

Community Conversations

Summary Report for Implementation

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OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

The purpose of this report is to aggregate the results of 171 recently completed Community Conversations into a format that is accessible and easy for Foundation staff and board to use as they make decisions on how to implement the new Strategic Plan in 2013.

This report's initial findings were presented at a meeting of the Strategic Plan Staff Implementation Task Force on Tuesday, March 12. The final results were presented in person to the same group on Monday, April 23.

Background on New Strategic Plan:

As the oldest and largest community foundation in Colorado, The Denver Foundation listens closely to its community and adjusts its approach periodically as community needs evolve over time. The Foundation's new Strategic Plan, released in November 2011, addresses a ten-year time frame, from present day through 2021. It is the Foundation's first strategic plan since the 2007-2009 national recession and the 2008 financial crisis. Reflecting the results of the Foundation's 2011 Listening Campaign, the new strategic plan focuses on three community objectives: Basic Human Needs, Economic Opportunity, and Education. The new plan also includes three partner objectives (Donors, Nonprofit Organizations, and Community Leaders) and five internal building blocks.

Description of Community Conversations Participants:

A wide variety of respondents answered the Foundation's requests to provide feedback and ideas on the new strategic plan, and how to best implement the plan. This included over 150 interviews with a diverse range of groups and individuals including leaders from throughout the Metro Denver nonprofit sector and from among resident-led community change groups. Foundation staff conducted the research between November 2011 and March 2012, and collected other relevant feedback provided to the Foundation through phone calls, emails, website comments, and in-person meetings.

Nature of Interviews:

The Denver Foundation staff, board members and partners conducted these interviews using an *appreciative inquiry* approach. Appreciative inquiry is distinguished by welcoming, open-ended questions that invite the respondent to share successes and promising practices, with an intention to ask for those ideas and approaches that work well. This approach avoids framing questions in ways that could lead respondents toward one set of answers instead of others. It avoids asking respondents to choose from limited sets of responses, such as those found in multiple-choice questionnaires. The primary strength of the appreciative inquiry approach for these interviews is how it allows respondents to volunteer ideas and feedback freely, increasing the validity and ideally the honesty of these responses. It is important to note that this information was collected from a relatively small number of individuals, especially when looking at subsets of respondents. Thus the information is considered as one set of information considered by the Foundation in implementing its strategic plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE DENVER FOUNDATION

Community Conversations participants offered advice and feedback in two different areas that can inform the Foundation's upcoming decisions on implementing the new strategic plan:

1. On the Foundation in the Community: Respondents offered advice on how the Foundation could consider making grants, interacting with grantees, and conducting itself in the community, even beyond its grantmaking. This is discussed in the first section, "Recommendations: The Foundation in the Community."
2. On Community Objectives: Respondents recommended promising practices that could help the Foundation tackle the three community objectives. This is discussed in the section entitled, "Recommendations: On Community Objectives."

Recommendations: The Foundation in the Community

Respondents suggested that The Denver Foundation consider taking a variety of actions to make progress on the goals and objectives of its new strategic plan. The promising practices suggested by respondents generally fell into five categories, which are listed below.

Approach 1: Connect

Respondents suggested the Foundation use its unique position within the nonprofit community to bring people and groups together in several ways.

"Be a Convener."

Because The Denver Foundation periodically reviews and revises its priorities as community needs change, respondents believed this practice gives the Foundation the independence and freedom it would need to convene groups either on opposing sides or a single side of an issue to facilitate better communication and cooperation among them. Cross-sector meetings around single topics were also recommended, as respondents felt these could inspire creative ideas and problem solving in participating organizations.

Additionally, respondents asked The Denver Foundation to convene its grantees together in groups to strengthen connections among these organizations and their work. Respondents suggested that informal receptions or meetings could be good ways to connect these organizations to each other in large group settings.

"Be a Matchmaker."

Many respondents saw The Denver Foundation as a hub of information, expertise, and institutional memory in the Denver nonprofit community. As a result, respondents suggested that the Foundation could create value by taking on a matchmaking role and

selectively connecting groups together that may never have met or considered working together previously. Respondents emphasized that these selected introductions would need to be carried out thoughtfully and strategically by Foundation staff and leadership to be most effective.

Several leaders of nonprofit organizations also wondered if The Denver Foundation would consider connecting its donors more directly with organizations that align closely with donors' philanthropic goals. One respondent suggested The Denver Foundation could take donors on site visits to high-performing nonprofit organizations that the donors have already funded to give donors a clearer sense of their investments' impacts.

Approach 2: Lead

Respondents asked the Foundation to consider if there may be opportunities for the Foundation to take the lead on issues of importance in the community. Respondents believed, for example, that more leadership is needed in several intractable issues, including education in Denver, state fiscal reform (particularly as it affects education funding), and immigration reform at the state and national levels. These could each be an opportunity for The Denver Foundation to assume a leadership and advocacy role on that issue, if it chose to do so. More generally, several respondents asked The Denver Foundation to consider being a primary advocate for Denver's nonprofit community as a whole to local, state, and national decision makers.

"Restore Hope."

The new strategic plan is the first one issued by the Foundation since the economic recession began in 2007. Reflecting this, many respondents asked The Denver Foundation to consider ways that it could "restore hope" and help Denver's most vulnerable populations to "dream again" after the stress and anxiety of the past four years. Low-income people have borne the brunt of the recent crisis and high employment that followed. Respondents hoped that The Denver Foundation could help give these people the chance to dream again and imagine better futures for themselves and their families. This was not a specific suggestion for action, but rather a recommended philosophy for the implementation phase.

Approach 3: Be Comfortable with Risk

Many respondents felt the Foundation should feel comfortable taking more risk with its funds than it does now, especially if that risk could make positive, meaningful changes happen quickly in either the funded organizations or in the community as a whole. This risk could be grants for innovation, seed capital for new ideas, or other entrepreneurial ventures. Respondents were split on whether this venture funding should go to established organizations or startups; some advocated that funds go to both types of organizations, while others suggested that promising new projects at established organizations with long track records of success should receive any seed funding first. Prudent risk tasking could be allowed in grants by allowing slower-than-normal progress toward a goal or partial failure of a project, if needed, so long as lessons are learned

from it. This would also reflect The Denver Foundation's commitment to being a Learning Community, as identified in one of the Strategic Plan's internal building blocks.

“Consider Larger Commitments” (Long-Term or Larger Grants)

The Foundation's grants are awarded annually, but some respondents asked if the Foundation would consider making substantial multi-year grants to a variety of organizations that work in areas of Foundation priority, both to enable long-term funding of those objectives and to give The Denver Foundation seal of approval to long-term community efforts. Separately, several leaders of smaller nonprofit organizations wondered if the Foundation instead might consider awarding multi-year grants to established organizational partners. These respondents felt such funding stability could both facilitate organizational long-term planning and help them access and leverage additional funds.

Separately, many respondents asked the Foundation to reconsider its “year off” requirement. Smaller nonprofit organizations, particularly those in the human services sector, felt this complicated their work because their organizations frequently faced difficulties in filling that funding hole every four years.

Approach 4: Leverage Resources And Expertise

Next, respondents hoped that The Denver Foundation could leverage its resources and expertise to build capacity in the Denver nonprofit community and attract additional funding sources to support the Metro area's needs. Many respondents, mentioning The Denver Foundation's respected position in the community, asked in particular if the Foundation could inspire and encourage new, large national funders to take interest in Denver projects and needs so the Foundation's support, and that of other local funders, could go farther than it would otherwise.

“Structure Grants to Spur Changes You Want to Achieve”

As a funder, The Denver Foundation has latitude to choose how to structure its grant funding and to decide to whom it will award grants. Because of this, respondents suggested the Foundation think creatively about ways to structure its grantmaking to spur and reward changes it wants, both in grantees' operations and within the community as a whole.

For example, many respondents noted there often exists a negative financial incentive for organizations to collaborate. Collaborative efforts can result in a loss of income for an organization and increased demands on its staff. Despite this disincentive, many respondents maintained that collaboration would be a positive asset in the sector. They recommended The Denver Foundation consider ways to structure collaboration grants that would help organizations implement them successfully.

Approach 5: Encourage Efficiency

Respondents asked the Foundation to use its unique role in the nonprofit arena to encourage collaboration among organizations and seek efficiencies. With less funding available now than there has been in previous years, it is important that all nonprofit

organizations use available funding as efficiently as possible. Many nonprofit organizations are using funding wisely and efficiently, but respondents wanted the Foundation to continue asking their partners for efficiency and seeking constant improvement.

“Encourage Collaboration and Coordination”

Respondents suggested that the Foundation could make progress toward the goals of its Strategic Plan by consistently encouraging collaboration and keeping the sector's focus on wise stewardship of resources in the pursuit of the public good.

Recommended approaches ranged from encouraging collaboration toward improved sector performance to working to eliminate duplication and overlaps among organizations' work. Publicly sharing grantee success stories and best practices or weighing if there is value in giving some preference to collaborative projects in large or multi-year grant applications, for example, would be ways to pursue this approach.

“Build Capacity in Nonprofit Organizations”

Respondents felt that The Denver Foundation could achieve long-term impact through this plan by building the capacity of organizations and people in the nonprofit sector. Areas that came up most often as opportunities for help, likely through the Foundation's technical assistance grants, were performance measurement, program evaluation, planning, leadership development, and communications. Additionally, respondents suggested the Foundation consider if it can help nonprofit organizations invest in technology upgrades and trainings for staff that could make organizations' systems and operations more efficient. Several respondents asked if The Denver Foundation could help nonprofit organizations build capacity to solicit donations more effectively from both small and large donors.

“Evaluation Is Challenging but Holds Promise”

Many leaders of nonprofit organizations asked for The Denver Foundation's help in finding methods to measure and evaluate programs in ways that are sensitive to each program's unique approaches and challenges. Several organizations asked if The Denver Foundation could also consider stories in place of, or in conjunction with, longitudinal data in evaluating a program's outcomes. Several respondents mentioned that reporting requirements can be a difficult for smaller organizations to meet and asked the Foundation to continue to streamline reporting procedures whenever possible.

Model Programs:

When asked what Foundation programs have worked well in the past, two Denver Foundation projects, the **Inclusiveness Project** and the Foundation's work addressing **hunger**, were mentioned repeatedly. Respondents felt modeling new programs after these could help the Foundation make an impact on its objectives. Respondents admired these programs for their inclusive approaches, their focus on building capacity in the nonprofit community, their ability to provide quick responses to critical community needs, and the open and transparent way in which these programs were implemented.

Strengthening Neighborhoods was also mentioned as a model Foundation program for how it has engaged with the community.

Recommendations: Community Objectives

Many respondents noted that the Foundation’s new community objectives frequently overlap, presenting the Foundation with opportunities and challenges. Prioritizing grants in the areas where the objectives overlap could maximize impact. It will be important for the Foundation to think through how best to balance these three areas in the implementation phase and then apportion work, staff, and other resources appropriately across the objectives.

Objective 1: Basic Human Needs

Many residents of the seven-county Metro Denver area struggle to meet their basic needs, including housing, health care, food, and safety. The Denver Foundation set Basic Human Needs as a community objective because it wants to make substantial progress toward fixing the current situation by 2021. Community members – including many who work daily with vulnerable populations -- offered the following advice:

“Help ensure shelter, basic medical care, access to nutritious food, and safety for the most vulnerable residents of Denver.”

- **Relationships are Key To Success:** There was a wide consensus around the value of relationship building and wrap-around services for vulnerable clients who have difficulty meeting their own needs. Respondents, particularly providers, felt it was important for funders like The Denver Foundation to understand both the cost and importance of successful case management. Respondents found that taking a “whole person” approach and focusing on a client’s strengths in case management has a powerful impact in helping people achieve stability.
- **Navigators are Needed:** Interviewees repeatedly said navigation is a major problem for clients in social services systems. Many services are underutilized because clients either do not know about them or do not have the skills needed to navigate the current complicated, bureaucratic social services systems.
- **Many Organizations in this Field Struggle to be Financially Self-Sufficient:** They felt that because some social services are dependent on foundations for support, it is not as useful for The Denver Foundation to ask such organizations to prove their financial self-sufficiency as it would be for the Foundation to ask such questions of other organizations with access to other funding or revenue streams.
- **Immigrant and Refugee Communities Face Unique Barriers:** Respondents noted that immigrant and refugee communities in Denver face even more obstacles to meeting their basic needs than other groups do. Respondents asked The

Denver Foundation to keep these groups' unique needs in mind when planning implementation of this objective and to remember the importance of bi-lingual support staff in agencies and culturally appropriate case management and programming.

- Basic Human Needs are Down Stream from the Other Two Objectives: In reflecting on the Foundation's three community objectives, a respondent observed that the need for basic human needs services is the result of failures of the Foundation's other two objectives. Other respondents expressed hope that progress upstream on education and economic opportunity would reduce the need for human services.

Objective 2: Economic Opportunity

Coming out of the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, the Denver area faces continued challenges in allowing all people the chance to achieve economic success. As a result of this, a second community objective in The Denver Foundation's new Strategic Plan is to help increase economic opportunity and success for people throughout the Denver area.

“Help foster interconnected and culturally vibrant communities in which low-income residents have the tools and opportunities necessary for jobs and careers that lead to economic self-sufficiency.”

Respondents often mentioned the complexity of this issue, explaining that a variety of pieces must all be in place for a person to achieve economic success. The following were mentioned as building blocks of economic opportunity that The Denver Foundation could play a role in protecting or facilitating:

- High-quality, affordable child care;
- Reliable and timely transportation;
- Financial literacy and education;
- High quality and affordable health insurance and care (particularly dental);
- Access to and affordability of job training and education to build useful and desired hard and soft skills;
- Ways to help employers look past any criminal records that job applicants may have; and
- Access to mental health care and substance abuse services.

Of these, respondents emphasized that access to job skills training and opportunities to build the soft skills needed for employment were the two most important and directly related factors to a person's ability to secure employment. The remaining factors on that list could be considered the minimum needs of employed people, as individuals who lose these are at high risk of losing any job they might have as a result.

Ways to provide people with job skills and to improve applicants' soft skills include apprenticeships, expanded offerings of GRE classes in the community, formal job training programs, mentoring, and the use of professional volunteers with human

resources experience to coach and advise new applicants coming into the workforce. Additionally, some respondents recommended that low-income people who achieve economic self-sufficiency should be invited to mentor other low-income people who are working toward economic stability.

Objective 3: Education

In the new Strategic Plan, The Denver Foundation plans to increase student achievement and graduation rates in targeted neighborhoods. Respondents offered the following advice on this objective:

“Help increase P-12 student achievement and graduation rates in targeted low-income neighborhoods.”

- **Convening Opportunity:** Respondents suggested that this topic presented The Denver Foundation with a good opportunity to take a leadership role in convening a wide variety of groups that work on this topic for meaningful discussion. If the Foundation chooses to do this, many respondents strongly recommended that it remain high-level and not take sides. They believe the Foundation’s non-political nature would be a real asset in this effort.
- **Make Education Relevant:** Respondents suggested that making connections between education and work by providing students with mentors, relevant job shadowing opportunities, and internships, can help make school more interesting and relevant for older children at risk of dropping out.
- **State Fiscal Reform:** Several respondents asked The Denver Foundation to consider advocating actively for state fiscal reform, and the calls for this activism were particularly strong in education-oriented interviews because of the effect dwindling state resources have had on state support for education. Many felt the state’s inability to support public education was eroding the system at a faster rate than private support can ever backfill. One respondent described state education funding as a bucket with a hole in it, explaining that only by plugging the hole at the bottom could the Foundation’s local investments in education not be wasted.
- **Set High Expectations:** A common desire among youth respondents interviewed for this project was for the community and adults to set high expectations for young people. Youth noted the poisonous effect of low expectations on a student’s motivation to stay in school and succeed and emphasized how important high expectations are as a factor in a person’s success.

Another strong theme from youth respondents and those who work with them was a phrase: “Your school should not determine your future.” Students were concerned that today a student’s school seems disproportionately to impact what that student’s future will be. This response ties into the concern expressed over low expectations. Youth also mentioned the importance of small class sizes and having school staff and

teachers who are bilingual not only in Spanish, but also in languages other than Spanish.

Other education recommendations from respondents included facilitating increased parent support and engagement, supporting high quality early childhood education, developing and implementing after-school and summer programs, and extending the school day. Respondents also felt improving the foster care system would make education access easier for children involved with child welfare agencies.

Arts

The Denver Foundation's new Strategic Plan does not specifically call out the arts as its own community objective, instead, the arts are integrated into the Education and Economic Opportunity objectives. Some respondents interviewed for the Community Conversations expressed concern about this. These respondents asked that the Foundation clearly communicate with them as to what would and would not be funded in 2013 under the new plan once those criteria have been decided.

Respondents suggested a variety of ways the arts could help in implementation of the new Strategic Plan as it's written:

- **Arts in Education:** Several respondents suggested that the arts fit into the Foundation's education objective as a way to engage students and inspire them to stay in school and graduate. Responsibility now often falls on local arts organizations to offer arts programming at schools in low-income areas as many schools have all but stopped offering art classes for students; this was noted as a source of strain. A few respondents suggested starting artist-in-residence programs in schools to help students gain exposure to that work and providing artists with teacher training as a way to build their skills in advance of deploying them in school settings.
- **Arts in Economic Opportunity:** Arts were also mentioned as a way to drive economic development in underserved communities. Artists could be provided with business training to prepare them for success as entrepreneurs or encouraged to move into underutilized areas of Denver or surrounding cities as a tactic of urban renewal.
- **Concern over Lack of Broad Access to The Arts:** Respondents also expressed concern over a lack of easy access to the arts among many segments of the Denver community. The largest group lacking access is the middle class, whom respondents feared can no longer easily afford tickets to events or admission fees to museums. Respondents also expressed specific concern over lack of access to arts among the Metro area's African-American communities.

With regard to The Denver Foundation's change in objectives in the new plan, several respondents expressed concern that a number of other Denver-area foundations – like Mile High United Way, The Daniels Fund, Season to Share, The Gay and Lesbian

Fund, and The Johnson Foundation – also reassessed or altered their funding strategies recently. Large changes in many funding organizations at once can feel disorienting to affected grantees, so respondents asked specifically for clear communication on The Denver Foundation’s plan once grant guidelines have been established.

NEXT STEPS

This report represents a point-in-time snapshot of feedback from the community on The Denver Foundation’s new Strategic Plan, but it marks only the beginning of the Foundation’s implementation process. The Foundation continues to hear ideas and strategies from its partners in the community and welcomes these. The Foundation welcomes continued community involvement in the process as it forms its 2013 implementation plan in the second half of 2012. Community members are encouraged to email their thoughts on this plan and its implementation to listening@denverfoundation.org and to visit The Denver Foundation’s Strategic Plan blog (<http://tdfstrategicplan.com/>) for updates.