

Strategic Initiatives:

FINDING YOUR NICHE

Over time, foundations and corporate giving programs have devised new methods of grantmaking to improve health within their communities. One type of proactive grantmaking gaining popularity is strategic initiatives. There are few resources for grantmakers interested in establishing these initiatives or fine-tuning those in existence; grantmakers have usually taken a “we’ll know it when we see it” view of designing and implementing strategic initiatives. This Issue Focus will answer some common questions about strategic initiatives and will provide examples to highlight the wide variety of health grantmaking being conducted through these initiatives. A list of resources for grantmakers interested in more information is also included.

WHAT IS A STRATEGIC INITIATIVE?

Strategic initiatives are focused grantmaking programs with structured projects designed to achieve a defined goal. The rationale for prioritizing these areas of funding often depends upon a particular theory of social change. While initiatives vary a great deal, some common elements exist. Most initiatives include:

- Identification of one particular program issue or area;
- Multiple program components, often including media, grant programs, and evaluation;
- Collaboration with other private and public sector organizations;
- Built-in assessment and evaluation;
- Identification of desired outcomes; and
- Long-term financial commitment from the foundation.

WHAT IS STRATEGIC ABOUT THESE INITIATIVES?

Making initiatives strategic requires careful planning. Grantmakers can have increased impact by coming into an issue at a critical juncture. If tuberculosis has reached epidemic levels in a community but prevention has not been a priority, perhaps a foundation can conduct a public awareness and prevention campaign; on the other hand, if what is needed is policy change, convening policymakers as the first part of the initiative might be more effective. Moreover, grantmakers can be strategic by understanding and utilizing the special positions they hold in communities and the influence they can have in moving issues forward. Foundations and corporate giving programs can also use

their dollars as leverage, bringing in other funding through partnerships and collaboration.

Strategic initiatives are not without their share of controversy, however. Some grantmakers and communities argue that strategic initiatives are in fact too directive, sending a message to communities that foundations know best what work must be done and limiting their funding accordingly. The limits of funding may not leave enough room for grantmakers to effectively respond to changing needs in communities; they may also prohibit foundations from making forays into new content areas that require exploration with preliminary funding. Strategic initiatives may also create fear among current grantees that their funding will not be renewed. Some grantmakers assert that responsive grantmaking – especially providing core program support to existing nonprofits – is in fact strategic, as it provides funding for programs that communities have themselves identified as important. While a few foundations fund solely in strategic initiatives, most choose to conduct grantmaking of both types and to support programs outside the initiative areas.

GETTING STARTED (STRATEGIC INITIATIVES 101)

So you’ve decided to start a strategic initiative. What comes next?

DIFFERENT SIZES, DIFFERENT SHAPES

Foundations of all sizes can engage in strategic initiative grantmaking. These initiatives can be highly structured national programs with multi-million dollar budgets; they can also be smaller-scale programs focused on one issue within one community over time. One of the largest and most well-known initiatives is the Violence Prevention Initiative conducted by The California Wellness Foundation. This initiative has four separate components – a policy and public education campaign, a leadership and professional development program, a community action program, and an initiative support/capacity building program – and has a budget of \$60 million over ten years. A much smaller initiative, the Public Welfare Foundation’s Harm Reduction Initiative funds eight programs across the country that support needle exchange, and totaled \$375,000 in 1999.

Step 1: Take a look at yourself.

Looking at your mission statement may be a good place to begin. Examine the goals and objectives of your foundation. Then remind yourself of the current foundation commitments – how much staff time do you have to devote? What level of financial resources are available? Strategic initiatives can often be more time intensive on the part of foundation or corporate giving program staff than more responsive grantmaking.

Step 2: Take a look at your community.

A needs assessment is probably a good idea, whether formal or informal. Some foundations may hire outside consultants to figure out the health priorities within communities, others may elect to conduct their own assessments. Talk to people – government officials, community leaders, health care providers. Get out on the street and learn what people are talking about. Don't assume that your foundation always has its finger on the pulse of the community – if you find out that you correctly anticipated the results of a needs assessment, that's good to know too.

Step 3: Take a look at what others are doing.

Once you've learned – or confirmed – the pressing health needs in your community, spend some time examining the issue. What work is already happening? Who is doing it? Are they duplicating each other's work or collaborating effectively? What research is being done? Are the results of that research being put into practice? What other grantmakers are active in this area – and how can you work with them to be more effective? In short, where will your dollars be most useful?

Step 4: Make some decisions.

Once you have selected a program area, you need to define your grantmaking strategy around this issue. Do you want to conduct this initiative in-house or fund other organizations to manage the program? What resources will you need (time, space, staff)? Will you have a Request For Proposals (RFP) process for some of the work? What will your evaluation component include?

WHAT FOUNDATIONS ARE DOING

- The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton has established the Quality Child Care Initiative, dedicated to improving the quality of child care provided to children from birth to age five in Stark County, Ohio. The initiative has several components. Through a RFP process, the foundation provides grants to local nonprofit child care centers wishing to pursue accreditation. The invited proposal process supports the creation of a training consortium to provide mentoring, technical assistance, and training to individuals working in the child care field. The foundation is

also implementing a public awareness campaign designed to raise awareness among Stark County residents and child care providers about the importance of high quality care. So far, the foundation has spent \$2 million for this 5-year effort.

- The California Healthcare Foundation has established the Quality Initiative, aimed at improving the quality of care in California through public reporting of quality measures, support of related quality improvement efforts, and the dissemination of consumer guidelines. The initiative plans to engage consumers, measure quality, and form partnerships with policy leaders, payers, health plans, researchers, advocacy organizations and others already involved in quality improvement. The foundation has devoted \$25 million over 5 years to this effort.

- The Colorado Trust, which funds exclusively in initiatives, currently operates the Senior Wellness Initiative. Designed to increase healthier lifestyles of older adults in Colorado, the initiative supports annual senior wellness conferences in which teams of older adults participate in learning about diverse health topics. These teams are then provided with funding to implement senior wellness programs within their own communities. The Colorado Trust has committed \$1.1 million over four years for this effort.

- The Quantum Foundation, located in West Palm Beach, Florida, has developed a \$3 million strategic initiative on children's behavioral health. The initiative was developed as one piece of an overall blueprint – with a planning component also funded by Quantum – for improving school health services in Palm Beach County. The purpose of the project is to replace the present system of fragmented and isolated programs with one that is based on best practices in the delivery of children's mental health services. The steering committee is comprised of Quantum, the Children's Services Council, The State Attorney, The Departments of Juvenile Justice, Health, and Children and Families, and others funding this effort. The committee has met and established the mission; their next step is to examine the ways in which children in elementary schools are assessed for behavioral problems and design effective prevention and intervention methods. The process will eventually extend to middle and high schools as well.

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