

GEO Member Spotlight



How the FISA Foundation's focus on learning through evaluation is leading to better lives for women, girls and people with disabilities



Kristy Trautmann, Executive Director, FISA Foundation

Every day, the FISA Foundation works to make life better for women, girls and people with disabilities in Southwest Pennsylvania — and in the process, address injustices and inequities that are in place on an even broader scale.

Operating for 16 years, while drawing on a history more than 100 years in the making, the FISA Foundation strives to not only empower grantees but also to learn from those grantees in order to advocate for better treatment and approaches. With limited resources and a staff of three people, the foundation recognizes that its own grant evaluations are a key opportunity to inform these advocacy efforts.

“We are a small, regionally-focused foundation taking on giant issues ... and so we need to be as smart as possible in leveraging our limited funds to make a difference,” said Kristy Trautmann, executive director of the FISA Foundation. “We always look at the grant reporting process as a learning process in addition to an accountability process.”

With this approach, the FISA Foundation tailors its grant reporting requirements based on what both the foundation and grantees want to learn. In addition to reporting on progress toward goals and objectives outlined in grant proposals, grantees are encouraged to share about the challenges they faced, what they'd do differently in retrospect, what advice they would give to a colleague on a similar project and what changes in the field are important for the foundation to understand.

Part of the learning process involves dealing with the power differential between grantmaker and grantee. It's critical for grantees to have as safe of an environment as possible to speak frankly about their challenges, where they are stuck and what didn't work out as well as originally hoped, Trautmann said.

“Our efforts have never been about trying to fix women and girls or people with disabilities, but they're about how we recognize that there are injustices and inequities built into the system,” Trautmann said. “It is important to recognize that our grantees know far more about the issues that they are working on than we will ever know, and that our role is to listen and learn from them.”

According to Trautmann and Anne Mulgrave, the foundation's program officer, the grants that the foundation learns the most from are often those that didn't go according to plan. If the foundation didn't ask honest, open questions about why the grant wasn't as successful as intended, then it would be a missed learning opportunity.

“We actively encourage that discussion and let them know it is part of our own learning process too,” Trautmann said. “It's not just that we want this information to hold them accountable or to prevent funding future grants. I think people have come to trust that we mean what we say in terms of using that information

Taking risks and being smart

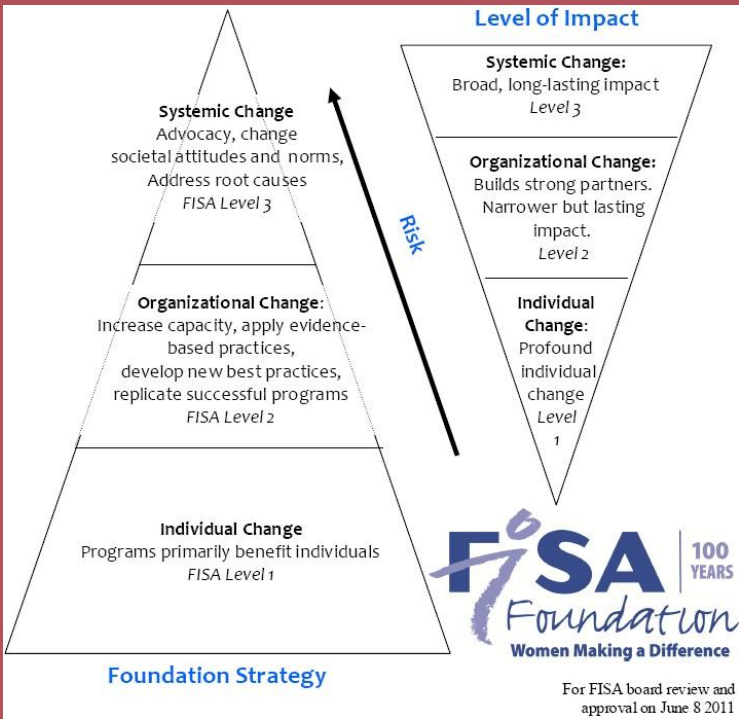
In grantmaking, there are courageous risks, and there are ill-advised risks. Through the experience of learning from grantees, Kristy Trautmann said the FISA Foundation has gained a much better understanding of which risks are worth taking and which risks don't pay off.

Drawing from experience, the foundation recognized that a grantee must meet the following three criteria:

- 1) A confident and trustworthy leader
- 2) A well-thought-out plan to meet the goals of the proposal
- 3) Measurements for success

FISA Foundation also supports its grantees' success by providing capacity-building grants and general operating support.

When it comes to understanding the impact of its grantmaking, FISA Foundation developed a visual metaphor to assist staff and board in talking internally about strategy: the Systemic Change Triangle.



Kristy Trautman shared the following about the Systemic Change Triangle:

“While the Foundation is very interested in working strategically to maximize its impact, we know we can’t jump immediately into funding systemic change work. We don’t know enough. When the Foundation is working with a new grantee it is most likely to begin with programmatic grants focused on direct services to assist individuals. Capacity building grants are also available to strengthen nonprofit partners. Funding at the bottom of the triangle allows us to invest in meaningful things while giving us time to learn about an issue, and about the leaders in a field before we begin making investments in advocacy or cultural change. By the time the foundation is funding at this stage, we know the partners very well, have credibility with them and possess a solid knowledge of the issue at hand.”

Going forward, the FISA Foundation is looking to find ways to spread the learning culture it has cultivated internally. The foundation is working to help grantees identify how they can use the data that is being collected in order to enhance the grantee’s own organizational learning and effectiveness — progressing one step further in enhancing the individual lives in the communities that the FISA Foundation serves.

To find out more about the FISA Foundation, visit fisafoundation.org

internally and passing it along to other grantees to give them a head start in avoiding problems or maximizing efforts.”

The FISA Foundation — which traces its history back 100 years to the alumnae of six girls’ college preparatory schools who established a convalescent home for women and, later, a rehabilitation center for people with disabilities — emphasizes modeling its core values through its own governance. Its board of directors reflects the communities that the foundation serves and is involved in the entire grantmaking process.

“We are informed from the tenet in the disability rights community, ‘nothing about us, without us,’” Trautmann said. “We certainly have always been governed by women, but we need to also be very inclusive of women with disabilities on our board and ensure that we are talking to and actively engaged in seeking solutions from the community rather than making decisions in isolation.”

Trautmann cited the foundation’s involvement with GEO as positive reinforcement in her work, particularly following the 2012 National Conference.

“One of the things that we have started to do differently as a result of the GEO conference is to recognize how valuable those voices of the people whose lives we’re trying to impact are to the process. As staff, we have always valued that,” Trautmann said. “But since the conference we have worked hard to incorporate grantees and recipients into board meetings. I really do look to [GEO] to provide me with good information on current trends in philanthropy and what other foundations are doing. It’s a wonderful resource.”

Every two years the foundation surveys its grantees about their experiences in the grantmaking process, asking if grantees feel listened to, respected and understood, if they know the status of their proposal throughout the grantmaking process and if they believe their work is valued by the foundation.

GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight:

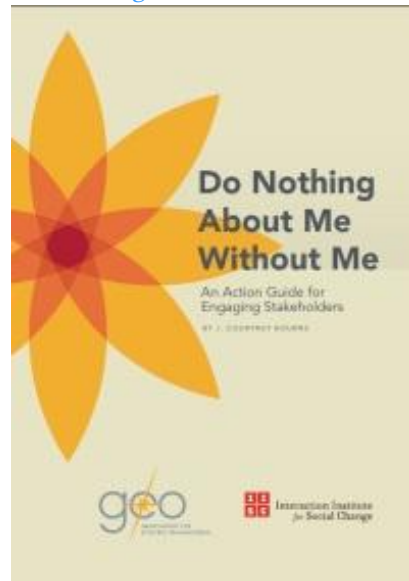
[Four Essentials for Evaluation](#)



[Evaluation in Philanthropy](#)



[Do Nothing About Me Without Me](#)



Find these and other resources for grantmakers at www.geofunders.org