

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

From “Moving Forward While Staying in Place: Embedded Funders and Community Change”
(Chapin Hall Discussion Paper, 2004)

SEABURY FOUNDATION

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SUMMARY

The Seabury Foundation is a family foundation with a 57-year history of grant-making in the Chicago area. Although deciding to maintain a diverse portfolio of grants, Seabury also focused on community revitalization in the North of Howard neighborhood of Chicago in 2000. Since then, the Foundation has made at least \$500,000 in grants each year in the target area. Partners include a diverse set of organizations working on education, child care, health, economic development, housing, and other issues. Seabury’s initial commitment to North of Howard was for 5 years. Now in the fifth year of its initiative, the Foundation has split its fifth and final year’s funding into 2 years to ensure a slower and more thoughtful process of disengagement. At end of year 6, the Foundation anticipates that it will continue to make a limited number of grants in North of Howard, but that it will no longer play as central a role.

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

The board chose to focus on North of Howard because some family members were personally familiar with the area; they had supported numerous organizations over several years; they knew the area faced significant challenges; and they had active relationships with and knowledge of nonprofits in the area. The board was also aware that many community actors, efforts, and information sources were isolated and disconnected from one another. Board members believed this disconnect presented an opportunity for Seabury to leverage its local contacts, knowledge, and funding into an initiative that would benefit the community.

The Foundation did not engage in a long, formal process of selecting among numerous criteria or alternatives. Once the idea of North of Howard emerged, “the choice seemed obvious.” After making a tentative decision to focus there, two board members undertook a more systematic look into the neighborhood to learn more about its issues and to explore whether the community’s leadership would be amenable to Seabury playing a more active role. Simultaneously, the board began to study a small number of other community-change efforts with similar commitments.

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

Seabury did not begin its work in North of Howard with a detailed plan or change theory. Instead, the board’s approach was shaped by the Foundation’s traditions, experiences, and values.

At one level, focusing on North of Howard responded to several internal institutional concerns and ideas about philanthropy. North of Howard offered an opportunity for the Foundation to continue its tradition of active, hands-on giving and to learn more about the context of its giving in order to promote more effective grant-making. Foundation leaders wanted to do more than write checks and believed their nonfinancial resources could contribute to community success. Focusing on a specific site would help maintain, focus, and connect the interest of the family’s large, diverse, third generation. Concentrating resources in a limited geographic area would produce a larger, cumulative positive effect than would spreading those resources broadly. Two additional institutional factors contributed to the Foundation’s decision: the asset base of the Foundation had grown substantially in the 1990s, and the Foundation had staff for the first time. These realities allowed the board to imagine a different style and strategy of grant-making.

Beyond the Foundation’s institutional needs, a set of deeply held beliefs about communities as vehicles for change also informs Seabury’s work in North of Howard. Seabury’s leaders believe that communities have untapped resources and potential to address their own problems, but that a community’s internal disconnectedness can frustrate its best efforts to move forward. Traditional grant-making, they believe, does not help foster effective community connections and can actually frustrate these relationships. A community’s nascent or hidden resources can be harnessed through a fair, thoughtful, and sustained process of engagement that brings community leaders together to foster a neighborhood’s will and capacity to address its most pressing problems. Energy and ideas for change, the leaders believe, must come from organizations and leadership in the neighborhood if change is to succeed.

Despite its activist bent, Seabury board and staff believed that there were inherent limitations in what a foundation could (and should) do. Seabury believed that outside entities such as a foundation could have only a limited understanding of what is truly needed in a neighborhood and that such institutions should resist the temptation to assume greater knowledge than warranted or to micromanage. Further, the board thought that decisions informed by the neighborhood were more likely to ensure that scarce resources were put to their best use. As one informant judged: “You can look at poverty and the individual programs designed to address it until you are blue in the face. Until you get into a neighborhood and see how these things affect

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each other—how everything becomes a part of the bigger picture—you don’t really get a full understanding of what is going on, particularly if you are a middle class white person. You don’t really know what it is like to live in a neighborhood like this. The approach of involving ourselves in the community is really important because you are really on the ground with people there and you can learn from them what is needed.”

As a result, Seabury board members resisted choosing specific solutions that made sense to them and, instead, created a community leadership forum that could set priorities and generate opportunities. Beyond this, the Foundation did not set clearly defined goals, but trusted that community improvement would emerge through the processes that they helped establish. The Foundation’s board and staff see themselves as co-learners and co-investors with the neighborhood; thus, faith in process, partnership, and community capacity, rather than in any particular program or policy solution, drives their work.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?

Seabury has two interlocking strategies. The primary strategy centers on building a coordinated community planning, problem-solving, and leadership group—the North of Howard Leadership Forum. The Forum is a flexible group of leaders of nonprofit organizations (usually eight to ten individuals)—primarily social service agencies—operating in North of Howard. The Forum also has included representatives from the local Chamber of Commerce and a church. In its initial stages, Seabury convened the forum to discuss community priorities and opportunities. An early planning process with an outside consultant helped the Forum to identify twelve areas of concern, but these were not translated into a detailed work plan. Seabury has favored organic, informal decision-making with the Forum over formal strategic planning or establishing fixed targets and outcomes. Community leaders participate because they believe Seabury takes their input seriously. Over time, the Forum has focused on four priorities: children and youth, economic development, housing, and community safety.

In strategic partnership with the Forum, Seabury identified and supported numerous, diverse local programs and projects in North of Howard. It tried to enhance rather than displace other funding streams, often asking, “What’s most difficult for you to fund from other sources?” The Foundation has provided support for a wide range of physical infrastructure and programs in community planning, education, housing, economic development, and health. These include efforts to build a community center; expand availability of child care; engage children and youth after school; increase parent involvement in the schools; improve literacy and other instruction in the schools; modernize school computers; run summer day camps for youth; start a summer



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farmers’ market; increase housing opportunities for women; build the network among African-American and Latino development companies; provide matching for community members’ Individual Development Accounts; and fund care at a health clinic.

Throughout the initiative, Foundation staff and board members have played many roles, including funder, technical assistance provider, convener, facilitator, strategic advisor to organizations, resource advocate to other funders and the public sector, internal and external networker, information resource, bridge, and mediator. Initially, Seabury was also central to the Forum’s functioning, but over time, Seabury has gradually assumed a less prominent and more facilitative role. Seabury’s relationships are not limited to the Forum. Staff and board are also in discussion with others in the community and fund organizations not related to the Forum.

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

The board created a committee of two members to monitor Seabury’s North of Howard work and make recommendations to the full board. Also, Seabury’s only full-time program staff person, the foundation director, spends significant time meeting with community members and outside officials regarding North of Howard. Both staff and board members regularly attend Forum meetings and participate actively in all the issue committees of the Forum.

Seabury does not follow its normal grant-making procedures in North of Howard. To promote responsive and nimble decision-making, the Foundation considers requests at any time rather than waiting until its regular thrice-yearly meeting. Seabury is also looser about the form of the proposals they will consider. The board has considered grants for North of Howard on the basis of a letter or a phone call. In addition, Seabury requires less formal reporting on its grants in North of Howard because of staff and board’s hands-on familiarity with program operations and frequent contact with program participants.

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

Accomplishments have been in two domains. First, North of Howard now enjoys a much higher level of communication and coordinated community activity. Also, numerous organizations have increased capacity to carry ideas into reality and are more aware of other ways of attacking problems. Second, a wide range of services and programs has been provided because of Seabury’s increased financial commitment, such as an expanded child-care center and

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educational and recreational programs for children and youth. Also, Seabury’s financial and political leadership led to the construction of a new community center—a long-stalled community priority.

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

Process versus outcomes. At times, a real tension arises between focusing on the processes of community engagement and capacity building, and pushing toward concrete and fast outcomes. This tension is related to the Foundation’s frustration with the limits of its ability to catalyze sweeping renewal in North Howard. Although board, staff, and grantees acknowledge that Seabury’s outside perspective, emphasis on collaboration, and commitment to the Forum bring valuable, new energy to long-standing community problems—especially those mired in neighborhood politics—board members still debate whether a more directive approach could achieve more.

Resident participation. The Foundation has a core belief in the importance of stimulating and responding to residents’ voices. It has relied primarily on the organizational leaders in the Forum to represent North of Howard’s varied constituencies. The Forum frequently discussed the lack of more direct input, but members could never agree on an effective process to address this challenge. There was also concern about the time and resources a more direct and broad-based process would consume.

Affordable housing. Seabury and the Forum have struggled to find workable, meaningful strategies to preserve housing options for low-income residents in the face of rising housing prices. Direct, local investment is too costly and national policy debates too remote. Recently, the Forum has begun to move forward with hiring a full-time “affordable housing advocate.” Housed in one of the local agencies and funded by Seabury and two other local foundations, the advocate’s job is to involve all of the key private-sector, nonprofit, and public-sector players in coordinating neighborhood efforts to maintain and develop affordable housing stock in North of Howard.

INTERVIEWEES

Roberta Buchanan, Howard Area Community Center

Kim DeLong, Family Matters

Deborah Holloway, former foundation director, Seabury Foundation

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