

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

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

GENERAL MILLS COMMUNITY ACTION

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SUMMARY

Spurred by a rising crime rate in Minneapolis, the General Mills Foundation decided to build a partnership with the Hawthorne neighborhood in 1997. The Foundation has widened its initial focus on crime reduction to include housing, education, social service reform, and other issues. Their work centers around the Hawthorne Huddle, a monthly meeting on vital community issues. The Foundation considers whether to continue its initiative every 5 years. They did not establish an overall dollar commitment; rather, they committed to “do whatever it takes” to bring down the crime rate. Total grants in Hawthorne vary each year but have averaged about \$500,000 annually.

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

Good corporate citizenship plays a strong, long-standing part in the General Mills culture. A rising crime rate in the company’s hometown of Minneapolis upset corporate executives and trustees and spurred them to use the corporate foundation to help tackle the problem as a “matter of conscience.” They joined with other major corporations in the Twin Cities region to form a high-level, public-private coalition against crime. However, corporate and Foundation leaders believed that achieving and maintaining progress depended on “getting community buy-in” and connecting regional efforts with people at the grassroots. One trustee suggested focusing on a specific neighborhood. The concreteness and feasibility of the idea won it support. If they could develop a successful model, others might replicate it.

The CEO charged Foundation staff with developing a plan, and after an analysis of neighborhood data selected Hawthorne as the focus of its investment. Hawthorne had one of the highest crime and poverty rates in the city and was depicted by police officials as the toughest nut in the city. At the same time, the community had some important assets, and many felt it was still “on the cusp.” Foundation representatives believed success there would demonstrate the possibility of success in other troubled communities.

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

Foundation leaders began with the idea that the community should adopt a standard of “zero tolerance for crime and violence,” and organize its efforts around this theme. However, when the Foundation pitched this idea at a series of block club and other meetings, residents expressed skepticism about its narrowness and urged Foundation leaders to adopt a more complex, holistic approach to reducing crime. Foundation leaders listened and broadened their thinking to include housing, youth development, education, employment, and other issues.

The Foundation believed that regular conversation and joint learning among community activists, leaders, and residents would produce progress. The initiative’s shape grew in large part out of then-Foundation President Dr. Clark King’s particular convictions, sensitivities, and skills. She managed the mobilization of corporate resources for the effort and personally represented the Foundation in the community.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?

The Hawthorne Huddle, an hour-and-a-half morning meeting, has functioned as the heart and mind of the initiative. It began as a monthly feedback mechanism for the Foundation and grantees. Instead of written reports, Foundation leaders asked grantees to come to a meeting to report on and discuss their work, with the idea that it would reduce paperwork, promote coordination, and create mutual accountability. Twelve people attended the first meeting. Since then, it has grown significantly, typically with sixty-to-eighty participants each month.

For the last 6 years, people representing local schools, police, parks, service agencies, faith communities, businesses, or block clubs, and individual residents, elected officials, judges, and others have attended these meetings. The Foundation provides breakfast to attendees, and its president chairs and other staff members attend. Each meeting focuses on a particular, pressing topic, such as reducing family violence, developing affordable housing, or planning for a new public school. Experts present information on the topic and attendees advance ideas and discuss next steps. The Huddle has become a crucial forum for community actors to share information, debate proposals, and coordinate action. Most of the projects that the Foundation supports have emerged from the Huddle. For the Foundation, the Huddle has served as a continuous, ongoing learning vehicle for identifying, developing, and monitoring efforts in Hawthorne.

The Foundation adopted a wide range of intermediate objectives as part of its strategy to help reduce crime in Hawthorne, including helping to build a new elementary school and eliminate blighted housing. The Foundation invested more than \$3 million to finance housing renovations

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and to help attract a group of housing developers to the neighborhood. It helped finance a series of community events that were widely attended, as well as numerous specific programs to serve narrower needs. For instance, General Mills chipped in for hot dinners at the local elementary school on parent-teacher conference night and for an Adopt-a-Bus-Stop program to recruit volunteers to watch over children waiting for school buses. Foundation efforts have also aimed at establishing norms of behavior by developing and disseminating community standards. The Huddle, block clubs, and others developed a statement of standards, which was distributed widely in Hawthorne. Activists also use “welcome wagons” to greet new residents and inform them of the community standards.

The Foundation and corporation have lent political influence to ideas that emerged from the Hawthorne Huddle. Because General Mills is a major corporate and civic leader in the region, public officials listen when the Foundation and its corporate representatives have something to say. For instance, when the school board announced its intention to build an elementary school, the Foundation helped make sure the city heard why Hawthorne Huddle participants favored another site. Ultimately, the school board changed its plans and built on the site preferred by the community. Many public officials and community residents appreciate the work done by the huddle, which means Huddle participants, including the Foundation, have enjoyed growing community stature and connection from these efforts.

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

Regular participation in the Huddle by Foundation staff and leaders constitutes the single most important practice. The president chairs the Huddle and two or more other staff usually attend. In this way, they learn about the community’s needs and assets in a way unrivaled by site visits. Over the years, their participation has demonstrated that General Mills has the “staying power” essential for community change.

The Foundation uses a separate, flexible, and responsive grant-making process for Hawthorne grant proposals to ensure that red tape does not inhibit promising initiatives. It accepts Hawthorne proposals at any time of the year and works to turn them around as fast as possible.

The Foundation rarely funds an entire program and is generally unwilling to fund specific projects indefinitely. Foundation staff are clear about these expectations up front and encourage and assist partners to generate other resources on an ongoing basis to sustain their initiatives.

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The Foundation’s investment in Hawthorne constitutes only a small fraction of its total investments. As a result of this diverse portfolio, Hawthorne may receive fewer dollars but also has less pressure to demonstrate immediate, measurable results.

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

The Foundation and its partners successfully established the Hawthorne Huddle, a central forum for discussion and coordination valued by many institutions and individuals in the community. The Huddle takes on pressing and controversial issues but operates with a tone of civility—it resists “gotcha” tactics. This approach helps public officials feel comfortable attending and many have done so, including U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, the mayor of Minneapolis, and city council members. The Foundation helped improve neighborhood infrastructure through improved housing stock, parks, and schools. Through many other programs, it has helped engage more Hawthorne residents in community life. For instance, instead of the normal 50 parents, about 300 parents attended teacher conference night, thanks in part to the hot dinners offered through Foundation support.

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

Building trust through listening. The Foundation met the initial challenge of entering the community by approaching this engagement “in listening mode,” being up-front and honest about their intentions, and having a credible, empathic messenger—Dr. Reatha Clark King. Dr. King spent a great deal of time in the community talking, listening, and following through on her promises. These efforts laid the groundwork for continued success through the years.

Leadership transition. Dr. King’s retirement posed a big challenge to the initiative. She had played a central, active role in forming and leading the Huddle. As her retirement approached, the Foundation considered how to manage this transition. Her successor, Chris Shea, was a strong leader in her own right, but from a different background and with a different set of skills and interests. The Foundation commissioned a survey of Huddle participants and Hawthorne residents to determine what they thought about the neighborhood, the Huddle, and the leadership issue. In response to an expressed community preference for a neutral, committed convener, the Foundation decided to remain directly involved. Shea plays a less hands-on role in the neighborhood but continues to provide leadership as the Huddle chair.

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INTERVIEWEES

Reatha Clark King, former president and trustee, General Mills Foundation

Hillary Freeman, Crime Prevention Specialist, Minneapolis Police Department

Ellen Goldberg Luger, Director and Program Officer, General Mills Community Action

Chris Shea, President, General Mills Community Action

