

CASE STUDY: GREATER HOUSTON COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Moving from donor leadership to more synergy

1. What is important about your foundation's history, mission, and community context that should inform your conversation around foundation and donor leadership?

The Greater Houston Community Foundation (GHCF) is twenty years old and has been traditionally very donor focused without any discretionary funds. GHCF has attracted very high net worth donors from the Houston area by offering outstanding customer service and efficient grantmaking. Houston donors expect to exercise strong control over their giving as evidenced by the hundreds of local private foundations. We also have a thriving local philanthropic sector with a strong United Way and a Rice University Center dedicated to nonprofit leadership.

In 2011, GHCF began efforts to build a philanthropic services team to help donors expand their philanthropic impact and leverage their giving through collaborative giving efforts. Over the past five years we have expanded our community leadership efforts by providing the Next Gen Donor Institute, expanded donor programming and knowledge resources, support of giving circles, and donor convenings. We also now offer philanthropic advising and consulting services to help companies and foundations develop effective philanthropic programs, leading to better results for our community. GHCF has been growing very rapidly and has just launched a Center for Family Philanthropy. As GHCF donor-focused leadership efforts have gained traction, we have now convened a Philanthropic Leadership Task Force to consider expanded leadership roles for GHCF and to create an action plan that we can take into strategic planning.

2. Why are synergies between foundation and donor leadership important to your foundation, and what do you hope to accomplish?

Synergies are critical to our foundation as we continue to focus on our donors' passions while ensuring that our foundation plays a leadership role in Houston. We believe that GHCF has an obligation to educate donors about community needs and about effective philanthropy. When we can align our donors' interests with these needs in effective strategies, the whole community will benefit. Our board has never embraced the idea of building an unrestricted endowment, so our efforts at foundation leadership need to be supported by the leadership and interest of our donors and other community stakeholders. We have already seen this happen through our early attempts at synergy.

Thank you to the Convening Planning Committee:

We are still developing goals with feedback from the Philanthropic Leadership Task Force. We know that we want to grow our role as a convener and partner to our donors so that together we can make a larger impact on the issues that need to be addressed in our community. We believe that there are ways we can work together with our vibrant group of donors to amplify their impact and use the GHCF platform to its greatest effect for the community. We have already seen this happen through our early attempts at synergy. We are still developing goals with feedback from the Philanthropic Leadership Task Force. We know that we want to grow our role as a convener and partner to our donors so that together we can make a larger impact on the issues that need to be addressed in our community. We believe that there are ways we can work together with our vibrant group of donors to amplify their impact and use the GHCF platform to its greatest effect for the community.

3. What are your foundation's current approaches and strategies towards reaching synergy between foundation and donor leadership?

GHCF has two Community Impact Funds (CIF) that create opportunities for GHCF donors and other local funders to learn together, pool their giving in support of strategic efforts around a chosen giving area, achieve better grantmaking results, and leverage additional resources. The two CIFs include:

- GHCF Strategic Education Fund (SEF) with 20 donors – established in 2011
- The Youth Homelessness Fund (GHFEH) with 15 donors – established in 2013

GHCF provides professional program and administrative staff to convene the group, do research, administer the grantmaking, and facilitate meetings. The financial model is one of shared ownership, where the participating donors pay two-thirds of the cost and GHCF pays one-third. The Strategic Education Fund had a three-year participation and funding cycle which has now ended, and we are working with a group of donors to decide whether there will be a second phase. The Youth Homelessness Fund has made an impactful grant and is in the midst of an RFP process now.

GHCF also began a donor working group against human trafficking in 2014 in partnership with a major donor of the foundation. The Anti-Human Trafficking Donor Working Group includes 21 committed donors and private foundations and focuses on leveraging their grant dollars through strategy alignment and the coordination and co-funding of transformative giving opportunities. The group seeks “upstream” solutions and opportunities – tackling root causes of this systemic and endemic problem.

Throughout 2015, the Anti-Human Trafficking Donor Working Group and GHCF staff participated in meetings with field implementers and experts to stay current on opportunities for collaboration and funding. In addition, GHCF provided advice, research, and consultation to these donors and foundations.

The group built a public-private partnership with the City of Houston through the design and creation of a Special Advisor post, specifically focused on human trafficking. On June 30, 2015, Mayor Annise Parker appointed Minal Patel Davis to this newly established position. Further collaboration with Houston's new mayor, Sylvester Turner, continues and builds on early results.

The Donor Working Group closely partners with Ms. Davis through participation on the Houston Area Council on Human Trafficking and other key initiatives.

Through these collaborative and strategic efforts, the group has moved the needle on this issue to catalyze systemic change, identify innovative projects, focus on prevention and policy, and provide much-needed support to victims.

4. What have been your foundation's successes to date in terms of achieving synergy?

Answered above.

5. What are your foundation's major challenges?

Our major challenges in this area will be resourcing our strategy and bringing the board along to embrace it. We believe that the Philanthropic Leadership Task Force can make a strong recommendation to the board for developing an active foundation leadership role in synergy with its donors. Senior leadership will also work with our board to determine how its composition might need to change to align with our strategy. Once we have an agreement from the board about the plan for leadership, we will need them to embrace a resource development plan.

6. How is the foundation going to measure the impact of its efforts to reach synergy?

We use a donor engagement metric to look at how engaged our major donors are with the foundation. We want to test over time whether more engagement will lead to larger giving, grantmaking impact in partnership with the foundation, planned gifts, and use of multiple services. We track all of the major donor engagement activities yearly to see how they affect donors' giving.

We have a dashboard and evaluation model for our Community Impact Funds and Donor Working Group. This measures donor engagement through participation, grantmaking impact, and dollars leveraged. We are attracting new participants to the group from local, private foundations that had not worked with GHCF before. We implemented donor surveys to capture donor sentiment on the experience so that we can adapt and adjust it to meet the needs of donors. We want to see how the learning contributes to changes in grantmaking behavior over time, but have not yet been able to measure that more than anecdotally.

As we develop new plans, we will need to create new ways to measure the impact of our efforts – our visibility, the growth of foundation assets, grantmaking impact and leverage, and our effectiveness as a convener and thought leader. We did our first donor perception survey in 2015 and so we can use that as a baseline to see if our donors perception of our impact increases with these efforts.