

PRESENTATION SNAPSHOT

Building grantee capacity as a core strategy to improve local food systems



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Presentation Abstract

Greater Twin Cities United Way (GTCUW), Minnesota's largest nongovernmental social services funder, connects local people and resources to change systems that limit our potential. Hunger and food insecurity require a spectrum of holistic responses that address emergency and root causes, while advancing long-term solutions for individuals, families, communities, and systems. To that end, GTCUW launched Full Lives, an innovative grantmaking strategy fostering a healthy and equitable community food system where all residents can thrive. This two-year, US\$1.5 million effort employs a place-based approach to community and economic development to reduce food insecurity by improving food access, food affordability, and food justice for a low-income Minneapolis neighborhood facing systemic food security issues. Full Lives grantees focus on diverse aspects of the local supply chain that strengthen North Minneapolis's local food system.

Full Lives further augments this effort through grantee learning focused on increased organizational capacity and strengthened connections among grantee organizations, with a cross-cutting theme of community development. GTCUW partners with local technical assistance providers to implement flexible, innovative, responsive, and targeted capacity-building strategies and services. This strategic investment generates cross-agency collaboration, active networking, organizational development, and enhanced food systems technical expertise. A robust evaluation—including qualitative and quantitative elements—reveals successes, challenges, and lessons learned from the design and execution of these capacity-building strategies. Practice and measurement of this grantee capacity-building investment suggests strategies and considerations for partnership development, incorporation of grantee and community voice in planning, and delivery of ongoing educational activities for grantees.

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Keywords: Community Food Systems, Grantee Capacity-building, Place-based Grantmaking, Partnerships, Food Security, Root Causes

Key Points

- **Framing of United Way and Role in Food Security:** United Ways are rethinking their approach to grantmaking for issues of poverty and food insecurity. Local economic and community development focused on community food systems as a grantmaking strategy shifts the emphasis from addressing individual need to a community-scaled, long-term approach. This is an important departure from traditional grantmaking approaches to food insecurity.
- **New Strategy and Full Lives Model:** The Full Lives grant program reflects this new approach, providing over US\$1 million in funding and targeted, strategic technical assistance to a cluster of grassroots grantees working across the community's supply chain with robust measurement.
- **Context about North Minneapolis:** North Minneapolis, a culturally diverse neighborhood with a sizeable African American population, offers a rich array of food systems-focused, community-based initiatives designed to grow health, wealth, and connectivity. Many residents face economic and food access challenges, as well as a shared passion for building their community through food and agriculture.
- **Why Capacity Building?** Organizations that have robust management skills, fundraising know-how, and expertise in food systems development are most likely to capably and effectively generate lasting systems change for the communities they serve. That's why the Full Lives program offers a diverse array of learning opportunities and support for grantees, in addition to funding.
- **What is the Capacity Building Approach?** Initial and ongoing grantee assessment and periodic questions posed to grantees help surface their learning agenda and identify desired competencies for just-in-time, responsive support. Grantees receive cohort-wide capacity-building experiences and resources, as well as organization-specific opportunities for customized consulting from technical assistance providers with expertise in evaluation, fundraising, organizational development, and food systems development.
- **Themes and Results:** Capacity building must be diverse, strategic, and responsive, via the effective deployment of resources, expertise, and relationships of trust. A community development framework for designing capacity building is also helpful.
- **Evaluation Model for Capacity Building:** Together, grantees jointly create the measurement system to holistically assess their learning, capacity building efforts, and associated impacts.
- **Challenges:** It is important to balance individual and group readiness; acknowledge that grantees do not always understand some of their own learning needs; ensure technical assistance providers possess intercultural competency; and that funders and grantees both have learning needs that need support.

Conclusion

Now in its second year of implementation, the GTCUW Full Lives grant-making program is designed to support the development of a *healthy, equitable, and sustainable community food system in North Minneapolis where all residents can thrive*. Robust evaluation has generated data that demonstrates this approach is catalytic for food systems change at a neighborhood scale. The program is a neighborhood-focused, place-based community food security grant strategy that provides US\$1.5 million in direct grants over 2 years to 14 projects in a cohort of 11 organizations working across the supply chain. Grantees include organizations working in production (development of community-owned greenhouse and urban farm), distribution, and retail (mobile markets and a nonprofit grocery store). We explore the foundational program component focused on capacity building, including the structure and community-based design. We also share early results from shared measurement evaluation, with successes, challenges, and lessons learned.

