



INDEPENDENT  
SECTOR

# THREADS

WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

BOSTON HIGHLIGHTS



# THREADS BOSTON

WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Event held at City Year Headquarters  
June 3, 2015

INDEPENDENT SECTOR THANKS OUR FUNDER, PARTNERS, AND HOST FOR SUPPORTING THREADS BOSTON:

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The Bridgespan Group  
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# OVERVIEW OF THREADS

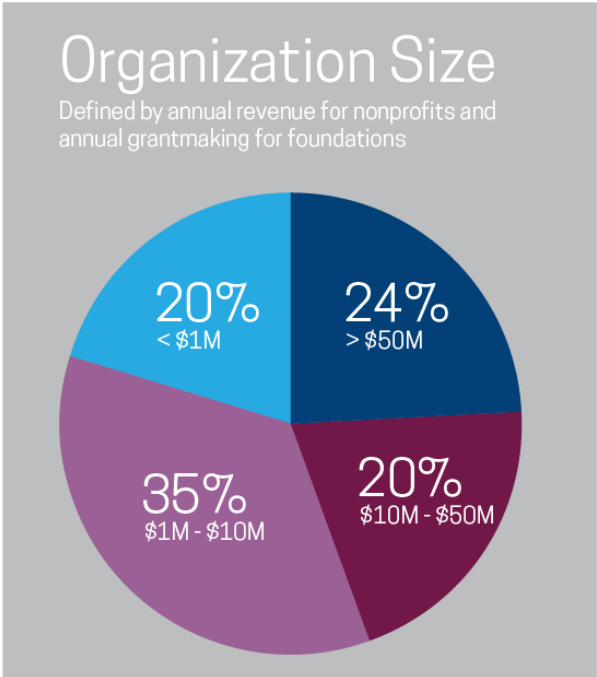
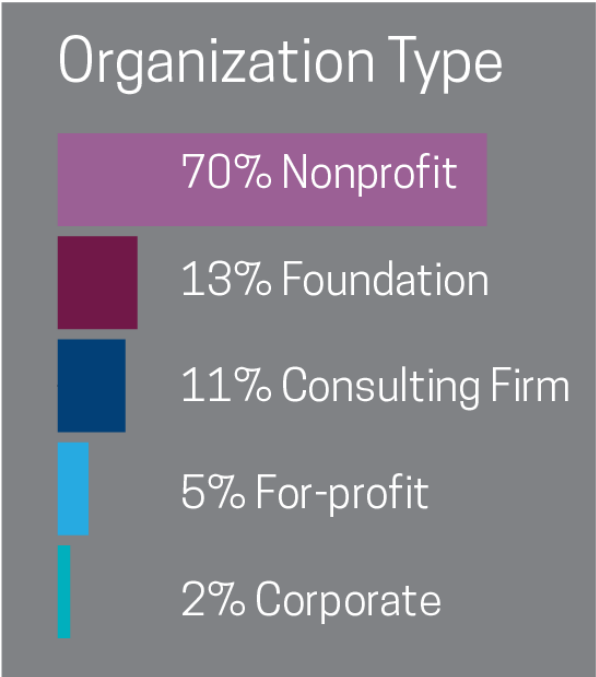
At the start of 2015, Independent Sector launched a series of community conversations called “Threads” in cities across the nation. The purpose was to convene leaders from nonprofits and foundations, and our other allies to explore the impact of society-wide trends on our sector today and in years to come. Threads are designed to engage over one thousand leaders in over a dozen cities to generate thousands of data points about (1) practices that are limiting the effectiveness of sector organizations and (2) innovative ideas for how to increase our impact. Each three-hour Thread featured:

- **Part I – Trends:** An overview of 9 global and national trends shaping our sector’s work, followed by a full group discussion to solicit feedback and generate additional insight about the trends;
- **Part II – Challenges and Solutions:** Small group discussions at which participants identify challenges they face at the organizational, sector, and societal level, then generate solutions for a particular challenge;
- **Part III – Bright Spots:** More small group discussions to brainstorm solutions that have moved the needle on a particular social/environmental issue (what we call “bright spots”);
- **Part IV – Feedback:** A large group discussion of potential roles that national organizations like Independent Sector can play to help the sector better accomplish its important work.

Input from each Thread is coded separately, and then analyzed alongside data from other events to create a national picture of challenges and bright spots. While these findings are not scientific per se, we believe they represent important perspectives from the field that can help drive our sector forward.

## THREADS BOSTON – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

### 68 Attendees



## TRENDS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE CHARITABLE SECTOR

Threads Boston kicked off with a presentation by Diana Aviv, President and CEO of Independent Sector, on [nine trends](#) shaping the world and our work. She did not make value judgments about the trends. Instead she sought to (1) make people aware of how the trends are shaping our world and therefore our work; and (2) encourage people to respond to the trends in light of their own organization's practices and particular circumstances. After this presentation, she encouraged participants to share their reactions to the trends. The following themes emerged.

### Major Themes

1. Diversity in Sector – As in other Threads communities, many attendees were concerned about the lack of diversity in the nonprofit and philanthropic community, even pointing out that in a city like Boston where people of color are a majority, the composition of leaders in the room did not reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.
2. Scale and Innovation – A pair of related themes that resonated with participants were scale and innovation. Some participants brought up the importance of scaling up efforts in collaboration with organizations and individuals and in partnerships with businesses to innovate and achieve impact nationally and globally. Others said that the charitable sector is already a source of innovation and change on the local and national levels and that it's important not to overlook areas in which charitable organizations excel in the drive for innovation and scale.
3. The Role of Business in the Sector – While partnerships with business were a key to success with many in the room, others questioned whether the business sector is truly more engaged in social and environmental change than it was in the past, or if business has simply become more successful at spreading the perception that it is more engaged.
4. Democracy and Citizen Engagement – Here in one of the true birthplaces of American democracy, participants raised questions about the changing nature of democracy and citizen engagement. One noted that engagement in the form of voting is down, and felt that general engagement with government also suffered. However, rising forces present both challenges and opportunities for democracy. Both the engagement of ordinary people in politics and the dominance of big money in the electoral process portend historic changes.
5. Globalization – Participants identified how a global charitable sector can present a threat to the needs of local communities as donors, volunteers, and program focus now enjoy international mobility. However, what individuals and organizations today define as “community” may have connotations beyond geographic ones, presenting opportunities.

## CHALLENGES

### ORGANIZATION & SECTOR LEVELS

At Threads Boston, we asked people to respond to the following two questions. What are the most significant challenges your organization is facing? What challenges are holding back the sector at large? Here are the top themes that emerged, followed by quotes from the field.

#### Major Themes

- 1. Financial Sustainability** – Funding was the top concern among Threads Boston attendees, with more than a quarter of all challenges comments to the topic of financial stability. Participants cited a mismatch between funder and nonprofit preferences in the areas of capacity building, risk tolerance, and the need to structure nonprofit activities into funder portfolios.
- 2. Leadership and Culture** – Common themes included the need for leadership that can adapt to complexity and a changing landscape and keep an organization growing. Participants also highlighted a desire for brave, experimental leadership to show the openness to risk and failure required to innovate.
- 3. Talent and Workforce** – Many attendees relayed concerns about attracting and retaining professional and volunteer talent. They cited obstacles including low salaries and benefits and a general lack of opportunity to offer or pursue professional development and training. In particular, many noted a difficulty in attracting diverse talent.
- 4. Relationships Among Organizations** – Others raised questions about collaboration, including who pays for it, and whether it's truly important. Some also highlighted the difficulties organizations see in achieving their missions due to lack of cohesion as a sector, often stemming from “turf” and competition issues.
- 5. Community Engagement** – Participants spoke about the need to be aware of shifting community demographics and community needs. Some raised concerns about nonprofits focusing more on their own self-interest and less on the people they serve in changing communities and their real needs.
- 6. Governance and Operations** – Major concerns were raised about the capacity to manage and communicate across large organizations, and for all types of organizations, participants shared the need to improve governance through the development of an engaged board and thoughtful governance structures. Participants cited the need for more funding for operations.

Several other critical themes emerged:

- The need to prioritize and invest in communications to increase awareness of the sector at large and of individual organizations.

- The tension between meeting immediate needs and addressing systematic change.
- The push for diversity and inclusion of staff and volunteer talent both in terms of race/ethnicity and in terms of age.
- Engagement with government was also raised, including the question of whether government has lost the ability to be a good partner.
- Finally, participants raised questions of impact and evaluation, and damage that can be done if an organization is driven by the wrong metrics.

### Voices from the Field

- “[We have no] room for failure. High risk, high gain. Business does this. We don’t.”
- “[Nonprofits feel] pressure to raise money and [to be able] to fit into a funder’s idea of what to invest in.”
- “[The] search for talent [is] long. [Meanwhile,] talent gets plucked away.”
- “Could we come together as nonprofits for policy change?”
- “Finding a balancing act between funders [and the] push for collaboration, are funders recognizing collaborations that exist? Is there really that big a return on collaboration?”
- “[Organizations are] disengaged on politics; [in a] move towards service, we are not engaging in democracy.”
- “[Our] ability to attract and retain talent [is hampered by] low salary and benefits.”
- “Nonprofits are afraid to experiment because of the high cost of failure.”
- “Somehow [it] has become more acceptable to be more vocal about self-interest [and] less focused on community.”
- “NGOs are not engaging in policy change. This holds us back from getting resources we need to make lasting change.”
- “There’s more and more demand for measurement on both sides of the table, but what are the right networks, models, wait time, and amount of information? [It] means different things for different funders and boards. And how do you measure ‘squishy’ issues (e.g., creativity, social movements)? How do we share knowledge of all sorts?”
- “[The] funding community is risk-averse. [An] irrational system of funding is not driven by what is working.”
- “[There’s a] change in how younger generation wants to volunteer; volunteers want to do small projects, not engage in longer-term connection. Is there a true desire to help or mostly to burnish one’s image?”
- “ ‘Results and impact’ pressure detracts from ‘holistic’ approaches.”
- “[How do we] change the discussion from scaling wide to scaling deep? Can we change the model so that organizations will get more resources/funding for going deep?”
- “[Organizations see] so much change, competing environments. How to reach people? [It’s] tough to measure. Truth doesn’t always win out; opponents don’t follow the rules.”

- “Communication and cohesion across large and diffuse organizations [is tough]. [How do we] ensuring that all staff at all levels understand the mission and programs, and how do you know who needs to know what?”
- “[Organizations must be] more strategic in communications, knowing how much to invest.”
- “Who is the funding cost of creating, planning, administering and assessing the costs of collaboration?”
- “Our mission foci are so interwoven and interdependent. Should we dumb down the ways we look at collaboration?”

## **SOCIETAL LEVEL**

At Threads Boston, we asked participants to look beyond challenges at the organizational- and sector-level by thinking about broader difficulties they faced. Here are the top societal challenges they mentioned.

### **Major Themes**

- **Inequality** – In every Threads session preceding Boston, inequality arose as a stand out theme. In Boston, participants mentioned the prevalence and wide-ranging impacts of inequality and poverty, in areas including adequate living standards, education and child development, and the lack of supports available to those trying to escape poverty.
- **Government-Related Themes** – Comments on this topic held up political gridlock and polarization as a major obstacle to charitable sector missions and the lack of coordination across sectors to achieve common goals.
- **Relationship Building** – A significant number of participants brought up the need to build authentic relationships to develop trust and social capital. Far more than in any other Threads event, Boston participants raised the importance of strong social ties to community resiliency and removing barriers.
- **Brand and Communications** – The final theme was the crucial importance of the sector’s brand, and how charitable organizations communicate it. Participants made points related to a general lack of public confidence in the sector, and that they have experienced difficulty in getting their messages to take root.

### **Voices from the Field**

- “Policies are so outdated. We have safety nets, but nothing to support those emerging from safety nets.”
- “Political gridlock is holding back [organizations from] scaling what works. Partisan government leaders don’t seek solutions that work.”

- “Valuing social capital and building trust in nonprofits [is crucial to] building resilient communities through strong social capital. Even potlucks! The social perception of the role and effectiveness of nonprofits [is key in] addressing change and services.”
- “How [do we] cut through the media and a distracted world to generate national attention to get real change?”
- “Changing people’s consciousness [at the] individual level [breaks down] societal barriers to creating change.”
- “Poverty impacts a child’s ability to learn. Poverty isn’t something that’s left at the door. Our organizations struggle to deal with this.”
- “There need to be more clusters and networks across sectors [to overcome political inaction].”

## SOLUTIONS

At Threads Boston, we asked participants to work with small groups to select a single critical challenge—whether from among the problems raised in the previous segment, or from their own experience. We then asked groups to propose solutions to these issues in their own words. Below are their responses.

### Challenge:

The need to use advocacy and public policy as a path to systems change

### Solutions:

- “Create [an] understanding of how to affect policy change: educate donors on importance of investing in change”
- “More dollars to support policy change [instead of] wait[ing] for it”
- “Invest in education of nonprofits to learn how local policy change can happen, what has worked, [and] what doesn’t”
- “Collaborative strategic planning”
- “Make [the] connection of how policy affects people”
- “Individual organizations must first start by engaging and activating their base/local community”
- “Effective social movements tailored to this age”
- “Effectively generating and using swarms”
- “Generating effective voter turnout and removing barriers to registration [and] internet voting”
- “We’re asking for transformative results, but not funding at that level. Sometimes you need to make high risk for high gain”

**Challenge:**

The need to develop and retain strong sector talent

**Solutions:**

- “Collective action to push existing resources, [including] state retirement plans, student loan forgiveness, [and] state-funded workforce development training”
- “Competitive pay/raises – prioritizing”
- “Providing [a shared cross-organizational] platform to learn and grow skills”
- “Nontraditional benefits [that are] low-cost: vacation, flexible schedules, [and] team building”
- “Partnering effectively to have leaders and organizations work together to build capacity and programs”

**Challenge:**

Poverty and economic inequality

**Solutions:**

- “Use a cohort model to support people”
- “[Use] an intermediary to connect the dots and help with overlaps”
- “Put family at the center. Help them in a coordinated way”
- “Help figure out more equitable distribution of resources [through] mapping of assets and resources”

**Challenge:**

Building relationships, trust, and community

**Solutions:**

- “Solutions journalism: Lift attention in media to what's working. Partner with community foundations. [Build a] movement to tell community/regional/national [audiences]”
- “Community-building: Getting people into communities without being exploitative [to] heighten awareness and understanding.”

## BRIGHT SPOTS

“Bright spots” are solutions to social/environmental problems that have moved the needle or had significant, systematic impact at the societal level. They often tackle a problem from a holistic perspective and can involve multiple players. Participants shared these bright spots during table discussions:

### Major Themes

1. **Cross-sector collaboration** – Many of the bright spots brought nonprofits together with government or business to solve a problem.
2. **Identifying clear, shared, ambitious-but-achievable goals** – Several examples included stories where a coalition first identified a pressing issue in local communities, and worked back through the necessary steps to achieve it. Successful projects were marked by a limited, knowable, achievable goal with broad support from stakeholders and community members.
3. **Engagement with communities being served** – Many of the bright spots engaged the community being served, for example by bringing together local youth with police in one case, and with artists and businesses for job training with another.

### Voices from the Field

1

**The Problem:** Land use misaligned with community needs and goals.

**The Solution:** The [Community Preservation Coalition](#) allied land preservation, affordable housing, recreation, and historic preservation advocates to pass the Massachusetts Community Preservation Act, made law in 2000. In many communities, advocates in these spaces often find themselves in conflict over competing priorities, but the Coalition found common goals and created a shared vision for unique, vibrant Massachusetts communities. Today, the coalition works with municipalities to implement smart growth and sustainable development throughout Massachusetts.

**In Their Words:** The results of this legislation and the decade-and-a-half of implementation have been myriad: “22,000 acres protected, affordable housing created, arts and theaters restored, wildlife [habitats preserved],” cited one attendee. She added, that how communities are implementing the law “is evolving over time,” noting that “any city could opt-in and have a good deal of control over decisions” while meeting state objectives.

2

**The Problem:** Mistrust between police and members of Boston communities, particularly youth.

**The Solution:** A collaborative program called [Youth/Police Dialogues](#), bringing together young community members and peace officers with facilitators in a series of sessions to build communication and trust. The project is a cross-sector collaboration among Boston-area police departments and YWCA Boston. The program recently expanded to police academy training with a cadet program and has inspired pilot inquiries in cities including Miami and Austin.

**In Their Words:** One attendee said that the sessions help to “address safety, snitching, and stereotypes,” and that the sessions have “moved the needle on policy/community relations” in Boston. “One officer and a teenager together de-escalated a tense situation before a group of teens and police after a shooting incident,” the attendee recounted.

3

**The Problem:** Unequal marriage rights for LGBTQ couples in Massachusetts and nationwide.

**The Solution:** After the years leading up to the June 2015 Supreme Court decision making marriage equality the law of the land, watching same-sex marriage become legal in state after state, it seems crucially important to remember that love first won in Boston in 2004, when Julie and Hillary Goodridge walked into City Hall to apply for a marriage license under police guard. Indeed without the coalition of funders, legal organizations, businesses and individuals that rallied behind [MassEquality](#), the data, real-world arguments, and people power necessary to win equal rights for LGBTQ couples may have been decades longer in the offing.

**In Their Words:** One participant described a collection of state and local movements in Massachusetts that went national. Formed in the late 1990s in reaction to attempts to pass legislation that would have prohibited the recognition of same-sex marriage, MassEquality and other organizations demonstrated a masterful “use of swarms,” effectively making marriage equality “a personal issue.” The “business community made an economic argument” for equality, while activists compiled and effectively communicated data and research for arguments and campaigns. The “pace of change was fast” and the Boston campaigns looked on as their movement “went national,” demonstrating the power of committed individuals to ignite local social change that spreads nationally.

# 4

**The Problem:** Lack of focused capital to address needs of low-income youth.

**The Solution:** A new fund administered by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation dedicated to improving the lives of significantly low-income youth. The [True North Fund](#) aggregates capital from 14 co-investors, helping 12 grantees raise the matching funds needed to secure \$30 in investment from the federal Social Innovation Fund. Grantees engage in critical programs ranging from summer learning to child welfare to bolstering educational and economic opportunities for juvenile offenders to reduce recidivism.

**In Their Words:** A participant explained that the True North Fund pools capital to “support the scaling of what works.” A combination of private funders, government, and leading nonprofits “aligns actions across organizations.” The participant said the fund is a “unique collaboration” that supports the basic work needed to make headway in fighting the challenges facing very low-income children and strengthens the performance of grantees in terms of overhead and evaluation as well.

## ROLES

We wrapped up Threads Boston by asking participants to tell us what roles national organizations could play to help local and regional organizations better achieve their missions. Common themes follow.

### Major Themes

1. Building awareness of the sector – In Boston, comments had a particular focus on the role of a national organization like Independent Sector in building awareness of charitable organizations as a cohesive sector, creating broader public awareness of the interconnectedness of nonprofits and foundations in seemingly disparate issue areas, and building an appreciation of the role of charitable organizations in communities.
2. Taking On Inequality – As with many comments on the challenges nonprofits face, an important theme arose in this portion of the conversation on national organizations taking a leadership role in the fight against rising structural inequality. Many of the individual issues charitable organizations work to address are rooted in poverty and inequality, and one participant asked if national nonprofit leaders would not lead on this issue, where would the leadership emerge?
3. Refocus Leadership on Communities – One attendee called for national nonprofits to “honor community” by refocusing the message of leadership on the core competencies of communities. This participant found language that encourages nonprofits to “fight for” communities rather than to “fight with” communities misguided, and felt that national organizations should take more of a partnership role than a leadership role.



4. Convene Actors – One participant saw a strong convening role for national organizations to fill a vacuum left by “absent government.” Through events like Threads Boston, the participant noted the opportunity to organize charitable sector labor to achieve social change, and hinted that who is included in these convenings could be defined more broadly to achieve that groundswell.