



PHILANTHROPIC
FOUNDATIONS
IN CANADA

LANDSCAPES,
INDIGENOUS
PERSPECTIVES
AND PATHWAYS
TO CHANGE

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Dedicated to our dear
friend and colleague
Jack Quarter
1942–2019

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Peter R Elson, Sylvain A. Lefèvre and Jean-Marc Fontan	
<hr/>	
Historical and contemporary landscapes of foundations in Canada	II
→ A contextual history of foundations in Canada	13
Sylvain A. Lefèvre and Peter R Elson	
→ Philanthropic Foundations Canada: Building a community and a voice for philanthropy	33
Hilary Pearson	
→ Financial accountability and reporting of foundations in Canada	54
François Brouard and Marc Pilon	
→ Donor-advised funds and charitable foundations in Canada	83
Carla Funk	
→ Corporate foundations: Cases and causes	108
Cathy Glover and Kelli Stevens	
<hr/>	
Indigenous perspectives on philanthropy	128
→ All My Relations: A journey of reciprocity	130
Stephen Couchman, Marilyn Struthers and Justin Wiebe	
→ Decolonizing philanthropy: Building new relations	157
Roberta Jamieson	
→ Relationship, reciprocity and respect: Reflecting on our journey at The Winnipeg Boldness Project	173
Gladys Rowe and Diane Roussin	

Pathways to change	189
→ The cost of social inequalities: Philanthropic field-building in Québec through the creation of the <i>Collectif des fondations</i> Annabelle Berthiaume and Sylvain A. Lefèvre	191
→ Community foundations at work: Mobilizing and connecting place-based philanthropy Laurel Carlton and Sara Lyons	216
→ Vancouver Foundation: Fostering meaningful engagement with youth Natalie Ord	239
→ Centraide's Collective Impact Project: Poverty reduction in Montréal Nancy Pole and Myriam Bérubé	262
→ Foundation House: More than just sharing space Jehad Aliweiwi, Marcel Lauzière and Bruce Lawson	287
<hr/>	
Reflections and conclusions	314
Tim Brodhead	
→ Contributors	324



Part three
Chapter eleven



Vancouver Foundation: Fostering meaningful engagement with youth

Natalie Ord





As a community foundation¹ with a provincial mandate, Vancouver Foundation's purpose is to bring together community assets to address current and emerging community needs across British Columbia. To do this, the Foundation takes a broad view of philanthropy: in recognition that raising funds to tackle an issue is only part of any solution, citizens, organizations and governments are engaged and invited to work together and contribute their time, ideas, expertise and energy to an issue. One of the current priorities of the Foundation is systems change, that is, to support projects, processes and programs that improve a social system and go beyond treating symptoms to address the root causes beneath an issue.

Vancouver Foundation was previously known as a broad-based, responsive funder. Indeed, most of its funding is distributed through donor-advised and designated funds, with the balance going towards the activities of the Grants and Community Initiatives department: responsive grantmaking, grassroots grantmaking, capacity-building for other BC-based community foundations, learning and evaluation, and youth engagement. As a Foundation executive described, "We were granting in eight different fields of interest, province-wide. Grants were having a broad but maybe not a deep effect on any issue. We decided we wanted to have more of an impact on root causes" (Glass, 2018, p. 8). One example of focusing on upstream solutions to create systemic change is the Fostering Change initiative, in which the Foundation was able to build on existing relationships, skills and knowledge both internally and in the community to make an impact on the lives of young people leaving care at nineteen. The rest of this chapter will focus on the evolution of the Fostering Change initiative and the lessons learned through taking on a more vocal, engaged role in policy advocacy.

¹ Community foundations are described in detail in the previous chapter (Chapter 10).

Youth Homelessness Initiative

Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Change initiative developed out of a previous program, the Youth Homelessness Initiative (YHI). Understanding that "the greatest asset of a community foundation is not the size of its endowment, but its knowledge of community and its ability to use this knowledge for community benefit and positive change", the Foundation used information collected from the 2006 Vital Signs report as the basis for its 2007 strategic planning process (Phillips *et al.*, 2016, p. 67), which identified poverty and homelessness as priority areas. Starting in 2008, the Foundation took a lead role or partnered in three key strategies to address homelessness, each representing human resources and/or financial investment from the organization.

First, the Foundation incubated the Streethome Foundation, which is focused on leveraging and brokering a comprehensive systems response to homelessness in Vancouver (<http://www.streethome.org>). Seed funding was provided by way of a \$500,000 grant in 2008, and subsequent grants of decreasing amounts were provided until 2016. Second, a partnership initiative was developed with the Mental Health Commission of Canada for the national, 5-year At Home/ Chez Soi study, focusing on a Housing First approach to ending homelessness. The Vancouver Foundation Board approved a grant of \$275,000 towards the study and Catharine Hume, a program director who oversaw the organization's own homelessness initiative, was seconded to lead the project in Vancouver for 3.5 days a week (C Hume presentation, 2009). In 2011, Catharine left the Foundation to work on the project full-time. Finally, in December 2007, Vancouver Foundation made the decision to develop the Youth Homelessness Initiative, with an initial focus on the city of Vancouver. In 2009, the focus was expanded to encompass the Metro Vancouver region.

Through a series of internal and external conversations, including with over 100 young people who all were or had been homeless, youth homelessness in Vancouver was identified as an area that needed particular attention. Young people experiencing homelessness are less visible than their adult counterparts and had been traditionally under-served, with limited access to social housing. At the same time, many people who experience chronic homelessness often first experience homelessness as a child or youth. Youth homelessness was thus seen as an area where Vancouver Foundation could have a real and measurable impact over time – both in terms of preventing homelessness and in terms of preventing longer-term or more chronic homelessness among youth (Legare & Rootman, 2011).

The goals of the initiative were: to make a significant contribution to addressing youth homelessness through granting, convening and partnership activities in Metro Vancouver; to support approaches that increased access to housing for young people aged between 16 and 24 experiencing homelessness in Metro Vancouver and to help young people maintain their housing; to support initiatives that involve young people in developing, implementing and evaluating the

projects; to encourage projects that build on strategies that are proven to be effective, as well as innovative approaches with a strong chance of success that could serve as a model to others; and to foster projects that strengthen the community's capacity to respond to youth homelessness and which emphasize collaboration and formal partnerships with other agencies in the field. A 2011 evaluation of the initiative noted that the Foundation was well on the road to the successful accomplishment of all its goals (*ibid.*).

The Youth Homelessness Initiative may have been the first Foundation-wide priority area to be established at Vancouver Foundation, but it did build upon existing work and on the organization's strengths. Before entering into this work, strong partnerships already existed with youth-serving organizations in BC through the work of the Children, Youth and Families granting program. A significant number of grants had already been given to areas related to poverty and homelessness over the years, and continued to be given through other granting programs such as Health and Social Development. YHI's granting process built upon existing grantmaking practices such as having a volunteer advisory committee, made up of local experts, that made grant recommendations. The Foundation already had experience of directly engaging young people in grantmaking through its Youth Philanthropy Council and so YHI's advisory committee also included two young people with experience of homelessness.

Where YHI's grantmaking differed from other granting programs was in providing additional funds above and beyond the grant request to be used towards program evaluation, a practice which was seen as having potential to strengthen the sector (*ibid.*, p. 15). The initiative also gave development staff a new way to attract and engage donors through a Homelessness Fund, which was established in 2009. Finally, YHI provided Vancouver Foundation with an opportunity to strengthen its community leadership profile and build on its unique strengths in convening a diverse set of stakeholders around an issue. Interviewees in the 2011 YHI evaluation strongly encouraged the Foundation to take a stronger and more proactive role in influencing public policy, noting its strengths in "giving a voice to youth and bringing their stories forward for governments, funders, policy makers and the public to understand the issues and the solutions" (*ibid.*, p. 23).

Despite the Foundation's "exceptional ability to convene, communicate and to lead, which can be used for influence, public education, advocacy", the 2011 evaluation also noted the awareness that this "represented a steep learning curve for the volunteer board" as well as some "uncertainty whether taking on the role of policy advocate would weaken the Foundation's overall credibility with donors and strategic partners" (*ibid.*, p. 19). These concerns aren't restricted to Vancouver Foundation; many community foundations resist participating directly in advocacy, preferring instead to play an indirect role through funding, knowledge creation and convening (Phillips *et al.*, 2016, p. 76). And, until recently, limitations on non-partisan public policy activity imposed by the *Income Tax Act* created an overall chill on charitable advocacy. That said, based on the recommendations of the evaluation and despite those concerns, in October 2011 Vancouver

Foundation's board renewed their commitment to youth homelessness and prioritized the development and implementation of a three-year strategy (2012–15) to reduce youth homelessness in Metro Vancouver.

The second phase of the initiative began in a similar way to the first: through a series of conversations. Within a context of rising numbers of homeless youth, Vancouver Foundation posed a number of key questions aimed at increasing impact over the three years: What are the key paths to homelessness for youth, and can we prevent them? How do we share knowledge among young people, service providers, funders and researchers and act on what we've learned? How do we communicate to citizens and decision-makers in a way that builds a sense of common cause and responsibility? Along with the Youth Homelessness Advisory Committee, nearly 40 stakeholders were engaged through group discussions and individual interviews, including a range of service providers, funders, researchers and youth (Vancouver Foundation, 2012b).

As a result of those conversations, the Foundation chose to commit to a prevention-based initiative with a focus on one of the populations most vulnerable to homelessness: young people who have experienced government care. Involvement in the child welfare system is a pathway into youth homelessness, particularly as young people hit the age of majority (which in BC is 19 years of age); indeed a 2003 survey by the Public Health Agency of Canada (2006), found that over 40% of street-involved youth across Canada had been in foster care. In British Columbia, approximately 700 young people age out of care each year out of a total of approximately 8,200 young people in care at any given point. As noted in Chapter 8, the majority of young people in care are Indigenous, part of a history of assimilationist child welfare programs that resulted in what the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada called “cultural genocide” (Blackstock, 2019, p. 5). Older youth in care in particular are disproportionately Indigenous, LGBTQ and/or young mothers (M Gifford presentation, 2012). The conversations with stakeholders established that youth involved in the foster care system are under-served, over-represented among the homeless population, and in definite need of focused support.

It was also suspected that the connection between child welfare system involvement and homelessness was not well understood, which meant that, unless there was a concerted effort to address youth homelessness, it was unlikely that any systemic change on the issue would be made. Based on a belief that “strengthening systems and services that ensure youth are connected, valued and safely housed before and after they transition out of care will reduce youth homelessness in metro Vancouver”, the decision was made to focus the second phase of YHI on young people aged between 14 and 24 in the Lower Mainland who are or were in government care and at risk of homelessness (Vancouver Foundation, 2012a, p. 4). In order to achieve the goal of preventing homelessness by strengthening policies and practices that enable young people to successfully transition out of care and into adulthood, a four-pronged approach was developed as outlined in Figure 1: youth engagement; community grants; shared learning, evaluation and research; and public engagement (*ibid.*, pp. 3–4). The program was initially intended to run until 2015, but a few years into the initiative the board took the decision to extend the timeline to 2018. And thus, Fostering Change, our Youth Homelessness Initiative, was born.

Figure 1: Fostering change placemat

<p>Vision: Every young person leaving foster care will have the opportunities and support needed to thrive as adults</p> <p>Mission: To improve policy, practice and community connections for young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood</p>				
<p>Outcome</p>	<p>A growing public constituency is aware and engaged in issues facing young people in transition from care to adulthood.</p>	<p>Young people have increased voice and influence in planning and decision-making.</p>	<p>Community organizations have increased resources, knowledge and connections to better support young people.</p>	<p>Research, evaluation and learning expand knowledge and effectiveness.</p>
<p>Community grants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arts and media projects highlight the issues for public understanding Public participation projects directly engage people in the issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Projects led by young people highlight issues of importance to young people and provide an opportunity for the practice of meaningful youth engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Projects increase inter- and intra-organization capacity, as well as community capacity Multi-year support for program services provides direct support to young people making the transition from foster care to adulthood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Real-time, supported, collaborative learning contributes to improvements in practice and highlights gaps – “what we don’t know”
<p>Youth engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people advise and participate in public engagement and communications work and act as co-hosts for events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people are involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of everything that we do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded number and improved quality of tools and supports for young people and adult allies collaborating in community Community organizations and communities are better able to engage in meaningful youth engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train and support young people to advise on research Train and support young people to participate as active researchers and respondents
<p>Shared learning, evaluation and research</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public release of findings from shared learning, evaluation and research help public understand issues facing young people in transition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YAC captures and shares learning about meaningful youth engagement Youth-led and youth-directed research and learning highlight issues of importance to young people and expand evidence base of what we know 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared Learning and Evaluation (SLE) workgroup learning products support better practice in work with young people and inform possible system and policy changes A community of providers is built, providing a foundation for greater sharing of knowledge, resources and opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SLE workgroup collectively identifies issues and learns together (practice-learning feedback loop) Contracted research contributes to evidence base of what we know Ongoing measurement of experience of young people contributes to evidence base of what we know (measure key indicators: health, housing, employment, education, support networks, finance)
<p>Public engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase broad public awareness of key issues Invite participation and grow constituency Engage public in developing possible solutions and actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The voice of young people and the expertise of youth leaders are amplified Provide a platform for young people to directly interact with and influence decision-makers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity of communities is developed to be able to confidently take public roles in promoting goals for youth in care Build credibility of organizations Showcase what is working and amplify success Highlight gaps in the system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning with communities about issues of importance to them and where they see strengths/gaps Generate a set of community tested “asks” that are meaningful and can be taken forward by stakeholders and assessed for relevance with broader public audiences and potential allies
<p>Why this matters</p>	<p>Research shows that systems change is enabled by public will which requires increased visibility of and engagement with the issue.</p>	<p>All people have the right to be involved in decisions that affect them. Research shows that authentic youth engagement leads to better individual, programmatic and policy outcomes.</p>	<p>Research shows that fragmented services lead to poor outcomes, so communities need to be supported to collaboratively surface and demonstrate programs and practices that enable better outcomes for young people.</p>	<p>Developing a collective understanding of what works in a BC context and what we still need to learn supports effective practice and can inform policy and system change.</p>

Youth engagement

Vancouver Foundation has a strong track record of prioritizing the involvement of youth in the development of programs, policies and infrastructure that affect their lives. Guided by the principle of “Nothing about us without us”, Fostering Change built on this legacy by creating the Youth Advisory Circle (YAC), which was involved in all aspects of the Fostering Change initiative. Vancouver Foundation’s *Youth Engagement Report: Learning from Fostering Change and Fresh Voices* (Glass, 2018) outlines nine key steps that were integral to the youth engagement work of Fostering Change.

1 Involve youth early in the process, and keep them in the centre throughout the initiative

One of the first actions in developing the Fostering Change initiative in 2012 was the formation of the YAC. As a Foundation executive noted, “The biggest advice I received came from a young person who said, so often organizations decide what they are going to do, and then they invite youth in. Young people want to be involved early, in the thinking, the planning, the decision-making” (*ibid.*, p. 10). Much of the first year was spent developing relationships, building trust, learning how to engage in group dialogue and exploring the relevant issues. This meant that when the time came to set goals and create strategy, young people were already full, informed partners. This also meant that the work of Fostering Change was more effective and reflective of the wisdom of those with lived expertise of the issue. As a staff member put it, “When we put young people in touch with the communications team and involved them in every stage, including the design, colour, content of the website, that shifted the ownership for the campaign. It became clear that we had to continue this practice of deep youth engagement” (*ibid.*, p. 19).

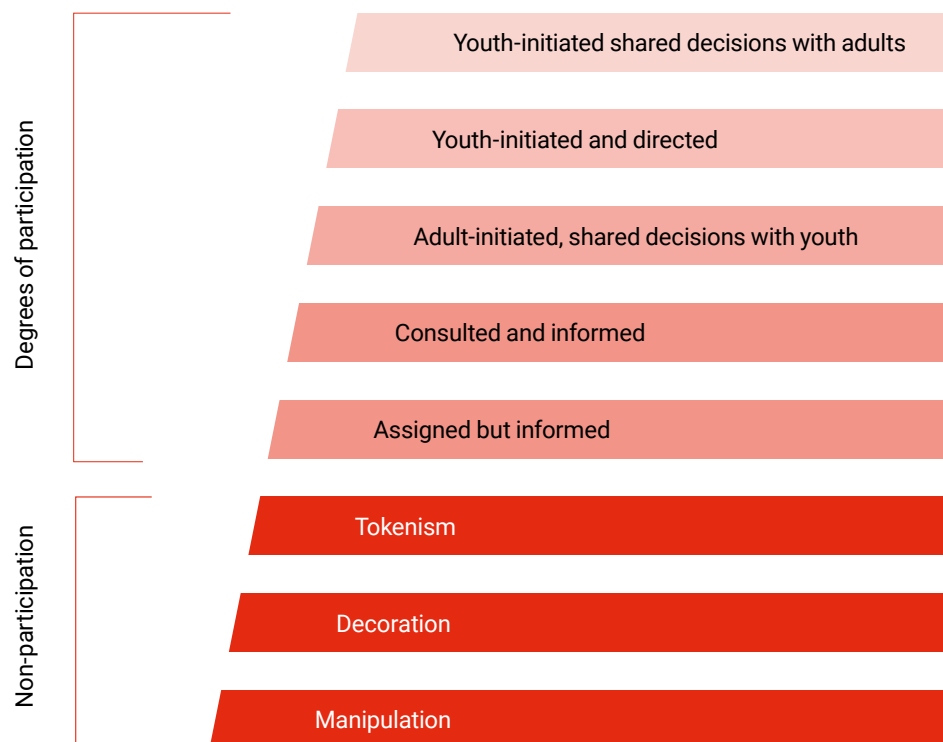
2 Be intentional about which youth are being engaged and why

The YAC was made up of six young people aged between 19 and 24, all of whom had lived expertise of foster care and homelessness. As a youth advisor pointed out, “The people who have the answers are the ones who are directly affected by the issue” (*ibid.*, p. 10). It was important to acknowledge that not all young people have the same access to power and to prioritize those with lived expertise on the issue.

3 Acknowledge power; don't ignore it

Taking the time to build trusting relationships between staff and young people, and between young people themselves, made it easier to have open conversations as well as reciprocity and respect, regardless of power imbalances. The Ladder of Young People's Participation (shown in Figure 2) was a useful tool to illustrate different levels of engagement. While there were times when decisions and activities were reflective of true adult–youth partnerships, sometimes these were being made or taking place on one of the lower rungs. Being transparent about the extent of youth decision-making power in different situations was an important part of navigating the power dynamics at play.

Figure 2 – Ladder of young people's participation



4 Sharing power means sharing information and responsibility

A key step in acknowledging power dynamics was for the Foundation to be comfortable with sharing power. As a staff member put it, it was important to “recognize that the whole organization needs to be on board. There’s a lot of internal work that needs to happen before being ready to take on an inclusion program. If adults are not engaged in their own learning process to address fears about making mistakes and sharing power, it is hard to engage young people” (*ibid.*, p. 25). Being transparent about things like budgets, workloads, timelines and administrative requirements helped to keep young people in the loop and able to participate in an informed way. Terms of reference were also created to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the youth advisory, adult allies and foundation staff. As a YAC member described, “I am expected to come prepared because it is part of my commitment. Be clear on what’s expected of the young people and what young people are expecting of the organization supporting them” (*ibid.*, p. 12).

5 Staff who build bridges between youth and the institution are the key to success

The program manager leading the youth engagement work had the professional skills to lead deep community engagement as well as personal experience of what it was like to be both a foster kid and a foster parent. This combination of professional and lived expertise was an integral component of the success of the youth engagement work of the Fostering Change initiative. However, lived expertise is not something that is typically valued through traditional recruitment processes. Bringing in youth engagement staff on a short-term contract was a way of demonstrating the importance of the role before the Foundation committed to a permanent position.

6 Youth engagement staff need to be well supported in order to support everyone else

Youth engagement staff work at the intersection between overall vision and daily practice, between adults learning to share power with youth and youth learning to work with an institution, and between the day-to-day realities of young people and systems that were not built for them. As a staff member commented, “It’s hard work to hold. This is something for foundations to understand when bringing people on to do real community engagement. They are coming in deeply connected to these issues and communities. Foundations are trading on staff’s credibility and relationships, whether they think about it or not. That is why it’s essential to demonstrate that their work is respected throughout the organization, not pigeon-holed or minimized” (*ibid.*, p. 14). Supports needed to allow youth engagement staff to do their best work include: job security, decent pay, trust and openness with leadership, commitment to reducing

barriers to youth within the organization, and efforts to ensure the youth program is understood and valued by all staff and board members.

7 Respect the knowledge youth bring with them while supporting them to increase their capacity to lead

The YAC had a dedicated training budget that youth could use for their learning priorities, such as group workshops in public policy or media training or facilitation skills. Staff and adult allies also provided ongoing informal coaching and ensured that young people were well prepared and supported before speaking at a conference or with elected officials, for example. As a community partner and grantee explained, “Fostering Change identified each young person’s gifts and linked them up with mentorship that was meaningful and effective. That reflects an Indigenous concept because, in our traditional community, you were identified for your gifts at a young age and mentored. The act of honouring young people is so profound for their development, for their sense of belonging, especially when they don’t have a family” (*ibid.*, p. 14).

8 In the Youth Advisory Circle, take time to get to know each other and to stay on track with the work

YAC members are most proud of two things: the relationships they built with each other and the achievements they accomplished together. Each YAC meeting started with a meal and a check-in question, both intended to contribute towards building relationships between members and with youth engagement staff. Sometimes the YAC would come together at someone’s house to prepare the meal, taking time to be in each other’s company outside official business. Having strong relationships between YAC members and with the youth engagement staff made it easier to stay on track and support each other through challenges and when the work invariably got messy.

9 Designated adult allies play a quiet but essential role in the Youth Advisory Circle, supporting young people to contribute to their fullest

The YAC was supported by three adult allies who were interviewed and chosen by YAC members themselves. Each of them had experience working with youth and were dedicated to the goals of the initiative. Their role was to attend meetings and build relationships with the young people to assist the group to learn, discuss and work together. As one of them noted, “My practice was to really engage youth members as knowledgeable people that deserve mentorship. They deserve to be treated as people who have capacity and ability and who are also there to learn. I asked a lot of questions and mediated what came up in the group as respectfully as I would with any other colleague” (*ibid.*, p. 15).

The Youth Engagement Report also highlights some key practices that ensured that young people were able to participate in the Fostering Change initiative:

- Food at meetings (healthy full meals, not just pizza!)
- Honoraria
- Transit tickets
- Meeting times that work for youth (it might be Friday evenings!)
- Variety of communication methods (graphic recording, silent reflection, sharing circles)
- Registration and travel to events and conferences
- Printed material for youth to review, rather than relying on electronic communications
- Individualized support (like assistance getting a passport to present at an out-of-country conference)

Being able to effectively support young people's participation in the work of Fostering Change required dedicated human and financial resources. It also required adjusting internal practices to support the work, which at times created challenges. Organizational choices such as whether or not to allow evening or weekend meetings in the office or how honoraria should be disbursed, along with questions around the frequency of meetings, amount of the food budget and how long processes took, had an effect on the overall climate of inclusion/exclusion.

Community grants

The approach to grantmaking evolved over the lifespan of Fostering Change. As with YHI, all grants were reviewed by a volunteer advisory committee made up of community members with expertise in the issue, ranging from young people with lived expertise (including a few members of the Youth Advisory Circle), researchers, direct service providers and foster parents. Together they made funding recommendations to Vancouver Foundation's board for final approval. Also similar to YHI, Fostering Change's grantmaking contained an evaluation component but, rather than funds being provided to organizations for them to conduct their own evaluations, funding was instead given to compensate for the time it took staff to participate in shared learning and evaluation activities led by the Foundation's in-house evaluation staff. The goal here was to ensure that learning was being shared between grantees and used to benefit the network, and initiative, as a whole. As one grantee explained, "Vancouver Foundation worked really hard to be a network medium, bringing grantees together to learn and share. We realized we have the same objectives and can collaborate instead of being siloed and competing for funding" (Glass, 2018, p. 20). Having a close relationship with grantees allowed Fostering Change to adapt its approach to grantmaking to better serve the overall goals of the initiative.

In the early years, larger multi-year grants were given for single-agency, direct service approaches to supporting young people aging out of foster care. This filled an important need in the community and allowed critical services to be delivered to young people, but it was not necessarily the most effective way to create change at a systemic level. There was a willingness from both the granting advisory committee and staff working on the initiative to fund prototypes and take risks to test out new ideas and ways of doing things as well as provide funding for activities that it is not always easy to get a grant for, such as engaging young people, bringing community together, creating and implementing advocacy campaigns, and working across agencies. The willingness to take risks and provide flexible funding supported grantees in delivering projects with greater impact. As one grantee put it, “We were listening to the interests and needs of the youth, and that would sometimes be different than what we had planned. The Foundation was flexible with us in terms of changing the project to meet the needs of the youth. That allowed us to do more meaningful work” (*ibid.*, p. 21). Over time, grants of varying sizes with different granting criteria were eventually developed, with the aim of supporting different aspects of the overall work of Fostering Change. In the five years between 2012 and 2017, \$5 million in grants were given to community organizations through five different types of grant, as described below.

Youth Engagement/Youth Partnership Grants

Youth Engagement/Youth Partnership Grants were grants for up to one year for a maximum of \$25,000. A condition of the grants was that young people had to be included in the design and delivery of the projects, which were intended to amplify the voices and engagement of young people. The purpose was to support creating knowledge, awareness and dialogue about experiences of youth transitioning from care to adulthood; connections between young people in, and from, care and their local community members; youth-led research and/or creative arts-based projects. These grants were reviewed first by the Youth Advisory Circle, who provided their recommendations and rationale for funding to the advisory committee.

Community planning and engagement grants

Community planning and engagement grants were grants for up to 18 months for a maximum of \$50,000. Their purpose was to support strategies that built capacity and common ground for shared action and learning by community stakeholders. Grants could support work such as convening and scoping early-phase engagement of stakeholders in development of practice and/or policy innovation, coordination of initial collective impact strategies, and local advocacy and awareness work connected to the goals of the Fostering Change initiative.

Multi-year strategies

Multi-year grants were for up to three years for a maximum of \$150,000. The expectation of these grants was that they would generate evidence to improve practice, policy and levels of collaboration and community engagement. In later years, the focus was explicitly on applications that extended beyond direct service and case management approaches. The expectation of grantees was that they would participate in the Foundation-supported shared learning and evaluation agenda as well as communications, public engagement and youth engagement activities.

Small grants

Small grants for \$10,000 were given for youth- and community-led initiatives focused on youth engagement, relationship building, community convening and public engagement. Given the small amount of funding, decisions on small grants were based upon the submission of the letter of intent alone and not a full application. To provide a quicker response, decisions on funding were made by staff in partnership with at least one volunteer advisory committee member.

Legacy grants

Legacy grants were provided in 2017, the final year that Vancouver Foundation housed the Fostering Change initiative, for a maximum of \$150,000 over two years. These were grants to build upon and carry forward the work of Fostering Change, in the following categories: youth engagement, capacity development, shared learning and research.

Shared learning, evaluation and research

Fostering Change's approach to shared learning and evaluation also evolved over the lifespan of the initiative. As indicated above, shared learning and evaluation activities were led by a staff member on the Fostering Change team, which was the first time that the Foundation had a dedicated staff person for learning and evaluation. Understanding that "Foundations need to become good learners and to position learning itself as a core strategy" when working on complex systems change, Fostering Change wanted to have the capacity for learning and evaluation embedded within the team as a key resource for both the Foundation and grantees (Patrizi *et al.*, 2013, p. 52). Just as with youth engagement staff, the position was initially a short-term contract, in order to demonstrate the importance to the organization of having a permanent staff member responsible for this work. In fact, this work proved to be so important that the Foundation currently has a Learning and Evaluation team within the Grants and Community Initiatives department, which is now staffed by three full time employees.

At the outset, only multi-year grantees were involved in the shared learning and evaluation (SLE) working group, but after almost a year the group was made accessible to all grantees (at their request), no matter what size or type of grant they received. Given the increased number of agencies involved, the SLE work evolved from one working group into multiple learning pods, each focusing on one theme related to the work, such as housing, education, culture, etc. Grantee staff self-selected into a pod based on its relevance to their work, and each worked through a prototyping cycle (planning, studying, prototyping, reflecting, and sharing) by selecting a practice that they were interested in trying. All grantees across the pods came together at least three times a year for Grantee Learning Days to share what they were doing and to learn from each other. Initially only grantees attended the Learning Days, but these evolved into an opportunity to bring together people across the community – with grantees being invited to extend the invitation to young people they worked with as well as other partner organizations, including the BC Ministry of Child and Family Development. These days were hosted by Vancouver Foundation in partnership with an external facilitator, and the process for each day was designed with interested participants, including young people.

The shared learning and evaluation work changed the Fostering Change team's relationship with grantees from one based on accountability to that of a learning partner. One grantee expressed it like this: "The Foundation worked closely with grantees. They got an intimate look at the barriers and opportunities so agencies were less afraid to give legitimate feedback. The Foundation didn't want the initiatives to fail. They encouraged us to look for what was working and expand it. Most funders think they can't take that risk and we have to pretend the proposal is perfect, that the organization always knows exactly what it's doing" (Glass, 2018, p. 21). Being a learning partner also meant approaching the work with a beginner's mindset and acknowledging that Vancouver Foundation is not the expert. Instead, the role of the Foundation was to honor the wisdom held by community groups by creating the space for grantees to reflect, share and build collective learning into their own work.

Beyond working with grantees and community partners, another way that the Foundation supported learning was through commissioning research. In 2013, Vancouver Foundation worked with Sentis Market Research to survey 1,820 adult British Columbians to "gain a better understanding of public attitudes, values and perceptions about youth transitioning to adulthood and, more specifically, for youth aging out of government care in the province" (Vancouver Foundation, 2013, p. 3). The results of the survey indicated that 80% of parents who have 19–28-year-olds living away from home provided their children with some form of emotional, social and financial support, and most British Columbians believed that 19-year-olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live away from home and support themselves independently: 68% of British Columbians were thus in favor of increasing the age at which government support is cut off to at least 21 (*ibid.*, p. 4).

The survey also, however, pointed to a lack of knowledge about young people in government care: only 28% of those surveyed were aware that government support ends when young people in care reach their 19th birthday and 71% underestimated the percentage of young people who are currently in foster care or in a group home (*ibid.*, p. 7). Given that systems change is enabled by public support, this information helped the Fostering Change team design their public engagement activities to increase visibility of and engagement with the issue, as will be described further in the next section. Indeed, a second public opinion survey, conducted three years later in 2016, indicated that public awareness and understanding of the scale and significance of issues facing young people in foster care had increased, with 38% of British Columbians aware that government support ended at 19 and less than half underestimating the number of young people living in care (Fostering Change, 2016, p. 4). The survey also found that an increased number of British Columbians (76%) were in favor of extending the cut-off for receiving assistance and support beyond the age of 19 (*ibid.*, p. 2). Knowing that there was broad public backing for better supporting young people aging out of foster care helped make the case for the Foundation to step into an advocacy role and dedicate human and financial resources to making policy change on the issue.

As well as conducting research to understand the public perceptions of and support towards the issue of young people transitioning from foster care, the Foundation also supported research to increase public and political will. The most high-profile piece of research to come out of Fostering Change was *Opportunities in Transition: An Economic Analysis of Investing in Youth Aging out of Foster Care*, (Shaffer *et al.*, 2016) The purpose of the study was threefold:

- to document what is known about the outcomes for youth aging out of care
- to estimate the costs of adverse outcomes
- to identify measures that could improve outcomes and assess their incremental costs in relation to the potential benefits they may generate

This was the first time that an economic analysis had been done with data specific to British Columbia. The research showed that educational, economic, social and wellness outcomes for many youth aging out of care were poor when compared with most young people, and the costs of those adverse outcomes were extremely high – up to \$268 million per year (*ibid.*, p. 1). Conversely, a basic package of increased supports from age 19 through 24 for living costs, education, community connections and social supports that could build on existing services and programs was estimated at \$57 million per year (*ibid.*, p. 2). This piece of research proved critical to building public will and advocacy efforts by proving that not only do youth aging out of foster care in BC deserve the same support and opportunities as all young people, but that it also makes economic sense to provide these.

Public engagement

A key component to the Fostering Change initiative was engaging the public to create the conditions for policy change. As a staff member put it, “Early on we realized we don’t have an evidence problem; we have a policy problem. How do we influence public will to provide political licence for the policy shifts that need to happen?” (Glass, 2018, p. 18). Part of the approach was to work under the belief that government both wants to do the right thing and is more likely to work hard to change policy when it thinks the public is behind it. Another belief the team was driven by is that it is within the role of a community foundation to influence public policy and advocate for change. Indeed, as Gibbins (2016) argues, “Policy advocacy is an inherent part of the charitable mission” and charities, which include community foundations, have a “moral imperative to pursue the public good and to be engaged as policy advocates in political and ethical debates about policy and social change.” In the case of Fostering Change, policy advocacy took place in a few different forms, including grassroots organizing, active campaigning, public awareness-raising, research, network-building, convening, and communicating with elected officials.

Building off the public opinion surveys This issue is, which indicated a willingness to get behind increased supports for youth aging out of care but a lack of awareness about the issue, one of the first projects Fostering Change took on was to change the narrative around youth in and from care. The team recognized that “sad images of marginalized youth might provoke a cheque-book response, but they won’t provoke a policy response. And youth won’t want to stick around, either. It’s their stories. It’s their lives” (Glass, 2018, p. 16).

Young people were trained and supported to talk about systemic issues, combining personal storytelling with a clear policy ask. As a YAC member pointed out, “This issue is about all of us, not one of us” (*ibid.*, p. 12). In 2015, the *Messaging & Communications Guide* was created based on input from youth, service providers, front-line workers, policy makers, funders, engaged parents, communications specialists and advocates. Its goal was to provide a resource for organizations, journalists and other people interested in the issue and to reframe it from one of stigma and hopelessness to one of hope and opportunity to make change. It also tried to get the public to think of youth in care as “our kids” instead of “those kids”, redefining how we perceive our role and responsibility as individuals and as a society to help them reach their potential.

That same year, a series of five community conversations held alongside community partners convened more than 350 people across the Lower Mainland. The conversations were designed to get participants sharing knowledge and networks with each other, spark new thinking from local perspectives map local assets and capacities for supporting young people leading up to and following aging out of care, and identify trends that would help establish shared interests in new granting, public policy, and youth and community engagement priorities (Fostering Change, 2015, p. 3). This was a starting point for building on the knowledge that exists in communities, to better

serve, support and enable healthy transitions to adulthood for young people in our care. The year 2015 culminated with the launch of a standalone Fostering Change website in order to share stories, resources and information – and to gather a network of supporters.

The next phase of the public engagement work was focused on active campaigning. Using a petition to build a list of supporters, a combination of online outreach and street teams were used to gather petition signatures as part of a campaign titled “Write the Future”. In six weeks of active campaigning more than 15,000 signatures were gathered from members of the public who backed increased supports for young people aging out of foster care. The campaign was a mechanism to increase public awareness of the issue and further proved that there was broad public support for it – which was important leading into the 2017 provincial election in British Columbia.

The next phase of that campaign was #supportthe700, focused on the candidates for the election. A pledge was developed asking candidates to commit to up to four actions related to improving supports for young people aging out of foster care. Through mobilizing the 15,000 supporters and conducting direct outreach to candidates, 147 candidates (40% of the total candidature) signed the pledge, 41 of whom went on to be elected. Additionally, the platforms of all three primary parties mentioned young people aging out of care, and in one of the televised debates leading up to the election the leaders were asked what they would do to improve support for young people aging out of care.

Engaging in advocacy at this scale was a new activity for the Foundation, one that required different skills and expertise than existed on the Fostering Change team. With just 3.5 full-time employees covering all aspects of the Fostering Change initiative, additional human resources were also required to run effective campaigns while maintaining the grantmaking, youth engagement and shared learning, evaluation and research work. In order to both develop the capacity of the Foundation to engage in this work and also involve young people in as many aspects of the campaigns as possible, Fostering Change partnered with contractors who had the skills and capacity to teach and learn as they worked. External consultants provided expertise in campaign strategy, communications, facilitation, public engagement and Nationbuilder web platform training.

To engage in advocacy as a registered charity, Vancouver Foundation had to remain staunchly non-partisan throughout the campaign work. Staff, board and young people needed to be educated on the rules as they pertained to election campaigns in order to reduce the sense of risk and ensure that the Foundation’s reputation would not be damaged. This work resulted in what one city councillor described “the best example I can point to of grassroots organizing and public policy campaigning in BC in the last five years” (Glass, 2018, p. 6). Recently, the BC government made significant policy improvements to the eligibility of former foster care youth to access financial support, the amount they can claim and the length of time they can continue to access it, by investing \$30 million in the program over three years, starting in 2018–19.

Lessons

Over the past few years, Vancouver Foundation has been working to better understand its role in supporting change. To do so, it has developed a theory of philanthropy, intended to “articulate how and why [it] will use its resources to achieve its mission and vision” (Patton *et al.*, 2015, p. 7). What has emerged is that Vancouver Foundation’s primary contribution to social change is influence, which is used to inspire community change through raising and granting money, convening formal and informal conversations, providing sectoral leadership and maintaining a solid professional reputation. This is evident in the work of the Fostering Change initiative.

As a community partner recounted, “Fostering Change was a real game changer and a landscape changer. It created culture shifts: in people’s attitudes towards youth aging out of foster care, and in the relationships among funders and community groups” (Glass, 2018, p. 6). It also brought increased attention and profile to organizations and individuals that had been in this work long before Vancouver Foundation made it a priority: “Our organization has been working with foster children for 30 years. When an actor as big as Vancouver Foundation entered the policy arena, it gave new legitimacy and visibility to these issues. Now we are able to attract MPs and city councillors to our events. We are more important to decision-makers than before” (*ibid.*, p. 20).

Making young people central to the initiative and making youth engagement a criterion for organizations seeking grants encouraged community organizations to improve their practice and see young people as significant assets: “The youth facilitators became legitimate advisors in our field. The initiative gave our network of organizations, even City Hall, access to an untapped network of young people who had become experienced in effective community engagement” (*ibid.*, p. 21). Recognizing, and growing comfortable with, its influence allowed Vancouver Foundation to amplify the voices and experiences of young people with lived expertise of the child welfare system, to invest in research and grantmaking on a targeted issue and to take on a new role as an advocate.

In order to address the root causes of complex social issues, foundations are finding that an emergent approach that “allows evolution and adaptation to challenges that arise as the strategy unfolds” is required, and Vancouver Foundation is no exception (McCarthy *et al.*, 2017, p. 64). The guiding principles of emergent philanthropy include: strengthening relationships between systems-level actors and the Foundation; co-creating strategy through collaboration with grantees, partners and those most affected by the issue; thinking at a systems level; adaptability supported by learning, self-reflection, critical thinking and experimentation; prioritizing equitable grant processes in which those most affected can both inform the process and successfully apply for grants; and committing to processes proven to lead to improved community outcomes such as through treating stakeholders as equals, focusing on the root problem and being authentic (*ibid.*, p. 66). Each of the four parts of the strategy described above required the Fostering Change team

to work differently, which was only possible through strengthened relationships and adaptive processes.

Working in this way also required a significant commitment of both human and financial resources. In 2016, for example, the initiative's program budget was \$468,500 excluding grants and staff. Along with the 3.5 full-time employees (director, program manager, evaluation manager and grant administrator) who made up the Fostering Change initiative, additional support was also provided by communications, finance, donor services and executive staff, in addition to the external consultants previously indicated. Working across the Foundation meant that internal practices in other departments also needed to adapt and change in order to support the work.

In the words of one Foundation executive, "We had an obligation to protect the organization. At the same time we had to acknowledge that we were asking youth to step into our box, not the other way around. So we had to face that there would be some things we needed to adjust internally" (*ibid.*, p. 25). That said, program staff reflected that the responsiveness of the organization to adjusting internal practices to support meaningful youth engagement was uneven. For example, Foundation administration twice changed the way YAC members received compensation out of concerns about accountability – from cash at each meeting to a cheque at each meeting to a lump sum termed a bursary. In one case, a YAC member living in social housing became ineligible for his apartment because he had to declare the bursary as income. Practices and changes such as this may have seemed small and more efficient for the Foundation, but they could have (and did have) huge consequences on the lives of young people. Balancing the Foundation's need for risk management with the creation of conditions for new ways of working needs to be spread across the organization; the commitment towards youth engagement and advocacy can't be confined to one department or initiative.

Working closely with young people and in community meant that Fostering Change evolved in a fluid way, with staff constantly learning as they went and adapting activities and strategies accordingly. This meant that sometimes the work moved very slowly, while at other times it had to move quickly. Keeping both internal and external stakeholders in the loop occasionally proved challenging. As a donor services staff member pointed out, "It was important for our team to understand why the Foundation is running a program instead of just making grants. What makes the program unique? How does it relate to the organizational objectives? It was not always easy for us to explain to donors" (*ibid.*, p. 23). Program staff often struggled when asked to report back to donors about the impact of their donation, because the initiative was not about service delivery. And challenges also arose when staff in other parts of the organization used language to describe the initiative that diverged from the narratives developed by youth and program staff.

These issues highlighted the need for better communication and understanding within the Foundation as well as, again, the need to have the entire Foundation on board with new ways of working. Likewise, sometimes external partners felt out of the loop as the initiative grew

and changed. As a community partner described it, “You create a network, and the community supports the public policy campaign. People put a lot of effort and time into it. When it all gets going, you need a feedback mechanism that shows the progress being made towards the stated goals” (*ibid.*, p. 21). While Fostering Change made sure to get buy-in from community partners at the start of the campaigns, more communication and transparency was needed throughout the initiative to keep everyone engaged.

Throughout the initiative, Vancouver Foundation acknowledged that the wisdom and commitment to this work resided in community, and in 2018 the Foundation returned Fostering Change to the community that had inspired it. The 2017 legacy grants provided funding for organizations to continue aspects of the initiative, with First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition taking on the continued advocacy work of the initiative. As a non-partisan coalition of 101 provincial and regional organizations, First Call is well positioned to expand the work of Fostering Change across the province and hold government accountable to better supporting youth aging out of care.

The sunsetting of the Fostering Change initiative at Vancouver Foundation was, however, not without challenges. While the board “saw the Foundation’s role as an incubator” (*ibid.*, p. 22) this was not always clearly communicated. Given that the initiative had previously been renewed twice (from 2012 to 2015 and then again from 2015 to 2018), many people and organizations assumed that the initiative would continue to be renewed, despite being told that it would end in 2018. And even though people understood that no further grants would be made to support work related to Fostering Change, it was more challenging for them to recognize that there would no longer be dedicated resources, such as staff and a program budget, at Vancouver Foundation for the initiative.

In a recent study looking at funders who managed a “successful exit” of major, time-limited, place-based initiatives, the authors found that the following components were vital: “[an exit] guided by respect for the relationships the foundation has forged with grantee partners; a clear intention to sustain the change-making efforts at the core of the initiative; inclusive and evidence-based decision-making; thoughtful and advance consideration of what comes next; and proactive management of the internal changes likely to accompany the transition to new efforts and focuses” (Cau Yu *et al.*, 2017, p. 65–6). These are important considerations for the Foundation as it takes on further time-limited strategic priorities.

Conclusion

While Vancouver Foundation is no longer housing the Fostering Change initiative, youth engagement remains a permanent focus of the Foundation. The current youth engagement initiative, LEVEL, builds upon the relationships, lessons and capacities developed out of Fostering Change and includes a grantmaking, grassroots-organizing and a public policy program component to address racial equity within the nonprofit sector. LEVEL also continues the practice of having clear plans about which young people are to be engaged, with an explicit focus on Indigenous and racialized immigrant and refugee young people. Additionally, Vancouver Foundation continues to prioritize addressing the root causes of issues through its focus on funding systems-change work through its responsive grantmaking program. By continuing to work in this way, the Foundation is indicating its desire to embrace its role as a changemaker, advocate and active community participant.

Three key takeaways

1

It's all about relationships: making time and space to build upon and strengthen relationships with and between grantees, partners, staff and young people is crucial. Don't attempt to tackle an issue unless you have existing relationships and experience in that area.

2

“Nothing about us without us”: place at the centre the voices and lived expertise of those most affected. Approach the work with a beginner's mindset and acknowledge that you are (probably) not the expert.

3

Understand and be willing to shift power dynamics: engaging in advocacy and changemaking requires flexibility and different ways of working (which will likely include changing or adapting internal policies and procedures) for the entirety of the organization. If it's a time-limited strategy, make sure to plan the end from the beginning and be clear and transparent about timelines and commitments.

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