We Can Do Better
By Embracing All of Our Kids

Report of Findings
Supporting Opportunity Gap Initiative Fund Grant Guidelines

Update following Collaborative Grant Workshop
March 21, 2016
BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Motivated by the work of Dr. Robert D. Putnam’s best-selling book, “Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis,” the Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation applied for and received a $1.5 million, three-year grant from the Margaret A. Cargill Foundation to better understand the “Opportunity Gap” in the Twin Ports region of Duluth, Minnesota, and Superior, Wisconsin, and to begin work in these communities to narrow that gap.

The Opportunity Gap refers to vast and growing differences in opportunities available to poor and well-off children and families nationwide. The expansion of that gap in recent decades is the focus of “Our Kids” and research work that Dr. Putnam and his Harvard University associates and partners have conducted in communities across the country, including Duluth.

In May 2015, Dr. Putnam came to the Twin Ports to give the keynote address at the Community Foundation’s Annual Celebration, where he addressed the Opportunity Gap and encouraged our region to take a leadership role on this issue.

“How we sense our responsibilities to each other is, I think, the underlying deepest cause of this Opportunity Gap,” he said in a video interview about his work that was published on the Community Foundation website. “What I’m trying to do is say to people, ‘Think about these kids as your kids, too.’”

Additionally, he urged Twin Ports residents and organizations to take action, saying: “Minnesota and Wisconsin have a history, actually, on issues just like this. This is the place out of which solutions to social problems often have come first. I’d like to nudge you to get in the game and begin thinking about how this problem can be fixed, first here but also nationwide.”

Subsequently, the Community Foundation received the grant to undertake work to address the Opportunity Gap in the Twin Ports. The goal was for these efforts to not only help our region but also to serve as an example of, or impetus for, similar projects in communities nationwide to begin narrowing the Opportunity Gap.

The Community Foundation organized an Opportunity Gap Convening Committee of civic, business, education and social-services leaders. This committee began holding a series of listening sessions throughout Duluth and Superior, talking to parents, teens and service providers that deal directly with issues that the Opportunity Gap presents locally.

Listening sessions took place at the following locations in Duluth: Myers-Wilkins School (parents), Community Action Duluth (parents) and the Boys & Girls Club Teen Center (teens). In Superior, listening sessions took place at: Northern Lights Elementary School (parents) and the Boys & Girls Club (teens). In addition, the Community Foundation solicited answers to written questionnaires provided to 10 nonprofit groups in the region, who presented their responses to the Committee: American Indian Community Housing Organization, Boys & Girls Club of the Northland, CHUM, Community Action Duluth, Duluth Head Start, Family Forum, Life House, Harbor House, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota and Myers-Wilkins Community School Collaborative.

Questions were asked, and findings were framed, in the following categories: parenting, education and community needs.
FINDINGS

Overall, the findings bore out the understanding that poverty is complex, longstanding and deep-seated in the Twin Ports, as in other communities. Solutions will not come overnight. Yet all individuals and groups interviewed identified clear opportunities to make a difference, sometimes immediately, by addressing issues and obstacles and by building on individual and community strengths.

Importantly, the findings from the listening sessions and from the nonprofit engagements repeatedly emphasized that it is crucial to have families and individuals who experience issues related to the Opportunity Gap involved in the shaping, execution and evaluation of the programs that are designed to support them and narrow the gap in the Twin Ports.

In keeping with Dr. Putnam’s research and book, the data-gathering listening sessions and questionnaires were organized to surface findings in the areas of parenting, education and community needs. Key findings and quotes from individuals who participated in the listening sessions included:

Parenting

- Families lack resources and support systems across a broad range of needs and services, including: transportation, child care, out-of-school programming, education, housing, health care, job training, financial stability and mental health services.
- Children, youth and families experience significant trauma, which affects their opportunities for positive outcomes.
- “We need to address the barriers that keep families in poverty so that the children of these families don’t continue to experience the trauma of poverty.”
  —Angie Miller, Community Action Duluth
- Young people as well as parents lack mentors and other caring adults in their lives who nurture and believe in their futures.
- There is a need to involve more families in whole-family counseling, education, parenting support and other services.
- “There is a lack of available, affordable and quality child care to support evening, overnight, variable working and weekend employment schedules.”
  —Angie Miller, Community Action Duluth
- “Families in poverty have the same issues, including alcohol and drug issues, many generations back. Housing issues are still there. We are not keeping up with housing demand. Families are still struggling. Everything has changed, but nothing has changed.”
  —Dave Cochran, Family Forum/Superior Head Start

Education

- There is a significant difference in school readiness found among youth in the Twin Ports—a clear reflection of the Opportunity Gap starting at the earliest levels of education.
- More than 200 children are on the waiting list for early education through Duluth Head Start, the result of lacking funding and “wrap-around” services that enable parents to work or attend school while their children are in Head Start. Lacking transportation is another significant barrier to placing more children in Head Start.
- “Families who are over the income guidelines often need the services that Head Start offers, but they cannot get their children in because of the income requirement.”
  —Dave Cochran, Family Forum/Superior Head Start
• “We are limited in the number of students we can serve in the out-of-school-time care due to lack of funding, lack of transportation and awareness.”
  —Jen Eddy, Myers-Wilkins Community School Collaborative
• “Our kids have a lack of access to learning opportunities within the community because of cost, transportation and awareness.”
  —Tracy Clanaugh, YMCA of Greater Duluth
• There is a lack of viable career paths and education-completion options for young people in the Twin Ports who have not finished high school.
• Education needs to be a positive aspect of the lives of young people.

Community
• The Twin Ports, like many communities nationwide, have witnessed an overall diminished sense of community that encourages more individuals, organizations and businesses to see all children and families as “our kids” and “our neighbors” and to find ways to provide support.
• Individuals and groups reported community concerns including: discrimination and racism; insufficient jobs, housing and child care; insufficient understanding about how to access community resources or learn more about them; and an overall lack of social connectedness, including not knowing or interacting with neighbors.
• People of color are disproportionately represented among low income children and families.
• “When it comes to home ownership, wealth, food access, etc.—look at the racial disparity. It is not the same statewide as it is in Duluth. Low-income people, especially people of color, feel completely marginalized, left out and left behind. Intervening only with kids won’t work. We need to invest in culturally specific work for families.”
  —Xavier Bell, Community Action Duluth
• Long-term housing options are limited for all individuals in poverty and especially for young men of color.
• There is a scarcity of and barriers to services for long-term mental health and substance abuse treatment.
• “If a person misses one or two appointments, they have a difficult time finding anyone that will accept them as a mental health patient in the city.”
  —Daryl Olson, American Indian Community Housing Organization
• Insufficient transportation once again is a barrier that presents issues across the spectrum, starting with access to critical services for youths.
• “A lack of transportation for our youths’ families makes it difficult for kids to attend our club activities if they are not within walking distance of our club branches.”
  —Todd Johnson, Boys & Girls Club of the Northland
FUND MISSION AND GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

Based on these findings, the Community Foundation sees initial opportunities to make a difference for grantees in broad areas of impact including:

- Restoring a stronger sense of community encouraging more individuals, organizations and businesses to see all children and families as “our kids” and “our neighbors.”
- Finding ways to connect more children and parents with a caring adult who supports them and genuinely believes in their futures.
- Providing more support for early childhood education, including programs that support parents.
- Matching low-income families with advocates to assist in navigating support networks.
- Eliminating barriers to participation in community and in/out of school programs, including inadequate transportation.
- Encouraging program leaders to engage the children, youth and families who experience the lack of opportunities in the shaping, execution and evaluation of the programs.

“Our findings included solutions as simple but as powerful as the need for more children to have another caring adult in their lives who nurtures and believes in their futures,” said Holly C. Sampson, President of the Community Foundation. “Too many young people growing up in poverty have limited opportunities. They need to have more caring people in their lives who can introduce them to opportunities and provide ladders to success.”

An overarching message gleaned from the listening sessions and the questions asked of nonprofit group was the imperative to include individuals in the shaping, delivery and evaluation of programs designed to support them. To be successful, assistance must be not only be transformative but also inclusive, empowering and collaborative.

“One of the most important findings in our listening sessions was that the families and individuals need to be involved in shaping that assistance,” said James Zastrow, Chair of the Opportunity Gap Convening Committee. “For the work of these new grants to be successful, these individuals and community supporters emphasized that it has to be done in partnership with program leaders and children, youth and families who experience the lack of opportunities in creating, executing and evaluating the programs. This will be an important characteristic we’ll look for in applications.”

To address the findings identified in the listening sessions, the Community Foundation has established the Opportunity Gap Initiative Fund and announced the first round of grant applications. Grants will be awarded in the range of $100,000 to $300,000, and possibly, higher, depending on the suggested program or scope of work, and with possible funding over several years.

The mission of the fund is to think in fresh ways about the nature and delivery of services to low-income children, youth and families and to support innovative and collaborative projects that embrace and empower families. The fund aims to fill missed opportunities or gaps in three areas: parenting, education and community. The fund has a particular preference for projects that focus on early intervention to: minimize the gap between students in early learning; eliminate barriers to participation in community or school programs; and directly engage low-income children, youth and families, especially people of color and Native Americans.

For more grant information, please see the Opportunity Gap Initiative Fund Guidelines.