

# A Short Course on Grassroots Grantmaking



grassroots  
GRANTMAKERS™

Janis Foster Richardson & E. Gabriel Works  
[www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org](http://www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org)

## About Grassroots Grantmakers:

Grassroots Grantmakers is a network of people, organizations and institutions who believe that what people do together in their home communities matters. Members of our network believe that when people see themselves and their neighbors as co-producers of community well-being, they create communities that are welcoming, vibrant, resilient and just. In these communities the impulse for people to connect and act around shared interests is in the water, the local culture and the community's muscle memory.

Our work is geared to growing a field of citizen sector investing that supports the work that everyday people do together to make their communities more welcoming, vibrant, resilient and just.

## About the Authors:

**Janis Foster Richardson** is Executive Director of Grassroots Grantmakers and has more than two decades of experience working with and within philanthropic organizations to support civic engagement and community change at the grassroots level. She served as Vice President of Grantmaking and as Executive Vice President at the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis and is an Asset Based Community Development Institute faculty member. Janis lives in South Central Texas and shares her perspective on resourcing active citizens via her blog, Big Thinking on Small Grants.

**E. Gabriel Works** is principal of Works Associates, providing consulting services that focus on enhancing the practice of philanthropy to grantmakers of all types, as well as servicing organizations that support grantmakers. Gabriel has served in the program departments of both the Charles Stewart Mott and Frey Foundations. Her work as both a regional/local grantmaker and a grantmaker working with both a national and international portfolio led to eight years in the very privileged position of studying the practice of grantmaking. To date she has been responsible for the development and ongoing performance of nearly a dozen intensive training courses offered nationally.

### For more information:

Grassroots Grantmakers

Office: 361-798-1808

Email: [info@grassrootsgrantmakers.org](mailto:info@grassrootsgrantmakers.org)

Web: [www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org](http://www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org)

Twitter: GrassrootsGM

*Look for us on Facebook*



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# A SHORT COURSE ON GRASSROOTS GRANTMAKING

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BY JANIS FOSTER RICHARDSON & E. GABRIEL WORKS

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# Contents

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An introduction to grassroots grantmaking	1
What do we mean by grassroots groups?	2
▶ Differentiating grassroots groups from other non-profit organizations	3
The Strategy of Grassroots Grantmaking	5
▶.. Envision Layers, Not Ladders	6
▶.. The First (Foundational) Layer	6
▶.. The Second Layer: Building Organizational Strength	7
▶.. The Third Layer: Advancing Social Change	7
The Practice of Grassroots Grantmaking	10
▶ Simpler & More Accessible Grantmaking Processes	10
▶ Cultural Competency	10
▶ Thoughtful Technical Assistance	11
○ Principle 1: Support People & Groups in Finding Their Own Way	11
○ Principle 2: Capitalize on “learning moments”	12
○ Principle 3: Build long-term relationships for deeper capacity growth	13
○ Principle 4: Focus on three related circles	13
Technical Assistance Models	14
Success Factors	17
Recommendations for Organizations New to Grassroots Grantmaking	19
Additional Resources	20

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## A Short Course on Grassroots Grantmaking

Grassroots grantmaking is a place-based grantmaking strategy that is simple yet powerful. Quite simply, it utilizes modest grants and common sense to help people reclaim their place as change-makers in their own community. It is about community engagement at the most human level. The strategy supports the determination and passion of people to actively join with their neighbors to create the community that provides the supportive environment they need to live the life that they want.

Grassroots grantmaking is powerful in that it recognizes the potential of a largely untapped resource for community vitality, resilience and justice - the informal associations at the community level that most frequently operate under the funding radar screen. These informal associations (the grassroots groups) serve as the locus for “active citizenship” in a community. Investing in grassroots groups provides a mechanism for activating a critical missing ingredient in more traditional community development strategies - the knowledge, passion, commitment and enduring presence of people who in live in a community.

It is common for foundations wanting to support community change to fund service delivery organizations. Adding grassroots grantmaking as a strategy expands a funder’s repertoire to include two powerful but distinctly different tools for community change – effective service delivery systems (what we commonly think of as nonprofit organizations) and effective community engagement mechanisms (grassroots groups). (Further discussion of this distinction below.) Becoming knowledgeable about and comfortable using both of these tools, funders are better positioned to make effective use of their philanthropic resources to advance community change. As a strategy, many funders find that grassroots grantmaking generates a significant return on their investment by:

- Engaging and advancing all voices within a community,
- Connecting with marginalized segments of the community, and
- Strengthening community leadership.

Many funders have found that grassroots grantmaking programs generate surprising benefits for small amounts of money. Grassroots grantmaking can also have significant benefits for the funding organization itself: new relationships and perspectives that inform other program areas, increased credibility as an entity that has deep knowledge and understanding about its community, and opportunities to create new partnerships with donors, local governments, and other philanthropies. Grassroots grantmaking can enhance a funder’s position as a community leader and demonstrate its commitment to community accountability.

For funders with small grantmaking budgets and a strong connection to “place,” using grassroots grantmaking allows the funder to make small grants go a long way while building the knowledge and relationships that will inform larger funding efforts down the road. With grassroots grantmaking, grants of \$500 - \$5,000 typically yield results that are more significant than the grant dollars would have suggested because grants support the work of and connections between passionate residents.

This work is often low-cost in nature and depends on volunteer commitment rather than paid professional help. Frequent by-products of grassroots grantmaking are a renewed sense of hope and pride, increased citizen participation and enhanced community leadership, all of which inevitably spill over to positively affect other quality of life issues.

### Building Community from the Inside Out

In their influential 1994 book, “Building Communities from the Inside Out”<sup>1</sup>, John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann observe that distressed communities are often over-flowing with programs that well-meaning outsiders have brought into the community as a caring response to the problems that they see. McKnight and Kretzmann believe that basing philanthropic investments on the premise that more services or a different approach to service delivery will drive change in challenged communities is a flawed approach. Further, they suggest that the expansion of the nonprofit sector over the past fifty years has had the unintended negative consequence of undermining civic engagement at the block level.

McKnight and Kretzmann believe that using services as the primary remedy to community challenges grows from a “needs-based mental map” on which many well-meaning community outsiders (including foundation staff) base their decisions. With attention primarily focused on the nearly endless list of problems and needs that are facing distressed communities, funders tend to rely on well-run nonprofit organizations that can expertly frame a problem, then design and implement a program to address that problem. However, by focusing strictly on needs and services, funders also overlook a community’s local assets – the people themselves and their potential to engage in solutions.

### What do we mean by grassroots groups?

Before working with grassroots groups, it is critically important for funders to become as comfortable in the world of grassroots groups as they are in the world of nonprofit organizations. While grassroots groups may have some of the same characteristics as start-up non-profits, they are fundamentally different. What distinguishes grassroots groups from traditional non-profit organizations is a structure that allows people who are bound together by their common experience of and interest in “place” to move their shared agenda forward in a way that depends on their collective commitment, energy, passion and skills.

Characteristics that grassroots groups share:

- **Place based** - They are quintessentially local – with specific connections to a block, neighborhood, local institution (school, library, church, community center, etc.), park, or rural area and arise from people’s shared experience with and interest in a place – an urban neighborhood or a rural community.
- **People focused** - They are directly and immediately responsive to the needs and wishes of the people involved. A defining characteristic is that most of the work is done not only for the people involved but also **by** them, with little or no paid staff, often without much

<sup>1</sup> **Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets** by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight. ACTA Publications. 1993.

specialized expertise, and usually without big budgets or other large resource reservoirs. They provide the mechanism for individuals to discover and bring forth their individual gifts to their community.

- **Informal structure** - They vary in structure and formality, from more formal (with elected officers/or a board of directors, written by-laws, and members who pay dues) to very informal (without any officers or formal memberships – perhaps even without a name). They may or may not operate as a 501(c)(3) entity – but more typically do not have (and probably do not need) this designation.
- **Membership** - While membership may not be explicitly defined, they work with a clear sense of who “belongs” and with the understanding that the group is a vehicle for the collective action of the members. Membership can range from two to hundreds.
- **Duration** - They can be temporary, transient or ongoing; they stay together so long as those involved find the association useful and fulfilling. They can be focused on a single issue or task or can work on multiple issues or tasks.
- **Intent** – Groups are formed for an endless array of intents, but basically people group around three primary motives: 1) to promote belonging (to promote a group identity, advance a particular set of values, build social bonds or oppose actions of others), 2) to promote inclusiveness and diversity (to deal justly with those excluded or empower those presumed to be powerless) or 3) to increase the capacity to act (to advance the common good, build connections for mutual aid, overcome polarization and conflict, prevent fragmentation, or add strength).

Grassroots groups are members in the family of organizations that Alexis de Tocqueville, in his classic treatise, *Democracy in America*, described as “associations.”

### Differentiating grassroots groups from other nonprofit organizations

For grassroots groups, both the process and the product of their work contribute to their communities’ strength and resiliency:

- The process (being part of the group, sharing interests, hopes and frustrations, deciding to act, planning the activity, finding more people to help, doing the activity, celebrating success) strengthens the web of relationships in a community – the social capital. Robert Putnam’s work<sup>2</sup> on the critical role of social capital in long-term community viability contributes to our appreciation of the value of process for grassroots groups. Who is involved and how things get done are just as important as what is accomplished from a grassroots grantmaking lens.
- The product (a playground, parade, newsletter, clean-up, block watch, etc.) is a grassroots group’s tangible investment in their community’s livability. Success in creating the product not only yields something positive for the community – it also helps the group by instilling confidence, building credibility, attracting new members and inspiring future action.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://bettertogether.org/putnam.htm> for more information about Robert Putnam and his work on civic engagement and social capital.

Nonprofit agencies, on the other hand, sometimes begin as grassroots groups but evolve into people-serving entities that focus on delivering a product— case management, youth or senior programming, home-ownership counseling, job readiness training, etc. Their product orientation demands structures that enable them to reliably produce desired results and sustain their operations over time. While many begin with a passionate founder who works with little or no compensation, the norm is to adopt a growing reliance on professional expertise and business-oriented staffing models as the organization grows.

Like hammers and saws, grassroots groups and nonprofit organizations are two powerful tools in a funder’s community-change toolbox. Like hammers and saws, however, they each are good at some things and not as good at others, as the chart below shows.

	Grassroots groups	Traditional nonprofits
Good at	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making room for everyone</li> <li>• Making and activating people to people connections</li> <li>• Blurring the lines between fun and work</li> <li>• Discovering, rediscovering and repurposing</li> <li>• Balancing dreams with current realities</li> <li>• Articulating a community vision</li> <li>• Identifying first-felt needs</li> <li>• Providing safe spaces for people to try out and strengthen their leadership skills</li> <li>• Learning while doing</li> <li>• Surfacing creative solutions</li> <li>• Consensual decision making</li> <li>• Action-oriented work that draws on the talents of the group</li> <li>• Acting, adapting and changing course quickly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing reliable services</li> <li>• Planning and budgeting</li> <li>• Developing routines and procedures</li> <li>• Quality control</li> <li>• Marshaling expertise</li> <li>• Meeting paperwork requirements</li> <li>• Creating organization-to-organization connections</li> </ul>
Not so good at	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing services</li> <li>• Sustained action</li> <li>• Quality control</li> <li>• Managing organizational transitions or change</li> <li>• Meeting paperwork requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to distinctive and changing community situations</li> <li>• Building community consensus</li> <li>• Empowering community residents</li> <li>• Building social capital</li> <li>• Coloring outside the lines</li> </ul>



So where do community development organizations and traditional community development strategies fit in this picture? While good community development organizations are rooted in the community, and may devote resources to strengthening community leadership, the big issues that they deal with demand many of the same skills and competencies that are required of incorporated nonprofits. Where many community development strategies begin with an issue and end with a product, grassroots grantmaking begins with community residents. More traditional community development approaches are focused on the product. Grassroots grantmaking is focused on the process and the product.

Both approaches are valid. What is important to keep in mind is that these are two approaches – two different tools in the funder’s toolbox, so to speak – each of which is powerful when used appropriately.

- ▶▶ *For example, a funder might be interested in addressing deteriorated housing in a specific area of a community while providing new affordable housing options for community residents. The most efficient way to accomplish this goal might be to give a sizeable grant to an experienced community development corporation to transform the blighted blocks with new affordable housing. Residents might have input in the plan for the project, or even volunteer to work on the project, but their voice is essentially the voice of consumers or customers or clients rather than of active citizens.*
- ▶▶ *Alternatively, a grassroots grantmaking approach would support residents setting their own priorities, developing plans to address those priorities, and getting to work as producers of that plan. A grassroots group may or may not address the blighted block or the need for housing in the community – but it will address first-felt needs while supporting and nurturing active citizenship in the community.*

### **The Strategy of Grassroots Grantmaking**

Grassroots grantmaking is both a practice and a strategy. As a practice, it employs a people-centered, engaged style of grantmaking to identify, connect with and get resources to groups that are typically overlooked by more traditional grantmaking.

As a strategy, grassroots grantmaking can help a funder achieve goals as simple as encouraging and rewarding block level, neighbor-to-neighbor interaction in a community, or as grand as increasing the power of residents to shape the future of their community. Depending on the goals that are driving the work, it can be done well with a small pool of resources, or it can require a significant investment of resources.

The difference between grassroots grantmaking that is strategic and grassroots grantmaking that is primarily about “doing good” is not so much what it does as how it is positioned. Strategic grassroots grantmaking – even at quite elementary levels – always begins with clear intentions about what is to be accomplished and a realistic understanding of and commitment to what will be required to be successful. It has the triple bottom lines of “who” (who is initiating and acting), “what” (what is being accomplished), and “how” (how is it building and strengthening horizontal and vertical relationships in a community). “Doing good” grassroots grantmaking has a keen focus on doing, without a keen interest on who is initiating and acting or maximizing the relationship building opportunities for the community and the funder that the doing affords.

A prerequisite to strategic grassroots grantmaking is that community-level engagement of residents must be the foundation on which all support is built. Because of the citizen-driven nature of grassroots

groups, the basic work of stimulating and supporting active citizenship is never done. For this reason, grassroots grantmaking works best when a layering strategy is employed.

### Envision Layers, Not Ladders

Effective grassroots grantmakers maintain their commitment to the fundamental work of stimulating and supporting active citizenship by building on this foundation like adding layers to a cake. They also realize that more layers require more resources and more institutional commitment (and risk taking).

This layering strategy is different from a laddering strategy, where funders accomplish one goal and move to the next more ambitious goal.

- ▶▶ *Layering suggests that “building on” rather than “moving on” (as in stepping up the rungs of a ladder) is the most effective strategy for grassroots grantmaking.*

### The First (foundational) Layer

- ▶▶ *The emphasis in the first layer is on encouraging and rewarding people who are moved by a spirit of community to turn off their televisions, get off their couches, and find some neighbors who will join them to do something to improve their immediate surroundings. Grant funds are used for the hard costs associated with the activity – paint, trash bags, plants, rakes, flyers, etc.*

Many funders – especially those without prior experience working with grassroots groups – begin grassroots grantmaking as a strategy to achieve the relatively simple, straightforward, and easy to measure goal of providing all-volunteer groups with a modest amount of working capital for community projects such as a spring clean-up, a festival or a block watch.

- Success for this type of grassroots grantmaking can usually be captured in a photograph – the garden, the transformed vacant lot, the playground with the fresh coat of paint, the festival in progress.
- Technical assistance for this type of grassroots grantmaking generally focuses on project specific areas such as project planning, acquiring needed permits, recruiting volunteers, generating publicity or finding additional project sponsors.

The strategy behind this level of work can be two-fold: 1) encourage and support people who want to join with their neighbors to do something to improve their community, and 2) use the experience of funding grassroots projects as a way to get connected to new constituencies and to gain new perspectives on opportunities and challenges that are facing the community.



Like a cake, this single layer of grassroots grantmaking can be artful, satisfying, and full of possibilities in its own right. Some funders have successfully used this strategy for years without adding any additional layers.

- ▶▶ *Funders considering a strategic approach to grassroots grantmaking must be careful to ensure that their expectations match their investment. If a funder does not commit resources in its grassroots strategy to leadership development and organization strengthening, it will end up with some good (and probably*

even amazing) projects that have some surprising spill-over effects in the community. It will not, in all likelihood, achieve immediate, discernible changes in indicators of community vitality such as crime rates or property values. Excitement about the potential of the “untapped resource” of resident groups and leaders may prompt funders who are new to grassroots grantmaking to set such unrealistic expectations while underestimating the commitment of time and resources that is necessary for these expectations to be met.

## The Second Layer

►► *For funders that have a clear social change orientation and a big-picture lens, a second layer of organization-strengthening work might be the right strategy. If they begin there, however, they must be sure that the first layer of grassroots grantmaking already exists within their community – either because they provide it directly or because another organization has been doing that work. Beginning at layer two without the ongoing foundational work of layer one will pose challenges such as:*

- *Hearing only from “the usual suspects” rather than a rich array of community groups and leaders;*
- *Difficulty connecting with new constituencies such as immigrant communities;*
- *Groups who quickly get in over their head, without the benefit of the learning that comes with smaller, project-oriented work.*

Some funders use grassroots grantmaking as a way to strengthen resident voice via strengthening the grassroots groups in the community. This interest is based on belief in the potential for groups of residents to take the front seat in setting priorities and designing workable solutions to problems that they identify as important for their community. In this work of building the second layer, useful funder practices include the following:

- Grants – while still supporting community projects - now come with different expectations. Projects are no longer ends in themselves, but rather “strength training” for the group as “learning by doing.”
- Technical assistance is now expanded with an organization-building focus – running good meetings, recruiting new members, bringing the group together around a shared vision, creating a budget and managing money, building power, leadership development.
- Foundational grassroots grants continue – if not by the funder of this second layer of activities, then by another in the community. Grantmakers who have laddered without ensuring the basic foundational support have continued to struggle to achieve success over the long-term.

## The Third Layer

►► *For those funders that have a clear social change orientation and are strongly committed to changing the power dynamic both inside and outside of their organization, the third layer – the most proactive grassroots grantmaking approach - might be the appropriate strategy.*

If project funding is the first layer and a natural starting point for funders that are new to grassroots grantmaking, and organization building is the second layer and a natural step in the grassroots grantmaking progression for funders with a big-picture social change orientation, then the third layer is the next and final step for funders interested in engaging with residents to advance their approach to social change.

Grassroots grantmaking at this layer puts the funder in a more proactive role – actively drawing on the new relationships and perspectives that the funder is gaining through its support of grassroots groups, and actively seeking opportunities to connect grassroots leaders and groups to tables where planning, prioritizing, policy setting and resource allocation are occurring. The funding organization (or another local funder) is still providing grants for projects and for organization building (layering, not laddering), but might now also provide support for issue-oriented community organizing or technical assistance that is more directly focused on helping a group establish the credibility and power base that it needs to fully participate in more substantive discussions. The funder is also utilizing relationships that have been established through grassroots grantmaking to bring new voices and perspectives to its own discussions – by adding grassroots leaders to grantmaking committees, or to the board of trustees, for example. The last layer requires a significant high-level organizational commitment from a funding organization – but with that commitment comes the promise of impact at multiple levels.

*The three layers of grassroots grantmaking that have been described can all be strategic. The prerequisite for strategic work is a clear intention about the capacity the funder seeks to help foster at the resident level, and a clear commitment to provide the resources necessary to foster that level of capacity. For funders that are new to grassroots grantmaking and who are working in places where there are few “teachers” who can guide them into the more complex relationships with grassroots groups, the first layer focus on community projects is an ideal way to begin.*



## The Strategy of Grassroots Grantmaking: Envision Layers, Not Ladders

Focus	Funder Tools
Layer 3	
Supporting citizen-centered change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecting groups to policy-level discussions</li> <li>• Building political will and muscle</li> <li>• Creating a shared vision and an action agenda</li> </ul>	Community Organizing Leadership Development Training Recognition/Celebration Deliberation Convening Technical Assistance Small Grants
Layer 2	
Building community capacity, strengthening resident voice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building organizational strength and resiliency</li> <li>• Identifying and nurturing community leaders</li> <li>• Strengthening horizontal and vertical connections</li> </ul>	Community Planning Leadership Development Training Recognition/Celebration Deliberation Convening Technical Assistance Small Grants
Layer 1	
Stimulating and supporting active citizenship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening social capital</li> <li>• Providing incentives for citizen-initiated action</li> <li>• Investing in people-powered projects</li> </ul>	Recognition/Celebration Convening Technical Assistance Coaching Small Grants

Institutional commitment

Resource requirements

## The Practice of Grassroots Grantmaking

While grassroots grantmaking is a more relational style of grantmaking, most of the components of the *practice* of grassroots grantmaking are similar to more traditional grantmaking. The development of successful grassroots funding relationships, however, usually requires a simpler grantmaking process, cultural competency and specialized technical assistance.

- *If you think about the traditional grantmaking process and then imagine that few if any of the organizations that you would like to apply have ever applied for or received funding, you can imagine what “tweaks” you would need to make.*

### Simpler and More Accessible Grantmaking Processes

Given the informal nature of the organizations you fund in grassroots grantmaking, changes in your grantmaking process may enhance your program.

- Very clear, straightforward proposal formats
- More pre-application assistance, such as fielding pre-application phone calls or visits
- A willingness to supplement information that is presented in the proposal with pre-award site visits or interviews
- More transparency about what happens, when and how decisions are made
- More post-award trouble-shooting assistance
- Flexibility regarding the grant period, with a willingness to grant extensions
- Sensitivity to the fact that grassroots groups are easily put off if they perceive that they are getting the runaround from the foundation
- Pre-application workshops that are held in a location such as a community center or a branch library – this can significantly increase both the number and quality of applications, and set the stage for the more engaged relationship between grantee and funder that is a characteristic of strong grassroots grantmaking programs.
- Site visits that are conducted with the understanding that while the proposal is important, it is not the point of the application process, which is to select the groups and projects that will derive the most benefit from your funding and that will help you meet your grassroots grantmaking goals.

Finding the groups that you want to fund can be an initial challenge. Because they are often working under the traditional “radar screen,” finding them is an on-going process that requires some creativity. Grassroots grantmaking is highly context-specific, so the best way to identify and connect with groups in your community may be different from another community. In essence, you need to find the source (or more probably, sources) of information about grassroots groups in your community, and begin there to build your own base of knowledge.

### Cultural Competency

- *Cultural competency is a prerequisite for any staff working with grassroots groups. The “right” staff member is someone who is equally comfortable in a church basement and a foundation boardroom, and can balance the “foot in both worlds” challenges associated with grassroots grantmaking.*

Grassroots grantmaking requires careful attention to the power dynamics in the funder-grantee relationship. Experienced funders have learned that they lead best by stepping back and creating the space, opportunity and support for people to come together to take active roles in creating the community that they want. It is this coming together of ordinary people with a common interest in improving their communities that is the focus of grassroots grantmaking.

It is critically important to remember that grassroots grantmaking is a relationship business, and as such it is highly dependent on having foundation staff with the right skills. Grassroots grantmaking program staff serve the dual roles of effectively facilitating the program in the community, and connecting knowledge from the program to the funding organization's big picture agenda. Their role is to help grassroots groups navigate the new and sometimes strange world of funders (and to build the capacity to manage the necessary reporting and accountability expectations that come along with funding without losing their active citizenship orientation), and, at the same time, to maintain the high-level organizational commitment that is essential for program success. This is no small job, but people with the skills and passion for the work exist in every community. Finding these people to staff your grassroots grantmaking program is essential. However, be careful not to "raid" the community of its best talent to work at your foundation!

### Thoughtful Technical Assistance

Whether grassroots grantmaking grantees thrive depends largely on the support they receive **in addition to money**. A grant to a grassroots group is not nearly as effective as a grant plus an active program of technical assistance. While grant funds provide wonderful "learning by doing" opportunities, healthy growth is enhanced by outside support. While technical assistance can be used in all three of the strategy layers, it is a stronger ingredient in layers two and three.

There are four principles that undergird thoughtful technical assistance for grassroots groups<sup>3</sup>.

#### Principle 1: Support People & Groups in Finding Their Own Way

The goal of community capacity building is to increase the community's ability to solve problems and create an excellent quality of life. The best way to foster a dynamic, self-renewing community is to help create opportunities for more people and groups to exercise and develop their creative, problem-solving, relationship-building powers. The primary strategy of capacity-building help, then, must be to help people invest more deeply in their own judgments and efforts, so that they can learn most effectively and acquire experience more rapidly. **Bringing your attention and presence, without directing or distracting: this is the essence of this first principle.**

Three practices are key to supporting grassroots grantmaking:

**Friendly listening** is the key way to live out this principle. When the goal is helping groups and leaders find their own way, listening may be the crucial form of help.

Friendly listening happens through informal phone calls and visits, dropping by to show interest, hear how things are going and express encouragement. It means returning calls promptly, and respecting

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<sup>3</sup> From **Helping Neighborhood Groups and Leaders Grow Stronger: Lessons from the Community Foundations and Neighborhoods Program, 1991-1995**, by David M. Scheie with Theatrice Williams, Steven E. Mayer and Tom Dewar. Rainbow Research. 1997.



invitations to attend celebrations and social events as seriously as invitations to speak or play official roles.

Friendly listening means *not getting in the way* of a group exercising its own problem-solving skills, and not getting in the way of a group taking responsibility for its own decisions and actions. Most of all, it means letting a grantee make mistakes, so long as what they propose to do is not actually illegal. Especially because of the power dynamic, it means scrupulously avoiding voicing judgments or telling people what to do. If asked to give an opinion or advice, one can respond; but always be explicit that it's the group's choice to act on this or not.

**Learning through experience.** Because people learn primarily by doing, assistance that is designed to facilitate leaders and groups learning through their own experience and staying the course even when things get tough will be most effective. The key is that the goals be locally generated.

Helping people and groups find their own way means not rushing to judgment on their decisions, and not pushing them to take on responsibilities they may not be interested in or ready for. Funders should be open to funding and assisting a broad range of projects and goals – whatever is identified through an authentic, broad-based group process as important and feasible.

**Patience** is critical to help groups and leaders get better at finding their own way. As outside observers, it can be difficult to be patient as groups pursue their own ideas and find out for themselves how well their choices work. This is why supportive relationships can be so helpful when they are long term, since this can make time and space for giving groups “a good let-alone.”



Growing stronger and smarter involves repeated cycles of theory, planning, practice and reflection. It's a process of getting a little better each time, cutting down the mistakes, increasing the skills. Affirming the importance of this process, and creating or protecting space for it is essential, as it is the first, most crucial kind of help.

## Principle 2: Stay in Touch to Capitalize on "Learning Moments"

Would-be assistance providers should ***stay in touch*** with the groups and leaders they help. They should become knowledgeable and stay up-to-date about the group's situation, its story, its culture and characters. Staying in touch means the would-be helper is *informed*, with an accurate understanding of the group and its circumstances. Staying in touch also means one is *accessible*; likely to be on hand when help is needed.

By being informed and accessible you will be positioned to be alert to "learning moments" – the developmental opportunities that arise in the course of a group doing its work and pursuing its agenda. Typical moments of greatest learning – and problem solving – include (a) when a group faces a crisis, (b) when a group is stuck in pursuit of a goal, (c) when a group is getting started on a new project or campaign, and (d) when people are moving into new roles. Help that comes at the right time is most efficient and has greatest impact.

Being with a group as it works through its difficulties and demonstrating usefulness at these times, builds trust between the funder and the group. Over time, as these critical passages accumulate and



trust increases, receptivity to new ideas will expand, as will the possibilities for addressing a group's deeper problems.

### **Principle 3: Build Long-term Relationships for Deeper Capacity Growth**

Experience has shown that like other organizations, grassroots groups rarely address their core problems right away. It often takes a year or more to get at and address core issues and motivations.

- People and groups rarely start out with an appetite to make changes in more deep-seated areas. They may not even be aware of their core dilemmas. They may think help is not available for these problems.
- Alternatively, group leaders may hesitate to make changes because they fear change will involve losing something precious (often a personal, private reward found in the problematic status quo). Or a group may feel it's too risky to reveal inner weaknesses.

Learning happens both incrementally and by breakthrough insights. Capacity-building strategies should draw on both styles. Groups often start out expressing interest in a specific problem, but this is seldom its primary problem. What becomes apparent however, as a group works through these self-identified problems, is that the group's ability to exercise power over the long-term really depends on how it addresses issues and develops deeper capacities.

A long-term relationship does not have to be intensely or continuously interactive. The point is to strive for some stability and continuity in who plays the “consultant role” (whether foundation staff or hired consultant) with specific grassroots groups, so that the group doesn't have to start and re-start the trust-building process with a series of well-intentioned but rotating advisers.

### **Principle 4: Focus on the Three Related Circles of Organizations, Individuals and Broader Networks**

The vitality of a community flows from dense networks of associations and relationships more than from the effectiveness of a single organization. It is important to recognize the fluidity and dynamic interplay among these three levels or circles of persons, organizations and broader coalitions and networks.

An organization's effectiveness depends on the skills and energies of the people involved, and on the broader networks and partnerships of which the organization is part. Paying attention to the broader web of relationships in which each group or leader is embedded will help those groups and leaders grow stronger. This is true for several reasons:

- An organization's relationships are key assets, a key source of power. This is what leverage is all about. A primary way in which grassroots groups achieve changes in their community is through calling in other organizations or individuals that can contribute to the situation.
- External relationships are key channels for information and inspiration. One of the easiest, most direct ways that grassroots groups and leaders learn and renew their motivation is through contact with peers.
- Connecting with other groups is empowering. Dialogue with others whose circumstances and values mirror one's own is the breeding ground for shared vision and joint action.

Finding others who will make common cause with you catalyzes greater courage and bolder strategies.

- ▶▶ *Institutions are generally more durable than individuals. A healthy institution can weather the temporary or permanent loss of individuals, so that the work moves forward even if certain individuals drop out or scale back their involvement. Since a grassroots group's effectiveness depends on active, effective individuals, however, failure to make sure that participation is meaningful and satisfying to individuals will mean loss of organizational capacity as individuals drop away.*
- ▶▶ *The premise of a focus on building individuals' capacity then, is that a group is only as strong and active as the people in it, and as individual leaders and members grow stronger, the organizations of which they're a part will become more capable.*



While organizational development strategy will inevitably be a human development or leadership development strategy, conversely, leadership development efforts must always be cognizant of the organizations and networks in which "leaders" are active. Individuals' effectiveness depends not only on their personal vision, skills and level of activity, but on their ability to mobilize and stay informed by and accountable to their community colleagues.



A common flaw of individual-oriented "leadership development" programs is that they tend to tear people out of their home context. Participants are pulled away from the original community relationships that were the basis of their knowledge, perspective, authority and influence. Excessive emphasis on individuals' vision, ambition and importance without commensurate attention to staying meaningfully embedded in their home relationships can cause local communication, support and accountability to wither – thereby eroding their capacity as spokespeople, problem-solvers and group-builders.

### Technical Assistance Models:

Designing the most effective technical assistance system begins with a close look at your local context:

- Is there an organization that currently provides technical assistance?
- Are there consultants in the area that have experience working with grassroots groups?
- Are the essential bases covered already, or are you starting from scratch?
- Does your grassroots grantmaking staffing design include staff that has the specialized experience needed to serve in a technical assistance capacity?
- Will staff have sufficient time to spend the face-time with grantee groups that is required for effective technical assistance?

Common approaches include:

- Managing technical assistance internally; the person who staffs the grantmaking process is also the primary technical assistance provider for the grantee groups.
- Contracting with an external organization to provide technical assistance to grantee groups.
- Identifying a pool of consultants or coaches to provide technical assistance to grantee groups.

- Providing access to an easily accessible technical assistance fund that grantee groups can tap into to contract for technical assistance directly.

It is important to think of technical assistance in terms of what groups need to be successful and grow stronger, not just what they need to develop fundable grant applications and comply with funding requirements. What emerging grassroots groups need to grow stronger might include:

What Do Emerging Grassroots Groups Need to Grow Stronger?				
A SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE	CONNECTIONS	SHORT-TERM PROBLEM-SOLVING HELP	LONGER-TERM CAPACITY BUILDING HELP	PATIENT MONEY
Characteristics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation</li> <li>• Recognition</li> <li>• Visible on ramps for newcomers</li> </ul>	Connections to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer organizations and leaders</li> <li>• More experienced groups</li> <li>• Policy makers</li> <li>• Resource providers</li> </ul>	Characteristics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific how-to help</li> <li>• On-demand help</li> <li>• Peers positioned as resources</li> </ul>	Help with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying long term goals</li> <li>• Charting a path from here to there</li> <li>• Accessing strengths and growth opportunities</li> <li>• Community planning</li> </ul>	Characteristics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible to grant-seeking novices</li> <li>• Not a sure thing, but consistently available</li> <li>• Offered with a spirit of welcoming</li> <li>• Grants for beginners as well as more experienced groups</li> </ul>



Climate



Connections



Short-Term Help



Longer-Term Capacity Building



Patient Money

**A Sample Planning Grid Showing Possible Delivery Mechanisms  
to Help Grassroots Groups Grow Stronger**

<b>A SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE</b>	<b>CONNECTIONS</b>	<b>SHORT-TERM PROBLEM-SOLVING HELP</b>	<b>LONGER-TERM CAPACITY BUILDING HELP</b>	<b>PATIENT MONEY</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share success stories with the local media and on your organization's website and social media vehicles</li> <li>• Regularly include grassroots leaders at planning, priority setting and decision making tables</li> <li>• Sponsor a recognition program for grassroots groups</li> <li>• Host and promote celebration events</li> <li>• Consider yourself and your mainstream institution as public champions for grassroots groups and leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produce and distribute a grassroots group directory</li> <li>• Support community councils or "groups of groups"</li> <li>• Connect groups via regular networking events</li> <li>• Produce who to call guides</li> <li>• Link groups together via social media and discussion lists</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for local leaders to attend regional and national trainings or conferences</li> <li>• Host Final Report Parties so funded groups can learn from each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate peer to peer problem solving by connecting groups and leaders through social media or more conventional tools such as a grassroots group directory</li> <li>• Provide accessible, on-demand 1-on-1 consultation</li> <li>• Organize how-to sessions for new groups and leaders</li> <li>• Host informal brown-bag opportunities with local experts</li> <li>• Host a local neighborhood conference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer leadership training for emerging and experienced grassroots leaders</li> <li>• Offer technical assistance that has a long-term lens</li> <li>• Offer and support community planning processes &amp; assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a small grants program that has an open door for new groups</li> <li>• Offer a step-up or tiered support option for more experienced groups</li> <li>• Provide a pool for technical assistance support than can be utilized outside of the regular grant process</li> <li>• Link groups to crowd-funding vehicles</li> </ul>

## Success Factors

The 2007 retrospective evaluation of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation's Community Foundations and Neighborhoods Small Grants Program focused on learning what happened to the small grant programs launched by the participating community foundations in the years since the Mott support ended, and on exploring how the practice of "grassroots grantmaking" has evolved. The evaluation examined programs that had remained vital and relevant over time, and those that had been discontinued or become stagnant. Of the 25 community foundations that participated in the Mott Foundation program, the majority are still engaged in grassroots grantmaking. Some of the participating community foundations cite this program as "changing their DNA."

What makes the difference between a program that remains vital and one that fades away? The retrospective assessment of the Mott Foundation program suggests that there are five factors that contribute to a grassroots grantmaking program's success and long-term viability:

### 1. Clearly Articulated Goals that are In Line with Available Resources:

- It is important that the funding organization has explicit expectations about what the program can accomplish and not be naïve about the role of residents as volunteers and what they can do. A key variable is whether or not the goals are realistic and in line with the scale of grants and other resources.

►► *For example, when a small number of grants are made once a year, an unrealistic goal would be long-term community change, while a goal of connecting with residents to increase the funding organization's visibility or to encourage active citizenship would be more reasonable. If on the other hand a significant number of grants are made in a defined geographic area, the grantees receive technical assistance at every stage of planning and implementation and are linked to a broad community development agenda; the goal of community change may be more feasible.*

### 2. A Lens that Sees Return on Investment Beyond the Impact of Individual Projects:

- For many long-standing grassroots grantmakers, their grassroots grantmaking program has value far beyond the community-level activities that it supports. It is valued as a critical connection to the community – a way for the funding organization to hear from and be more directly connected to everyday people, grassroots groups, and communities that are marginalized. For these foundations, the modest investment in a small grants program has increased their understanding of community needs and issues and enhanced the foundation's core philanthropic mission. For other funders, the expected return from small grants work included other benefits, such as complementing or enhancing other program investments or strengthening their capacity to exert institutional leadership on other civic issues.

### 3. Patient Money:

- Grassroots grantmaking is not something that can be done well in a short period of time. Funding that remains in place over the long term to help both established and new groups is a key factor for sustainability. Patient money on a consistent basis is important.

►► *Where grassroots grantmaking programs have remained viable over time, the level of funding has remained steady over time. In some cases, the funding has increased and the funding base has been broadened. Although the amount of funding that is typically directed to grassroots grantmaking programs is relatively modest compared to overall assets and other grantmaking programs, the fact that funding has remained in place over the long term is a key factor for sustainability.*

- A grassroots grantmaking program can be used as an opportunity to establish funding and program partnerships with governmental entities, other foundations and the business sector by aligning with the self-interests of these entities (e.g., the city's community planning process). A number of long-standing grassroots grantmaking programs that did not have funding partners at the beginning of the program have brought in partners to ensure that the program is sustainable, valuing and promoting the importance of patient money.

#### **4. High-Level Institutional Commitment to the Values of Grassroots Grantmaking:**

A key factor that contributes to the long-term viability of grassroots grantmaking programs is the foundation leadership's (Board, CEO and senior management staff) commitment to the values of diversity and resident engagement. The more durable programs (those that have sustained leadership and that effectively manage staff transitions) appear to be those where the program values are embedded in the organizational culture and where there are champions at every level of the organization. In many cases, grassroots grantmaking has become a platform or organizational strategy for many different program areas.

Grassroots grantmaking programs can be challenging to established policies and practices that have historically kept funding organizations at arm's length from the grassroots community. Change at this level has resulted in some profound shifts in the way that funding organizations see themselves and use their resources.

- A longer time frame - a relational style of grantmaking takes time and requires sufficient staff resources to achieve both the program and institutional goals.
- Commitment to support grassroots groups at every stage of their organizational development.
- Support by senior leadership for a planning and evaluation infrastructure that allows the grassroots grantmaking experience to inform and influence a range of foundation activities, including program grants and, for community foundations, donor development.

#### **5. Valuing Resident Voice and Influence:**

The final sustainability factor is one that extends the organizational commitment beyond resource allocation. It is the keystone for sustaining changed organizational behavior and is a prerequisite for going deeper and broader.

The funding organizations that institutionally value resident voice acknowledge that the grassroots grantmaking program is a means to change the power dynamics in a community. They recognize that the work of developing and supporting resident voice is not a one-time activity but an ongoing process that is never completed. These values become the DNA for how the organization does and approaches its work. Examples of how this organizational value may be expressed include:

- Delegating decision-making to residents.
- Equalizing voices at policy tables.
- Promoting resident voices in the broader community.

### Recommendations for Organizations New to Grassroots Grantmaking:

For foundations and other funders and organizations that are considering how to foster community engagement or who may be designing new programs that entail connecting with new constituencies, the recent retrospective assessment of the Mott Foundation program offered the following recommendations:

- ***Be clear about why you are considering a grassroots grantmaking program.*** Programs that have clear goals are more likely to be both sustainable and effective. Different situations suggest different goals and may lead to different program strategies. Goals and strategies should fit where you are on the continuum of grassroots grantmaking experience. For funders new to this approach, it is better to start out modestly and build relationships, and to take on more challenging goals and a more ambitious program strategy only when these are firmly in place.
- ***Understand the kinds of capacity needed to implement a program well.*** If your experience working with non-traditional grantees is limited, it may make sense to work with a mentor from another funding organization. It may also make sense to invite residents to help design the program to ensure the program aligns with the needs and capacities of the resident groups you would like to support. It is important that the sponsoring organization consider if the program staff and other resources available match a more relational style of grantmaking. The hands-on approach that is required is often a departure from traditional grantmaking, so a plan for doing it well needs to be part of the overall program design.
- ***Technical assistance and capacity-building need to be part of the core program.*** A well-designed program should include an array of different technical assistance supports that may change as the program evolves. Technical assistance often requires significant foundation staff time in addition to other financial resources.

## Additional Resources

### Books:

Jim Diers, *Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way* (2004, University of Washington Press)

Mike Green, *ABCD: When People Care Enough to Act* (2007, The Inclusion Press)

Frances Moore Lappe, *Getting a Grip: Clarity, Creativity and Courage in a World Gone Mad* (2007, Small Planet Media)

Alison Mathie and Gord Cunningham, *From Clients to Citizens: Communities Changing the Course of their Own Development* (2007, Practical Action)

John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (2012, Berrett-Koehler Publishers)

### Articles & Reports:

Tom Burns and Laura Downs for Grassroots Grantmakers, "A Legacy of Leadership and Support for Grassroots Grantmaking"

[www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org/2010/07/a-legacy-of-leadership-and-support-for-grassroots-grantmaking/](http://www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org/2010/07/a-legacy-of-leadership-and-support-for-grassroots-grantmaking/)

Cynthia Gibson, "Citizens at the Center: a New Approach to Civic Engagement"

[www.casefoundation.org/spotlight/civic\\_engagement/summary](http://www.casefoundation.org/spotlight/civic_engagement/summary)

Brianne Peters, Mengistu Gonsamo, and Samuel Molia, "Capturing Unpredictable and Intangible Change: Evaluation an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Approach in Ethiopia" (March 2011)

<http://coady.stfx.ca/tinroom/assets/file/OP10.pdf>

The Rose Foundation, *Lessons from the Grassroots* (2010),

[www.rosefdn.org/downloads/lessonsfromgrassroots.pdf](http://www.rosefdn.org/downloads/lessonsfromgrassroots.pdf)

Tim Saasta for Grassroots Grantmakers, "Building Resident Power & Capacity for Change"

[www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org/2011/07/building-resident-power-capacity-for-change/](http://www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org/2011/07/building-resident-power-capacity-for-change/)

Byron P. White, "Navigating the Power Dynamics Between Institutions and Their Communities"

[www.kettering.org/wp-content/uploads/Navigating\\_Power\\_Dynamics.pdf](http://www.kettering.org/wp-content/uploads/Navigating_Power_Dynamics.pdf)

### Blogs:

Big Thinking on Small Grants by Janis Foster Richardson

<http://janisfoster.blogspot.com>

### Website:

Grassroots Grantmakers

[www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org](http://www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org)



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**Grassroots Grantmakers**

Office: 361-798-1808

Email: [info@grassrootsgrantmakers.org](mailto:info@grassrootsgrantmakers.org)

Web: [www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org](http://www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org)

Twitter: GrassrootsGM

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