

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

From “Embedded Funders and Community Change: Profiles”
(Chapin Hall Working Paper, 2006)

ROSAMOND GIFFORD CHARITABLE CORPORATION

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SUMMARY

The Rosamond Gifford Charitable Corporation, established in 1954, serves Syracuse and the surrounding Onondaga County community. In 2003, foundation leaders decided to devote about half of their \$1.2 million annual grant-making budget to a targeted initiative in the 30-block Southside neighborhood of inner-city Syracuse. After intensive neighborhood discussions, the foundation created a new organization, the Southside Neighborhood Action Group (SNAG), to stimulate a “bottom-up” process of neighborhood development. With the help of a resident advisory group, SNAG engages in several neighborhood development strategies, including a housing improvement mini-grant program. A major goal is to strengthen the neighborhood’s leadership and organizational base so that residents can achieve their goals for the area.

HOW AND WHY DID THE FOUNDATION EMBED ITSELF IN THIS PARTICULAR NEIGHBORHOOD?

Gifford traditionally supported community-based organizations that address such issues as youth violence and neighborhood capacity building. The foundation’s targeted focus on Southside began after the 2002 Citistates Convergence co-sponsored by Gifford, the Central New York Community Foundation (CNYCF), and the *Syracuse Post Standard* newspaper. That intensive civic process engaged diverse constituencies in discussions about how to move Syracuse forward. Participants described the plight of inner-city neighborhoods in a way that inspired Gifford to concentrate resources and attention in one neighborhood.

Gifford and its partners, CNYCF and Syracuse 20/20 (an organization of civic leaders), selected the Southside neighborhood. With a poverty rate of about 35 percent, Southside was plagued by many of the traditional problems facing distressed inner-city neighborhoods. Despite its relative proximity to downtown, development pressures have not yet reached the neighborhood. The area’s 5,100 residents (predominantly African Americans and a small but growing number of Hispanics) also have some assets—approximately half own their homes. And, because the neighborhood had little support from the government or nonprofit organizations, residents were used to taking action on their own.

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WHAT BELIEFS AND THEORIES OF CHANGE INFORM THE FOUNDATION’S WORK?

Gifford positions itself as a catalyst, developer, and facilitator of resident-driven change rather than as an expert on the Southside community. Foundation staff see their main job as getting to know the residents and helping them develop a clear, compelling revitalization agenda instead of prescribing one favored by the foundation. This approach stems from Gifford’s belief that other community-change efforts have had inadequate results because they didn’t involve enough neighborhood residents in meaningful ways or partner with organizations that truly represented the residents.

Gifford’s leaders assume that creative collaboration, capacity-building efforts, and opportunities for residents to voice and address concerns will generate new leaders and stimulate action around the residents’ own definition of success. The new relationships and capacities can be leveraged to promote other outcomes, such as increased economic development and affordable housing.

Foundation staff describe their theory as less linear than a programmatic approach. “This kind of work has to respond to how the relationships feel—when you can push and when it’s better to step back and see what happens,” says one. “This doesn’t mean that we don’t try to get things moving if they are stuck. But we wouldn’t necessarily know ahead of time when that would be.” Moreover, “it is not the information *we* know that will make this work or not. It’s who we are and how we conduct ourselves and how well we can find ways to support residents.”

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?

In all of its work, Gifford aims to deepen and diversify resident participation in neighborhood revitalization and to build residents’ confidence and leadership skills. For example:

- ❑ Gifford staff spent considerable time meeting with local leaders to assess the merits of working through an existing intermediary organization or starting a new one. At the community’s recommendation Gifford created a new entity, the Southside Neighborhood Action Group (SNAG), to coordinate the work. SNAG is led by a neighborhood coordinator and an advisory committee composed of residents and representatives from the neighborhood’s community development corporation, housing organizations, and other groups.
- ❑ Gifford hired a consultant to work with neighborhood residents and advise the foundation on its approach. The consultant had extensive community development experience and was

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soon holding meetings attended by 40 to 60 residents. The consultant recruited 15 to 20 of the most active participants for a Working Group, which meets at least once a month to take on projects that members deem important.

- ❑ Gifford sends residents to national conferences and sponsors learning exchanges with other cities involved in neighborhood development. Three residents from the Working Group, the neighborhood coordinator, the chair of the foundation board’s program committee, and some foundation staff attended a recent conference co-sponsored by Funders Network for Smart Growth and PolicyLink.

Gifford uses partnerships to extend the foundation’s resources and connect the neighborhood with outside organizations and resources. For example, the Working Group partnered with the Newhouse School at Syracuse University to design billboards with positive messages to replace others posted in the neighborhood by the Department of Justice. Other partnerships support small business owners, an urban entrepreneurship program, and a summer jobs program that trains young people in landscaping, lawn maintenance, and conflict resolution.

SNAG’s neighborhood coordinator plays an important role in the Southside strategy. A resident himself, he communicates with people throughout the neighborhood, works with local housing groups to recruit and train block captains and build block associations, and administers (with help from the SNAG steering committee) a mini-grant program for home improvement. The mini-grant program provides up to \$5,000 for home repairs, painting, porch construction, etc. Although the program originally solicited applications from individual homeowners, it is now being administered through the block associations, which means that residents decide which properties receive grants. So far, forty-eight homes have been improved. SNAG also gives grants of up to \$500 to help block associations recruit, mobilize, and develop members.

WHAT INTERNAL PRACTICES, STRUCTURES, AND POLICIES HAS THE FOUNDATION DEVELOPED TO SUPPORT THE WORK?

Gifford’s trustees have supported the Southside initiative from its inception. The board, a diverse group of community leaders, is deeply committed to Syracuse and its surrounding area and has fully embraced the notion of a targeted neighborhood initiative. Each board member contributes specific assets—such as connections to key officials and neighborhood resources, knowledge about organizational development, and financial and legal expertise—to the foundation’s work on the Southside. As one member noted, “This is personal work, we are involved, and it means something to us.” Members of both the board and staff describe a high

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level of trust, debate, reflection, and transparency within the board and between the staff and board.

The arrival of a new executive director in 1999 provided an opportunity to assess Gifford’s work and consider new ways of enhancing it. The foundation created a new staff position, Program Director for Foundation Initiatives, which is filled by a former program officer. The initiative director works with the neighborhood coordinator and the consultant on all aspects of the Southside initiative. All staff are involved in the initiative in some way, whether by attending community meetings, leveraging their networks, writing press releases, or providing consultation.

Gifford tailored its expenditure of funds to fit the initiative’s pace, believing that too much money given too quickly would deepen distrust and undermine residents’ sense of control. In addition to covering the salary of the neighborhood coordinator and providing \$250,000 for mini-grants, the foundation’s money is earmarked for convenings, leadership development opportunities, and youth programs in the targeted area. Gifford has spent about \$800,000 in the first two and a half years of the initiative and expects to continue its contributions for at least 5 more years.

WHAT CHANGES IN THE COMMUNITY DOES THE FOUNDATION POINT TO AS SIGNIFICANT?

The initiative is only in its second year of implementation, so it is too early to expect many visible changes in the neighborhood. Moreover, foundation staff note that Gifford is too small to produce major system changes or neighborhood transformation on its own. “The best we can do is help people get to the point of creating change for themselves,” a staff member acknowledges. Staff believe that the funder’s role is to provide “access to the discovery of a solution, not just to the creation of one.” That said, the experience of renovating forty-eight homes suggests that after several properties on a block are fixed up, other residents on that block are more likely to invest in their own property. SNAG hopes to stimulate this “tipping point” phenomenon through continued support for home improvements and by strengthening the block associations.

Other signs of change include the neighborhood organizations’ ability to work together; increased membership in the block associations; and a new sense of resident optimism, as viewed by members of the Working Group.

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WHAT WERE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES? HOW DID THE FOUNDATION CONFRONT THEM?

Evaluating the work. The Southside initiative’s emphasis on process can make it difficult to evaluate progress. Foundation staff have started talking with evaluation experts but have not yet determined what approach would add value to the work. The neighborhood comprises two Census tracts, so potential exists to track demographic changes over time.

Establishing a positive relationship with city government. Historically, the neighborhood has not received many public resources, especially in terms of housing. Initiative leaders are trying to forge new relationships with a city that does not have strong ties to its low-income communities. Politics, poverty that disproportionately affects people of color, a limited corporate base, and a struggling local economy all pose obstacles to reducing the disparities between middle-class and poor neighborhoods in Syracuse. Over the long run, Gifford hopes to help city officials recognize that it is in everyone’s interest to view neighborhood residents as assets.

Moving at a pace that works for everyone. Gifford feels a tension between taking action and taking time to communicate with and engage all the relevant constituencies—residents, staff, board members, and local partners. It is especially important to keep the initiative from getting ahead of the residents, despite the temptation to act unilaterally when faced by immediate opportunities. Foundation staff cope with this tension by keeping the initiative’s objective in mind: “The primary goal is not to build houses or get people jobs. Rather, it is to enable residents to achieve the goals they set for themselves (which may be housing or jobs) and in the process gain the self-respect, skills, relationships, and networks that will position them to continue to improve their lives and the community in whatever way they desire.”

INTERVIEWEES

Kathy Goldfarb-Findling, Executive Director

Brian Moore, Program Director for Foundation Initiatives

Heidi Holtz, Program Director for Community Grant Making

Marlene Bryant, Program Associate

Judith C. Mower, President, Board of Trustees

Billy Harper, Program Chair, Board of Trustees

Steve Muhammad, Neighborhood Coordinator, SNAG (Southside resident)

Diane Turner, President, Interfaith Housing (Southside resident)

