



INDEPENDENT
SECTOR

THREADS

WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

SPOKANE HIGHLIGHTS



THREADS SPOKANE

WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Event held at Empire Health Foundation Philanthropy Center

June 16, 2015

INDEPENDENT SECTOR THANKS OUR FUNDER AND HOST FOR SUPPORTING THREADS SPOKANE

Empire Health 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 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.

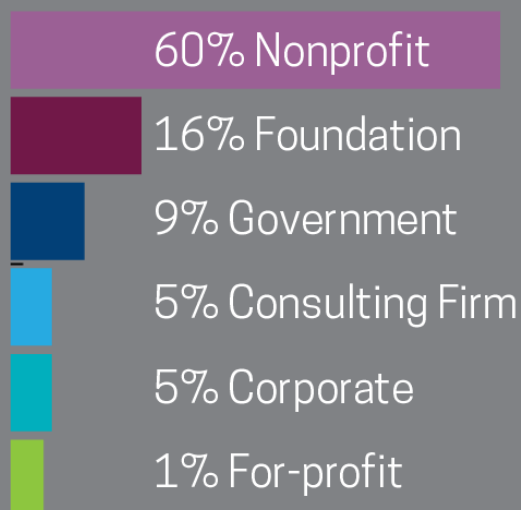
THREADS SPOKANE – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

56 Attendees

29% CEO

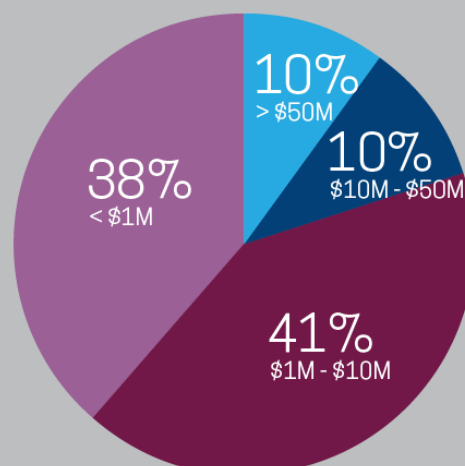
71% NON-CEO

Organization Type



Organization Size

Defined by annual revenue for nonprofits and annual grantmaking for foundations



TRENDS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE CHARITABLE SECTOR

Threads Spokane 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. **Talent Management** – The audience expressed concern about the need for new leadership. One individual summarized this sentiment saying, “The leaders we have trained are no longer the leaders that are needed. How do we build talent that can take us to new places?”
2. **Advocacy** – Participants talked about advancing a cause through public policy reforms but acknowledged that, “We don’t know how to advocate here at the local level.” They added that funding local advocacy efforts has been a major challenge.
3. **Collaboration** – Attendees noted that local organizations cooperate quite well, a sentiment captured by one person who said, “Spokane knows how to collaborate.” Others concurred but noted areas for improvement. One said that government was missing from the equation. Another stated there was no sharing of funding or back office services among nonprofit organizations.
4. **Measurement** – A discussion unfolded around the need to measure impact and outcomes better. Many called for a more holistic approach that included assessing “systems.” Others stressed the need to ensure we “hear from those we serve.”
5. **Size of Nonprofit Community** – Audience members mentioned that there were simply too many nonprofits that “never die” (to quote one individual). The result, she added, was “too much competition for resources.”
6. **Skepticism of Institutions** – This theme surfaced among participants who said the public is increasingly suspicious about the effectiveness of institutions in general. They discussed how this perception harms nonprofit organizations.

CHALLENGES

ORGANIZATION & SECTOR LEVELS

At Threads Spokane, 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. Relationships Among Organizations** – Attendees in many Thread cities have talked about the lack of overall collaboration in the sector. The discussion in Spokane, however, was slightly different. Here the audience focused on how to work better together. For example, they addressed the need to communicate well; stay focused on common objectives; and recognize that effective collaboration takes time. They also explored how to differentiate organizations in a collaborative rather than competitive manner.
- 2. Financial Sustainability** – Participants stated that the current funding structure perpetuates bad practices such as a mentality of scarcity and short-term thinking. They were concerned that the need for fundraising drains capacity that should be funneled into programs. Some said new initiatives were “driven down” due to lack of funding; others said new programs had to be “invented” to get funding. (Both quotes cited below in “Voices from the Field.”)
- 3. Governance and Operations** – Many called for increased professionalization of the sector. We should build the “business case” to garner support rather than offering an emotional appeal, stated one person. Others talked about board and organizational structures that don’t allow for quick decision making as developments in the field change. Finally, some mentioned the high cost of reporting/audits.

Other themes surfaced. These included concerns about decreasing government funding and difficulty obtaining such funds (i.e., government asking “unreasonable demands” of nonprofits that are underfunded). Impact and measurement represented another theme: mainly, funder requests for immediate data verses more long-term measurement and the need to capture the positive economic impact of nonprofits on the economy. Finally, participants discussed diversity (the need for better cultural competency skills) and talent management (retention challenges).

Voices from the Field

- “Differentiation of what you do verses others, but doing that in a collaborative way...a lot of people doing similar things with a different twist. How to work better together?”
- “Steps beyond collaboration: how are our organizations held accountable for change?”
- “Goal agreement and aligned acting: different kind of conversation about long term goals. Patience.”
- “Time: are we using peoples' time effectively? Are we maintaining relationships face-to- face? So much is misunderstood in quick electronic communication.”
- “Duplicative, expensive back office functions at each nonprofit instead of shared resources.”
- “Fear to step ‘outside your lane’ - too focused. How to collaborate without losing your purpose? And honor your donors [at the same time]?”
- “Disincentives to cross-pollinate: structures/system [result in] constraining not facilitating.”
- “[We have a] scarcity mentality.”
- “Lack of capacity for nonprofit sector to take risks: demands of funders for success.”
- “New initiatives being driven down [due to] no or little change capital.”
- “Funding - focus on innovation and the needle: You need to invent a program to get funding and the needle must move to continue funding. We must be innovative to get funds.”
- “Demands of fundraising are exhausting - events, grant writing, etc.”
- “Need to present a more business-oriented face than we do: the goal isn't ‘here's my cause, let me make you cry.’ That's not enough for business case. Need marketing plan - market to future staff, board members.”
- “Hard to respond to all the demands quickly enough to maximize opportunities.”
- “Mediocre board engagement: board decision structures aren't nimble enough for pace.”
- “Drifting into a bad situation: under resourced/capacity (pay staff too little) --inadequate business admin and reserves.”
- “Costs of reporting/audits [is a challenge].”

SOCIETAL LEVEL

At Threads Spokane, 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. **Income Inequality** – This theme has surfaced in several Threads cities. In Spokane, the discussion centered on the lack of middle class jobs, uncertainty/access to health care, and the challenges in serving children. Regarding the latter, one individual pointed out that “greater poverty” translates to “greater need.” (Full quote cited below in “Voices from the Field.”)
2. **Government-Related Themes** – Audience members voiced concern over the increasingly partisan climate in Washington, D.C. and Olympia, WA. Polarization has made it challenging to advance public policies and has led to feelings of skepticism toward government institutions among the public. People also critiqued the intense competition for state level funding and raised questions about the appropriate role of government in the areas of health care, food security, and higher education.
3. **Economy** – Participants discussed the state of the economy at length. Many felt that Spokane’s economy hasn’t bounced back as quickly as other parts of the nation. They also addressed the resulting impact on the nonprofit sector in terms of fund raising, engagement, government funding, etc.
4. **Technology and Communications** – Conversations about this trend raised more questions than answers. People asked whether email was still an effective tool to reach those they serve as well as their members and volunteers. They also noted that “time and money” were needed to capitalize on this trend.
5. **Pace of Change** – Attendees expressed concern over the speed at which nonprofit organizations must conduct operations. Several people specifically commented on “demands for immediate measurable progress” which undermines long-term approaches and requires considerable capacity to measure effectively.

Voices from the Field

- “Lack of middle class jobs: poverty, growing gap, income inequality.”
- “Serve all children - greater poverty, greater needs, lack of resources: majority children living in poverty in our region.”
- “Healthcare: access, uncertainty.”
- “Role of government in basic needs: health care, food security, higher education.”
- “Competing for state funding.”
- “Partisan and polarizing politics: Washington, DC and Olympia, WA.”

- “The economy: Spokane hasn't bounced back as fast after recession.”
- “Challenge in technology and communications: are emails reaching people? How to communicate and reach our members? How do we engage our volunteers and members? Time and money.”
- “Pace of change (patience): technology pace makes us face demands for immediate measurable progress.”

SOLUTIONS

At Threads Spokane, 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:

How to differentiate ourselves while collaborating without competing for the same funds.

Solutions:

- “Create more funding requiring more collaborations.”
- “Familiarization with others one-on-one and/or groups in a non-threatening way.”
- “Identify a picture of services and funding.”
- “Do something to create trust.”

Challenge:

Lack of investment/centralization of data analysis and information sharing.

Solutions:

- “Create a pool/forum – a center for nonprofit effectiveness – on human resources, data, programs, governance, outcomes analysis ... a shared resource pool.”
- “[Offer] training at agency level around data analysis.”
- “[Offer] nonprofit board training.”
- “[Create a] shared set of outcome measures.”
- “Create a culture of performance improvement.”
- “Create partnerships with nonprofits and data-driven organizations.”
- “Identify strategies to scale effective programs.”

Challenge:

How to move beyond shared learning experiences to operational interdependencies.

Solutions:

- “[We need] common leadership development, peer coaching, face-to-face networking.”
- “[Create] loaned executive programs.”
- “[Expand] programmatic planning across agencies (natural business benefits/affinities....)”
- “Develop prospective value proposition models for redistributing savings and resources across sectors.”

Challenge:

Nonprofit sustainability.

Solutions:

- “What nonprofits can take on other nonprofits administrative functions?”
- “Look for efficiencies/streamline nonprofit administration ... [but] don’t reduce people delivering mission to population.”

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. We asked participants to share bright spots during their table discussions. The following themes arose.

Major Themes

1. **Ecosystem Approach** – Participants in Spokane echoed a theme shared in many Thread cities on the importance of approaching problems from multiple angles and offering ‘wrap around services’ to communities being served. Doing so can create powerful outcomes, said an attendee, such as transforming “health care into human care.” (See “Voices from the Field” below for more details.)
2. **Nonprofit/Government Partnership** – Government agencies can be immensely helpful tackling issues that are overly complex, require substantial resources, span vast in geographic regions, or necessitate changes in the law. This sentiment was raised during Threads, particularly around nonprofit missions to raise high school graduation rates and improve early childhood services.

3. **Measurable Results** – Attendees discussed the widespread belief in the importance of measuring specific, concrete results. In addition, they noted the need to create clear goals as well as benchmark and track outcomes/impact.

Voices from the Field

1

The Problem: Spokane business owners expressed concern about their ability to hire well-educated employees.

The Solution: The mission of [Greater Spokane Incorporated](#) (GSI) is to drive local economic development by increasing employment and investment. They paired up with the Spokane School District to improve educational opportunities to children and offer professional development to teachers. According to their website, GSI has worked with 32 businesses, 200 business professionals, 260 educators, 30 parents, and over 5,800 students.¹

In Their Words: An individual familiar with GSI noted that they helped boost “on time graduation rates to 80 percent,” involved nonprofits in developing solutions, and “promoted bonds and levies” to drive resources to schools. She also said the Spokane School District was willing to “open the schoolhouse doors” to non-educators in an effort to improve the quality of education.

2

The Problem: Fragmented mental health services in eight Spokane counties.

The Solution: The [Regional Support Network](#) (RSN) administers the public health system on behalf of the Washington State government and Spokane County. A significant part of its mission is to facilitate partnerships across all sectors to improve the health/safety of the nearly 670,000 individuals under its purview.² For example, RSN collaborates with school districts to help raise graduation rates and offer full-day kindergarten to working-class families.

In Their Words: KSN “took the time to align networks, learn resource and cultural differences, share data, and [encourage others] to let go of turf,” said one participant. She applauded the organization for “taking on this challenge” and getting results.

¹ <https://greaterspokane.org/education-and-workforce/>

² <http://www.spokanecounty.org/mentalhealth/content.aspx?c=2121>

3

The Problem: Programs for autistic people failed to offer comprehensive, 'one-stop-shopping' services.

The Solution: [Northwest Autism Center](#) (NAC), which formed in 2003, uses "community-based approaches" to serve adults and children with autism.³ Their many services include providing/deciphering detailed clinical research studies that can be challenging to understand; offering online diagnostic criteria across the spectrum of autism; and advocating on behalf of those with the disease.

In Their Words: One Threads attendee complimented NAC's advocacy efforts to "increase access for youth" with autism in the fields of insurance, education, and Medicaid. She also praised their ability to expand Crisis Intervention Training to local police.

4

The Problem: Foster children graduate from college at lower rates than other students.

The Solution: [Fostering Scholars](#) began at Seattle State University in 2006 to improve graduation rates for foster children.⁴ It recognizes their unique set of needs and offers, according to its website, financial, academic, and personal support. Similar programs include Guardian Scholars and California College Pathways.

In Their Words: In some cases, programs like Fostering Scholars, Guardian Scholars and CA College Pathways have "changed college graduation rates from 3% to over 70%," noted one individual. She added that part of their success comes from tapping different funding sources and cited government funding, individual donors, and philanthropic organizations.

5

The Problem: Fractured health care system that was also confusing to users.

The Solution: [Better Health Together](#) is built on the idea of "collaborative action." Specifically they involve many players across sectors to achieve what one participant called the "triple aim" of "better health," "better care," and "reduced costs."⁵ They not only work to expand health care access but also provide "in person assisters" to walk people through confusing insurance plans and registration processes. Key partners include Spokane County, universities, school districts, nonprofits, and private insurers.

In Their Words: Better Health Together "thinks like an ecosystem" mentioned one attendee. By offering "wrap around services," they seek to transform "health care into human care."

³ <http://www.nwautism.org>

⁴ <https://www.seattleu.edu/fosteringscholars/>

⁵ <http://www.betterhealthtogether.org>

6

The Problem: High rates of re-hospitalization of homeless people because of the risk of infection and other complications while living on the street.

The Solution: [Housing, Healthcare and Homeless](http://www.voaspokane.org/homeless-health-housing) (known as H³) has been tackling this problem⁶ and working to end chronic homelessness by building new housing units. Organizations involved span the public-private sectors, including among others, local Spokane hospitals, Catholic Charities, Volunteers of America, Empire Health Foundation, Center for Justice, Spokane emergency medical services, and Better Health Together. H³ embraces a “triple bottom line” (in the words of one participant) that includes (a) helping homeless people recover from surgeries and other illnesses following hospitalization; (b) lowering costs for the city of Spokane by reducing the need for homeless shelters; and (c) saving health care dollars by minimizing preventable re-hospitalization.

In Their Words: The same Threads participant stated that this program has reduced “preventable re-hospitalization by 30%” and is “on track to end chronic homelessness in Spokane next year.”

ROLES

We wrapped up Threads Spokane 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. **Branding/Communications** – Participants asked Independent Sector to promote the larger value of the sector. They argued that the public doesn’t fully grasp the economic impact of nonprofits as well as their pervasiveness/importance to a well-functioning society.
2. **Size of Sector** – Many called for a national organization that would sort through the sheer number of nonprofits to help “rationalize” the community. Doing so, some said, would free up resources and create more capacity for effective institutions.
3. **Skepticism** – Some individuals expressed skepticism that a national organization could provide technical assistance to local communities. “Do you really know,” asked one person, “what we need?”
4. **Collaborative Models** – This theme arose during a dialogue on how to improve collaboration. One person said, “Tell us who is doing this and how? What is working?” The conversation suggested a hunger for models of partnerships that have been effective.

⁶ <http://www.voaspokane.org/homeless-health-housing>

5. **Leadership** – Attendees commented on the proposed role of providing tools/programs to the sector. Said one: “The tools you provide MUST help to create leadership capacity in the sector.”
6. **Ethics and Accountability** - Like other Threads, Spokane included a lengthy discussion on the need to set standards for everyone working in the sector. Many participants called on Independent Sector to take up this role, a refrain likely based on its [*Principles for Good Governance and Ethical Practice*](#).
7. **Convener** – Finally, many urged Independent Sector to maintain its current role as a “neutral convener,” capable of bringing together many different perspectives both inside/outside the sector.