

Case Study

Foundation for the Mid South

BY CYNTHIA M. GIBSON

For more than two decades, the Foundation for the Mid South (FMS) has focused on improving the quality of life for communities in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Its core “recipe” for creating healthy, vibrant communities is fivefold: education to produce a prepared workforce; community enrichment (e.g., parks, housing, environment, etc.); leadership to help residents create change; economic development; and health care access.

In 2002, the foundation decided to focus on place-based community development efforts in Leflore County, Mississippi, and St. Francis County, Arkansas. Known as Communities of Opportunity (COO), the initiative did not pick up steam until 2006, when Ivey Allen became the foundation’s new president. With a strong background in and commitment to community development, Allen jumped feet first into her new position by conducting a comprehensive assessment of the region and the COO initiative. That assessment revealed the COO’s initial goal of strengthening the targeted communities’ health, education, and economic self-sufficiency—while important—was not being paired with equally strong efforts to sustain this work over time. Allen believed the best way to achieve that goal was to build the capacity of residents to use local skills and knowledge to form and implement solutions that would help the community develop and achieve its own vision.

That led to the foundation modifying its focus to include building the capacity of organizations and individuals to be leaders of change within their own communities. Specifically, Allen wanted to use the foundation’s experience to create a model by which Mid South communities could engage their residents, develop a shared vision among stakeholders, and build the capacity of leaders and organizations to develop solutions that enable communities to grow and prosper. This strategy “makes sense,” she notes, “when you have limited funds to cover three states. For fifteen years, we’d been supporting some nonprofits that were still fledgling, despite

ongoing investments. That made us realize that we were never going to be as effective as we could [be] unless we helped them develop their capacity and connections to build the region themselves.”

Talking about the strategy change was one thing; doing it was something else and not without its challenges, particularly in a rural area that had experienced more than its share of poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. Although the resident engagement process had begun before Allen came on board, there hadn’t been much movement. “People were annoyed because they’d been meeting for two or three years, and nothing was happening. They were just meeting and eating.” Allen stepped back to assess the situation, especially trying to identify residents able to transcend the divisions that were keeping people from working collaboratively. Chief among those was race. “There was a lot of suspicion and hostility,” Allen says, “because for so long, people of color weren’t ever asked to be at the table.”

People also weren’t being asked to commit to something concrete, leaving the fledgling group of committed residents adrift. To reinvigorate the process, foundation staff worked with these residents to establish several small committees that would help bring other community members to the table—all with the goal of drafting a comprehensive strategic plan for the community. The foundation provided funds for facilitators to help move the process toward its goal of devising this plan and added new staff to help manage and serve as the glue for the moving parts.

For more than a year, the ever-growing group of residents brainstormed the question of which issues were priorities and feasible to tackle. At first, people were somewhat skeptical. “A lot of folks looked at this with jaundiced eyes,” Allen remembers, “like, ‘yeah, sure, you’re going to do something.’” There were also thorny racial issues, with some whites expressing their concerns about the plan, which was perceived by some as code for “we don’t want certain people at the table.” At the same time, some

blacks were circumspect about participating in a process that could end up like so many other similar efforts: with “whites telling blacks what to do and how to do it.”

There were also challenges in getting consensus. Rather than get mired in these disagreements, however, the group agreed to acknowledge them and quickly move on to areas where there was agreement. This consensus-driven process resulted in a document outlining a key set of issues the group agreed were important—some big scale, some more modest in scope—and that served as the backbone of the community plan.

With this draft in hand, the group announced that it would be holding a meeting at the local civic center and would invite the entire community to provide feedback. In the meantime, the FMS staff and board, including Allen, had been taking deliberate steps to “work their connections” with a wide range of residents and institutions, including city council members, school administrators, nonprofit staff people, and business leaders, to make sure there was a range of diverse perspectives at the meeting. “We had to be really intentional about getting people there who wouldn’t normally have been there and who represented all parts of the community and not just ‘token’ representation,” Allen says. “That included whites with power and blacks who felt that they didn’t have any power at that time. We had to convince all factions of the benefit of having a cross-section of voices there.” Having a staff person dedicated to the process was instrumental in engaging a diverse swath of the population. “She was the face of this work,” Allen observes, “and provided some consistency, which people appreciated.”

The strategy paid off, with hundreds of people weighing in on the plan. Although many were still somewhat skeptical, there was a general sense that if they wanted to see something happen, they had to be a part of it. So, why not give it a try? The final plan was adopted four months later. Its purpose: to collectively identify the strategic goals of all community, economic, civic, and educational organizations and promote implementation of a comprehensive plan that would improve the quality of life for Leflore County citizens in a way that reflected the entire community.

This plan became the blueprint for work in four priority areas that emerged from the community engagement process: economic development, education improvement/reform, health and wellness, and community and leadership development. Each focus had a number of strategic and measurable goals, which, in turn, were accompanied by several action steps the group agreed to pursue. In addition to capitalizing on residents’ assets and strengths, the plan included a commitment to secure and coordinate resources from federal, state, and municipal organizations; foundations; economic development agencies; legislators; and local businesses. It also became the road map for work in Leflore County for the next six years.

Recognizing the need to assuage people’s skepticism about whether this process would lead to anything concrete, foundation staff members, along with the committees, decided to kick-start the implementation process by identifying immediate goals that could achieve quick wins. One that had broad support was establishing a community health center. This effort already had a head start because of the planning committee’s success in establishing a collaborative relationship with the local hospital, which had long wanted to build a similar facility. FMS helped to convene a series of meetings for discussions among residents, hospital representatives, and other key partners that eventually led to the collaborative securing roughly \$1.6 million for a community health center. This kind of early win, says Allen, “helped people want to continue working together as a community.”

Results

Early wins also ignited momentum behind the community’s efforts to implement the rest of the plan, which has since produced demonstrable, measurable results. One of the most significant is the community’s ability to leverage public sector resources for its economic and community development goals, such as improving downtown spaces and bringing new businesses downtown.

A particularly impressive accomplishment was the community’s efforts to upgrade its water and sewage systems, which had fallen into serious disrepair. Lacking the considerable financial resources needed

to achieve that goal, the committee working on this part of the plan partnered with FMS to brainstorm about possible financing streams, including public grant-making agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency. To help the group make a strong case with public funders, the foundation provided \$90,000 for a feasibility for the upgrades as well as for a grant writer to turn those data into a proposal. The result: The region eventually was able to secure almost \$30 million for the project, including \$19 million in state and federal funds—a return of 333 percent on the foundation’s relatively modest investment.

Similarly, the foundation provided \$30,000 for proposal writers to help secure federal dollars for nurse-family partnership programs. That investment led to more than \$30 million flowing to the region for these kinds of partnerships, which have helped to improve children’s health outcomes.

Other community achievements included:

- Supporting teacher and administrator capacity building, which, in just two years, has helped Leflore County schools move from being “at risk of failing” to “academic watch.”
- Assisting the district in securing a \$5 million school improvement grant for its struggling high school.
- Creating a countywide marketing plan to new businesses, a plan that was successful in attracting several new businesses to the downtown corridor.
- Using a \$250,000 investment to leverage nearly \$2 million that helped build twenty-one new housing units in Itta Benna, Mississippi—an effort that was recognized by the governor as “the best community development organization.”
- Reopening Itta Benna’s public library—which had been closed due to a lack of funds—and expanding its services to include free Internet access and a community meeting space.
- Renovating five of the nine county parks and ongoing efforts to improve the remaining four.
- Establishing a community garden that expanded access to fresh foods, a walking track on donated land, and a new health clinic that provides health care to low-income families.

But the results weren’t limited to the community. The foundation found that through the community engagement process, it was able to enhance the leadership capacity of residents to continue these efforts on their own, well into the future. Specifically, FMS supported training for more than one hundred residents in leadership skills; partnered with local business leaders to provide leadership and career training to hundreds of high school students; and held workshops for nonprofit and community leaders focused on strengthening their organizations’ management, financial, human resources, and fundraising systems.

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Roles

FMS wore a number of hats, depending on the circumstances, says Allen. “We worked hard at working with nonprofits, public officials, business leaders—whoever would be the most effective at doing this work and be the hub—to move it. We made grants, leveraged resources (especially outside funding), brought in facilitators for public meetings, convened meetings, and supported research and data that informed community development efforts and ultimately leveraged millions of dollars.” FMS also provided grants for specific projects, such as the school district’s launch of a comprehensive school improvement and professional development program. Another grant went to Main Street Greenwood (in Mississippi), which provided financial assistance to local businesses for downtown facade improvements.

Staying Power

FMS has begun to implement an exit strategy for this work by letting the community know that it plans to “be out” sometime in the next few years. Allen admits that while she can’t predict the future, she’s fairly confident that “people will continue to

identify the things they want to work on, based on the friendships made through this process, which we had nothing to do with.” As proof, she points to a core group of residents that continues to meet on a weekly basis to ensure the plan is on track.

Allen thinks that these are auspicious indicators of staying power—something that wasn’t driven by money from FMS. “Our work was helping communities leverage state and federal dollars and putting this work on the radar of elected officials who draw down this money. Now that people know how the system works, they can do it themselves.” She points to calls or e-mails she gets from local residents saying, “I wrote a proposal for our project, and we got money from a foundation!” The ability to leverage resources has also prompted local government to support the community’s economic development activities in a more consistent way.

If she had to do it all over again, Allen says that she would ensure that there was a diversity of voices at the table. She’d also tap folks with a sensitivity to and experience with small-town and rural development as well as make sure that there was sufficient local leadership and ownership of the process from the start. “It’s important to have the right voices at the table initially. It’s also important to incorporate a greater understanding of the leveraging and partnering with other organizations as well as grant-writing and communications skills.”

Lessons Learned

Boards have to be encouraged to see the big picture. Allen notes that it’s “often hard to get folks on foundation boards who can move beyond zeroing in on really narrow causes or feeling like this kind of comprehensive community engagement isn’t appropriate for them. ‘That’s what the Chamber of Commerce is for!’ is something I heard often. Or that our real purpose was increasing assets.”

To change these mind-sets, Allen advises community foundation staff members to start slow: pick one community and test the community engagement approach over a certain time period. It’s also helpful to remind board members that the community foundation is often viewed as a nonpartisan player and, as such, can play an important role in helping

to bring people together toward community transformation. Executive directors can work with board members to recruit potential candidates who represent a cross-section of the community, especially people who are “community driven.”

Not all board members will jump on the bandwagon. People will leave, Allen says, and that may lead to a loss of some financial resources, but “over time, those same people will start reading about things that are happening, and they’ll start seeing how the community foundation’s resources are actually being used in ways that have longer-term impact.”

This work is not easy and takes patience and time. There is no question, Allen says, that community engagement work is painstaking, slow, and frustrating at times, especially in communities with a history of racial division. People have to learn to trust each other, and that doesn’t happen overnight. “You have to help people really hear other people’s perspectives—and give them the space and time to be heard. You have to be able to help people respect various points of view.” Also important is recognizing where your individual and institutional strengths, as well as biases, lie.

... but it should be time limited. FMS has been undertaking this kind of work for a decade, but at some point, it has to pull out, Allen says, because the community eventually “has to continue this work without funders driving it. That doesn’t mean you can’t still participate in community meetings or check in from time to time. You have to know when to exit but not let it drop. Make sure people own this and carry it through.”

You’re working with the community. Achieving comprehensive community change, Allen states, requires funders to be there for the long haul but in a way that conveys they’re working with the community rather than directing it. The community has to take the lead and own it. Also, Allen notes, “you have to back off. You need to recognize that the community foundation is a silent voice, but that you’re still there to help make sure the process doesn’t spiral out of control and to continually ask people how you can help them achieve their goals—without telling them what to do.”

Statistics

Dollars spent in providing community engagement-related grants: Approximately \$4 million. This is a “very rough” estimate, Allen says, because a number of contracts issued were in the early stages of the operating support work.

Dollars spent by FMS in contracts: Approximately \$2.7 million.

Approximate staff time spent by FMS employees at its height: Four full-time employees (eventually down to two full-time employees).

Approximate number of people who participated in the process during its tenure: About 500.

How this work affected FMS’s internal operations: It contributed to clarifying its programming and community engagement but had “no real internal operations impact.”

How this work affected FMS’s decision making about its grants and/or the grants of other community organizations: The major requirement was to give support to the organizations that fit the strategic plan for the community.

Hire staff that understand their role to be facilitative rather than directive. “All of my staff,” Allen says, “are facilitators. They are able to go into communities with a mind-set of helping, rather than telling folks what to do or how to do it.” That doesn’t mean assuming that residents will have all the skills required to devise and implement a comprehensive community development plan. “Staff need to be conscious that most people want to ‘do well’ but they may not have the skills or capacities right away. So,

we can help identify where there are capacity gaps and help fill them, for example, like providing leadership development opportunities or trainings for nonprofit directors.”

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