

# Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Nonprofit Support Program

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Assessment and Evaluation  
Executive Summary Report  
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## Introduction

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving (the Foundation) provides a wide range of capacity building services to nonprofit organizations in the Greater Hartford region through its Nonprofit Support Program (NSP). As part of its commitment to continuous learning and improvement, NSP commissioned this assessment and evaluation of its programs in the fall of 2015.

The goals of the evaluation are to:

1. Evaluate existing programs, services, and resources and assess the impact on NSP grantees.
2. Learn about current and future needs of grantees, and about trends and best practices in the field that might influence future programming of NSP.
3. Identify areas for potential improvements to programs, services, and resources that will increase the potential for impact on NSP grantees.

The evaluation used three primary methods to gather information that would help to answer NSP's questions – review of NSP's materials, telephone and in-person interviews, and review of best practice capacity building literature and trends. The inquiry gathered the perspectives of a total of 97 people.

- Grantees – 39 individuals: (30 Executive Directors + 9 Board of Directors leaders)
- Consultants – 17 individuals
- NSP and other staff at the Foundation – 21 individuals: (7 NSP staff; 9 Foundation Program Staff; 4 Foundation Vice Presidents; and the Foundation's President)
- Capacity builders and field leaders – 20 individuals: (8 capacity builders; 8 foundations; 2 consultants; 2 academics)

## Summary of Key Findings

The evaluation gathered feedback from all stakeholders about NSP's programs and approach, and about NSP's impact on the individuals who participate, the organizations they work for, and the communities they serve.

### **1. NSP approach and services are effective and having a meaningful impact on the community.**

- NSP provides a unique and highly valuable contribution to the nonprofit community in Greater Hartford. Beyond the funding, grantees praised the variety and depth of supports they receive from NSP, which have helped them to become stronger, more effective organizations.
- Quality programming, combined with a flexible approach and a diverse range of resources is a successful formula for capacity building.
  - Programs are rich in content, illustrating best practices in a host of capacity areas needed for effective nonprofit management and governance.
  - NSP is responsive to the current and evolving needs of the nonprofit community, and demonstrates a deep appreciation for the realities of running a nonprofit.
  - Funding for implementation and consulting follow-up assistance to tailor the plans to an organization's circumstances are highly valuable resources.
  - Attending sessions with a team from the organization – board and staff and/or staff teams – help facilitate implementation of best practices.
- NSP has had a meaningful impact on the individuals who participate, the organizations they work for, and the communities they serve.
  - Knowledge, skills and confidence has increased for staff, as have the level of professionalism. Executive Directors reported a transformational impact on them

personally and professionally, and board leaders cited numerous examples of lessons they learned and how those were applied to create a stronger board of directors.

- Organizational change is evident. Ninety percent of interviewees reported accomplishing more organizational change than they had anticipated. Grantees cited increases in overall stability, staff capacity, and their ability to be strategic and proactive. Growth has been measured by increases in budget size, donor base, endowments, cash reserves and capital funds, and as a result, in the scale of programs to meet community needs.
- Communities and clients are better served by enhanced quality in programming and responsiveness.
- Consultants are a critical resource for nonprofits in Greater Hartford to develop and implement strategies that strengthen their organizations and their impact in the community.
  - Professional development opportunities boost consultant capacity and sharing of best practices throughout the community.
  - Some consultant matches were not as on-target as others. Further assistance is needed to help nonprofits become better consumers of consulting services, and to further build the capacity of consultants.
  - The pool of consultants available to nonprofits does not sufficiently match the diversity of the community's needs. NSP should explore innovative programs aimed at increasing the bench strength and diversity of the consultant pool.
- Grantees view NSP as a highly valuable component of the Foundation, reporting significant benefits from the Foundation's investment in NSP programs and services.
  - NSP plays a strategic role within the Foundation, which can be extended as the Foundation implements its new strategic plan.

**2. All of NSP's programs are seen as valuable. Those that combine group learning opportunities with consultant and funding support provide added benefits especially in facilitating implementation of best practices.**

- **ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENTS** continue to serve their intended purposes: helping an organization to identify its strengths and weaknesses and to separate causes from symptoms of problems in order to determine the best course of action. Board members pointed out that the assessments have been "*eye opening*" for the volunteer leadership who now have a better understanding of the organization and have created greater buy-in to the roadmap ahead. A few examples where the consultant was not the right fit for the grantee were noted, but for the most part, leaders were pleased with the consultant facilitation of the assessment process.

Recommendations

- Continue to support organizational assessments especially for groups that are unsure of the most strategic capacity building activities to take.
- Ensure the consultant match meets the expectations and goals for the client.
- Expand the content to include an assessment of the organization's ability for adaptability and generative/ strategic thinking and actions, organizational sustainability and bench strength, and evaluation capacity.
- **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GRANTS (TAGS)** are essential in helping grantees implement best practices, especially in support of organizations becoming more proactive and strategic. TAGs are highly valued by the grantees and praised as one of the ways NSP helps groups to plan and carry out best practices. Strategic planning grants were cited most frequently as a critical step in

the development and maturation of the organization, which in turn helped to measure outcomes, market to new audiences, raise additional funds, and set a clear direction for the future. Numerous leaders referred to their strategic plans as “*real road maps*” and ones that are regularly used to chart their course and measure their progress – they are not “*on the shelf.*”

#### Recommendations

- Continue to offer flexible TAGs which are responsive to the needs of grantees.
  - Increase the funding for implementation to support more follow up coaching and consulting.
  - Re-examine the size of the grant, especially for large projects such as strategic planning, and the policy that the amount of grant is tied to the organization’s budget size.
- **THE STRATEGIC TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM** is an effective means for ensuring that nonprofits have the tools and systems to reach their strategic goals. It is especially important to enable organizations to participate in the program more than once as it is with other programs. Cited repeatedly as one of the most unique services offered by NSP, grantees praised the multi-faceted approach, the high quality of the program, and especially the funding to actually purchase equipment, software, and other technology. Significant outcomes have been achieved by participants – from improved communications with their community through better use of social media, functional phone systems and up-to-date websites, to enhanced capacity to attract and expand donor bases. Pairing Strategic Technology with Building Evaluation Capacity, and with Financial Management participation affords organizations added benefits.

#### Recommendations

- Continue the program and its availability for additional rounds of participation.
  - Create a deadline for submission of the technology plans to better control the grant pipeline.
  - Expand the role of the consultant to be more hands-on/ directive and to spend more time with some groups that need it. For all groups, clarify the expectations for the consultancy and the project outcomes.
  - Consider an ‘advanced’ course for groups that have participated in the training in prior cycles, and short courses or webinars to provide added training in specific topics.
  - Create a ‘community of practice’ after the training where grantees and consultants alike can share ideas and an alumni network to continue sharing best practices.
  - Further link Strategic Technology to other NSP programs for added benefits.
- **THE FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT PROGRAM** was praised for its comprehensive and complementary array of services and grants and its impact on strengthening the financial infrastructure of grantees. It has also led to impressive results: a stronger financial position based on sound systems, greater accountability, enhanced staff capacity, and a more educated and engaged Boards of Directors. Boards have increased their ability to access the information they need to fulfil their fiduciary responsibilities. Organizations with a stable financial base have grown. While most groups reported that they are now able to sustain financial staffing positions on their own, some found operationalizing this function still a challenge. Added benefits were achieved for groups who also participated in Strategic Technology and Board Leadership.

#### Recommendations

- Continue the program and look for ways to extend linkages between Strategic Technology and Board Leadership participants.
- Explore the availability of more advanced curriculum for groups with existing financial management capacities.

- **THE BUILDING EVALUATION CAPACITY** is highly effective at building skills and knowledge and at the same time, supporting organizations to institutionalize evaluation practices. Grantees have begun to implement program improvements as a result of lessons learned through evaluation activities. With greater ability to collect outcome data from the community and from their work, organizations have shifted programs to meet community needs, enhanced fundraising capacities by being able to show meaningful results and data, and created greater internal integration and program coordination within their groups. For the most part, evaluation methodology has been institutionalized, although some organizations still find this challenging. More staff have become enthusiastic about evaluation practices, but board members have not participated in the program as of yet.

#### Recommendations

- Continue BEC and expand to more organizations as resources allow, including the provision of a grant to further implement evaluation systems; however, measuring the impact of this work will be a longer term effort.
  - Expand the educational component to include the Boards of Directors and determine how to tailor workshops to the Board's role in measuring impact.
  - Explore how to aggregate data across participating agencies to demonstrate the impact BEC is having on organizational change and community improvement.
  - Look for ways to coordinate participation between BEC and the Strategic Technology Program and with the Board Leadership Program.
- **THE BOARD LEADERSHIP PROGRAM** has contributed to building more engaged boards of directors with stronger governance practices and heightened leadership in fundraising. The multi-session workshops with Chuck Loring, followed by individualized consultations to tailor the lessons to each organization's unique circumstances was applauded as an effective approach to strengthening boards and governance practices. Participants reported major changes in board functioning, including recruitment and retention of effective new leaders, clearer delineation of roles, enhanced fundraising capacity, and the creation of a greater sense of shared goals and direction between the staff and volunteer leadership. Leaders reported a shift towards more strategic and generative discussions at Board meetings and an increase in the board's focus on fundraising. However, some groups found it challenging to continually engage Board members to attend the sessions and follow-up on the lessons learned. Further, some groups did not think the follow-up work with the consultant was optimally effective due to the skill level or approach of the consultant.

#### Recommendations

- Continue to offer the program which is in high demand among nonprofit leaders.
- Revisit the consultant pool for this program and provide organizations further selection assistance to ensure the best consulting match to meet the client's goals.
- Increase resources to provide coaching to boards over time and to enable consultants to provide follow-up six to twelve months after the program ends.
- Consider more advanced workshops, or more in-depth governance programs such as the NeighborWorks Excellence in Governance program.
- Examine how to facilitate greater alignment between the Board Leadership program and BEC to further reinforce the Board's role in evaluation.
- Explore organizing leader circles for Board Chairpersons or for Executive Director together with Board Chairpersons.

- **THE EXECUTIVE TRANSITIONS PROGRAM** provides a vital set of resources to organizations going through a leadership transition and should be continued to meet the growing need in Greater Hartford. The program has been very helpful in structuring and managing the transition process. Auxiliary benefits accrued from the process such as becoming clearer about their strategic direction, revising bylaws, updating personnel manuals, and improving governance practices. The concept of succession planning should be broadened to focus on deeper issues of organizational sustainability. NSP should consider programs such as leadership sabbaticals and other programs that build bench strength and create shared leadership.

Recommendations

- Continue to offer this valuable service to groups going through an executive transition.
- Augment the program with a focus on organizational sustainability and consider how to combine this with enhanced services to current executive and mid-level managers based on best practice research and trends.

- **EXECUTIVE WORKSHOPS AND OTHER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES** also received positive reviews from grantees. The Executive Management Institute and other learning circles for Executive Directors have a proven track record. Leadership, managerial, and analytic skills have been developed, as has overall confidence. Many of the leaders reported ongoing contact with others they met through these sessions, using this peer network for personal and professional support. The Senior Leaders Circle was reported as highly valuable as well and there is growing interest in more programs for emerging leaders.

Sessions at the Pond House and other half-day sessions were also praised for the caliber of the presenters, the topics, and the value of the materials. Executive Directors and Board leaders noted feeling energized afterwards and seeing that they are not alone. They appreciate that the sessions are offered at no cost, the convenient location, and the ability to bring other staff which supports professional development. And yet while the leaders all appreciated the sessions and mostly saw value in them, the biggest challenge is implementation of ideas.

Recommendations

- Continue EMI and other programs targeted to Executive Directors. Consider cohort composition to maximize peer sharing and the possibility of future collaborations.
- As NSP has already planned, expand the learning opportunities for emerging leaders.
- Coordinate sessions with other providers in the community such as CT Association of Nonprofits.
- Continue to offer the half-day sessions, explore the option of more advanced level workshops where feasible, but balance the number of programs with the available resources for other priority programs.

## **Conclusion and Summary of Key Recommendations**

The Nonprofit Support Program should be applauded for its commitment to and excellence in delivering effective programming that builds and sustains highly functional nonprofits serving a range of fields in the Greater Hartford area. All aspects of NSP were praised for quality services, and there is ample evidence that the programs are achieving meaningful outcomes for the individuals who participate and for their organizations. The Foundation, through NSP, is a major contributor to creating a stronger community of nonprofit organizations in Greater Hartford. The programs taken as a whole and the high degree of grantee participation, speak to the linkage between programs, and the ripple effect that happens from the individual to the organizational level. While the evaluation was not intended to

measure specific quantifiable community level outcomes, leaders attested to the fact that they believe NSP's capacity building has in fact contributed to their ability to improve outcomes for the clients and communities they serve.

This evaluation confirms that NSP is providing the types of support to nonprofits that are successful in building capacity and effectiveness -- no major areas that require substantial changes were found. There are however, some recommendations for ways NSP can further enhance its impact through greater coordination of programs, more focus on a holistic approach to organizational adaptability and sustainability, and providing the next level of learning on a range of capacity areas. Moreover, NSP and the Foundation as a whole should examine the kinds of community level outcomes it seeks, and together determine how to increase resources towards measuring those outcomes.

Based on the lessons from this evaluation and the trends and challenges leaders described, NSP should consider the following recommendations:

- Continue to provide the wide array of excellent programs with a flexible approach that responds to grantee needs.
- Supplement existing practices with additional support to grantees to help them determine the next level of capacity building that is right for them with periodic visits and check-ins.
- Consider ways to expand efforts to support implementation including adjustments to the size of the TAGs or other resources that provide ongoing coaching.
- Create more linkages between programs to facilitate the combined benefits such as coordinating technology, financial management, board development and evaluation capacity programs.
- Infuse adaptive capacity and outcome measurement/ evaluation capacity into the assessment format, in strategic planning, and in other initiatives undertaken by the grantees to the degree feasible.
- Identify and support programs that build emerging leaders, build bench strength, and support shared leadership models to foster sustainability.
- Consider program adjustments to support smaller agencies and to also provide more advanced curriculum or forums for more experienced organizations.
- Explore new trends in governance and consider additional content or expanded programs for the board as a whole and board chairs.
- Support grantees to become even better consumers of consulting services and support consultants with professional development opportunities and assistance in tailoring their work to meet the needs of grantees.
- Explore innovative programs aimed at increasing the bench strength and diversity of the consultant pool.
- Build on the evaluation data already collected to create a more comprehensive approach to evaluating the impact of NSP funding and programs, which will require additional resources.