

NEWS AND ANALYSIS

MARCH 02, 2017

✓ PREMIUM

Baltimore Foundation Turns to Local Consultants to Reach the People It Serves

By Rebecca Koenig



THE CASEY FOUNDATION

Consultants from the Casey Foundation meet with Baltimore residents to talk about job training.

BALTIMORE

In a sunny board room in Baltimore, a cadre of young consultants tease each other over macaroni and cheese. They've gathered to reflect on a report about youth unemployment they've produced after months of work.

They've all called Baltimore home for years. And they're all black.

That's no accident. As philanthropy grapples with its lack of diversity, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is piloting a new approach: creating a pipeline of black consultants, who have experience with local organizing, drawn from the communities the foundation serves.

The idea arose in the wake of protests in Baltimore in 2015, set off after 25-year-old Freddie Gray was fatally injured while in police custody.

Nearly two years later, the foundation says it has assembled an eight-person "community consulting" team. The grant maker will use the

process of building of the team, and the employment report it produced, to develop recommendations about revamping job programs that can be used by city government and nonprofits.

Some of the new consultants have master's degrees; others have founded grass-roots nonprofits. All have the "capability to reach young people where they are," says Danielle Torain, former senior associate with Casey Foundation who oversaw the pilot program.

The results of hiring "true community champions" have been "almost magical," she says. Drawing on their personal experiences and networks, the consultants have been able to reach Baltimoreans unlikely to speak openly to a foundation program manager or vice president.

The reason for their success is simple, says consultant Shawn Burnett, who founded youth art nonprofit Walks of Art: "We actually let them speak for themselves."

Finding New Expertise

After Mr. Gray died in April 2015, government and private money poured into the city for programs intended to help people like him. The mayor's office and the Casey Foundation worked together to manage one effort, One Baltimore for Jobs, which was supported by a \$5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. The goal was to help youths — particularly young black men with criminal records — find jobs.

Problems surfaced.

Commissioned research on the city's "youth unemployment epidemic" did not capture the perspectives of the people it was meant to help, Ms. Torain says. It was hard to recruit people for the program and to keep participants involved, making leaders realize just how shallow their understanding was of both the problems and the promise in city neighborhoods. Meanwhile, foundation leaders, whose lives were far removed from the realities of many of the city's residents, saw that their consulting pools lacked both the diversity and the cultural understanding needed to do the job.

So Casey's leaders started "thinking differently about where expertise actually is," Ms. Torain says. Just as businesses run consumer tests before releasing products, philanthropy should seek community feedback before creating social programs, she explains. And that requires hiring people who know the right questions to ask of the right people.

The foundation recruited eight Baltimore residents with years of organizing experience for the pilot.

Community Credibility

For several months, the group met almost weekly. They reviewed reports about the local economy, talked to business leaders about employment opportunities, and traveled to Detroit to compare its ecosystem with Baltimore's. They created a plan for seeking input from community members, then held "corner conversations" in places residents felt comfortable talking about their concerns and aspirations. Consultant Huey Blake — "Huey from 'round the way" — recalls saying just the right thing to put one shy focus-group member at ease, "letting him know to put it all out there. Once he heard that, he became more expressive."

It's an example of how "we were able to get the buy-in that we needed because we looked like the people we were working with and lived near to their blocks," says consultant Imani Victoria Bryan, chief executive of Dream Strategies, a local firm that does public-health research.

Yet even with their local ties and intimate knowledge of the city's neighborhoods, the consultants still had to overcome resistance from some residents, says consultant Kirsten Allen, founder of Meraki Community Uplift. It makes Ms. Allen wonder how philanthropic leaders who "don't know the talk or the walk" could possibly succeed in setting up social programs.

"How authentic is the information you're given?" she asks.

Ms. Torain wanted to ensure the participants would leave the experience more prepared to work with other institutions seeking to tap the expertise of community leaders. The group got tips from experienced consultants of color at Frontline Solutions, reviewing the basics of setting rates, entering into contracts, and demanding fair compensation. Some say they've felt exploited by institutions in the past.

To that end, the Casey Foundation paid participants a rate that Ms. Torain describes as competitive.

Focusing on Race

The consultant experiment was part of the foundation's commitment to advancing racial equity to better serve children and families.

Nonet Sykes has overseen that work since 2011 and has been director of racial and ethnic inclusion since 2015. Her job is to make sure the foundation is itself diverse while it tries to eliminate external structural barriers that prevent people of color from thriving.

There's been a marked shift in thinking since Ms. Sykes started at the foundation in 2001. Back then, a group of employees was trying to address racism through conversations with coworkers about social issues. Today, staff members prioritize changing systems and policies. And rather than approaching race obliquely by "supporting disadvantaged families," Ms. Sykes says, "we are now being explicit as to who those families are."

Getting to that point required convincing senior leaders, and then the rest of the staff, to put race front and center in both its mission and its internal culture. It wasn't easy, but she and others kept pointing to data showing that race is a major determining factor in whether children grow up safe and healthy.

The foundation now hosts staff training sessions about racial inequity. It asks grantees about the racial composition of their staff. It runs internal assessments of its human resources, governance, grant-making, and investment programs, keeping track of progress with a scorecard. When it moved to a new building, it hired a builder committed to working with minority contractors.

Today, the 200-person staff is 54 percent people of color, up from 16 percent, making it more reflective of the people it serves. And people are more comfortable having what Ms. Sykes calls "authentic conversations" about race.

The consultants say they were skeptical when Casey first approached them.

Having someone like Ms. Torain — a Baltimore native who has worked at local nonprofits — on staff was crucial to gaining their trust, believes Rodney Foxworth Jr., founder of Invested Impact, a consulting firm in Baltimore that focuses on economic development, social innovation, and equity.

"You have to have a Danielle," he says. "Do you have those people on staff that can then go into the community, and work in partnership with the community, because they have profound respect and love for that community?"

There's no excuse for not hiring people like Ms. Torain and the community consultants, he says: "Places like Baltimore, we're rich with a community of leaders like them."

Sticking Together

At the meeting at Baltimore's Center for Urban Families, the macaroni and cheese runs out long before the consultants' ideas do. They have plenty of advice to offer the philanthropic world: Wealth is not correlated with knowledge. Skills people develop when they are shut out of the economy can also be entrepreneurial skills. People want help, and they are the ones who know what kind of help they need.

How the consultants use this wisdom next is largely up to them. The foundation has plans to apply information from the report to its unemployment programs. The consultants may provide technical assistance as those plans take shape. And they may make a tool kit for how other foundations can use community consultants.

They are eager for another assignment, perhaps one they can tackle together.

Of the group and the work, Mr. Blake says, "It just fit like tailored suits."

Send an e-mail to Rebecca Koenig.

Copyright © 2017 The Chronicle of Philanthropy