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# Partnering for Impact

*Combining National Knowledge  
with Regional Leverage  
for Local Impact*



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 The Association of  
Baltimore Area  
Grantmakers

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## Suggestions for Using this Document

In addition to providing general knowledge and insights about how partnerships between national funders and regional associations can work, here are a few suggestions about how to use this document to further discussions and/or information sharing.

- Identify the top 2-3 lessons learned that resonate most with you and discuss with your team.
- Use the lessons in this document as a reference in creating your own foundation/RA project.
- Distribute and discuss the “Quick Guide” section in this document as part of staff training.
- Use this report as a starting place for a meeting with your local RA (or, if you’re an RA, with a national funder) to talk about potential partnerships.
- Feel free to include material from this document in blog posts or newsletters, with citation and a link to the full document online at [www.abagrantmakers.org/partneringforimpact](http://www.abagrantmakers.org/partneringforimpact).

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## Introduction

Regional associations of grantmakers can be natural and effective partners for national funders that wish to derive greater impact from their work in local areas. Regional associations have the ties that create strong local networks, the trust that creates local buy-in, and the knowledge about local issues, interests and culture. All of these things are absolutely vital for a national funder to incorporate if their work in local communities is to be successful.

But what should national funders and regional associations keep in mind when working together? How do different perspectives come into play, and how do they affect understanding, implementation and outcomes of joint projects?

From 2010-2012, the Annie E. Casey Foundation worked with the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers (ABAG) to test the feasibility and practicality of sharing Casey Foundation learnings and knowledge with grantmakers through regional associations. This effort, named the Learning and Action Agenda Project, had the ultimate goal to provide local grantmakers with information and strategies around issues of importance to the Casey

Foundation — particularly around the Foundation's Family Economic Success framework — and to motivate them to take action on those issues within their own communities and networks.

This report documents the experiences, successes and lessons learned during the Learning and Action Agenda Project by Casey Foundation staff, ABAG staff, and staff from participating regional associations. It is our hope that this report will serve as a resource for the entire Casey Foundation staff and the staffs at all regional associations as they consider similar work. Likewise, we hope that this document may also serve as a guide for other national funders who wish to partner with regional associations.

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- Indiana Grantmakers Alliance - Marie Beason
- Iowa Council of Foundations - Angela Dethlefs-Trettin
- San Diego Grantmakers - Nancy Jamison
- Southeastern Council of Foundations - Greg Gerhard and Kenita Williams
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## Executive Summary

The Learning and Action Agenda Project (LAAP) was a three-year partnership (2009-2012) between the Annie E. Casey Foundation and nine regional associations of grantmakers (RAs) to deliver national foundation expertise through trusted regional networks in order to inform local grantmaking. During the course of the project, both the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the regional associations — in particular the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers (ABAG), which coordinated the project — learned valuable lessons about working together. This report is intended to share those learnings with other national foundations and regional associations.

Early in the project, participants agreed to focus on sharing information from the Casey Foundation's Family Economic Success (FES) framework with local grantmakers. The FES approach helps low-income working families and neighborhoods move out of poverty by using strategies to earn, keep and grow assets. Efforts to transfer this knowledge included trainings for regional association staff hosted by the Casey Foundation, webinars about FES topics for funders, philanthropic advisors and RA staff hosted by ABAG, and local educational programs and communications for members at each of the participating RAs.

Overall, the project highlighted many ways in which partnerships between national funders and regional associations can be mutually beneficial. It proved that RAs are well positioned to be trusted facilitators for local efforts, are able to garner useful feedback from their members to inform a national agenda, and are adept at sharing national information with grantmakers in their geographic areas. Working with a national funder provided RAs with a way to leverage that national reputation and influence to build local interest, and gave RAs access to valuable knowledge to share with members, thus enhancing their own services. Both RA staff and Casey Foundation staff also used LAAP as an opportunity to think through their roles and obligations as partners, and indicated they are now better prepared to evaluate potential partnerships in the future.

In terms of achieving project goals for distributing information on the FES framework, there is much to indicate success.

- Nearly 50 convenings over the course of three years delivered information to hundreds of individuals. National webinars reached more than 350 participants. Participating regional associations issued 18 reports, articles or other new resources about issues related to FES, and two have established collaborations that will include FES knowledge and strategies in their ongoing work.
- Local funders indicated a willingness to work on issues associated with FES, and the Casey Foundation learned more about what is required to get local funders to embrace a national foundation's framework for approaching a systemic problem.
- LAAP also showed the value of specific tools for enhancing partnership interactions. One was the use of webinars, which were well attended and proved an easy way to enhance outreach. Another was training offered to RA staff and board members in Results Based Facilitation, which helped participants learn to plan and conduct productive meetings — a skill they report they'll use throughout their work. An online wiki site for sharing documents did not get the traction that was expected and was eventually abandoned.

Lessons learned from the project about working in partnership include those about roles, communication and capacity of national funders and RAs.

- National funders can be valuable partners for enhancing regional knowledge, bringing a wealth of information and expertise in areas that affect communities within a specific region. Leveraging that national knowledge can improve local grantmaking.
- Regional associations offer valuable relationships and trust for expanding a national foundation's reach, offering vital relationships and connections with individual foundations at the state or community level.

- Partners should be clear in defining roles. Casey Foundation staff and RA staff often reported different perceptions of what their roles were. While Casey Foundation viewed this effort as a true partnership, several RAs interpreted their roles as grantees, which led to misunderstandings about what and how much funding each partner would provide.
- Using an intermediary offers pros and cons. Using ABAG as an intermediary for LAAP — while certainly beneficial in terms of organization, logistics and efficiency — may have created an unintentional communication gap between Casey Foundation and the other participating RAs.
- Communications efforts deserve special attention. Developing compelling ways to communicate FES messages with RA members proved challenging, both in terms of language that resonated (“economic success” vs. “breaking the cycle of poverty”) and in terms of translating abstract ideas about specialized funding strategies for an audience that is largely made up of generalists.
- Capacity is a driving factor in participation. Participation in LAAP caused several RAs to reconsider their capacity in terms of time and finances when partnering with a national funder. Many faced challenges in balancing the needs and obligations of the partnership with myriad other member services, and uncovered tensions or disconnects between what Casey Foundation offered in terms of content and what members wanted. In terms of time and capacity, RAs encountered several unexpected hurdles in conveying information to and generating interest among their members, which slowed the initial project timeline. Additionally, Casey Foundation staff found that requests for presentations were more than they could deliver without the assistance of consultants.

In considering future partnerships, lessons learned from LAAP suggest the following:

- Both national foundations and RAs should be clear about funding obligations and expectations up front.
- Because not all RAs are the same or have the same capacity, national funders may have to tailor their approaches to each partner.
- RAs should carefully explore their roles as conveners vs. leaders for their members, and shape their partnership commitments accordingly.
- National funders that are more vested in certain geographic areas may get more traction with RAs that share that same footprint.
- Potential partners should be clear at the outset about the focus and content of their work, and be in agreement about its value and relevance to RA members.
- Establishing metrics for measuring success may help foster a sense of ownership and shared successes among all partners.

The Casey Foundation’s funding for LAAP concluded in 2012. However, several of the participating RAs have indicated that they will continue to incorporate messages and information from FES into their ongoing work. In addition, almost all participants reported that they would be willing to explore or participate in a national funder/RA partnership in the future.

“We find that the FES model is a hopeful one and one that resonates with funders,” said one RA staff member. No doubt this is true — and hopefully the information sharing and conversations that have arisen and will continue to arise from the Casey Foundation’s FES content will continue to spur local funders to action.

## About the Learning and Action Agenda Project

The Learning and Action Agenda Project was designed to bring The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s national expertise to funders working locally on issues affecting families and children and increase the capacity of regional association (RA) staff to help their members move to action. From the Casey Foundation perspective, the Learning and Action Agenda Project was an opportunity to share knowledge in an area where the Foundation has considerable expertise. It was also an opportunity to work in partnership with RAs, which Casey Foundation saw as ready and able organizations, ideally suited to educate and motivate multiple local grantmakers. Miriam Shark, Associate Director, describes this project as “part of a wholesale strategy to get good information and actionable strategies into the hands of those who can take action.”

The Casey Foundation worked with nine regional associations, representing some 1,400 grantmaking foundations in 19 states and/or metropolitan areas. The Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers served as both the coordinating organization for the project and as a participating Regional association. Funding and content expertise were provided by the Casey Foundation. For more on leadership roles in this project, see Appendix 1.

Soon after the project began, participants agreed that within the scope of “families and children” issues, they would focus more directly on sharing the Casey Foundation’s Family Economic Success framework and agenda with local grantmakers. A complete description of the Learning and Action Agenda Project timeline and activities is available in Appendix 2.



### About Family Economic Success

Family Economic Success (FES) is the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s comprehensive approach to help working families and neighborhoods move into the economic mainstream and participate in the modern economy. This approach integrates the strategy areas of workforce development, family economic supports, and community investments. These strategy areas — summarized as “Earn It. Keep It. Grow It.” — can help families secure adequate incomes through work, saving, investing, and effectively managing their money, while at the same time supporting institutions and policies that make the cost of living reasonable for working families. Learn more about FES at <http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/CenterforFamilyEconomicSuccess.aspx>

### Participating Regional Associations

*(Membership numbers are approximate)*

- Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers (145 members)
- Connecticut Council for Philanthropy (105 members)
- Council of Michigan Foundations (359 members)\*
- Delaware Valley Grantmakers (141 members)\*
- Grantmakers Forum of New York (65 members)
- Indiana Grantmakers Alliance (138 members)\*
- Iowa Council of Foundations (65 members)\*\*
- San Diego Grantmakers (90 members)
- Southeastern Council of Foundations (350 members)

\* Dropped out before end of project

\*\*Joined project in September, 2011.

## Project Successes

### Success for the National Funder/Regional Association Partnership Model

The Learning and Action Agenda Project helped clarify the important roles that regional associations are uniquely suited to play in helping their members achieve community change with real impact, in partnership with a national funder.

- From the outset, RAs can help circumvent the impression that a national funder is only interested in pushing a top-down agenda, and can be a trusted facilitator for creating on-the-ground partnerships.
- Regional associations provide an opportunity for national funders to not only share tools and strategies, but to garner useful feedback on the efficacy of those tools and strategies and to discover new and better ways to deploy them.
- Because they are highly trusted by their members, RAs are perhaps the single most effective way to get information out to foundations within specific geographies to increase awareness. The Learning and Action Agenda Project was very successful in this respect, providing high value in terms of information sharing to both Casey Foundation and hundreds of smaller grantmakers.

From the perspective of the regional associations, the successes of working with a national funder came in the ability to leverage Casey Foundation's national reputation to attract member participation, gain access to new knowledge and to expert presenters to add value to their own member services, and to learn a great deal about FES issues in their own communities — which will provide ongoing benefit to their members. It also gave RA staff the opportunity to think through questions about their roles in partnership with national funders versus their obligations to members. Exploring questions of expectations and accountability during this project left several RA leaders feeling more confident in their abilities to evaluate potential partnerships with national funders in the future.

“One common theme of this project was that it was very member specific and member driven,” says Irene Lee, Director of Work/Wealth at the Casey Foundation's Center for Family Economic Success, who served as a primary staff contact for the FES content. “I heard

individuals exploring how they as RA directors or senior staff could link FES to member interests and still link externally to the Casey Foundation. Those who were able to figure it out were able to provide new streams of information — planting seeds for their members. Others were those where someone really understood the content because they came out of that field and could leverage their cohorts to adopt the FES agenda.”

Overall, both Casey staff and RA staff expressed positive feelings about the Project and their experiences with the national funder/regional association collaboration. “At the core, I love the idea of learning, connecting with other regionals, and connecting to Casey's knowledge,” said one RA leader. Another added, “Everyone learns from national collaborations, so we'd definitely do this again.”

“Regional associations know their funders and what drives them better than anybody,” says Shark. “We know that 70% of all giving is local, so it's very important to pay attention to, learn from, and share ideas with local funders. I am very enthusiastic about RAs as partners for national foundations.”

### Success by the Numbers

- 1** Highly regarded Regional association successfully led its peers in working with a national funder.
- 3** Casey Foundation staff gave a significant amount of time to this project.
- 9** Regional associations moved a conversation about Family Economic Success further along in their regions.
- 30** Regional association staff and members received training on creating and conducting more productive and effective meetings — a skill they say they will employ in every aspect of their work.
- 48** Programs about or incorporating Family Economic Success were delivered by participating Regional associations.
- 360** National webinar participants who were informed about Family Economic Success strategies.
- 18** Reports, articles or other new resources generated by participating Regional associations about issues related to Family Economic Success.
- 1400+** Foundations had the opportunity to hear, learn and begin to do something about Family Economic Success issues.
- 2** Established collaborations inspired by the Learning and Action Agenda Project to include FES knowledge and strategies into their ongoing work.

## The Qualitative Summary

From a qualitative perspective, the Learning and Action Agenda Project shows many indications of success. First and foremost, the experience of exploring a process for moving funders from ideas to action was beneficial across the board. RAs report that they valued the process and the opportunity to explore a new method of motivating their members.

Specifically, interviews with Casey Foundation and RA staff revealed that:

- **The needle moved.** The content and scope of the various RA convenings was successful in pushing at least some members from non-awareness to conversation, and in some cases, specific actions. As the quantitative figures show, there were nearly 50 convenings held as part of the Project, and each provided — at the very least — new knowledge for foundation participants to ponder.
- **Funders are willing to work on this issue.** The Learning and Action Agenda Project demonstrated to the Casey Foundation and the Regional associations that there is a considerable level of funder interest around issues related to Family Economic Success, and opportunities to capitalize on that interest could take many forms.
- **There are learning opportunities here.** From the perspective of a national funder, this project provided valuable insights into what it takes to entice local funders to embrace a national agenda in order to

deliver sought-after results. It also helped the Casey Foundation learn more about what is required internally from a national funder that wishes to share its agenda more broadly. “National funders have to be active — they can’t have others be missionaries for them,” as one participant explained.

- **Webinars extend the reach.** National webinars — when delivered through trusted intermediaries like RAs — are a very valuable tool for promoting a national funder’s messages. Approximately 100 people joined each online presentation and discussions that ABAG hosted as a part of this project. “Our webinars were a great example of supporting the partnership within the project and of reaching out to a broader network,” says Hyleck. “A webinar doesn’t necessarily move foundations to action, but it does get information out there to a wide audience. It’s an easy way for regional associations that don’t have the capacity to deeply engage in a project like this to still deliver substantive content to their members.”
- **Effective meeting training is a crowd favorite.** The incorporation of training for planning and conducting effective meetings was a stroke of brilliance. RA staff and members across the board found Casey Foundation’s training, called Results Based Facilitation (see [www.rbfnetwork.com](http://www.rbfnetwork.com)), to be extremely valuable, and said that they would incorporate the lessons learned from this training into all of their work, above and beyond the Learning and Action Agenda project.

## What Success Looks Like: A Regional Focus on Poverty

The Southeastern Council of Foundations (SECF) underwent significant staffing changes during the course of the Learning and Action Agenda Project. As a result, it did not deliver the wide range of programs to members that other RAs did. However, member interest and discussions around the effects of poverty — including the ways in which it affects families and children — has led to initial steps in creating a new 11-state Poverty Initiative at SECF.

“We understood the Casey Foundation’s FES framework, but we wanted to go bigger,” explains Greg Gerhard, (former) Director of Grantmaker Education and Strategic Partnerships. “We are including FES as a component of this work, and it has reaffirmed for some of our key members the value of SECF as a convener.”

Although still in the early stages as of this writing, SECF members who make up the Poverty Initiative’s leadership team (including a Casey Foundation staff person based in Atlanta) are planning ways to share resources and best practices to address poverty and build conversations and convenings throughout SECF’s 11-state membership.



## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Naturally, a project of this scope and size is not without challenges. Both the Casey Foundation staff and RA staff discovered several hurdles along the way, but working to address them resulted in several valuable lessons learned:

- **Great strides often start with baby steps.** Although the original hope was that RAs would “hit the ground running” in their delivery of Casey Foundation content to their members during the first year, several unexpected hurdles reshaped that year into one more focused on research and readiness — both worthwhile endeavors that likely increased overall activities and results among the RAs.
- **Creating the proper tools is critical.** “It’s often difficult for a large funder like the Casey Foundation to translate its considerable knowledge into actionable items and tools, particularly for smaller grant-makers,” says Shark. However, by working with ABAG, Casey was able to refine the tools used to present the FES framework, thus giving the regional associations a more enticing way to engage their members.
- **Tools must be easily accessible.** The method of tool and resource delivery can increase or hamper their usage. ABAG created an online wiki site for document sharing, but it proved to be somewhat complicated to use, and neither ABAG nor Casey had the staff available to keep resources updated and conversations flowing.
- **Staff capacity is a challenge for both national funders and regional associations.** For the Casey Foundation, the Learning and Action Agenda Project coincided with organizational repositioning and staffing changes. The internal point person assigned to coordinate the Foundation’s interactions and coach colleagues in participation was juggling many demands — and this point person changed mid-way through the project. Staff turnover at several RAs also made for time lags and gaps in ongoing knowledge development. For example, in the second of two effective meeting trainings the turnover in attendees

was so significant that the planning team opted to deliver content that could stand on its own rather than build upon the first workshop.

For both the Casey Foundation and RA staff, involvement in the Learning and Action Agenda Project was just one of many, many responsibilities, so devoting time and attention was a challenge. One RA staff member summed it up this way: “The more extra work a project like this requires, the less likely it is to happen. Don’t do it if you don’t have the staff resources to implement.”

Casey Foundation’s Lee observed that, “As a Casey Foundation director with a small staff, a challenge that caused both success and stress was that this project started to generate requests for presentations from Casey staff. We didn’t have the capacity to handle that, although fortunately we had contracts with other consultants. In the future we should build that staff capacity into the work plan.”

- **The gap between national and local foundation capacity is large.** “The average number of staff at a local foundation is about 2.2,” Shark points out. “This makes it difficult to translate abstract ideas about specialized funding strategies into action among an audience that is mostly made up of generalists. We need to provide specific help if we want to see people take specific action.”

Moreover, presenting a broad perspective like the one in the FES Framework can be overwhelming or intimidating to smaller funders. “They feel they are either too small, only doing a tiny piece, or looking through a completely different lens,” explained one RA staff member.

- **Language can be a barrier.** Both Casey Foundation staff and RA staff struggled to find a common language with which to discuss the content of Family Economic Success. “There was some tension between Casey’s way of looking at things and what our funders were doing or interested in adopting. We couldn’t find the same language,” said an RA staff member. For example, many local funders were already familiar

with and attracted to concepts like “breaking the cycle of poverty” and were able to understand “Family Economic Success” when introduced in those terms.

- **Local funders have minds of their own.** “Regional associations can set the table, but their members have to want to dine, and will determine whether to do so together or separately,” says Shark. Almost all of the RAs struggled to find the right “fit” between the Casey Foundation FES content and their members’ current interests and activities. Few were able to present the entire FES framework as an independent concept, but had to work it into their existing programming. “You can’t make funders want to do things a certain way at a certain time,” said an RA staffer. “You have to meet them where they are. No amount of money changes that.”

“Finding the right fit is vital,” said another. “Make sure the content is completely in alignment with your members’ work. Make sure you have funders who are already interested in and/or doing the work.”

- **Gauging funders’ interests and including their opinions takes more time than you’d think.** Reaching out to funders and gathering their input on working with a national funder — and working specifically on FES issues — took much more time and logistical wrangling than originally anticipated. Although ABAG spent considerable time creating a survey instrument for participants’ use, only four were able to execute it. Others observed that their members were already “over surveyed,” which made it difficult to solicit a response. Some RAs did not have the capacity to reach beyond the “usual suspects” or existing affinity groups to tap other members. As a result, engagement among RA memberships may not have been as deep as desired.

“We hand picked members to participate in our first convening,” explains one RA staff member. “In retrospect, we should have done a call for sessions of some sort to the whole membership, then created a system to vet and focus. What we do for one, we should do for all. There certainly were some voices we didn’t capture. I’m worried that the group we have will become a clique.”

## What Success Looks Like: More Powerful Advocacy

The Connecticut Council for Philanthropy took advantage of a ripe political climate to focus many of their Learning and Action Agenda Project efforts on advocacy. Overall, the Council hosted 11 programs and 5 conference calls in which the value of advocacy was discussed, encouraged as a grantmaker strategy, or reviewed for outcomes. Presenters included nationally recognized organizations and speakers, including the Alliance for Justice; Leslie Crutchfield and John Kania, authors of *Do More Than Give*; and Tom Kelly, Associate Director for Evaluation, Organizational Learning and Influence Unit, Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Various Council member affinity groups have incorporated advocacy for families and children into their activities, including the Council’s Early Childhood Collaboration, Green Jobs Learning Community, and a group that has launched a new survey to benchmark and inform health care policy in the state.

“The language from the Learning and Action Agenda Project about moving to action coincided with our affinity groups becoming much more active as advocates,” says the Council’s President Nancy Roberts. “We greatly benefited from both of the Productive Meetings sessions in Baltimore.”

Connecticut’s new governor and his commissions are open to building public/private partnerships. Due to their expertise and particular knowledge, a number of Council members have been invited to serve on commission boards or sit on task forces. Their participation, in turn, has strengthened philanthropy’s position in the state and has provided for a heightened level of exchange in grantmaker meetings.

Casey Foundation and RA staff learned valuable lessons about working with one another as well.

- **RAs do not all have the same capacity.** “From the Casey Foundation perspective, we probably would be more conscious of each RA’s capacity as a leader in starting a project like this next time,” says Shark. “We should be more aware of each RA’s ability to a) deliver very concrete tools and b) provide substantive leadership to move groups to action. All RAs are able to do something, but we could be more aware of their individual capacity levels and calibrate expectations more appropriately.”
- **Clarity from national funders is crucial.** RA leaders urged Casey and other national funders to be clearer about their expectations for collaborations and about the funds available. Several RA interviewees felt unclear about the activities for which they could or should receive funding, and about their specific roles and Casey’s expectations. All of the RAs saw value in this project, but most said that next time they will ask more questions and do more due diligence about the fit, time and resources required for a project like this before they commit to participation.
- **Participants view funding differently.** While RAs by and large viewed the Learning and Action Agenda Project as a grant-funded initiative, the Casey Foundation approached it as a co-investment opportunity, in which RAs would step forward as equal partners. This difference in perceptions about funding led to differences in perceptions about roles and behavior; organizations and individuals typically think and respond differently when they identify themselves as “grantees” vs. “partners.”

### What Success Looks Like: Collaborative Relationships with a Sharper Focus

San Diego Grantmakers incorporated learnings from the Casey Foundation’s FES framework to inform the activities of their already active Transition Age Youth Funders group (formerly Child Welfare Funders). Over the course of the Learning and Action Agenda Project, funders chose to focus on one particular element of the very complex spectrum of poverty: the challenges and needs of youth transitioning out of the foster care system.

Inspired by an early 2011 learning session about transition age youth, several funders provided a planning grant for San Diego Youth Services to explore the feasibility of launching a new center that would combine a drop-in function with structured learning and recreational opportunities for transition aged youth (TAY). The goal was to create an environment where these young people can experience positive growth and development as they prepare for and enter adulthood through increased ability for independent living and self-sufficiency, and improved physical and emotional health and wellbeing. That initial funding led to additional government funding for several new “TAY Academies” in the San Diego area.

“Lessons learned from the productive meetings training helped us work more effectively with our Child Welfare Funders – ultimately leading to their greater focus on Transition Age Youth and the creation of the TAY Academies,” explains Nancy Jamison, Executive Director, San Diego Grantmakers. “These Academies are all likely to include services that will help the young clients increase their financial savvy and job readiness – in the spirit of FES!”

## A Quick Guide For National Funder/Regional Association Partners

For national funders and regional associations who are considering working together on a common project or for a common purpose, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers offer the following guide for consideration, based on their experiences with the Learning and Action Agenda Project.

### DO

- **Consider national funders as a valuable partner for enhancing regional knowledge.** National funders often have a wealth of information and expertise around areas that affect communities within a specific region. Leveraging that national knowledge can improve local grantmaking.
- **Recognize the valuable relationships and trust that regional associations offer for expanding national reach.** Because of their relationships with individual foundations working at the state or community level, regional associations are key partners for helping national foundations share their expertise and improve their own effectiveness.
- **Understand the relationship(s).** Decide together whether this undertaking is one between equal partners, between grantor and grantee, or another kind of relationship altogether.
- **Say your piece.** Have frank discussions about money and expectations up front. These can sometimes be difficult topics to discuss at the beginning, but they'll only get more difficult as time goes on.
- **Share power.** Find ways to share power and leverage. While one partner may hold a bigger checkbook, another may hold the trust of other partners or audiences that are key to success.
- **Own your engagement.** Agree upon clear roles, types and levels of investment, and measures of accountability among all partners.
- **Know the benefits.** Clarify “what’s in it for me” for all involved parties. While both foundation and RA staff can be highly motivated for a common good, it helps to see a payoff close to home.
- **Know where you’re going.** Agree on desired outcomes and how you’ll define success. Know where you’re going, and you’ll be more likely to get there.
- **Be flexible.** Be willing to adapt project structure, timelines, expectations, etc. as the project unfolds. There is more than one way to achieve a desired outcome, and part of the benefit of working in partnership is discovering and testing new methods and approaches.
- **Adapt your tools.** Individual partners may have specific tools they favor, but often those tools may require “re-tooling” to have more rewarding use for the group as a whole or to better address the challenges targeted by partners.
- **Appreciate the limitations of personnel time.** Unless your partnership plans to hire dedicated staff, everyone involved is adding the partnership’s work onto what is likely an already full plate. Be patient with yourself and with fellow partners and understand that other obligations will compete for attention.

## DON'T

- **Confuse a coordinator with a middle-man.** While having one person or organization facilitate the project is a good idea, assuming their go-between services can take the place of direct communication between partners can be a mistake.
- **Be in a rush.** Partnerships between national foundations and regional associations are great for addressing deeply rooted social issues, but like every other approach to a gargantuan problem, getting to a point that feels successful will take time — most likely more time than anyone anticipates.
- **Expect a perfect outcome.** “Success” in partnerships often is not an end result so much as an ongoing experience. While reaching agreed-upon goals every time is extremely satisfying, more and better learning can often come from the process of working toward the goal — including learning why it may be unattainable.
- **Hang your hopes on a checkbook.** Although important, money is just one tool in a partnership’s arsenal. Money is never enough to solve a problem, nor is it the only way to meet a challenge.

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## Observations and Recommendations

In the course of conversations regarding the Learning in Action Agenda Project and this report, a number of observations and recommendations came to light that may serve to inform the Casey Foundation and other national funders that wish to work with regional associations, as well as the regional associations themselves.

- Not surprisingly, there were many recommendations regarding funding for national foundations wishing to partner with RAs. Although the Casey Foundation's strategy of leaving funding for RA work up to RA members is a valid one, it may not provide enough incentive for RA staff or their members when the agenda that a national foundation wishes to put forward is something new or "extra" for an RA to take on. RA participants expressed some frustration that the Casey Foundation was unwilling to pay for staff time related to moving this agenda forward.

"Asking for action without further investment becomes the sticking point," said one RA staffer. "If a national funder isn't willing to commit to putting forth resources, then they shouldn't even enter the arena."

On the other hand, Casey Foundation considered the Learning in Action Agenda Project a co-investment opportunity among interested partners, with the anticipation that RAs would provide some internal funding.

Perhaps a larger funding commitment up front, with an expectation of pass-thru funds to individual RAs for project activities, is worth consideration. Conversely, national funders might insist on an advance commitment from RA members to also fund a collaborative project before diving in.

Along with the question of funding comes the question of time. Given the unanticipated amount of time it took to assess the interests of RA members and develop programs for them, was the length of investment for this project enough to get the traction Casey Foundation hoped for? Or did it end when momentum was just beginning to build?

- For the Casey Foundation, there is the challenge of finding the "sweet spot" in its relationship to each RA. For each, the Casey Foundation's relationship falls somewhere on the continuum between national content provider and local, participating RA member. If a national funder like the Casey Foundation wishes to be regarded as a peer by fellow members in a regional association, it may wish to develop a deeper understanding of what a "peer" relationship is within each RA's culture, one that resonates for both Casey Foundation and small foundations in specific locales.
- For RAs, a challenge may lie in exploring their roles as conveners versus leaders for their members. Bringing funders together to hear and learn is one thing, actually influencing them to coalesce or being able to guide them in their desire to do so is another. Regional associations can bring great value in either role, but limits of staff capacity and funding suggest that both a national funder and an RA itself would be better served if the RA's role and ability were clear before beginning a project like the Learning and Action Agenda.
- Aside from ABAG, the Southeastern Council of Foundations and Connecticut Council for Philanthropy were the only two RAs that had an active Casey Foundation site in their geographic area, and thus the potential to leverage Casey Foundation more powerfully into their projects. It could be that a concerted approach to work with RAs that share geographies in common with Casey Foundation investments would provide both Casey Foundation and the local funders with increased access to one another's expertise, thoughts, knowledge and networks.
- Anecdotally, RA staff members' feelings about success of different aspects of this project seem to directly correlate to their sense of ownership and relevance in decisions about the project's scope and direction. For example, nearly everyone was complimentary about the effective meetings training, because it is applicable in every aspect of a staff member's work. But not all RAs saw the FES content as the best fit for their

organizations. Not surprisingly, those who already had some sort of alignment or fit for the FES content within their existing work seemed more successful and enthusiastic about their content-related work. Although the Casey Foundation attempted a strategy of “choose content first, partners second,” a more thorough “unpacking” of content and concepts up front, with exploration of their relevance to existing RA work, might have resulted in deeper buy-in among RAs.

- Communicating directly with each participating RA rather than relying on one RA – however stellar – as an intermediary may have garnered greater buy-in and results. Several RAs commented that they had very limited communication directly with Casey Foundation staff and wished they could have had more. To move their members to action, they explain, they needed the faces to back up Casey’s reputation. They believe that their members would tend to listen to a “live” Casey Foundation staffer, more greatly value

their experience and advice, and be more likely to organize to move to action as a result of that contact. As one RA leader pointed out, “The ability of a RA to attract national resources is valuable only when those resources are in evidence in the community.”

- Despite the fact that they struggled with staff capacity to implement the Learning and Action Agenda, a couple of RAs pointed out the importance of incorporating measurements into the mix, especially if the end goal is to collect evidence of successes to share with others. “If you want to develop scenarios to publish about the value of the FES context to funders, more measurement of how the partners are using that context could have been done, and expectations about that measure could have been set at the beginning of the project,” said one RA staff member. Securing an early agreement upon mutually accepted outcome measurements or project deliverables may help RAs further define their activities and “sell” the project to their members.

### What Success Looks Like: Using Data to Provide Real-World Context

“Our members do not seem to have a problem positioning their grantmaking in terms of FES,” says Liz Wilder, Executive Director of the Grantmakers Forum of New York. “It’s a context they readily accept.”

In addition to providing four programs to help funders understand the context of the FES framework, Grantmakers Forum of New York produced a case for FES using New York state data and a local “report card” for Rochester using a community indicators database created by the local United Way and community foundation.

“The Rochester report, *Family Economic Success: A Monroe County Overview*, proved to be a useful example of how community indicators can be used to define a problem and provided a background for our FES events,” Wilder reports. “Most of our more populous areas have community indicators available and are eager for examples of how they can be used for community action.”

The Forum regularly shared aspects of the case, report card and other elements of FES related to local issues in its monthly newsletter, and highlighted FES as one of the key initiatives in its yearly renewal notice to members and annual report. These activities have raised awareness of FES among funders across the state. Now the Forum incorporates an FES message in much of its programming, frequently provides FES information in their newsletters, and is soliciting support to produce additional FES reports using community indicators.

## Going Forward

Although the Casey Foundation's funding commitment to the Learning and Action Agenda Project concluded in 2012, several of the RAs participating in the project plan to continue to incorporate FES information and strategies into their work.

"I believe that all RA staff now know more about FES issues and can now better connect their members with information and resources about poverty and other related issues. I also think they better understand how FES issues intertwine with other work at their associations," says Betsy Nelson, ABAG President.

Some RAs will continue to share FES content with their members. Others hope to continue to convene around FES or specific aspects of it, but only if they can find the funding to do so. Almost all of the RAs will use lessons learned about creating effective meetings to bring members together around other content and issues.

"We find that the FES model is a hopeful one and one that resonates with funders," said one RA staff member. No doubt this is true — and hopefully the information sharing and conversations that have arisen and will continue to arise from the Casey Foundation's FES content will continue to spur local funders to action.

### Learn More

Want to learn more about recommended approaches and practices for national/local funder partnerships? We recommend *The Do's and Don'ts of Working With Local Funders* (Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers, 2005), a collection of recommendations from national funders and regional association representatives. Download at [www.abagrantmakers.org](http://www.abagrantmakers.org).

### What Success Looks Like: Telling Meaningful Stories

In addition to member gatherings, The Iowa Council of Foundations (ICoF) captured the human aspects of Family Economic Success by sharing the stories of funders in their state. "We engaged an author to write stories about five of our members and specifically highlight an area of their work related to helping families move to economic self-sufficiency," explains Angela Dethlefs-Trettin, Executive Director. "We put an all-call out to members to gather the stories, which also helped us further introduce and reinforce the FES conversation."

The publication, *The Impact of Funders on Family Economic Success*, was rolled out at the Council's Membership Meeting in January 2012. The stories highlight: a workforce development partnership supported by the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines; the Bridges Initiative funded by the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque; Individual Development Accounts offered with support from the Iowa Credit Union Foundation; a scholarship and training program for adults who wish to re-enter the workforce, supported by Iowa West Foundation; and the Marshalltown Education Partnership, convened by the Martha-Ellen Tye Foundation.

ICoF built momentum from the publication release by including a panel discussion at the Member Meeting, featuring members who shared examples of how they were utilizing the FES framework and strategies locally.



## Appendix 1: Leadership Roles

### Casey's Role

For its part in the Learning and Action Agenda Project, the Casey Foundation provided:

- intellectual content and shared knowledge around its Family Economic Success (FES) framework;
- training on how to conduct effective and productive meetings that move groups to action, and training on measurement and evaluation;
- Casey credibility on issues related to FES that the RAs could leverage to inform and encourage their members; and
- the occasion for all parties to work together through ABAG, one of the most highly respected RAs.

While the Casey Foundation provided funds to ABAG to administer the project, it did not provide funding directly to the Regional associations to cover their staff time as participants in the project. Grant funds covered most costs related to in-person workshops and convenings held for project participants and also were available for a portion of the costs of educational programs, webinars and events held by the Regional associations for their members. The Casey Foundation's philosophy in this funding approach is that Regional associations engaging in this work in their areas can and should be supported by their members. Financial support from members for projects like this one can indicate the level of interest within an RA and whether or not members will follow through by taking action.

### ABAG's Role

ABAG was the natural choice as the coordinator and intermediary for this project for several reasons. First, its geographic proximity to the Casey Foundation headquarters and staff provided for faster and easier face-to-face meetings to plan and discuss the project. Secondly, Elisabeth Hyleck, Special Initiatives Director for ABAG, who served as the project coordinator, was previously employed by the Casey Foundation. Her strong personal ties facilitated more direct and open conversations, relationships with Casey Foundation staff in various content areas made it easier to connect on issues of interest to RAs, and her deep understanding of the Casey Foundation's culture allowed her to translate it into the project's day-to-day operations. And finally, Casey Foundation had experienced first-hand ABAG's expertise at moving its own members to action around specific initiatives.

"We thought it made sense for us to coordinate this project. Engaging in a meaningful way with our members on substantive issues is our stock in trade and is very appreciated by our

members," says Betsy Nelson, ABAG's President. "We have a long-standing relationship with the Casey Foundation and are accustomed to working with them and our other members."

As the national coordinator, Hyleck and ABAG:

- surveyed fellow RAs to determine the level of interest in the project;
- recruited RAs with a demonstrated level of interest to participate in the project;
- continually provided information about the project's focus and intent;
- gathered feedback and ideas that were used to make ongoing refinements to the project's processes and expectations;
- hosted regular convenings – both in person and via webinars and conference calls for RA staff and their members;
- managed an online community for sharing ideas and resources; and
- served as the primary peer leader for RAs and communications conduit for the Casey Foundation.

### Why Regional Associations Were Interested

In 2009, ABAG explored with other RAs the level of interest in pursuing a collaborative learning and action agenda for their members based on issues and strategies honed by the Casey Foundation. This exploration revealed that RAs had an interest in:

- Focusing members on issues in the family / children arena;
- Connecting local funder interest and actions to national movements;
- Access to inspiring speakers and national experts;
- Working with peers on how to help members move to action;
- Collaborating with other regional association staff to design and implement educational opportunities; and
- Access to specific Casey Foundation tools and resources.

If provided with assistance to increase staff capacity to address the items on this list, RAs thought they'd be able to:

- Link members to nationwide/Casey Foundation experience and knowledge;
- Improve their ability to help move funder groups from learning to action and apply these skills to other issue areas;
- Provide members with materials and information germane to their work;

- Spark new interest among funders about FES topics;
- Help members and RA staff more actively engage with state agencies and policy makers;
- Help to ease a funder’s hesitations about addressing more complex issues;
- Support foundations to act in their role as conveners and community leaders; and
- Reach a larger pool of funders with similar interests through technology.

## Appendix 2: Summary of Project Activities

### Year One: Assessment, Preparation and Introductory Programming

The Learning and Action Agenda Project began with a Co-Design Convening in Baltimore in January, 2010, in which staff and members from each participating RA and the Casey Foundation met to discuss the project’s goals and purpose and the learning interests of RAs. Participants also used this time to become familiar with the Casey Foundation’s Family Economic Success framework through presentations on workforce, Center for Working Families, financial coaching, foreclosure prevention, asset building, financial services and FES in a rural context. Casey Foundation staff also introduced some approaches and tools to make funder learning agendas more organized and impactful.

From there, the RAs began to more deeply examine the specific interests of their members, and how best to deliver Casey Foundation knowledge about FES and engage members in actions around that knowledge. In the process, participants discovered two important hurdles to overcome:

- 1) RAs needed to strengthen their understanding about member interests and activities in the area of Family Economic Success. To that end, ABAG led in the creation of a funder interest survey that four participating RAs used to gather that information. Others conducted analyses of their own. Although the need for this step was originally unanticipated and required a considerable investment of time, it proved well worth the effort as RAs honed their strategies for delivering FES content to their members.
- 2) Although the Casey Foundation’s knowledge and strategies about FES were rich and well developed, further work was needed to help ABAG and the other RAs clearly describe and explain the FES framework to members in ways that facilitated engagement. ABAG worked with Casey Foundation to

create new materials to explain the FES framework and its three components: Earn It, Keep It, and Grow It.

As 2010 progressed, RAs participated in monthly conference calls to keep momentum going. RAs created and hosted 13 educational programs for their member about FES issues, reaching hundreds of funders at the local level. Hyleck, as project coordinator, also hosted a well-attended national webinar for funders and philanthropic advisors about the shifting policy environment and its effects on working poor families. Many RAs that were not participants in the Learning and Action Agenda promoted the webinar to their members, and several of those have reported using the information and strategies from the presentation in their local activities.

In September 2010, participants received the first of two Results Based Facilitation trainings from Casey Foundation staff that focused on how to plan for and conduct more productive meetings — an experience that participants report they highly valued in its own right.

By the end of 2010, the RAs had solidified their grasp of the FES framework and areas of intersection with their members’ interests, and were either beginning to deliver or planning to deliver information and programs to their members.

### Year Two: Building RA Capacity, Delivering Messages and Exploring Actions

After the preparation and introductory programs in 2010, the RA “rubber hit the road” in 2011. In her coordinating role, Hyleck planned and hosted 3 national webinars for funders and philanthropic advisors about FES-related topics that attracted more than 275 participants. Hyleck also hosted a webinar about evaluation for the RAs in the project. Sixteen RA representatives attended a second intensive, in-person Productive Meetings Workshop, this time focused on moving groups from talk to action, planned by Hyleck and Barbara Squires, Director of Leadership Development for the Annie E. Casey Foundation and held at the Foundation’s office in Baltimore. 30 RA staff attended a workshop about measuring influence and impact planned and facilitated by Hyleck and Tom Kelly of the Annie E. Casey Foundation for the Forum of Regional associations of Grantmakers Summer Conference. Hyleck also continued to maintain the project’s online community, hosted regular conference calls with RA participants, and continually strategized about how to build and strengthen the project’s processes and tools.

Individual RAs focused on delivering engaging programs to their members in 2011. Highlights of some RA activities can be found in sidebars throughout this document. As a group, the

RAs held 35 local education programs reaching over 900 grantmakers and engaging them in discussions about FES issues and strategies.

The activities were as varied in focus and size as the RAs themselves. For example, San Diego Grantmakers created a gathering for members focusing on asset building — including the relevant elements of the FES framework in their discussions. They also convened a broader audience, including members, nonprofits, elected officials and others, to discuss poverty in the San Diego area, featuring a facilitator and speakers recommended by the Casey Foundation. Presentation of the complete FES framework was an important part of this event. The RA also hosted learning sessions about Transition Age Youth, which, when combined with an understanding of their risk factors related to the FES framework, helped lead to a new focus on youth transitioning out of foster care (see sidebar, page 9).

Grantmakers Forum of New York created a local report card on FES using an existing community indicators database produced by the United Way and the local community foundation, then used this data to make the case as to why and how FES strategies can be effective. They shared the report through a number of brown bag lunches and newsletter articles (see sidebar, page 13). This RA also hosted a gathering of funders and nonprofits to discuss gaps in local FES assistance programs and the need for resource navigation assistance for residents, with featured speaker John Molinaro from the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, a Casey Foundation partner.

The Iowa Council of Foundations, a late arrival to the Learning and Action Agenda Project, created and disseminated to members a publication about helping families move to economic self-sufficiency (see sidebar, page 14). It also featured a presentation from Molinaro at a statewide meeting for members.

Delaware Valley Grantmakers held 12 programs in 2011 focusing on FES issues and addressing strategies identified for each stage of the FES framework, with subject matter including workforce issues, poverty, homelessness, education, and advocacy and civic engagement. They also helped produce one of the national webinars, *The Suburbanization of Poverty and our Social Service System*.

In addition to coordinating the project for all RAs, ABAG also worked closely with its Basic Human Needs Affinity Group and its Financial Literacy and Asset Building Affinity Group to explore strategies from the FES framework. For the Basic Human Needs Group, ABAG delivered several educational programs on topics related to emergency assistance, collaborative funding opportunities focused on crisis prevention and

alleviation, and opportunities to help coordinate various public and private service providers. For the Financial Literacy and Asset Building Group, ABAG researched and shared information about effective financial education, briefed funders about legislative policies and trends, underwrote a local Credit Builders Alliance training for relevant area agencies, and met with the Mayor's office to discuss joining Cities for Financial Empowerment.

The work undertaken by participating RAs proved quite challenging for some and inspiring for others. As a result, 2011 saw a slight turnover in participants. The Council of Michigan Foundations separated from this project in June, and the Iowa Council of Foundations joined in September, after recognizing significant interest in FES issues among its membership.

### **Year Three: Extending the Learning and Action**

Although the Casey Foundation made its final grant for the Learning and Action Agenda project in 2011, a carryover amount was available in 2012 to provide support for RAs to continue their work — this time in the form of a 1:1 match for the local funds they secure. At the time of publication, none of the participating RAs had requested these funds. The Indiana Grantmakers Alliance and Delaware Valley Grantmakers chose not to continue with the project in the first quarter of 2012. The six remaining participants each provided plans about goals and activities for the year and ideas about sustaining their efforts beyond the project period.

From the national perspective, ABAG produced a national webinar for funders entitled, *The Adolescent Brain—New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning from Foster Care*. This webinar was provided to all RAs in the country to offer to their members with good response: 96 people registered and 50 people dialed in. Planned with staff from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, it highlighted the work of this key Casey Foundation partner.

### **Helpful Links**

**Center for Community and Economic Opportunity (formerly the Center for Family Economic Success)**  
[www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/CenterforFamilyEconomicSuccess.aspx](http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/CenterforFamilyEconomicSuccess.aspx)

**RBF Network - Results Based Facilitation**  
[www.rbfnetwork.com](http://www.rbfnetwork.com)

**Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers**  
[www.givingforum.org](http://www.givingforum.org)

**Annie E. Casey Foundation**  
[www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)

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The Association of  
Baltimore Area  
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