

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

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

THE DENVER FOUNDATION

950 South Cherry St., Suite 200, Denver, CO 80246, (303) 300-6547

www.denverfoundation.org

SUMMARY

The Denver Foundation (TDF) is a community foundation dedicated to improving the quality of life for people who live in the seven-county Metro Denver area. TDF invests and distributes earnings from donor gifts to nonprofit organizations and manages specific donor-advised philanthropic programs. It also has created initiatives to address social goals, including the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program, which fosters leadership, social networks, and economic improvement in nine contiguous Denver neighborhoods and a neighborhood in adjacent Aurora.

Strengthening Neighborhoods provides grants to groups of residents in the target neighborhoods for various projects and activities. The grants go directly to neighborhood residents rather than to established nonprofits and—combined with consultation from foundation staff, connections to technical assistance providers, and partnership with local nonprofits—support resident-driven planning, programming, and social action.

HOW AND WHY DID THE FOUNDATION EMBED ITSELF IN THESE NEIGHBORHOODS?

The Strengthening Neighborhoods Program evolved in the mid-1990s from Denver Foundation board members’ desire for more proactive, strategic grant-making. The board organized a facilitated process to plan the foundation’s course and engaged about 100 representatives from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in it. A ranked list of priorities emerged from five 3-hour meetings, at the top of which was the goal of strengthening neighborhoods.

The foundation also brought on a new executive director, and under his leadership, resources and staff size grew dramatically. TDF staff conducted interviews with local and national community-organizing experts, community development professionals, and researchers and visited program sites to learn about neighborhood-strengthening strategies. Staff hoped at first to design a citywide program, but the need to concentrate resources led TDF to work in a handful of contiguous, low-income neighborhoods where at least half of the residents are people of color. All of the neighborhoods had high levels of need as well as potential for change, and none was the site of any other foundation’s work.

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

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

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

TDF deliberately steered away from declaring specific community-change goals, such as reducing teen pregnancy or unemployment. Instead, the objectives of funded activities are set by the residents who organize them, and the program’s broader goals focus on enhancing social networks and building leadership capacity.

Strengthening Neighborhoods’ goals are (1) to develop indigenous leadership, (2) to build and strengthen relationships among people living in the target neighborhoods, (3) to foster economic development, and (4) to enhance and build on residents’ neighborhood pride. The theory of change that supports these goals is that helping neighborhood residents come together around shared goals and shared activities (from small events such as block parties to broader neighborhood improvement projects and organized action campaigns) will build the community’s “social fabric” and set the stage for and catalyze other work in and on behalf of the neighborhood.

There is some tension in Strengthening Neighborhoods between supporting small grants for relatively modest, programmatic projects (e.g., block parties, neighborhood cleanups, and after-school programs) and using small grants strategically to foster progress toward broader social-change goals (e.g., planning, organizing, and advocacy). Although the former characterized much of the program’s early focus, increasingly the work has shifted toward strategic grant-making (although not exclusively). TDF continues to fund block parties, community gardens, and the like; whenever possible, however, it uses those activities to lay the groundwork for subsequent grants that target broader social change.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?

TDF’s neighborhood work has been a process of experimentation, learning, modification, and augmentation with additional resources. The foundation also has allowed residents’ priorities to shape the work, especially in the beginning. TDF staff typically encourage residents to develop proposals and then support ideas driven by residents rather than by organizations.

TDF held multiple community meetings in each neighborhood to explain the program, describe the availability and potential of the funding, identify neighborhood leaders, and engage residents in the work. Small meetings organized by TDF led to larger ones organized by residents, which led to networking among residents and foundation staff and requests for small grants. At first,

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

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

TDF made money available “for just about anything” that involved residents and benefited the community, hoping to build experience and comfort with the grant application and implementation process. Many of the early grants were catalytic—to get things started—as much as to address a specific need. Later grants received more scrutiny, especially to see how well they aligned with the program’s four goals.

Although TDF staff had always helped neighborhood groups write grant applications, they realized over time that residents needed additional support for planning. Thus they began to award micro-grants (under \$500) for early planning, capacity building, and agenda setting. Many groups received serial micro-grants, which they used flexibly (e.g., for translation, food, transportation, child care, travel, and conference costs that enabled planners to come together).

To build the skills, knowledge, and capacity of residents and informal neighborhood groups, TDF also increased its technical assistance services and connected grantees with other technical assistance options, both by contracting with technical assistance providers and by giving grantees support for individual consultants. TDF funds nonprofit organizations in several neighborhoods to help advance community organizing and social-change activities and helps some small-grant recipients organize themselves in more sustainable ways. Thus some groups “graduate” from being small-grant recipients to becoming local nonprofits funded by TDF.

Foundation staff maintain long-term relationships with resident groups and help them think about possible next steps for their work. Behind the scenes, they leverage their access to and influence with powerful players in local government, the school board, and the philanthropic community.

TDF’s growing interest in fostering broader social change has led the foundation to foster cross-neighborhood alliances for policy change and, in some cases, to work with community groups to help them become sustainable organizations. TDF operates a leadership program to develop the skills and knowledge of neighborhood leaders, for example, and staff bring current and former grantees together with their counterparts from other neighborhoods for peer learning and networking.

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

Since the strategic reorientation a decade ago, TDF’s organizational changes have been more cultural than structural. Board members have been willing to make a lot of changes to become more proactive and to focus a significant portion of assets on neighborhood strengthening. There



EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

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

also have been personnel changes, including recruitment of a more diverse board of directors and a larger, more diverse staff (in terms of demographic characteristics and substantive background).

Staff who work in the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program now have experience in organizing and advocacy, and they are directly involved in community work. Staff have discretion to make immediate decisions on grant allocations under \$5,000 and on strategic decisions about engagement and technical assistance. Staff work is supervised by a steering committee, which also makes decisions on larger grants. The committee meets bimonthly, and at least half of the members are nontrustee residents of the partner neighborhoods.

WHAT HAS THE FOUNDATION ACCOMPLISHED?

The Strengthening Neighborhoods Program has produced an array of small outputs—from community gardens to after-school programs—and more substantial victories, including increased citizen engagement, stronger social networks among residents, and community-organizing campaigns that have changed policy and practice. A good example of the latter is the opening of the Ana Maria Sandoval School, a bilingual Montessori school in northwest Denver operated by the Denver Public Schools. TDF gave small grants to Anglo and Latino parent groups and to community organizers to develop neighborhood leaders, coordinate planning, and create an organizing strategy around the community’s goals for the school. Community members organized petition drives and demanded hearings with the school district’s Program Design Advisory Committee, the entity responsible for allocating resources for any new or reorganized school. Meanwhile, residents mobilized to open up the committee process and gain representation on the advisory committee.

The result was the creation of a fully bilingual school (all students are taught in English and Spanish) that uses Montessori pedagogy. The parents’ group that organized through this process chose the school’s name and its principal and has an ongoing role in school governance.

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

Evaluating the work. The fluid, process-oriented, long-term nature of the neighborhood work, along with the indirect path from input to outcome, makes it difficult to evaluate the program or to demonstrate causality.

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

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

Supporting “resident-driven” change with a multifaceted approach. In a program designed to foster and support resident-driven, community-based social change, money (grant-making) is not enough. It also was essential for TDF to provide responsive and effective technical assistance, consultation, and connections to other resources outside the partner neighborhoods.

Balancing roles and missions. There is a tension between engaging in the Strengthening Neighborhood work (and thus allocating a lot of resources to a small geographic area) and being a community foundation that serves all of Metro Denver. Even more challenging—especially as the community organizing and advocacy work matures and tackles issues of inequity and social justice—is the need to strike a balance between constituents on the political left and right.

Ensuring long-term funding for long-term goals. Strengthening Neighborhoods’ goals will take time to achieve, and therefore a long-term commitment to funding and technical assistance must be explicit and institutionalized. TDF has earmarked 15 percent of the foundation’s discretionary payout to the neighborhood work.

INTERVIEWEES

David Miller, CEO, The Denver Foundation

Christine Soto, Vice President of Programs, The Denver Foundation

Patrick Horvath, Manager, Strengthening Neighborhoods Program, The Denver Foundation

David Portillo, Program Officer, Strengthening Neighborhoods Program, The Denver Foundation

Patrick Ridgeway, neighborhood resident

Tracy Gallegos, Parent Liaison, Fletcher Elementary School

Mario Flores, Technical Assistance Provider, Strengthening Neighborhoods Program

Lisa Nordholt, Director, Morehead Youth Center

Joanne Trujillo-Hayes, Principal, Ana Maria Sandoval School

Ana Jo Haynes, Trustee and Chair, Strengthening Neighborhoods Steering Committee

Dean Prina, Trustee and Member, Strengthening Neighborhoods Steering Committee

Darrell Watson, Neighborhood Resident and Member, Strengthening Neighborhoods Steering Committee

