived in poverty in the neighborhood for decades with no help. The woman explained her difficult struggle in getting to Minnesota from Somalia and asked him to understand that she had endured many physical and emotional hardships in her journey, and that her life was as difficult as his but in different ways. It was the beginning of a trusting relationship that was based on mutual understanding and a willingness to explore each other's cultures.

The Cedar Riverside and Phillips neighborhoods have some of the largest concentrations of new immigrants in Minneapolis. These two neighborhoods are also the long-term, multigenerational homes of large segments of African-American and Native American communities. Despite community resources, new immigrants and long-term residents face challenges in building connections with one another due to cultural differences, language barriers, and geographic territoriality.

The **Native American Somali Peacemakers Project** provides opportunities for youth to create and implement their own innovative public safety solutions while integrating the knowledge and peacemaking traditions of their community elders. The project has three social connection objectives:

- increasing the measurable skills, knowledge, and resources of Native American and Somali youth to work together to create and implement public safety and crime prevention projects in their communities;
- expanding community partnerships between Native American and Somali organizations and leaders, along with law enforcement and other key allies, to decrease youth violence within and between communities; and
- honoring and utilizing traditional cultural conflict resolution methods passed down by respected Native American and Somali elders to produce community-owned public safety solutions and to rebuild relationships between elders and youth.

The project is a rare and powerful opportunity to model how intentional, cross-cultural reconciliation and communication can make entire neighborhoods safer while, at the same time, equipping youth living in poverty with the leadership skills they need to be successful in life.

For more information about the project, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUibt0xI43g.

INCREASING AWARENESS AND INTERACTION

This was one of the largest issue-awareness efforts undertaken by the Blue Cross Foundation, and by involving the community, many new people were exposed to the important link between social connectedness and health. With the three finalists serving as ambassadors, they, too, educated new audiences about their own work and the importance of social connectedness.

A vast majority of entrants were not current or past foundation grantees, thus the Connect for Health Challenge also expanded the base of organizations engaging with the foundation. Additionally, the Challenge expanded the foundation's base of partners and provided them with the opportunity to work with organizations in a different way than it typically does as a grantmaker.

From this experiment, the foundation uncovered key lessons:

- To reach new people and organizations, you have to go to them, rather than wait for them to come to you.
- Careful planning is needed around public voting in order to offer equal opportunities to each finalist.
- There was widespread enthusiasm for involving the public in the grantmaking process.

- This grantmaking approach presented opportunities to expand the impact and continue to engage entrants after the Challenge ended.

This approach to grantmaking allowed the Blue Cross Foundation to blend issue-awareness efforts with grantmaking efforts. With the right topic, this approach can be an excellent way to leverage grantmaking to meet an array of issue-awareness and community engagement goals. Connect for Health Challenge grantees are currently implementing their projects, and an independent evaluator will be evaluating the impact of the grants over the next year.

To see all Connect for Health Challenge entries, go to www.InCommons.org/connectforhealth

For more information about the work discussed in this article, please contact Stacey Millett, Senior Program Officer at the Blue Cross Foundation at Stacey_D_Millett@bluecrossmn.com.

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