



INDEPENDENT
SECTOR

THREADS

WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

MINNESOTA HIGHLIGHTS



THREADS MINNESOTA

WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Event held at Metropolitan Ballroom

May 27, 2015

INDEPENDENT SECTOR THANKS OUR FUNDERS, PARTNERS, AND HOST FOR SUPPORTING THREADS MINNESOTA:

FUNDERS

Otto Bremer Foundation
The Bush Foundation
The Minneapolis Foundation

PARTNERS

Minnesota Council on Foundations
Minnesota Council of Nonprofits
Minnesota Community Foundation
Northwest Area Foundation

OVERVIEW OF THREADS

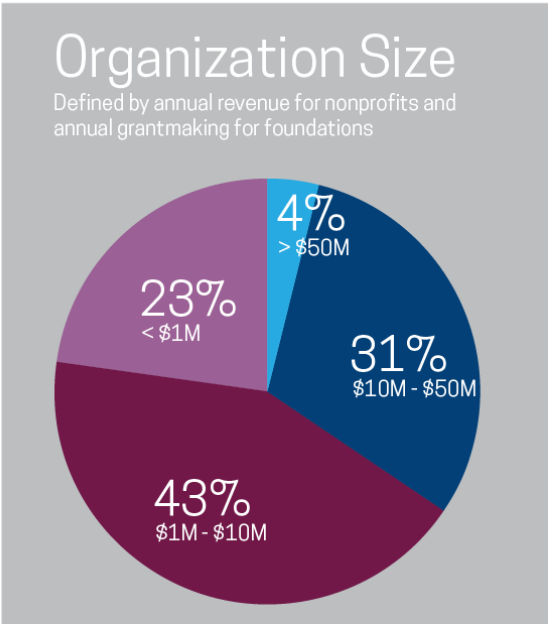
At the start of 2015, Independent Sector launched a series of community conversations called “Threads” in cities across the nation. The purpose was to convene leaders from nonprofits and foundations, and our other allies to explore the impact of society-wide trends on our sector today and in years to 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 session includes the following:

- **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 Threads event 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 MINNESOTA – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

97 Attendees





TRENDS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE CHARITABLE SECTOR

Threads Minnesota 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. Inequality and Inequity** – Attendees raised concerns over economic and racial inequality. There was a shared recognition among many participants of socio-economic inequality, and its impact across multiple communities and issue areas. In addition, there were deep concerns about widespread racial inequalities. Many participants used forceful language calling for an end to institutional racism and searing imbalances of power, along with the need for equity (not just diversity *per se*). This theme has unfolded in Threads cities – almost in real time – in conjunction with current events and conversations about race sweeping across America. One participant stated that we must “overcome our own bias of thinking someone is wrong if their approach is different than our own.”
- 2. Urban/Rural Divide** – In this largely rural state, many worried that rural communities are falling further and further behind urban ones. Reasons offered included the relative lack of services and funding in rural areas.
- 3. Cross-sector Collaboration** - Many attendees criticized the lack of cross-sector collaboration. Another said there were too many barriers between business and nonprofits, fueled by lack of communication and dissimilar approaches.
- 4. Disruptive Forces** – Finally, a general consensus arose over the rapid pace of change taking place today. Some questioned the proliferation of information and the difficulty of identifying credible, reliable data amid the noise. Others said there is a real need to step back and think strategically, but urgent day-to-day operations almost always prevent that from happening.



CHALLENGES

ORGANIZATION & SECTOR LEVELS

At Threads Minnesota, 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. Leadership and Culture** – Like other Threads, participants in Minneapolis noted shortcomings in organizations and the sector regarding habits/culture. They said these needed to shift to improve overall effectiveness. For example, one individual said “we think we have all the answers” instead of being open to innovative ideas or new approaches. As another example, an attendee said that sector organizations tended to not focus on clients/users, but instead driven by issues such as “ego, fear, and fiduciary duties.”
- 2. Governance and Operations** – Participants called for change in several ways regarding this theme. They cited a need to be more nimble, have greater capacity, and generate more financial support for operational needs. They sought “new models of doing business” to save resources/increase efficiency.
- 3. Vision and Approach** - Participants argued for the need for more long-term thinking and more partnerships across sectors. They hoped to raise awareness about the value of creating an “ecosystem perspective” as well as greater focus on root causes and systems change rather than service delivery.
- 4. Government-Related** – A frequent topic of discussion was the role of government at all levels. Specifically, four categories of thought emerged: questions about the role of government/nonprofits in society; the need for government and nonprofits to work better together; the lack of advocacy by nonprofits; and the challenges of working in highly regulated fields.

Other critical themes that surfaced at Threads Minnesota included financial difficulties (operating in an environment of scarcity); the need to better brand the sector; the importance of community engagement and relationship building.

Voices from the Field

- “Organizational nimbleness [is a problem]: Conservative (old) structure vs. innovative practices. How to adapt and change but keep purpose/focus?”
- “We think we have the answers. [Being] rewarded for knowledge/expertise challenges our ability to be inclusive.”
- “[A challenge is the] low number of leaders with expertise and appreciation of cross-sector leadership and implementation.”
- “Not user-centered in our approaches [and] also driven by ego, fear, fiduciary duties, governance structure, all pulling away from focus on community need.”
- “Large-scale organizations need more nimbleness in governance and management.”
- “We need greater infrastructure and capacity.”
- “How resources are structured for our sector is the challenge. We need investments for organizations vs. only for programs. Funders must be willing to invest in the infrastructure of organizations and bold experiments to address these trends.”
- “Resources and new models [are needed]: new models of doing business to increase efficiencies and save resources.”
- “[One challenge is] nonprofit boards who don't understand governance: how boards need understanding of ecosystem of support.”
- “Understanding of long arc of change [is a problem. We] need partnership and commitment from all sectors.”
- “Not focused enough on root causes/systems change. [There's an] over emphasis on service.”
- “What is governments' job? What is nonprofits job?”
- “Silos [or a] siloed-mentality (among nonprofits and all sectors) [is a problem]: need to embrace other sectors, embrace collective responsibility (not vilify other sectors) --silos occur within nonprofit sector too.”
- “Inadequate focus on policy advocacy [is a challenge].”
- “Tension between innovation and nimbleness when working within a ‘regulated’ environment (e.g. privacy, government funding streams, banking/investment, etc.).”



SOCIETAL LEVEL

At Threads Minnesota, 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

1. **Culture** – Concerns over issues like ideological polarization and reactionary behavior surfaced during small group discussion. People felt that issues like these were contributing to societal problems rather than helping to solve them.
2. **Racial Inequality** – As mentioned earlier, attendees used strong language on racism as well as the economic inequalities that often accompany it. Their exact quotes follow, including ideas suggesting that those in power need to share power and attempts at inclusion are often inauthentic or less meaningful than they should be.
3. **Inequality** – In addition to racial inequality, participants drew connections to other crosscutting issues including health, education, sustainable wages and a tax code that “perpetuates the status quo rather than a transfer of wealth.”

Two additional themes emerged. First, how do we break through to people with important messages in an age of info overload? Second, how do we define community at a time when society seems more divided than ever? One participant commented: “fear has become a powerful force” that keeps people from finding common ground.

Voices from the Field

- “[There’s a] lack of agreement on how to address issues [that] also ties into polarization of government/gridlock and polarization of info sharing/selection of info access. Difficult to make meaningful progress.”
- “Political will/urgency: How do we create a sense of urgency outside of crash-like natural disasters. We seem willing to accept long-term inequality.”
- “Reactionary behavior [is a problem] (ex. Homelessness as a result of Federal policy).”
- “Increasing income inequality, declining middle class and declining economic mobility [are all problems.] Causes: systematic racism; disparities in education; barriers to higher education; talent-oriented economy.”
- “Power and privilege: Economic insecurity fuels a ‘hands off’ mentality. In order [to have] more diversity in leadership, people in power need to share power.”
- “Do we have the will to allow for diverse leadership?”

- “Denial of the diversity of human conditions [is a challenge.] There are structural factors that keep people from succeeding.”
- “We're not embracing the change that's coming. [We] ask people of color to participate but not authentically. Desire to fix people of color and not work in partnership.”
- “[Challenges include] income disparities, wealth gap, money inequality.”
- “[Challenges include] massive inequality: money leaving communities of color.”
- “[Challenges include] health equity: how health impacts community.”
- “Tax code promotes transfer of wealth to charitable causes that promote status quo (arts, education, hospitals).”

SOLUTIONS

After small groups brainstormed challenges, we asked them to select one and discuss solutions. Their responses follow.

Challenge:

Lack of capacity and will to embrace risk and spur innovation in the sector.

Solutions:

In MN, the majority of the tables decided to address this particular challenge. Possible solutions identified:

- “Reframe the narrative about investing in capacity and infrastructure to help organizations achieve greater impact on their mission.”
- “Encouraging innovation. Funders support pools of funds for innovation across sector. Nonprofits could create a seed fund for programmatic staff to launch bold new efforts that seed innovation.”
- “New dynamics between funders and nonprofits that support authentic relationships and allow nonprofits to work where they thrive.”
- “More cross sector conversations to design solutions and share ownership for implementation.”
- “Create an ecosystem to nurture more ideas.”
- “Collectively address problems. What is one organization can't solve a seemingly intractable problem, but a group of transformational leaders, new thinkers, may be able to tackle it differently”

Challenge:

The need to develop new leadership and operating models that promote diversity and authenticity.

Solutions:

- “Creating time and space for building trust, especially related to racial equity, shared power, authentic relationships.”
- “Meeting people where they're at and lift up community voice in authentic ways.”
- “Truth telling. Creating space to drill down on wrong assumptions.”
- “Create safe spaces, allow people to speak from their own experiences.”
- “Create funding stream to test some new models and document [them]: share results, successes, and failures!”

Challenge:

Racial and economic inequality

Solutions:

- “We need a unifying vision that addresses not only meeting needs but changing systems.”
- “Focus on education as a solution.”
- “Election reform - limit PAC contributions from outside contributors.”
- “Support higher minimum wage; reduce income disparity within nonprofits.”

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 therefore involve multiple players. Participants shared these bright spots during table discussions:

Major Themes

1. **Community Involvement** – At Threads Minnesota, several Bright Spots highlighted innovative ways to engage the people who are being served. One program involved a child achievement zone, in which participants were considered full and equal “partners” – not simply recipients of services. They also held families accountable as a way to foster long-term commitment to the program.

2. **Broad Partnerships** – Attendees underscored the importance of tackling problems through broad coalitions that included a variety of organizations within the sector as well as with government agencies and corporations. One example included the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless (detailed as a Bright Spot below).
3. **Effective Communications in Coalitions** – Participants discussed the power of using compelling stories, consistent talking points, and sustained media outreach as a way to rally support for their cause/combined mission. When every organization in a coalition stayed ‘on message,’ the group was far more effective achieving shared goals than when each member organization spoke independently.

Voices from the Field

1

The Problem: Sex trafficking of underage girls in Minnesota was a growing problem.

The Solution: [Minnesota Girls Are Not For Sale](#) began a campaign in 2010 to bring to bear direct service providers, law enforcement, donors, judges, faith community leaders, elected officials, and others around a very clear mission: end sex trafficking in Minnesota. They gathered over 85 different [stakeholders](#), drafted a comprehensive plan, and ultimately helped form a statewide task force. The Women’s Foundation of Minnesota was a driving force. The result: changes in legislation, increased state budget allocations, and more effective services.

In Their Words: An individual involved with Minnesota Girls Are Not For Sale described the organization’s job to serve as a “tipping point” that “create[d] partnerships across policy, services, and law enforcement.”

2

The Problem: In 2013, an amendment was introduced to limit the freedom of marriage to heterosexual couples in Minnesota.

The Solution: Minnesota’s [United Campaign for Marriage Equality](#) formed to prevent the legislation from passing. They formed a broad coalition that included business leaders, faith-based organizations, and other nonprofits. All agreed to stick to a disciplined, comprehensive communications plan that featured compelling stories, broad outreach, and a unified message. After the amendment was defeated, campaign members agreed to continue to work together over the long haul to promote marriage equality.

In Their Words: We formed an “amazing cross-organization collaboration,” said one person familiar with the campaign. “We enlisted unusual suspects,” he said, “[that included] business leadership, the faith community, and African American leaders.”

3

The Problem: A 2012 Minnesota study found that approximately 14,000 Minnesotans are homeless on [any given night](#).

The Solution: The Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless has worked to leverage \$220 in state funding to tackle this problem on multiple fronts. According to its website, the coalition is a hub for over 150 homeless service providers. The organization also uses an effective communications campaign to raise awareness and create a shared sense of urgency.

In Their Words: One participant lauded the campaigns “model for collective action” and the in-depth “relationship building” that has taken place among partners over time. When challenges arise, he said, coalition members “stick together.”

4

The Problem: In 2006, the Metropolitan Council (the regional government agency service the Twin Cities) approved a proposal to build an 11-mile [light rail](#) to connect various central business districts and the University of Minnesota. In response, residents and business owners expressed concerns over noise/congestion; impact on historic buildings; the impact to existing traffic patterns; and closures to business during construction; among other issues.

The Solution: City government opened up the process in a way that gave the public an opportunity to have a voice in the process. They launched an aggressive outreach program in communities for people to share their concerns and offer suggestions, while also learning more about the technical details of the new transportation line. They also marshaled city, state, and federal money to mitigate the impact on people and businesses. The city sought to be transparent about the “Green Line Corridor” (as it became known) as well by keeping the media informed, issuing fact sheets, holding open forums, and engaging community leaders.

In Their Words: One attendee lauded the project, saying the Green Line reflected an “orientation to equality” because the process included communities and businesses most impacted by the changes.

5

The Problem: Services for children in Itasca County, MN were fragmented and poorly aligned.

The Solution: “Invest Early” attacks this problem head on by offering a “united front for kids and families” (to use one participant’s words). Four school districts came together to offer what they called “[wrap around services](#)” to low-income children. They include KOOTASCA Head Start, Itasca County Human Services/Public Health, Mayville State University, and Itasca Community College. The program has successfully created a combined “learning community” and is funded by federal/state budgets, private funds, and foundation gifts like those from The Blandin Foundation.

In Their Words: Said one attendee, the program is a model of “extreme collaboration [that] transcended sector boundaries and bureaucratic barriers.”

6

The Problem: Low-income MN families have limited options to re-build credit, tap into credit-building loans, and build financial assets.

The Solution: The [FAIR Initiative](#) offers financial services and tax assistance to help move people out of poverty. According to their website, some 550 volunteers (accountants, tax practitioners, financial planners, etc.) volunteer over 20,000 hours of help each year. The program also partners widely with banks, credit unions, tax preparation services, nonprofits, foundations, and MN government agencies at all levels.

In Their Words: One participant said the program offers “positive, effective options for low income people [unlike] predatory services.” She also praised FAIR for “engaging with nonprofits that have expertise in this space” by forming working groups and partnering with national organizations.



ROLES

We wrapped up Threads Minnesota 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. Be Inclusive** – A repeated theme emerged over the need to listen to more “voices” (to quote one participant), especially in communities we serve. People noted that nonprofits often design programs first, and then engage community members later. This order must be reversed, they said. The theme of inclusion also touched on small organizations. Specifically, one individual noted that most nonprofits are [small](#) and Independent Sector should welcome their engagement. Finally, the theme of inclusion touched on better engaging Millennials in all aspects of our work.
- 2. Public Policy Plus** – Related to the previous theme, many urged Independent Sector to take a more aggressive stand in the public policy arena on issues like the minimum wage and immigration reform -- even if doing so might upset some of its members. They also urged IS to continue its public policy work on behalf of the nonprofit and philanthropic community. In addition, many called on IS to step up its efforts to engage the public sector. In fact, the desire to partner with government resonated more strongly in Threads Minnesota than any other gathering thus far.
- 3. Network Across Sectors** – A repeated theme in Threads Minnesota and others was the urgent need for Independent Sector to serve as a bridge between nonprofits, foundations, corporations, and government at all levels. One person said, “We count on IS” to convene groups and foster collaboration. Another noted that Minnesota -- despite its reputation for collaboration and inclusion -- would benefit from and welcome a national organization like IS that could help them network across sectors.