

SKILLMAN FOUNDATION

100 Talon Centre Drive, Suite 100, Detroit, MI 48207, (313) 393-1185

www.skillman.org

SUMMARY

Created in 1960, the Skillman Foundation's mission is to help children in metropolitan Detroit by improving their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. With an annual grants budget of about \$23 million, Skillman has made substantial investments in youth development programs and in school reform, school leadership, and an initiative that identifies and recognizes good schools in Detroit.

Detroit's child well-being indicators, however, have not improved, causing Skillman's leadership to conclude that its grantmaking was not intense, focused, or strategic enough to reach large numbers of those most in need. The Good Neighborhoods Initiative (GNI) is an attempt to focus the Foundation's resources in six neighborhoods where, collectively, more than 65,000 children or about thirty percent of Detroit's children live. Launching the initiative in 2006, Skillman expects to devote about \$75 million over ten years to "transform communities with children in the most need and with the least resources into healthy, safe and supportive neighborhoods."

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

Nearly fifty percent of Detroit's children live in poverty. The Skillman Foundation analyzed the city's neighborhoods to assess the size of their child population as well as their levels of need, difficulty of problems, and evidence of commitment to change. GNI targets three types of neighborhoods, with two selected in each of the three tiers. Tier 1 neighborhoods are traditionally working and middle class neighborhoods that now include large numbers of poor children and families, including many immigrants. Tier 2 neighborhoods have experienced some decline but are restoring their vibrancy. Yet, they still lack the resources and capacity to move their agenda for children forward. Tier 3 neighborhoods have experienced tremendous decline and disinvestment but show a desire and readiness to take on children's issues. Combining intensive analysis of local data and consultation with neighborhood and civic leaders, the Foundation selected GNI's six neighborhoods within this three-tiered framework.

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

Skillman approached GNI's development with an underlying assumption that the neighborhood is the best avenue for making meaningful change for families and children and that the community must have a meaningful voice in the design and implementation of any strategy for change. An examination of the experience of other foundation initiatives led the Foundation to make various design choices early on: it would work in partnership with public, private, and nonprofit groups within each neighborhood as well as outside of it; it would customize its approach to the different needs of each neighborhood; it would not mandate a governance structure for local decision-making; it would rely heavily on the use of data but integrate it with local knowledge; and it would value transparency, putting the inevitable foundation/community power dynamics on the table and promising not to misuse them intentionally. The Foundation also assumed that it would need to change internally to implement the initiative, shifting its role to assume leadership in convening stakeholders, brokering partnerships, and influencing policy changes at the school district, city, county, and state levels.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?

Skillman ultimately selected seven goals for the initiative, each with a set of possible strategies. The goals challenge neighborhoods to:

- ❑ Maximize the assets, capacity, and impact of the resources and institutions through neighborhood-wide collaboration and partnership
- ❑ Enable a cadre of natural helpers who are committed to providing services or supports for children
- ❑ Establish effective neighborhood-based human services delivery systems for children, youth, and families
- ❑ Improve the neighborhood's child-friendly spaces and physical infrastructure
- ❑ Make available more age-appropriate high-quality out-of-school programs for children and youth
- ❑ Increase public and private investments to strengthen services and impact
- ❑ Use wealth-building strategies to build the resiliency of children and their families

The Good Neighborhoods Initiative is structured to roll out in the following phases:

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

- ❑ **Planning (6-12 months):** With the support of technical assistance providers, each neighborhood receives support to engage as many different voices as possible in a planning process that includes five community meetings during which participants identify one overarching but achievable goal related to the well-being of children. Strategies to achieve that goal are also identified in each of the three domains of a child's life—home, school, and neighborhood.
- ❑ **Readiness (2-3 years):** Implementation begins during this phase and involves both strengthening existing strategies and adding innovations. Significant attention is devoted to building the neighborhood's capacity to improve child well-being indicators.
- ❑ **Demonstration (3-6 years):** This phase involves working to achieve the neighborhood's priority goal, implementing strategies, marshaling resources, practicing collaboration, and producing results.

As of the fall of 2006, four communities have completed the planning process, engaging about 1000 people in each community (the average attendance at each of the five community meetings was 250-400). Each community has selected the goal of its work over the next decade, such as ensuring that all children have access to long-term positive youth development opportunities or that families will have the resources they need to ensure that children have positive educational experiences in and outside of school. These communities are now moving into the readiness phase during which they will form workgroups to develop more specific strategies and work plans. Three co-conveners (two residents and one nonprofit leader) will receive training to enable them to provide oversight to the work in each neighborhood. Outreach will continue, as will Foundation staff engagement. GNI's final two communities will launch their planning in early 2007.

Two technical assistance teams will continue to work with the initiative: the National Community Development Institute has taken the lead in designing and facilitating the planning and workgroup process, while the University of Michigan team has provided useful information and data for the community meetings and carried out cross-community workshops following planning.

Skillman expects to make four types of grants in GNI, ranging from learning grants (\$500-\$5000) and small program grants (\$500-\$5000) selected by a committee of residents to larger community change grants (\$75,000-125,000) to nonprofits for work in the neighborhood, and systems change or policy grants at the city, regional or state-wide levels that can be connected to the work locally. All grants will be made based on advancement of and alignment with the community plans of each of the six targeted neighborhoods.

Besides grantmaking and pursuing a policy agenda, the Foundation aims to identify, broker, leverage, and help to shape the way new resources are targeted in the six neighborhoods. Examples of such resources include: city and state initiatives (such as the Mayor's new neighborhood initiative, which will work in three of the six GNI neighborhoods); national and regional foundations interested in working in Detroit; and nonprofits working in Detroit but not necessarily in GNI's six neighborhoods.

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

Skillman staff view GNI not as a discrete initiative but as a new way of doing business for the Foundation. Program staff are playing a more hands-on role in the communities, encouraging new grantees (rather than issuing program announcements and waiting for groups to apply), developing partnerships with other organizations, and trying to weave together different community efforts to improve outcomes for children. Frequent evening meetings in the community have required the Foundation to institute flextime and to adopt new technologies so that staff can communicate with each other in the field. The Foundation has charged NCDI with facilitating a staff development process and involving outside experts in Foundation-wide discussions as GNI evolves. All Foundation staff including those involved in Skillman's finances and administration are expected to understand GNI's underpinnings and place in the field, and participate in some way as appropriate.

Skillman's board has also been very engaged in GNI's development. It has spent many hours discussing the initiative and, for the first time in its history, it held one of its recent meetings in San Diego so that it could visit some community change initiatives that had been in place there for some years. In order to support the Foundation's ability to be a nimble and responsive grantmaker, the board is considering increasing the size of the grants and the size of the grant pool over which the President can have discretionary authority.

An initiative like GNI with so many working parts and so many partners and collaborators requires strong internal vehicles for communication and coordination to keep participants working effectively with each other and learning together. Skillman has instituted a number of such vehicles ranging from a weekly phone call among all the key players (Foundation staff, TA providers, community liaisons, community partners, etc.) to discuss strategy and logistics, to a Learning Group that meets every 3-4 weeks and is composed of Foundation grantees and other city and regional organizations that either are or could contribute in some way to the work going on in the six target neighborhoods (residents will soon be invited to join this group). Skillman

program officers work in teams with each one taking the lead in one neighborhood but also serving as a back-up on another team. Another important vehicle for sharing data and reports is a web-based tool called Bravelo, which collects all documents, minutes from meetings, memoranda and other materials related to GNI, allowing those with access to stay in the information loop.

Finally, in instituting its new approach, the Foundation recognized the need for two new or expanded capacities. First, it hired Berg Muirhead to develop a communications strategy including public and media relations and working with the teams on materials, events, and other communication needs. Second, it worked with the Prevention Network to outsource some of the administration required to handle the large increase in small grants generated by GNI.

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

Skillman, its technical assistance providers, and its community partners all underscore the success of the planning process in engaging large numbers of community residents and stakeholders in coming up with a community goal for GNI. The process has generated momentum and energy and has built upon the considerable preexisting trust and respect with which Skillman operates in Detroit.

Although Skillman only launched GNI in 2006, it has begun to see signs of changing the way investment is done in Detroit, pointing to its possible influence on the city to undertake neighborhood work and the interest in GNI's neighborhoods that community partners experience as a result of what they cite as the increased credibility that GNI has brought to their efforts.

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

GNI represents a massive effort requiring new internal capacities for the Foundation at the same time as it works to stimulate new ways of doing business in the community. Like other foundations deeply engaged in communities, Skillman faced challenges getting good local data, addressing cultural and language differences within communities (including the need for Spanish and Arabic translation), and keeping residents and other stakeholders engaged as the initiative moves from planning to early implementation.

Skillman has adopted a learning stance for GNI, positioning the Foundation among its partners not as the expert but as a catalyst for collective learning. As staff have become increasingly intentional about creating the space and vehicles for learning, they are turning to the challenge of

designing an evaluation that can serve learning, accountability, and knowledge development functions. Skillman is exploring different ways in which such an evaluation might capture lessons and assess progress toward shared goals in real time, while also building the capacity of communities to undertake their own self-evaluation.

INTERVIEWEES

Carol Goss, President and CEO, The Skillman Foundation
Tonya Allen, Program Director, The Skillman Foundation
Marie Columbo, Program Officer, The Skillman Foundation
Ed Egnatios, Program Officer, The Skillman Foundation
Sharnita Johnson, Program Officer, The Skillman Foundation
Omawale Satterwhite, President and CEO, National Community Development Institute
Kelley Gulley, Program Director, Mid-West Office, NCDI
Larry Gant, University of Michigan School of Social Work
Kara Ziedins, University of Michigan School of Social Work
Kristin McGee, University of Michigan School of Social Work
Alice Thompson, Black Family Development, Osborn neighborhood
Mike Fisher, Detroit Community Initiative, Osborn neighborhood
Mary Banks, Northwest Detroit Neighborhood Development, Brightmoor neighborhood