Case Study: High Impact Volunteer Engagement Pilot

Offer more services with fewer resources is a common nonprofit motto. The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, the state’s community foundation, saw an opportunity to reframe this perspective by taking a look at the role skills-based volunteers can play in nonprofit capacity building.

The High Impact Volunteer Engagement (HIVE) pilot was seeded by the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation as a unique initiative that was implemented with the expertise of two cross-sector partners. As part of the initiative, 10 nonprofit organizations were selected to participate in a year-long training, coaching and support program to expand capacity through skills-based volunteer engagement. The impact has been far-reaching: the 10 organizations are now equipped with powerful new methods of thinking about strategic volunteer engagement to increase organizational effectiveness for greater outreach and social impact.

INCEPTION OF THE PILOT

The idea for the HIVE pilot was incubated at the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, the state’s community foundation. The Foundation invests charitable assets of generous donors to make grants to nonprofit organizations and provide scholarships to students with the goal of maximizing impact. Since the Foundation’s establishment in 1962, it has fostered wide-ranging partnerships on public issues. These partnerships aid in the delivery of the Foundation’s mission of strengthening communities and inspiring greater giving to improve the quality of life for the people of New Hampshire.

Innovation has emerged as a key strategy for the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and its donors, who seek to create maximum impact with charitable dollars. The Foundation’s enduring commitment to bring best practices from around the country to New Hampshire is guided by a vision to help communities thrive.
in a rapidly changing world. For more than half a century, the Foundation has developed partnerships and programs that stretch deep into the state, allowing it to become well-acquainted with New Hampshire’s social and economic landscape. In 2013 alone, it distributed more than $30 million in grants and scholarships, collaborating with thousands of partners on programs ranging from early childhood education to fighting substance use disorders. Another recurring theme in its efforts has been nonprofit capacity building. For example, about nine years ago the Foundation spearheaded the transformation of the New Hampshire Center for Nonprofits from a trade association to a capacity building and leadership center. The Center has grown to extend valuable resources for management and leadership to 700 nonprofit members and approximately 3,500 board and staff leaders.

The squeeze that the recession of 2008—and the consequences of a recovering economy—put on nonprofit organizations reinforced the Foundation’s role in supporting the nonprofit sector. The Foundation renewed its determination to find creative capacity building approaches to help nonprofits achieve their mission. “The environment required us to think about new ways to support the nonprofit sector. In particular, the Foundation was looking for ways to bring more resources to the sector by tapping into New Hampshire’s human capital,” said Anne Phillips, Director of Grantmaking.

There was a reservoir of talent, skills and expertise among New Hampshire residents. More precisely, New Hampshire’s populace—from those nearing traditional retirement age to the millennial generation—carried a strong desire to give back to the community. That population, interested in deeper civic engagement, represented a wealth of resources that could be energized to benefit the nonprofit sector. After extensive research and conversations with experts, including staff at VolunteerMatch, Phillips became convinced that a program to improve the engagement of skilled volunteers could provide the much-needed impetus. Conceptually, the program would match these resources
with the needs of the nonprofit sector. Although many New Hampshire nonprofits were engaging volunteers successfully, there was a need for resources specifically focused on strengthening volunteer engagement practices and better use of skilled volunteers.

The Foundation’s vision resonated with two donors whose involvement laid the foundation for a cross-sector partnership. The Corporate Fund, a unique collaborative effort that brings together funding from some of the state’s largest corporations for a variety of philanthropic initiatives, signed on as a supporter. Over the last three decades, The Corporate Fund has supported various programs to enhance management and leadership capabilities of nonprofits. Incidentally, the Foundation had promoted the creation of the Corporate Fund, and the two organizations continue to collaborate. An anonymous donor interested in capacity-building and innovation also joined the effort. These open-minded investors were prepared to bet on new ideas.

With the funding in place, Phillips was able to move forward. She recognized the need for operational partners to help shape the vision into reality.

**FINDING THE RIGHT PARTNERS**

The Foundation had laid out the vision, provided the financial backing, and now extended its crucial leadership role by identifying and bringing key partners together. JFFixler Group, a nationally recognized leader in innovative and strategic volunteer engagement, and the New Hampshire Center for Nonprofits (Center) were identified as having the valuable volunteer engagement expertise and operational support necessary to coordinate the program.

Beth Steinhorn, President of JFFixler Group, had designed and implemented a model for capacity building through an innovative pilot project in skilled volunteer engagement, and refined it at organizations across the US and Canada. She understood the tremendous potential in catalyzing sustained organizational change. But for her, this initiative offered something different. “It was the vision of the Foundation for a strong cross-sector partnership in a statewide initiative that brought together an array of nonprofits from across the state,” she said.

Mary Ellen Jackson, Executive Director of the Center, added: “The HIVE pilot was innovative because it recognized the need for nonprofits to develop a deeper talent, and also build their thinking about resources, available at our fingertips. It took volunteerism into a whole new arena.”

The Foundation’s choice of partners coupled volunteer engagement expertise with an adept nonprofit capacity building partner to transform the concept into a practical, inspiring effort.
Steinhorn’s training and coaching expertise combined with the Center’s connections in the sector, provided the specialized skills required for successful implementation of the HIVE pilot. The two partners also shared the Foundation’s passion to expand resources for the nonprofit community.

“No one had a pony in the race,” Jackson said. “It was three good partners saying ‘let’s see if we can make this happen.”

“THE HIVE PILOT WAS INNOVATIVE BECAUSE IT RECOGNIZED THE NEED FOR NONPROFITS TO DEVELOP A DEEPER TALENT.” MARY ELLEN JACKSON, NEW HAMPSHIRE CENTER FOR NONPROFITS

CHANGE THEORY AND PRACTICE

Steinhorn explains the theory of change underpinning the HIVE pilot this way: “successful and lasting organizational transformation begins with one small strategic step.”

HIVE activities exposed the nonprofits to emerging trends in volunteerism and the ways in which those trends could enhance organizational capacity. Models and tools for organizational change were interwoven into training and coaching activities. “We focused on how to make change stick,” Steinhorn said. “It was a combination of introducing best practices in volunteerism along with organizational transformation to position pilot teams as agents of change.”

INTEGRATING BEST PRACTICES

Steinhorn helped design a competitive application process to select 10 New Hampshire nonprofit organizations to participate. Applicants outlined strategic goals and described ways in which engaging skilled volunteers would lead to greater impact for their organizations. Each four-to-eight person project team was required to include volunteers and staff. Finally, the executive and board leadership of candidate organizations had to support the applications.

By integrating skilled volunteers and getting senior management buy-in from the onset, the HIVE model emphasized key best practices in volunteer engagement. Support from executive leadership was also important because nonprofits did not receive any direct funding, though their participation entailed a significant time and
organizations with budgets over $10 million and more than 50 staff, to those with budgets less than $250,000 and just one or two staff members. The amount of volunteer involvement also varied with each participant’s program model, with some organizations using only a small handful of volunteers to others leveraging hundreds.

The design of the HIVE pilot focused on effectively meeting the diverse needs of this cohort of nonprofits.

The pilot was launched at a full-day summit which brought together all 10 teams and key partners in one room. Each team identified one clearly defined area for organizational change that would benefit most by engaging skilled volunteers. Much of the summit was designed to support teams as they refined their projects. The idea was to pinpoint one small but crucial strategic change. Examples include RESPONSE to Sexual & Domestic Violence which prioritized remodeling its volunteer training program and updating it with an online volunteer training option; The River Center, a family resource center, focused on developing a “volunteer leadership succession plan” to ensure the longevity and sustainability of volunteer-led programs; and, Symphony New Hampshire decided to plan a fundraising event led and managed primarily by volunteers.

personnel commitment. Tanya Prather, Manager of Volunteer Services at Home Health & Hospice Care, one of the HIVE participants, recalled discussing the time commitment with her manager: Could their team really afford it? The coaching sessions and the implementation could involve 35-50+ hours of the team leader’s time, in addition to that of other staff and volunteers. After weighing the tradeoffs, they decided to take the plunge. Like other nonprofits in the program, the Home Health & Hospice Care team prioritized investing in skilled volunteer engagement for greater returns.

The nonprofits selected to participate represented a broad range of issue areas and services: from support to victims of domestic and sexual violence, to housing help for the homeless, to programs promoting art and culture. The size of the organizations involved varied—from
Over the course of 11 months, Steinhorn worked closely with each of the participating nonprofits, providing guidance in making change and assistance to tackle the hurdles organizations encountered. Cohort-wide activities were integrated throughout the program to create opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.

A committee with one representative each from the Foundation, JFFixler Group and the Center met regularly to oversee progress and make revisions to shepherd the program through to success.

Participants took ownership of individual projects. “Those who signed up pushed themselves harder than anyone else,” Jackson said. “They are learners—and people who want to get better at every facet of their organization.”

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

The HIVE pilot focused on eight volunteer engagement practices:
1) Organizational commitment; 2) Volunteer roles; 3) Cultivation planning;
4) Recruitment tactics; 5) Screening & making the match; 6) Training & accountability; 7) Support & collaboration; 8) Measuring & acknowledging impact.

A bird’s-eye view of the results showed organizational improvements across all eight.

![HIVE Pre-Post Project Comparison](image-url)
The impact has percolated much deeper than statistics reflect. The pilot enabled fundamental shifts in perspective that opened new directions for both staff and volunteers.

For participants like Home Health & Hospice Care (HHHC), a simple technological fix connected many missing dots for the organization and its volunteers. Vigil volunteers at the organization provide company and comfort to patients during the last stages of life. It had become increasingly challenging for the volunteer manager to coordinate volunteer schedules on the phone without any technological support. HHHC wanted to develop volunteer leadership and an online portal to schedule and coordinate vigil volunteers. A volunteer on the HIVE pilot team with a background in technology helped develop a platform of tools. These included phone texts, broadcast messages and a shared calendar through which volunteers could remain informed and sign up for slots. The self-scheduling mechanism produced unanticipated results. It gave volunteers a tangible way of seeing their own contribution as part of a team and community.

A volunteer described her experience this way: “As a vigil volunteer, being able to see the volunteer calendar has a tremendous impact. Seeing the names and times and the hours that others are contributing makes me feel part of a much greater community that is surrounding this one individual. How profound it is to simply be a member of this volunteer community. This so-called technical solution around scheduling has had a far greater cultural impact than we could have anticipated. It is one of those unintended but positive outcomes.” The number of vigil hours in the first nine months following implementation was nearly double that of the previous year.

The HIVE pilot has many such powerful stories, testifying to its overall success and impact.

These nonprofits are now striving to sustain the changes introduced. Some are going further: extending the principles and strategies they learned to maximize volunteers’ skills in other areas of their organizations and programs.
NEXT STEPS

The HIVE pilot’s achievement and its significance for the nonprofit sector in New Hampshire has been gaining attention. The strongest indication of its success lies in the rising demand for similar initiatives. The Foundation and the Center have been receiving a steady stream of inquiries from other nonprofits looking for similar support. The three partners are committed to building on their work and are exploring models of scaling up the pilot to ensure that changes are sustained in participating organizations — and to reach a wider cross-section of nonprofits in New Hampshire. The Foundation is also looking for donors to finance follow-up programs and is hopeful that the success of the HIVE pilot will attract additional investors.

The HIVE pilot inspired nonprofits by giving them the means to think creatively about volunteer roles and responsibilities. It served as a catalyst to build momentum for wider organizational transformation. During the course of the program, the 10 teams shaped their nonprofits’ transformation based on new ideas: that volunteers are equally invested today in the impact of their service, that they are as accountable as full-time staff, and that their contribution can be far greater than routine, administrative tasks. In fact, volunteers are a valuable resource for the leadership, direction and sustainability of any organization’s endeavors.

To access resources related to the HIVE program, visit http://http://www.nhnonprofits.org/resource-center/resources-hive-program.

All photos were taken by Cheryl Senter, courtesy of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation.

This case study was developed by Bank of America Service Leadership Fellow Jayati Sethi.