



StrengthenND[®]

Lessons Learned

Where We Have Been

In 2023, Strengthen ND implemented the Creative Community Solutions Grantmaking Program similar to 2022, with the exception of only holding one grantmaking round instead of two.

Typically, grantmaking is done in two rounds with deadlines ending April 30th and September 30th; however, in 2023, we made a strategic decision to hold only one grant round (ending September 30th) to allow for added capacity and focus on the Bush Prize.

In our second year of implementation, the team at Strengthen ND felt very good about our outcomes. We have worked diligently to incorporate feedback loops with North Dakota's nonprofit community to understand where we hit the mark and where we might need to adjust. We have worked to balance our grantmaking committee so that it is representative of the state. And we have tried to create operational efficiencies that will allow our team to focus more on our end goal of building the problem solving capacity of North Dakotans instead of day-to-day tasks.

In 2023, Strengthen ND granted \$215,300 in its single grant round, bringing the total investment in North Dakota up to \$3,490,300 since the program's inception in 2022. The 2023 grantees included:

- **Rolla JDA (Rolla, ND):** \$100,000 to test a community revolving fund to support short-term and long-term economic and community development through property renovations.
- **Native Max (Greater ND):** \$40,000 to spread *Creatives Indigenous*, a six-week start-up program for Native entrepreneurs, into North Dakota.
- **Bismarck Global Neighbors (Bismarck & Mandan, ND):** \$30,000 to develop the foundation of an immigrant-led and immigrant-cultivated leadership incubator to support more New Americans to engage in leadership and to advocate for themselves.
- **The Arts Center (Jamestown, ND):** \$26,400 to develop and test strategies that utilize the arts as a catalyst for behavioral change in youth.
- **Youthworks (Fargo & Bismarck, ND):** \$18,900 to develop a Youth Participatory Action Model to increase youth leadership and engagement for LGBTQ+ populations.

Where We Are Going

To focus on continued quality improvement and reflection, Strengthen ND administered

its annual Community Survey to North Dakotans who have had an interest in Creative Community Solutions and/or the Bush Prize, applied for Creative Community Solutions and/or the Bush Prize and were declined, and applied for Creative Community Solutions and/or the Bush Prize and were awarded. The Community Survey was made available in mid-December, with results officially collected and compiled in mid-January. It is through these survey results and operational notes/takeaways throughout the year that we have crafted the following five lessons learned:

- 1. *Creative Community Solutions is too "loose"; meaning, applicants and potential applications would like more guidance as to what to include during their application processes.*** In response, Strengthen ND has been working to craft a simple sample application that potential applicants can review to provide them with a basic framework for communicating their project, its problem solving process, and intended impact. Further, we have redesigned our grantmaking guidelines collateral to ensure they are more straightforward and easy to understand. Finally, through more advertising of our funded projects - specifically calling out their problem-solving processes and stages of innovation - we hope to better influence potential applicants to come forward with a more clear request. In summary, we are working diligently to balance the intention of the program - an open and accessible application - with outlining some parameters for folks to be creative within.
- 2. *Creative Community Solutions and its philosophy are not widely understood.*** It will be important to more clearly and concisely articulate the program's intention moving forward through 2024 and beyond. To do this, Strengthen ND will create a more prominent spot on its website to clearly list and lay out Creative Community Solutions grantees, their project ideas, and their stages of innovation. Further, through the publication of our Creative Community Solutions magazine, which will be made available both in hard copy format and electronically, we are hoping to increase the understanding of the program's philosophy by potential applicants. Finally, Strengthen ND is creating a specific page on its website titled "What We Are Learning", which will feature our annual Creative Community Solutions Lessons Learned Publication, digital Creative Community Solutions magazine, grantee videos, and evaluation findings to date - all with the goal of increasing awareness and understanding.
- 3. *Strengthen ND needs to continue working toward equity.*** Our organization's philosophy toward working with individuals and groups of any background is to meet them where they are at in terms of skills, geography, attitude, or ideology. We plan to continue that intent toward individual and small group engagement, while also deepening our understanding of the contexts of communities that exist across North Dakota. Currently, we provide a limited "Context of Community" training at the beginning of each of our Grantmaking Committee Meetings. In 2024, we will formalize this training and put it in the form of a toolkit or reminder sheet that will also be available for Grantmaking Committee members to refer to when they are directly reviewing and acting upon decisions.

Further, we are continuing to monitor three key benchmarks with regard to equity: 1) Grantmaking Committee makeup (currently, we are composed of 50% people of color and 50% white); 2) Demographics of Applicants; and 3) Investment Allocations (segmented by Rural, Urban, Statewide, White-Led Organizations, and BIPOC Organizations (with Native-Led Organizations as a subcategory).

4. **Strengthen ND will lean into transparency.** In order to increase program understanding and to be as open as possible, Strengthen ND is designing a “What We Are Learning” page, which will feature annual reflections on lessons learned, the Creative Community Solutions Magazine, grantee videos, and evaluation findings.
5. **Strengthen ND needs to create a more effective environment for introductory phone calls.** Introductory calls are an integral part of our process to ensure equity and quality proposal sourcing; however, striking a balance between a very open introductory meeting and an introductory meeting with parameters to create efficiencies has been difficult. To create time for more discussion and technical assistance, Strengthen ND is developing a pre-meeting introduction packet, with very clear guidelines and descriptions of awarded projects, for review by individuals prior to the meeting.

Grants Since Inception

Below are the 2022 and 2023 Rounds 1, 2, & 3 Quick Stats, which feature the categorized investments made with the Creative Community Solutions Grantmaking Program.

Rounds 1-3 Quick Stats		
Investments in BIPOC-Led Organizations	\$1,192,314	31.16%
Investments in Rural Approaches	\$2,284,501	65.44%
Investments in Urban Approaches	\$867,338	24.85%
Investments in Statewide Approaches	\$338,900	9.71%
% of BIPOC-Led Orgs Applied vs. Funded	7 of 28	25.00%
% of Non-BIPOC-Led Orgs Applied vs. Funded	13 of 66	19.70%
% of Finalists are BIPOC-Led	7 of 20	35.00%
% of Finalists are Non-BIPOC-Led	13 of 20	65.00%