

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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ECF CEO Talks About the Community and the Foundation

By Mary Helt Gavin

Corrections submitted by ECF in *blue* Thursday, July 14, 2016

When Monique Brunson Jones came to Evanston Community Foundation last year, it was with the head of a businesswoman and the heart of a social worker. Before becoming CEO of the Foundation, she was Director of Programs at the Chicago Foundation for Women, where she led a staff of 14 and oversaw a budget of \$3.8 million. She also previously worked as Director of the Office of Violence Prevention in the Cook County Department of Health and served in clinical and management positions with the Jane Addams Hull House Association.

As a businesswoman she oversees the development of new funding sources, the evaluation of programs, and the awarding of more than \$800,000 in grants each year to local not-for-profit agencies. “We spend about 5% of the endowment each year,” she said. Her background in social work helps provide a context for assessing the community.



ECF President and CEO
Monique B. Jones

Evanston Community Foundation

The Foundation awards responsive grants, those given in response to proposals from agencies; grants earmarked by donors for specific purposes; and grants that are “donor-advised” but not necessarily directed toward a program or purpose. In deciding to award the responsive grants, “we pull data from other organizations, such as the City’s Health Department, the Heartland Institute and the census, so we can learn where are the best places to make a difference,” said Ms. Jones. Responsive grants can be used for operations or for capacity-building, such as shoring up the back office or creating a “donor path” to enhance revenues, said Ms. Jones.

Corrections:

Responsive grants are used to provide support for improvements and expansions of programs and new programs. They are also used to provide capacity building support in order to build nonprofit organizations’ sustainability. Examples of capacity building are improving board functioning, helping with technology such as fundraising software or website development, or developing marketing and branding materials.

DonorPath is a social enterprise business, now part of Network for Good, which helps small nonprofits improve their fundraising. This year, with the support of an anonymous donor, ECF is piloting a partnership with DonorPath to work with 13 Evanston nonprofits. This is not part of our responsive grants program.

She said some agencies may be reluctant to admit they are struggling with those issues, and in the past it has been “hard to put capacity-building in a grant, but I’m happy to change that culture.”

Correction:

ECF has been providing capacity building through its responsive grants program since 2002 and through its root2fruit grants program since 2003, thanks to a partnership with the Mammel Foundation. Root2fruit has provided nearly \$1.3 million in capacity building grants since 2003. ECF remains committed to helping nonprofit organizations grow and build firm and sustainable foundations

Evaluating the programs led to some changes, Ms. Jones said. A major change was the shift away from funding direct services.

Correction:

ECF has not shifted away from funding direct services. In fact, of the 29 responsive grants awarded at the May 26 grants award celebration and annual meeting, 21 provide support for direct services in Evanston. Generally, ECF does not provide direct services itself outside of its Leadership Evanston program.

The Foundation also decided to discontinue the two-generation program, which had been funded two years ago as a pilot. “We don’t want to keep a program that can’t meet its goal,” said Ms. Jones.

Correction:

The Two Generation Initiative was always intended to be a short term pilot to learn about the potential for working with the parents of young children while their children receive high quality early childhood services. Through a partnership with Northwestern University and Ascend at the Aspen Institute, along with the contributions of generous local donors, ECF was able to pilot three sessions of a career explorations program. The Foundation learned a great deal through that program and is incorporating that learning into its responsive and Communityworks grants programs.

With some changes and additions, the Communityworks program, with its goal of having every child ready for kindergarten and adult ready for work, was spun off from the Foundation, with funding, and became part of the Evanston Cradle to Career initiative.

Correction:

ECF is continuing to focus on its long-term goal of every child ready for kindergarten, every youth ready for work through its Communityworks grants. Communityworks grants were just awarded that continue to support home visiting and family support in Evanston, along with literacy enhancements for parents and children and psychological supports for young parents. ECF is delighted to be a partner in the Evanston Cradle to Career Initiative, and the work ECF supports with its Communityworks grants is an important part of reaching the goals of Cradle to Career. Several of the Foundation’s staff and board members are actively engaged as part of the Cradle to Career on the operating team and solution design teams.

The Communityworks Fund is an endowed fund of ECF with a broad focus on early childhood care and education, workforce development, and land use and protection. Like all of ECF’s endowed funds, it will be here to address the challenges of Evanston long into the future. While the challenges Evanston faces and the strategies ECF supports to address those challenges may change over time, the commitment to help Evanston be more just, vibrant, and inclusive will not.

The Foundation is still concerned with early childhood education, said Ms. Jones. “Early childhood is so important, you’ve got to get it right.” Collective impact, the concept behind the collaborative effort of Cradle to Career, is important because it helps eliminate the “silos” of funding and programs that individual organizations can see as their prerogative. “Silos are created because of competition for money,” said Ms. Jones. “Competition is created by what is perceived to be limited funds. ... I’m happy to eliminate the silos with funding.”

Our goal is to monitor the funds. We want to be here long after any of this staff has left,” Ms. Jones says. Even more succinct may be the email address: info@evanstonforever.org.

The Evanston Community

Ms. Jones said she has found in Evanston “all the good that I knew that it has.” At the same time, “Evanston is a very diverse community and a very segregated community,” she said. In response to a question about what surprised her about the community she said, “I was most surprised at its inability to address some of the challenges, such as equity. I was also surprised at how many people want to level the playing field.” She said that, while Evanston’s education system is “far better than Chicago’s, when you see children come unprepared and the leave unprepared, you know there is a systemic problem. ... Maybe this is a parent problem, and we can help some parents. Maybe this is a teacher problem, and we can help teachers.” She said the Foundation’s focus on early childhood education and care is a way to help address the achievement gap between minority and white students.

Ms. Jones said she would like to see the Foundation be a convener of conversations and a “thought-leader. ... We’d like to say ‘This is the Foundation’s role.’”

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