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# Strengthening Social Connection and Opportunities in Rural Communities

Views from the Field (<https://www.gih.org/category/views-from-the-field/>)

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This brief describes an unfolding learning journey intended to strengthen social connection, resident voice, and agency to address inequities in rural health and well-being. Along the way, we have come to realize the important lessons for each of our institutions and ways in which we are better off for having taken this approach to our work.

At St. David's Foundation, we believe that realizing health equity to minimize the consequences of poverty and racism reflected in the social determinants of health is foundational in our work in Central Texas. Rural communities are dramatically under-represented in philanthropic investments nationwide and in Texas, and the Foundation's own balance of investments skews toward initiatives that serve urban populations. When philanthropic dollars are invested in rural communities, they are typically directed to the few established nonprofits and local government entities that implement programs or provide services to residents. Community members, especially people experiencing vulnerability and isolation, are rarely asked what they need to improve their health and quality of life and how they may utilize the power inherent in their communities to contribute to those improvements. The most common observation from the philanthropic sector is that "these residents" are rarely poised to receive and control funds to work on the issues they believe are most important for the health and well-being of their own community. Listening and enabling capacity can change that.

## Listening to our Rural Neighbors

After a sustained period of building deeper ties and stronger relationships in our rural communities surrounding Austin and Travis County, the Foundation learned that many of our rural neighbors felt disconnected from and ignored by the Foundation and local decisionmakers in their communities who decide how resources are prioritized and distributed to address

community needs. Residents from the surrounding rural counties of Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, and eastern Williamson County expressed an interest in working with the Foundation and their peers on priority concerns including youth, mental health and substance use and misuse, food insecurity, and affordable housing.

## Community Capacity Building and Enabling as Rural Strategy

In partnership with The Strategy Group (TSG), a national consulting firm with expertise in catalyzing resident-led community networks focused on health and well-being, the Foundation invested in community capacity building (CCB) strategies to engage interested residents in working collaboratively on issues of importance to community members and enable their inherent power to participate in problem solving.

Informed by residents, the Foundation and TSG co-designed an approach that incorporated key community capacity building outcomes so that residents could develop their own solutions to pressing self-identified community health concerns. TSG also offered a process for the Foundation to build its own capacity to invest differently in rural communities— an approach that invested in network infrastructure, resident leadership development, nonprofit leadership to partner with and support community networks, and connected people experiencing vulnerability and lack of connection to opportunities for community development.

The Foundation's **rural strategy** (<https://stdavidsfoundation.org/grantmaking/strategic-priorities/thriving-rural-communities/>) centered social impact networks (Plastrik et al 2014), network weaving (Holley 2012), and sustained community engagement to create an expanding, diverse, inclusive resident-led network focused on health and wellbeing inequities often reinforced by historical and structural legacies of exclusion and privilege. Stuart (2014) notes, "this is one of those cases where a commitment to social justice is crucial. It is important to consider who is included in the "community" that is leading the process. Who is excluded from community leadership? Whose voices are missing from community debate? Whose interests are being served?"

And if the community is driving decisions about their own development, what does that mean for how the Foundation should be investing in community?

## Centering Equity and Equitable Opportunity

As St. David's Foundation has embraced and prioritized health equity, rural investments evolved to become more place-based and community-focused. How the Foundation showed up in the community (and how frequently), how grant opportunities were presented, and how funds were distributed when CCB was the overarching purpose changed the nature of the relationship between funder and community. In our rural work, the Foundation recognized that a portion of our rural investment needed to give the community control over decisions and resources to determine what resources were needed to spur or make lasting change.

## Bringing it all Together in Central Texas

The community network approach in Central Texas prioritizes:

1. Centering the voices and lived experiences of rural BIPOC residents (equitable opportunity);
2. Seeding a network of interested resident leaders who have a deep understanding of their and their neighbors' needs to direct their own community development work; creating new relationships; and offering new ways of working, thinking and leading in community; (i.e., social impact networks);
3. Engaging and supporting local residents to organize themselves to work on projects that move the community from talking about problems to taking action on problems (i.e., self-organizing);
4. Supporting residents who want to develop the leadership skills to engage other residents to work together in a resident-led network focused on health and wellbeing (i.e., network weavers); and

5. Putting a pool of resources into the hands of those who have the lived experiences of health inequity, poverty, social isolation; are closest to community problems; and who want to work with their peers to improve community health and wellbeing from a solidarity stance.

## What are Networks and Network Weavers?

Social impact networks (like the ones emerging in Central Texas) are constellations of people, organizations, and communities connected by a shared purpose to make change. In the Central Texas network, there is a high-level purpose to improve the health and wellbeing of residents in the region.

**Network weavers** (<https://learning.stdavidsfoundation.org/insight/catalyzing-community-transformation-in-bastrop-county-network-weaving/>) are residents in the Foundation's rural service area who have chosen to be a leader in the network; they are the "engines" of our regional network. Weavers strategically connect other residents, convene groups of interested residents, coordinate small projects aligned with resident interests and needs, and work to grow the network and the projects the network is interested in pursuing. Holley (2012) describes a network weaver as "someone who is aware of the networks around them and explicitly works to make them healthier. Network weavers do this by helping people identify their interests and challenges, connecting people strategically where there's potential for mutual benefit, and serving as a catalyst for self-organizing groups."

The Foundation provides operating support for TSG as well as funds to support network infrastructure (e.g., communications, evaluation, training, storytelling), stipends for weaver leaders, and shared gifting circles. To date, over 100 residents have been trained to be network weavers in Central Texas.

## Building Community Leadership

The Foundation's investment in community capacity building by catalyzing resident-led networks and training residents to become network weavers is designed to engage and support residents to contribute their time and talents (i.e., community leadership) to solve pressing self-determined health and wellbeing challenges in their own communities. Residents also participate in monthly peer assist sessions which enable real-time feedback and advice from peers as they practice their leadership skills.

## Participatory Grantmaking

Using participatory grantmaking processes and resources, network weavers are supported to identify local problems and then work collaboratively with other residents to co-design and test solutions. **Shared gifting**

(<https://learning.stdavidsfoundation.org/insight/rural-residents-as-grantmakers-experimenting-with-shared-gifting/>) emerged as an important participatory grantmaking tool to support weavers during the second year of project implementation. We asked ourselves: "*how can a small pool of grant funds be used to foster connection across different communities and authentic collaboration, rather than competition?*" Shared gifting allows residents to decide what the most urgent community needs are, rather than the Foundation, and then to grant dollars to community projects they wish to support. There are no required outcomes of the process other than what is determined by the participants during the shared gifting process.

From participant reports of the shared gifting process, we were excited to learn that a shift in control of grant funds from the Foundation to the group of network weavers (residents) created an environment of social connection, equity, encouragement and support, feelings of abundance, and community. The typical grantmaking experience of competition and scarcity often experienced by potential grantees when responding to competitive grant opportunities was not reported by participants. Instead, weavers were excited to make new connections with other weavers, hear about new projects happening in their community, extend offers of time, talent, and treasure to other weavers, and expressed pride to be able to support those projects with the resources they controlled.

## Conclusion

Residents who have participated in network weaving and participatory grantmaking have shared a common experience of personal and professional transformation, social connection, empowerment, and awareness of new possibilities and promise for their communities. The Foundation's experience of investing in rural communities and its people by creating opportunities for resident decision making about how resources should be directed to pressing issues in their communities has revealed new possibilities for grantmaking and use of our social capital to advance the health and wellbeing of rural residents in Central Texas. Further, the experience with weavers as grantmakers underscores the importance and urgency of integrating community voice consistently in the Foundation's equity-driven journey.

## Voices and Learnings

Network weavers were invited to share their thoughts on how weaving has influenced their personal and professional lives. The themes found in their comments were that network weaving:

- Offers both professional and personal value to persons.
- Provides a framework that is valuable to tackle complex community issues.
- Facilitates making connections that create change in the community.
- Allows the use of shared gifting as a unique learning, connecting, and growing experience.
- Fosters among network weavers a desire to build new skills and capacities to continue to strengthen their work within their own communities.
- Encourages persons who had existing networks to make those networks more effective, efficient, and stronger by implementing what they learned in the Network Weaving learning opportunity.



*"Weaving has tremendous value as it has empowered me to create with others outside of my usual network, helping to expand my reach and capacity to support others."*

*"Throughout the past few years, in a mid-COVID society, Network Weaving has proven to be a skill set and collective necessity to maintain community collaboration. As work-life has evolved and more individuals experience isolation, Network Weaving has made the ability to connect (in-person or virtual) a go-to process for me in my personal and work life."*

**Krystal Grimes**, 2019, Shared Gifting Grantee/Grantmaker

*"Ultimately, all of us have the same end goal of building a better community. We all are here for the same reason; we're all doing this work because we have a passion for community building. And network weaving has really given us that opportunity."*

*"It has given me a really clear framework for what I'm doing. It's not something that lives in my brain. Now, it's an actual process and an actual framework that I can utilize to share information."*

**Elizabeth Marzec**, 2021, Organizational Leader, Shared Gifting Grantee/Grantmaker





*“Helping the community that you live in, helps you, it helps your children and helps your grandchildren. So, I think that is the point in the future that weaving really impacts.”*

**Linda Quiroz**, Shared Gifting Grantee/Grantmaker

*“Bringing leaders together, making community change, and having people who never thought of themselves as a leader know that they can all make a difference. I love that.”*

**Kathleen Moore**, 2019, Shared Gifting Grantee/Grantmaker



*“Prior to network weaving, I had no idea how to get this passion, this idea realized . . . I’m trying to be involved in the community. But I needed direction. I needed ideas, I needed strategies. And so, when I was invited [to learn about network weaving], it gave me what really felt like a breath of fresh air, because I’m going to be around peers that can help me along the way. And then also for me to help others.”*

**Sonya Hosey**, 2021, Shared Gifting Grantee/Grantmaker

*“I think about the word power. And that power is shared. It doesn’t belong to one person or group . . . and I love that about network weaving;”*

*“I have watched the whole design of network weaving just open this road for people to speak and share and dream, and nothing is impossible”*

**Maureen Stanek**, 2019, Shared Gifting Grantee/Grantmaker



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