

Northwest Area Foundation grantmaking and leveraging Assessment of the initial two years under a new strategic plan

Introduction

The Northwest Area Foundation (NWAf) supports efforts to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable prosperity in the eight-state region encompassing Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Washington. In 2008, the Foundation approved a strategic plan charting a new direction and grantmaking approach. Under the new framework, the Foundation supports the work of proven and promising organizations to achieve three interconnected, mutually reinforcing outcomes: increased **assets and wealth** among people with low incomes, increased **capacity and leadership** to reduce poverty, and improved **public policy** solutions to reduce poverty. The Foundation also devotes significant resources to a fourth area, **leveraged impact**.

In spring 2011, the Foundation contracted with Wilder Research to conduct an independent review of grantmaking and leveraging activities during the first two years under its new strategic plan. Wilder's review follows [Gaining Perspective](#), a January 2011 report from FSG Social Impact Advisors reflecting on lessons learned from the decade of grantmaking preceding this new plan. Wilder's assessment entailed a grant review, staff discussion groups, and a review of Foundation documents.

Major findings

Overall, Wilder's assessment found that NWAf work during this period was closely aligned with the new strategic framework. The Foundation has supported strategies that directly impact low-income people, built regional infrastructure in the form of individual and organizational capacity, and impacted public policies affecting individuals' ability to build and maintain assets. The Foundation has done so by supporting scalable strategies, replicable models, and the work of proven and promising organizations.

Projects have touched low-income people in rural, urban, and reservation communities throughout the region. Across outcome areas, the Foundation leveraged limited dollars by collaborating with funders, convening key stakeholders, and disseminating information on areas of impact. Accomplishments are detailed in Wilder's full report.

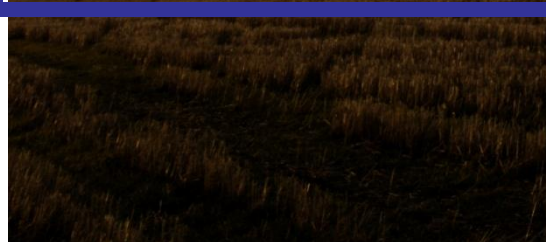
Key recommendations

The new strategic plan embraces adapting the Foundation's approach based on lessons learned along the way, and Wilder's report offers recommendations for the Foundation's consideration. Highlights follow:

- **Elevate assets and wealth as the primary strategic outcome.** Increasing assets and wealth among low-income people appears to be the Foundation's overarching goal, supported by efforts to build capacity and leadership and change public policy.
- **Mobilize the full organization behind the mission.** The current strategic plan encompasses the work of the Program Department, but could be broadened to reflect the full scope of NWAf activities.
- **Clarify strategies in a few areas.** The Foundation can consider whether current strategies related to green pathways to prosperity and sectoral development are on target or could be further clarified.
- **Consider the merits of making longer-term grants.** Grants reviewed ranged in length from 6 to 18 months. Feedback suggests that grantees perceive longer-term grants as important to attaining and demonstrating long-term impact.

Conclusion

Overall, the NWAf's grantmaking during the initial two years under its new strategic plan appears well-aligned with the outcomes and principles articulated in the new framework. Wilder's report illustrates linkages across outcome areas, highlights accomplishments within each area, and presents considerations for refining the strategic framework moving forward.



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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Northwest Area Foundation grantmaking and leveraging: Assessment of the initial two years under a new strategic plan* report. This report and other reports on related topics are available at www.wilderresearch.org.

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