

PEER NETWORKING AND COMMUNITY CHANGE

Experiences of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

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Executive Summary

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Peer networking is a problem-solving and decision-making approach built on *interaction*, both structured and informal, among two or more people defined as “equals” by their similar goals and interests, job roles or place in a community. Peers come together to exchange information, disseminate good practices, and build leadership structure for work they do together, such as a community change initiative.

A two-year study of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s peer networking activities focused on how they support the Foundation’s interests in community change and improving philanthropic practice. Results include both good practices and challenges of peer networking, and how these might be applied by Casey and other grantmakers.

How Peer Networking Evolved at the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Systematic use of peer networking approaches emerged from Casey’s system reform work beginning in the 1990’s. As part of this work, multi-site initiatives were shaped by numerous convenings of philanthropic and community peers. Activities expanded in the mid-1990s, as Casey developed a five-year plan and strategic framework, then obtained diverse input about them through “consultative sessions” involving nearly 600 stakeholders. The success of these approaches led to an organizational philosophy that “conversation matters” in the process of change, and that peer networking is a useful strategy for encouraging conversation.

The early success of Casey’s Children and Family Fellowship Alumni Network gave it a high profile in the Foundation. Coupled with extensive use of peer networking in Casey’s multi-site *Making Connections* initiative, this success encouraged wider application of the peer networking approaches examined in this study.

Peer Networking Activities Studied

A total of 19 peer networking activities were studied (see list at end). They included 13 that were funded and coordinated directly by Casey. Participants in these activities included Casey staff, staff of other foundations, and a variety of community leaders. Six other peer networking activities were examined in which Casey was a participant along with other foundations.

To learn about these activities, interviews were combined with document review. Interviewees included Casey staff, other philanthropic and community participants in the peer networking activities, and thought leaders in philanthropy.

An Example of Casey’s Peer Networking

At each of about four meetings a year of the **Urban Child Welfare Leaders Group**, approximately 20 commissioners or directors (and their deputies) of child welfare agencies in big American cities come together to talk about the unique challenges they face. They discuss frankly the many challenges of running a complex child welfare system in an urban setting, and they listen to experts who talk about topics like older youth aging out of care, or

court reform. The goal is to lift up specific problems a member wants the group's help to solve, and also to "move the field" towards systems change, including but not limited to the kinds of change the Annie E. Casey Foundation is promoting for vulnerable kids and families.

The Group's members pay their own way (Casey covers hotel and meeting expenses), and they set their own agenda (with support from Casey staff). One meeting a year is planned in collaboration with the Pew Commission on Child Welfare. The Commission helped fund a recent meeting on court reform, which included a strategic session on the regional level with court personnel and advocates. The Group now is operated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in collaboration with Casey Family Programs.

Though small, this peer network represents more than 50 percent of all "kids in care" in the United States. Thus it can have significant impact on how child welfare services are organized and delivered, and offer leadership for many communities not represented at its meetings.

Ten Good Practices of Peer Networking

Study results indicate that internal and external peer networking activities of the Annie E. Casey Foundation were seen as successful because they:

- Provide a safe, trustful place for participants to interact on topics important to them
- Encourage personal as well as professional interactions among participants
- Customize the peer networking structure to meet specific participant needs
- Promote opportunities for the participants and their organizations to collaborate
- Encourage participant feedback about the strengths and challenges of peer networking

- Build the activity's initial success before broadening its range of participants
- Offer resources for participants to translate ideas into action
- Create sub-groups within the peer networking activity to focus on particular topics of interest
- Shape the activity by analyzing the successes of other peer networking activities
- Level the playing field by sharing basic information about the focal area of peer networking

In addition, the peer networking activities studied reflected, to varying degrees, a dynamic balance between structure and informality – defined by Peters & Waterman in their 1987 book *In Search of Excellence* as "simultaneous loose-tight properties." They were structured enough to promote continuity and follow-through. But they also were informal enough to encourage candid conversation and adaptability to whatever the participants thought should be discussed.

Ten Challenges of Peer Networking

The research also identified several drawbacks or limitations of Casey's peer networking activities, along with operating strategies that are important but difficult to implement:

- Peer networking is costly in both time and money
- Participants in peer networking may find it difficult to take action on good ideas they've developed
- The goals of peer networking may be difficult to identify and to share with others
- Peer networking may be difficult to integrate with other activities of its sponsor

- It may be challenging to balance equality with expertise in selecting peer networking participants
- Organizational complexity and culture of a peer networking sponsor may limit chances for success
- It may be challenging to develop a good exit strategy for a peer networking activity
- Replicating peer networking activities may be difficult
- Participant turnover may limit the success of peer networking
- Individual and group psychological factors may limit the success of peer networking

Key Questions for Creating or Enhancing Peer Networks

Learnings from the 19 peer networks studied in this research inspired questions that might be used as a checklist for those who are deciding whether to create a peer network, how to implement it, or how to evaluate/enhance its operations:

- Who comes to the table as a peer? (e.g., are peers at the right levels in their organizations or communities?)
- Who facilitates the peer network? (e.g., its funder or a third party)
- What process and structure are needed for peer network meetings?
- What can be done to facilitate additional networking outside of peer network meetings?
- What resources are needed to operate the peer network?
- What policy needs to be developed for peer communications, both inside and outside?

- What relationships can be established with other peer networking activities?
- What measures of success are possible, and how can these be used to improve the peer network?
- What relationship does the peer network have to other organizational or community activities?
- What kind of exit strategy is needed, and how will network members know when to implement it?

Key Questions for Creating or Enhancing Peer Matching Systems

Although only one peer matching system (TARC) was examined in this study, considerable data are available from other research about its operation and successes, leading to another set of key questions that might be used by those planning, implementing, or enhancing/evaluating a peer matching activity:

- What are the specific purposes of the peer matching? (what is needed, not just what is wanted)
- Who needs to be present from both sides of the peer match?
- How will each side benefit from participating from the peer match?
- Who facilitates the peer matching?
- What resources are needed for peer matching?
- What measures of success are possible, and how can these be used to improve the peer matching activity?
- What relationship does the peer match have to other organizational or community activities?

- What kinds of follow-up to the peer matching are needed?

The good practices and challenges identified by this study might also be used alongside the two sets of key questions presented here, to guide brainstorming about peer networks and peer matching at any stage of their life cycles.

Acting on the Study's Results

Study findings suggest six ways in which the Annie E. Casey Foundation might expand and enhance its use of peer networking strategies:

- (1) Integrate these peer networking strategies internally with the Foundation's philanthropic strategy;
- (2) Disseminate learnings about peer networking through Casey's internal Knowledge Management system;
- (3) Hold a Casey "consultative session" to synthesize and advance knowledge on peer networking;
- (4) Promote links of Casey peer networks to other networks in philanthropy and community change, both internal and external;
- (5) Explore refinements in peer networking, such as low-cost approaches (many of the activities studied here are relatively costly to implement) and improved methods for including community residents; and
- (6) Evaluate more rigorously the impact of Casey's peer networking activities.

The study report also discusses how to place peer networking in the larger context of *transformational change for foundations* – how foundations re-shape their philanthropic strategy and their overall approaches to dealing with change, using approaches like peer networking. Casey has used

peer networking activities to increase active involvement of stakeholders in its initiatives, and to promote Casey's greater involvement in peer learning with other foundations. This represents a significant change in the Foundation's philanthropic strategy.

Comparisons also are made in the report with peer networking and transformational change approaches of other foundations, and with use of these methods in the private sector. These discussions raise additional issues that Casey and other foundations may consider in contemplating future uses of peer networking – as a strategy for promoting community change and for improving philanthropic practice.

PEER NETWORKING ACTIVITIES STUDIED

Casey-Coordinated Peer Networking

Child Welfare Training Directors Group
Children and Family Fellows Alumni Network
Community Foundation Exchange
Family Strengthening Awards
Language Access Network
Leadership in Action Program
Making Connections Local Coordinators Network
Making Connections Resident Leadership Network
Making Connections Social Network
National Partners Network
TARC Peer Matching
United Way Training Program
Urban Child Welfare Leaders Group

Externally-Coordinated Peer Networking

Casey/CSSP Alliance for Race Equity in Child Welfare
Lead Program Executives Group
Leadership Development Funder Affinity Network
Long-Term Funders Exchange
National Rural Funders Collaborative
PRI Makers Network

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