

The Elmina B. Sewall Foundation

Evaluation and Learning Report: Summary

April 2023

Introduction and Purpose

In 2019, the Sewall Foundation formalized its approach to its work. The approach is grounded in Sewall's long-standing commitment to reciprocity, humility, and learning, and in working in partnership with nonprofits and communities throughout Maine. Sewall's approach is informed by three frameworks (Exhibit 1) that are essential to how we work: [trust-based philanthropy](#), [emergent learning](#), and an equity lens. We view these frameworks as interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and the foundation for how we bring our values to life in our internal and external work.

In 2022, we began a formal evaluation process of our approach, reflected in the collection of baseline data and experimentation with tools designed to support reflective practice and emergent learning. This was the first year in which Sewall systematically conducted data collection to learn more about its processes and practices, resulting in Sewall's first evaluation and learning report.

Findings

Internal Processes and Functions

In keeping with its values and commitment to equity, Sewall has worked to improve the experience of stakeholders, prospective grantees, and current grantees who interact with the foundation. To that end, Sewall has:

- Developed plans to revise its website in 2023; and
- Made its application process less cumbersome;
- Collected baseline demographic data to assess staff and board diversity and to learn about the diversity of its grantees.
- Employed a process called Before Action/After Action Review (BAR/AAR) to plan events and meetings and reflect on them once they were completed.

The following themes stood out from the data:

- Users appreciate the website's transparency and comprehensiveness (especially around its equity journey and grant making) but found the lengthy text overwhelming.
- Almost all grant applicants had a positive experience with the new platform and found it easy to use.
- Voluntary demographic data collection provided baseline information on executive leadership and boards of directors. While most organizations answered at least one question, data were incomplete.
- Using BAR/AARs for events and meetings helped staff set goals, anticipate challenges, consider power dynamics and equity, reflect after the fact, and make improvements in real time.

Applying the Sewall Approach to Programs

Focus area lead staff (known as Community Partners) evaluated their performance through self-reflection and by piloting interviews with grantees structured around questions related to Trust-based Philanthropy. Key themes are organized around how staff assessed their own work and how organizational partners perceived Sewall's work and contributions.

- Staff reported that making more multi-year grants, new community engagement processes, strengthened collaboratives, and improved organizational capacity point to progress in implementing trust-based philanthropy and equity-informed grantmaking.
- Staff also shared that learning to work differently to facilitate more equitable grantmaking and resource allocation can be challenging to navigate and increases staff workloads.
- Organizations report that Catchafire and consistent funding have contributed to their growth and success.
- Respondents praised Sewall staff for being good thought partners, praised Sewall's application and grantmaking processes.
- Convenings and gatherings organized by Sewall help participants meet new people, bring policy and grassroots organizations together, and identify opportunities to work together.
- Sewall could do more to:
 - Coordinate convenings with other funders.
 - Partner with other organizations and funders to better support people doing collaborative work
 - Support stressed organizations in new and collaborative ways such as pooling resource across foundations to enable them to provide benefits and living wages.
 - Help improve relationships between white people and BIPOC communities.
 - Share grantees' work more broadly.

Discussion

The reflection and data gathering conducted in 2022 produced rich information and learning around trust-based philanthropy and equity-informed practice. Grantees notice that Sewall staff members are going the extra mile to support them, from the time they apply for funding to long after the awards have been made. Sewall is supporting collaboration in a way that is generating impacts in policy, planning, and programming. New organizations are growing, and they say that Sewall's faith in them and commitment over time have been instrumental in their growth and stability. Several staff increased engagement of BIPOC and youth-led organizations. Some of this work is in the early stages, and more will be known as the work continues to unfold in 2023 and 2024. The application survey produced overwhelmingly positive results, suggesting that grantees feel very supported in this process. There is more to be done, as evidenced by a desire for Sewall to collaborate closely with other funders and help them to improve relationships across race, class, and status.