



COMMUNITY PROGRAM DESIGN PROCESS: A SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER INPUT

Prepared by Frontline Solutions for our client, the McKnight Foundation



April 3, 2020



ABOUT THIS REPORT

The McKnight Foundation commissioned this report to inform its program strategies and return learnings to the participants of the stakeholder engagement process that Frontline Solutions conducted. The research and opinions presented in this report are those of the participants interviewed or analysis by Frontline Solutions; they do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the McKnight Foundation. Readers should also be mindful that McKnight staff continue to develop the Vibrant & Equitable Communities program since the time period this report covers. The Foundation plans to announce program guidelines in the fall 2020 so please turn to mcknight.org then. Finally, please do not quote, cite, or distribute any of the findings of this report without the express and written permission of Frontline Solution and the McKnight Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

Frontline Solutions is a Black-owned national consulting firm that delivers a full range of services in strategy, program design and implementation, research, organizational development, and community engagement. We have worked deeply in diverse geographical areas, partnering with foundations, grassroots organizations, local governments, and nonprofits alike. In every engagement, our commitment and aim are to center the voices and genius of communities, specifically Indigenous people and people of color.

At the end of October 2019, the McKnight Foundation engaged Frontline as they launched a multifaceted and multilevel input-gathering process designed to shape and inform the Foundation's new Vibrant & Equitable Communities Program. The primary goal was to identify powerful and relevant strategies that could guide three initial exploratory focus areas: economic mobility, equitable development, and civic engagement. McKnight knew that in order to do this well they needed the wisdom and expertise of outside leaders, especially the community stakeholders with whom the Foundation will partner and who will be most impacted by the new program.

Using McKnight's history, [Strategic Framework](#), and staff expertise as critical frames of reference, several partners contributed to this effort through the following engagements:

- a full-day focus group conversation with 13 McKnight staff members
- a series of six listening breakfasts, organized and hosted by McKnight staff, with more than 80 community partners, impact investing partners, and philanthropic leaders

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- two gatherings, organized and hosted by Greater MSP, including one with 18 local CEOs
- one gathering, organized and hosted by the Headwaters Foundation for Justice, with a selection of HFJ partners
- three gatherings, organized and hosted by Voices for Racial Justice, with leaders in Greater Minnesota
- one gathering, organized and hosted by TerraLuna Collective, with a selection of McKnight's Education program grantees
- one-on-one interviews, conducted by Frontline Solutions, with 33 key local and national stakeholders
- discussions, organized and hosted by the Minnesota Initiative Foundations, with more than 200 nonprofit leaders, students, business leaders, artists, retirees and others from 11 distinct communities across Greater Minnesota
- conversations, organized and hosted by Tony Looking Elk, with 12 Indigenous leaders from diverse sectors in Minnesota
- a broadly accessible online questionnaire, designed and analyzed by the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, that yielded approximately 600 usable responses

In total, McKnight received input from more than 1,000 stakeholders, representing a diverse cross section of people, places, sectors, and organizations in Minnesota and beyond. Frontline compiled this input into six (6) separate reports. In an effort to return what the Foundation learned from these engagements back to the contributing people and communities, Frontline summarized the stakeholder input according to the following three themes:

1. A Better Understanding of How Power Is Viewed (analysis)
2. How McKnight Approaches Its Work (methodology)
3. Feedback on Focus Areas (implementation)

Important Note: McKnight is extremely grateful for and humbled by the willingness of so many fellow Minnesotans and national friends to participate in this process. The Foundation's approach to this comprehensive stakeholder engagement was to do more than simply check a box. Foundation staff and board recognize that they did not reach enough people with enough depth of engagement to say, "We spoke to Native leaders," or "This is

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what residents of Greater Minnesota think.” However, through this process, they received a profound offering of collective wisdom that influenced staff and board members in developing bold and courageous strategies. Ultimately, McKnight recognizes that deep and meaningful community engagement is critical to achieving the Foundation’s goals. This process was about moving in that direction, on the journey towards *a vibrant future for all Minnesotans*.

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW POWER IS VIEWED

Overview

Although McKnight did not directly ask stakeholders about power in the input-gathering process, they frequently used the word in their responses. Respondents consistently asserted that the thoughtful role of power is central to what McKnight aims to achieve.

Summary of Findings

- Participants consistently elevated that a shift in the existing Minnesota power structures is critical if McKnight is to accomplish its program goal to: *build a vibrant future for all Minnesotans with shared power, prosperity, and participation*. Prosperity and participation will be byproducts of shifts in power.
- Participants said it is imperative that McKnight recognizes, and reckons with, the fact that inequities in power are most often and most notably along racial lines.
- According to participants, McKnight must be proactive in leveraging its role, proximity, and resources to influence and advocate on behalf of Minnesotans who have not been equitably included in power, prosperity, and participation. This may require—at times—challenging the systems that have been complicit in maintaining these inequities (i.e. government, corporations, and philanthropy.)

HOW MCKNIGHT APPROACHES ITS WORK

Overview

After mapping and analyzing power relations, it is tempting to move straight into action. However, participants’ feedback focused as much on how McKnight approaches its work as on which issues or content-areas the Foundation funds.



Summary of Findings

- Centering POCL leadership and communities is about more than simply articulating values. In order to support and fund grassroots organizations—the organizations working closest to the issues—McKnight must explore new definitions of capacity, initiating shifts in internal practices, and cultivating a tolerance for creative tension.
- The technical aspects of grantmaking matter: grant review process, terms of grants, general operating funds, budget and proposal requirements, etc. As one focus group articulated, “Shifting to multi-year funding contracts would alleviate the burden funded community partners face and allow them to dedicate more time towards program-work. However, that strategy alone would be futile if not accompanied by efforts to reduce limitations on the use of funding, and increase access and transparency to the decision-making process.”
- According to participants, McKnight can use grantmaking to build the capacity of communities to absorb capital investments. Additionally, the Foundation should connect program strategy with impact investment strategy. Accomplishing its goals will require attracting and leveraging capital for investment beyond what is possible with grantmaking.

FEEDBACK ON FOCUS AREAS

Overview

In addition to providing insights about power and methodology, stakeholders also offered potential strategies for the new program’s focus areas, and their intersections with the arts and climate change. Below are some of the prominent themes that emerged.

It’s important to note that these are the focus areas that were publicly available at the time. Since this community input process took place, the Foundation has continued to refine these areas of work and how to articulate them, which they will share when the program guidelines are announced in the fall of 2020. Visit McKnight’s [Vibrant & Equitable Communities](#) webpage for the latest updates.



Summary of Findings

Economic Mobility

- As one interviewee remarked, any meaningful endeavor to create economic mobility must start by asking the question, “Why are people poor?” Two basic approaches to answering this question are to evaluate the opportunities people have to make money (living wage jobs and business ownership) and to examine the cost of essential goods and services (housing and childcare).
- According to participants, the Foundation could expand access to capital through Community Development Financial Institutions, micro-lending and other investments. It could also provide training and support throughout the business lifecycle (launching, growing, succession planning), mindful of the fact that immigrants face particular challenges, such as navigating language, cultural, and legal barriers (e.g., the naturalization process).
- Across urban and rural communities, youth are struggling to find work. In Greater Minnesota, specifically, the ability to retain the talent of the area is critical to a thriving economy. Young people are not only leaving for opportunities in metro areas, but also moving to neighboring states. Redefining educational and career success is imperative, as is expanding access to workforce development programs and apprenticeships.

Equitable Development

- According to participants, many white-led organizations lack knowledge on how to successfully employ DEI principles in their workplace. POCI leaders report that they experience tokenism when working in predominantly white spaces, especially in rural areas. When these organizations do not effectively operationalize equity, POCI leaders and organizations are tasked with conducting DEI training for those organizations, rather than devoting their time and energy to working on broader issues for their communities.
- Housing policy literature emphasizes increasing the ability of POCI folks to live in white or multiracial, multiethnic communities. Yet trends indicate that some white residents choose to leave as more POCI make these neighborhoods their home. If this trend continues, said participants, then the historic patterns of deflated equity



and underinvestment, along with their attendant quality of life outcomes, will not change.

- Some participants observed a perceived tension between Greater Minnesota and the urban metro areas. Often organizations from the bigger cities are paid to do community-building work in rural areas and smaller towns. This does not build capacity for Greater Minnesota. Attention and respect must be paid to the nuances (strengths, blind spots, resources) of working in each context.

Civic Engagement

- In order to create equitable systemic change, leaders and communities must build the knowledge, skills, and capacity to exercise their voices and power. Organizing helps neighbors know and understand each other's lives, which is critical to building common interests and a sense of shared humanity. As one interviewee remarked, "I have never been more optimistic about the movement that is building in Minnesota, and it is because of the depth of community power-building."
- Organizing is hard work that requires significant time and resources. Low-income residents often do not have the capacity to volunteer on boards and commissions. The Foundation can expand this capacity through stipends and leadership development programs and advocate for workplace civic participation benefits and initiatives. McKnight must also be willing to place bigger bets on POCI-led organizations, particularly those doing political and community organizing in communities of color, and encourage other foundations to do likewise.
- According to participants, the Foundation should consider facilitating a multiracial, multigender, multiclass space, aiming to build a shared understanding of the historical systems and structures, such as pervasive institutional racism, sexism, and concentrated power, that have influenced present day realities. While providing long-term, flexible funding for POCI-led community organizing work, McKnight could also build a coalition of institutions that can help make needed changes on a structural level. Partnerships are needed at the local, regional, and state levels of government, as they were during the 1980s farm crisis.



The Arts and Climate Change

- As public policy shifts towards advancing 100% renewable energy, new jobs and business opportunities will emerge. Because the climate change burden is heaviest for communities of color, McKnight should consider shaping its investments to build renewable infrastructure to benefit those communities. One bright spot is Shiloh Temple in North Minneapolis, which constructed a large solar garden on its roof. Black workers installed it, and Black families and individuals benefit from it. The church lowered its energy costs while providing jobs and instilling pride in the neighborhood.
- Participants identified the changing landscape of journalism as an opportunity for artists to powerfully share the problems communities face, and how to resolve them. For example, the variability of media narratives is one reason it is difficult to address climate change, particularly in Greater Minnesota. Rural leaders could consider articulating more directly the aspects of life impacted by changes in climate (e.g., water quality, recreation, pollinators, prairies, etc.). It would be useful to train artists in digital media and climate change so their work can better integrate science and facilitate deeper dialogue.

CONCLUSION

Frontline Solutions' observation of the McKnight Foundation's community stakeholder input-gathering process illuminated two things of note:

- McKnight engaged in a healthy struggle to be efficient and expedient while also taking the time to connect with, listen to, and engage Minnesotan communities across an array of platforms and geographies. The Foundation's timetable created both a sense of urgency and a functional limitation. McKnight could not engage everyone, yet at every phase, the Foundation was energized and motivated to intentionally gather input from a wide variety of community stakeholders. This included a further round of engagement in March with grantees and partners that informed how McKnight developed its new program guidelines.
- McKnight staff and board members embraced the hard work of equitable engagement. The result is that stakeholder input added valuable perspective to the Foundation's ability to design a new program. In the process, McKnight reflected on

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its understanding of power and approach to philanthropy so that it can make the impact it seeks. This is critical personal and institutional work, and McKnight continues to show up for it.

This process was a commendable step for the McKnight Foundation, and it is just the beginning of a new phase in their journey. As the Foundation continues to learn and to center the perspectives of its diverse set of community stakeholders, the possibilities for social change and impact will become increasingly expansive. McKnight's emerging posture and approach will result in more than just a new set of program strategies that the community helped inform. Rather, this process (and hopefully others to follow) demonstrates one part of the Foundation's role in renegotiating the interplay between community power and institutional power. This is the work required to shift systems, the work required to realize *a vibrant future for all Minnesotans with shared power, prosperity, and participation.*

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