

Community Foundation Leadership in Action Stories

Making Sure Every Person Counts in Berks County

Among the Berks County Community Foundation's many policy initiatives, one relatively modest effort is notable for its dramatic return on investment. It started with an observation that the community lacked a Starbucks. It was 1999 and Starbucks was well on its steady march across the US landscape – already the object of civic envy. Staff wondered if the community might be missing out in other, more significant ways. Corporations base their investments on data. Public spending and projects are based on good data too. Was the problem with the numbers. The foundation was determined that the region have an accurate picture of itself to present to the world. With the United States 2000 Census just around the corner, it saw an opportunity for the community foundation to step in to make that picture as complete as possible.

The stakes were high for the Reading, PA, area. The community was changing and in need of an economic lift. With more than 200 years of history, it had survived boom and bust, including recent job losses and business downturns. Descendants of English and German immigrants had been joined during the decade of the 90s by a wave of Latino, largely Puerto Rican, immigrants.

Foundation staff knew that few shared their fascination with statistics and conceded that the census was the driest of topics. They needed to convince others that every person counted – that this snapshot of the community's make-up would guide where new fire departments, schools and senior centers would be built, how people would be represented in Congress, and even where coffee shops would be located. A concerted effort was needed to convince people to participate in the census.

The foundation capitalized on its wide-range of contacts, big table for people to gather around, and grant money to put on that table. It invited community members, including advocates from the Latino community, public officials, the United Way and labor unions, to the table to talk and brainstorm. The census has been known for under-counting the people it most needed to reach. Some residents are unable to read the English-language questionnaire and many view it with suspicion and fear. In changing

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about the Framework for
Community Leadership by
a Community Foundation
and the building blocks
illustrated in this story,
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communities, many people are simply missed. The group decided what was needed was a team on the streets to help people fill out their census forms and, with a \$10,000 grant from the community foundation, they did just that.

The effort succeeded. Official results accurately reflected both the growth and change in the city's and county's populations. In the most striking shift, the community's Latino population doubled during the 90s, growing to more than one-third of the city's population.

The pay-off was immediate and significant. Equipped with a more complete snapshot of the population's age, income, occupation and other characteristics, local officials were able to attract an extra \$12 million in federal aid. Even more far-reaching, the results were central in protecting civil rights when local census data were cited in a federal complaint demanding the end to voting discrimination against people of Puerto Rican descent in Berks County.

Residents can now choose from among several Starbucks to sit and ponder the good things coming to Reading because a group of people cared that it was worth the effort to make sure every person counts.