

Game Changer Awardees

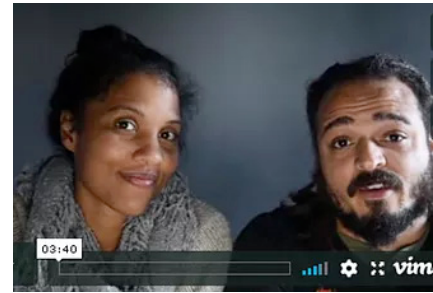
At Forward Community Investments, when it comes to reducing social, economic & racial disparities in Wisconsin, we are a relentless investor, connector and advisor.

In our capacity as a community development loan fund (CDFI), we play a critical role in bringing investments and resources – loans, grants and capacity-building assistance – to communities that have historically been unbanked and underserved. Through the development of affordable housing and community facilities, the mission-based organizations we serve build wealth in disenfranchised communities.

To that end, FCI offers monthly Game Changer Grants intended to provide opportunities for micro and small programs and initiatives that align with FCI's mission and vision.



We know that for many grants, applicants are put through an arduous process that can discourage rather than encourage bold efforts to bend the proverbial arc of justice. Not so here. Rather than answering a laundry list of questions, we've taken a simpler approach that relies on storytelling, cell phones and five-minute videos.



Jan 2017 - Dec 2018

231 video applications received

16 people engaged in the review process

30 awards given (totaling \$87,000)

72 WI counties reached via countless social media posts, traditional media outreach and individual visits

100+ questions answered about the Game Changer process (people can't believe it's as easy as it sounds!)

2017 Game Changer Awardees



Fit Oshkosh

Fit Oshkosh started in a local church when executive director and co-founder Tracey Robertson began having regular conversations with a fellow parishioner about race and its implications in their lives. Over time, these talks blossomed into what became known as Color Brave Community Conversations.

After three years of these informal events, Fit Oshkosh was born with the mission of expanding their conversations beyond the faith community. Today, Fit Oshkosh hosts book readings, movie discussions, trainings and more “to lift up the narrative in our community around race,” Robertson said, “because we know that a racially literate community is a more socially just community.”

The community agrees with Robertson. According to Oshkosh Police Chief Dean Smith: “As a new chief of police, I relied on Fit Oshkosh for introductions to diverse members of the community that I may not otherwise have been able to accomplish on my own.”

The Game Changer grant to Fit supported trainings for three Oshkosh-area nonprofit organizations: The Christine Anne Domestic Abuse Services; ESTHER of the Fox Valley, and All Saints Lutheran Church.



Bury the “N” Word Event - Beloit

“Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” That was the philosophy behind reviving a “funeral” for the N-word held by the Beloit Historical Society in 2006.

“We all know that words have the power to either unify or separate people,” said Beloit’s Wanda Sloan. “The N-word is a perfect example of that power.” It’s why Sloan and the community first came together more than a decade ago to symbolically bury the N-word. The event received local, state and national press attention.

Ten years later, Sloan felt it was time to revive the event in Beloit, since the N-word was still in use. She said the community needed to be reminded about the historic destruction of this word; this is what led to the Historical Society receiving the Game Changer grant in 2017.

The event, held in October 2017, included educational workshops, movie screenings, and a luncheon. The keynote address was given by A.J. Carr, a 14-year-old motivational speaker and entrepreneur. The event was successful in identifying local youth who will remain active in social justice issues long after the “funeral” that marked the beginning and not the end of a movement.

2017 Game Changer Awardees Continued

Program the Parks - Milwaukee

Vaun Mayes started Program the Parks because it's much easier to bring services and support to people where they are. In the hot summer of 2016, Sherman Park in Milwaukee was where hundreds of kids hung out. And they were getting into trouble.

Mayes was concerned about the violence and unrest prevalent in the park. Joblessness and a lack of purpose were major drivers for this unrest. With help from the community, Program the Parks started offering transportation, meals, job training and work opportunities to young people. Once that first summer was over, Program the Parks was able to gain access to a permanent building and invest in a printing press, camera and studio equipment, giving kids access to job training opportunities.

The program has had real impact in reducing crime in Sherman Park. Mayes said the sheriff's department used to get five or six calls a day in response to "trouble" in the Park; today, a squad car is a rare sight. Mayes estimates that since Program the Parks began, crime in Sherman Park has gone down by 80%.

While volunteer help has been plentiful, the problem for Program the Parks has been funding. The Game Changer grant – one of their first grants – gives some stability to the program. "We are providing something for our people to fall back on, including hope," Mayes said.

Workers' Rights Center: Wage Theft Program - Madison

For the last 10 years, the Workers' Rights Center (WRC) has been fighting wage theft in Wisconsin and helped workers collect \$1.5 million in unpaid wages. Not getting paid the fair or legal wage is a problem that greatly affects the Latino population, especially immigrants. Carlos Miranda of the WRC said employers often don't care about immigration status until workers protest issues like not being properly paid; once that happens, employers are likely to withhold pay until workers can provide documentation. Mistreated workers often are concerned about their legal status and can't afford legal representation to fight the injustice. That's where the WRC comes in, advocating on behalf of workers to get the pay they deserve.

Michael Fields Agricultural Institute Growing Urban Leaders in Food Systems Madison & Milwaukee

On one level, the Growing Urban Leaders in Food Systems (GULFS) is a curriculum for middle and high school classrooms, as well as community organizations, to teach students of color in Madison and Milwaukee about agriculture and the food systems in their communities. But on a broader scale, the initiative of the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute aims to help young people become leaders in their communities, responding to issues from food deserts and urban agriculture to social justice and entrepreneurship. Michael Fields intends that the work studying urban food systems can build into internships, jobs, and future academic achievement for students in the program.

Latino Academy of Workforce Development - Madison

Numbers tell the story about why the work of the Latino Academy of Workforce Development in Dane County is so important: Latinos are the largest ethnic group in Dane County, making up 6.1% of the population with 44% of Wisconsin Latinos having been born in Dane County.

Annually, the Latino Academy serves approximately 800 students, giving them experience and training in a wide range of careers and trades as a means of addressing poverty and socioeconomic disparities for Latinos in Dane County.

"The concept of building something with your own hands is really powerful," said Latino Academy co-director Carla Garces. Co-director Norma Gallegos said one of the greatest things about the Academy's work is how it builds upon itself, as graduates go back out into the community and become role models for other students and their children.

The Academy used the Game Changer grant as part of its Bilingual Construction Program, a seven-week intensive training course. The funds were used to create a "tool lab" with woodworking tools, so students can build furniture that is later sold to support the program.

2017 Game Changer Awardees Continued

Neighborhood House of Milwaukee:

Teens on the Move Neighborhood Canvassing Project - Milwaukee

Neighborhood House of Milwaukee has been around for more than 70 years, providing a range of services to residents living on the near west side. Over the years, the population has become more diverse, and the service area has grown. Neighborhood House's intent with the Teens on the Move project is to focus on the core population near the House itself, using trained young people to go door-to-door to survey residents' needs and let them know about the services provided by the Neighborhood House. The teens in the program are paid during the training period and for their canvassing efforts; they are encouraged to develop talking points based on their own experiences at Neighborhood House.

“We Are Icons”

Photography Project - Madison

What does a hero look like? That's one of the questions that the “We Are Icons” photography project hopes to answer, in a way that promotes positive images of people of color. Husband and wife team Marie and Johnny Justice are re-creating iconic images like James Bond, Marilyn Monroe and Wonder Woman with people of color. The future of this project is to expand into a calendar, coffee table book and website with later aspirations of giving young people of color access to the arts and other areas of society where they have been traditionally marginalized.

JONAH - Chippewa Valley

Joining Our Neighbors Advancing Hope (JONAH), a grassroots organization of faith communities in the Chippewa Valley, is taking a two-pronged approach to helping underserved people in the area. The first is EXPO (Ex-Prisoners Organizing), a group of formerly incarcerated people working with law enforcement and the judicial system to improve re-entry into society and reform sentencing. The second is the Immigration Task Force, trying to get systems in place to help undocumented people know what their rights are, have access to legal assistance, and build relationships with employers and churches.

Fondy Park Public Art Project - Milwaukee

Transforming an abandoned plot of land in the Lindsay Heights neighborhood of north Milwaukee into a community showplace is the mission of the Fondy Park Project. The revitalized space now includes an event stage, green space, plants, benches and chessboard tables; a big difference from its former iteration as a fenced-in vacant lot. The Game Changer grant was used to fund a one-of-a-kind welcome sign designed by local African-American artist Evelyn Terry. “Any way that we can get money into the community to make constructive change is always a good thing to me,” Terry said.

Voces de la Frontera - Madison

The continuing controversy over immigration has made services for those affected by these policies more important than ever. Voces de la Frontera Madison is an advocacy group leading the fight to challenge policies that attack Wisconsin's immigrant and LatinX communities. Voces is training 1,000 community members in Know Your Rights workshops; these volunteers learn how to form rapid response teams to help people in crisis and build bridges in the faith community to strengthen sanctuary opportunities. A major advance in their work was hiring a full-time staff person housed at Centro Hispano to coordinate education efforts and help provide legal services to people dealing with ICE.

HealthConnect Inc. - Madison

Using technology to match low-income uninsured and underinsured people with the service providers in their area is the mission of HealthConnect. The group has created a web-based database tool where users can search for everything from housing and transportation to legal services to dental care and mental health support. The pilot program includes partnering with service providers throughout Dane County, followed by a statewide expansion. In 2018, HealthConnect changed its name to Where Is Care; the website and database of information can be found at aboutwhereiscare.org.

2018 Game Changer Awardees



Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program: *MultiCultural Outreach Program - Dodgeville*

The MultiCultural Outreach Program (MCOP), working with law enforcement, has pioneered a program to issue free photo ID cards that show the bearer's ties to the community, including their employer and another local person and/or church affiliation. This keeps workers from going to jail after a traffic stop, and risk possible deportation.

The law enforcement collaboration program is just one slice of the wide-ranging efforts by the MCOP, part of the Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program based out of Dodgeville. MCOP also provides services to the traditionally underserved immigrant population living in southwest Wisconsin, where farms, factories and manufacturing plants have turned to immigrant workers for help.

MCOP is designed to act as a collaborative link between families, local schools, government agencies, employers, landlords, medical providers and community groups in Grant, Iowa, Lafayette and Richland counties.

“A basic lack of understanding of cultural differences is responsible for personal tensions and clashes,” said MCOP chairperson Shirley Barnes. “MCOP’s intention is to address and decrease these cultural and racial tensions in this small corner of rural Wisconsin.”



Lussier Community Education Center: *Youth Action Summer Internship - Madison*

Every summer, the Lussier Community Education Center’s Youth Action Summer Internship (YASI) brings together the past, present and future for a group of high school students, many of them people of color.

In the present, the 8-week intensive course helps teens learn about social issues and action-taking. “It’s a really great opportunity for students to explore who they are in the world, with a group of people with similar interests,” said Daniel Steinbring, Youth Programs Manager at Lussier.

Dealing with the past includes a field trip to Washington, DC and a visit to the National Museum of African-American History and Culture. And the future comes into focus when the students tour various college campuses, including Central State University in Ohio, the only HBCU (Historically Black College or University) in the Midwest. “Touring the college campuses and listening to the college leaders gave me a better understanding of what they are looking for and an idea of how I can get into these schools,” said Melord Acklin, a two-year member of YASI.

All these perspectives come together to give the students a view of the world they would not get without the wide-ranging internship program. “We recognize that we don’t live in a utopia. It’s far from perfect,” said Breeah Hawkins, a three-year Youth Action member, “but change can start with us.”

2018 Game Changer Awardees Continued

Black Youth Alliance-WI - Green Bay

A goal of the Black Youth Alliance-WI, an after-school program in Green Bay, is simple: help students feel seen and heard. “The more that our young people feel strong and confident in who they are, the less likely they are to commit acts of violence in their various relationships,” said Robin Tinnon, Black Youth Alliance’s Program Manager.

The Initiative spends several hours each week in three Green Bay schools, talking to elementary, middle and high school students about black history and culture and healthy relationship skills. While the initial target for the Alliance was to support 10 young people in each of the three schools, they are now helping a total of 70 youth.

“We want to invite our young people to tell us what culture is. What is black culture? What are our kids doing? What do our kids care about? What things interest them? What are young people invested in?” Tinnon said. “We really try to learn with them and from them because they are our future.”

Tinnon said the way the Alliance tries to address inequities in the community is to meet families where they are and learn firsthand about what they need to live less stressful lives. This can lead the Alliance to help with things like tutoring or personal support. The Game Changer grant money was used primarily for food at the after-school Alliance events.

Arts@Large - Milwaukee

During the 2017-2018 school year, Arts@Large served nearly 13,000 students in 55 public schools across Milwaukee, allowing students to express themselves and build bridges in their schools and neighborhoods. The Fabric of Milwaukee program - an initiative of Arts@Large - focuses on the immigrant and refugee student population, working to counteract widespread issues of bullying, harassment and depression with the universal language of art. Students get the chance to hear the immigrant stories of artists, and then share their own experiences through art, journaling and spoken word performance. Arts@Large founder Teri Sullivan said the intent is for the arts to be a tool for real social change, to promote diversity and bring peace to school communities.

Milwaukee Women’s Muslim Coalition: Wisconsin Muslim Journal - Milwaukee

When Janan Najeeb, President of the Milwaukee Women’s Muslim Coalition, was looking for a publication representing the Muslim viewpoint in Wisconsin, here’s what she found: Nothing. Zilch. Zero.

“There was really no way that the Muslim community had a way to interact with each other...and there was no window for the broader community to know what the Muslim community was doing and what issues concerned them,” Najeeb said.

So, they took matters into their own hands and started the online publication, Wisconsin Muslim Journal at wisconsinmuslimjournal.org. The website launched in February 2018. While the Coalition has been able to do a lot with a very small team, they applied for the Game Changer grant because they wanted to expand their efforts with trained professionals. “We want to be able to recruit more journalists and more photographers and train them, so they know exactly what needs to be done, and we want that training to be done by professionals,” Najeeb said.

The Milwaukee Women’s Muslim Coalition has been around for more than two decades in the greater Milwaukee area. Najeeb is hoping that the Journal becomes another evolution in the Coalition’s work. “We’re often told by well-meaning individuals that it’s important for minority groups to have a voice, and they tell us that they are willing to be our voice,” Najeeb said. “What we ask is that instead of being our voice, pass us the microphone so we can be our own voice.”

Safe & Sound - Milwaukee

Sometimes it takes uncomfortable conversations to lead to collaboration and healing. That’s the message of the Face-to-Face workshops organized by Safe & Sound, a Milwaukee organization dedicated to creating safe neighborhoods through communication. Participants in the workshops have included Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, members of the Milwaukee Bucks, and law enforcement and residents from around the city. The workshops involve both young people and adults talking about stereotypes, segregation and how those divides can be healed. The Game Changer grant received by Safe & Sound was used to create promotional materials for the Face-to-Face program, helping to expand its reach beyond word of mouth promotion.

2018 Game Changer Awardees Continued

Project RETURN - Milwaukee

Project RETURN (Returning Ex-Offenders To Urban Realities and Neighborhoods) takes a comprehensive approach to helping men and women in Milwaukee resume their lives after being incarcerated. They not only offer services like employment assistance, alcohol and drug abuse treatment, individual and group counseling, and housing referrals, but they also employ previously incarcerated individuals. Executive Director Wendel Hruska said of the people who RETURN helps find employment, the recidivism rate is less than 5%. One of the keys is bringing services directly into the community. “We exist to help the individual from where they’re at to where they want to be,” Hruska said.

Youth Emerging Successfully (YES!)

Madison

While the Youth Emerging Successfully (YES) program received funding from the City of Madison and UW-Madison for its summer program to empower at-risk youth on Madison’s north side, they were missing one final piece of the puzzle: funds for food and transportation for the participants. That’s where the FCI Game Changer grant came in. YES is designed to empower young people to become role models and mentors in their communities through learning about conflict resolution, relationship building, strategic planning, business and project development, and even social media and web programming. The summer of 2019 will be the second year for the YES program in Madison.

Fresh Start Learning - Milwaukee

Everyone needs to know that someone cares about them. When Fresh Start Learning goes out into the streets of Milwaukee to show victims of human trafficking and domestic violence that someone does care, they hand out a Purpose-Filled Purse with personal care items and a handwritten letter to let women know that help is waiting for them when they are ready. Once they are ready, Fresh Start offers counseling and legal and medical services. As a next step, the Humble Beginnings program can shelter up to six women who receive job readiness training, legal help and healthcare. Fresh Start’s motto sums it up: “You have to start somewhere. Why not here?”

Student Expulsion Prevention Project (StEPP) - Madison

On one level, the goal of the Student Expulsion Prevention Project is simple: make sure students in Dane County public schools who are facing expulsion have legal representation. But on a broader level, the program hopes to keep kids in school and break the pipeline often seen between the school system and the prison system. Attorneys who volunteer with the program receive training in how to interview their young clients, the laws governing expulsions, and how to recognize their own possible cultural blind spots and biases. Volunteer attorney Yolanda Woodward put it this way: “I want to bring in the fact that this kid does not deserve to not have an education.”

conNEXTions - Madison

conNEXTions’ mission is to help underrepresented young people in Madison aged 18-29 achieve their goals by increasing their financial knowledge, building their social capital, and connecting them to the community. The three main pillars of the effort are mentoring, networking and professional development. in topics such as financial literacy, confidence building, resume writing and interviewing skills. “My mentor is great,” said conNEXTions participant. Hewan Schade. “She helped me make connections with individuals working at organizations around town who are my age and share my interests and passions.”

Cultivating Urban Plans & Economic Development (CUPED) - Milwaukee

Honoring the legacy and spirit of a landmark in Milwaukee’s black community is the reason Cultivating Urban Plans & Economic Development (CUPED) received the FCI Game Changer grant. CUPED is transforming the site of the Reader’s Choice bookstore, the last black-owned bookstore in Wisconsin, into a new home for two organizations promoting African-American leadership and programming. Grateful Girls works with young women who have experienced trauma, including sexual or mental abuse. Jazale’s Art Studio is a community art hub for youth art programming. The redeveloped site is named “Kindred” after a science fiction novel by African-American author Octavia Butler.

Judy Wilcox Game Changer Awardees

Operation Fresh Start - Madison

Operation Fresh Start got its own new beginning in April this year, moving into a much larger space that was once a church and school on Milwaukee Street in Madison. The renovation work was largely done by the young people served by the organization, which offers alternative education options to young people aged 16 to 24. The new facility has classrooms and offices, the gym offers storage for tools and equipment, and the school is now a childcare facility. Programs offered by Operation Fresh start include high school diplomas, job training, career advice and construction experience.

YWCA Madison - Madison

YWCA Madison received the Judy Wilcox Game Changer grant because of its work to combat homelessness in the community. Family Housing Stability is a shelter diversion program that serves homeless families who have not yet entered the shelter system. The Family Shelter program provides housing to families with minor children, along with case manager support. House-Ability is a collaborative program that serves homeless families who have at least one disabled adult in the household. The Second Chance Apartment project is a collaboration among the YWCA, The Road Home Dane County, and local congregations to provide transitional affordable housing.

Victims of Milwaukee Violence Burial Fund - Milwaukee

When families are at their most vulnerable, the Victims of Milwaukee Violence Burial Fund can be found helping with red tape, connecting families to resources in the community, and providing grief counseling. The Fund puts it this way: “We offer a space where crying is allowed, expressing anger is encouraged and hugs are always plentiful. Many of the families stay connected for years.” In 2018 alone, the Fund provided more than 1,500 resources to Milwaukee families of murder victims, served more than 100 people in its Life After Loss support group, and provided school supplies to more than 300 children.

Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program

Darlington Farm Worker Housing Project Darlington

Safe, affordable housing for migrant farm workers is one of the many goals of the Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program (SWCAP). The Darlington Farm Worker Housing Project aims to create 24 units of two- and three-bedroom apartments for farm workers and their families in rural Wisconsin. SWCAP has selected a site and is currently building the capital stack for the \$7 million project. To date, USDA Rural Development has awarded the project \$2 million in grant funds and \$1 million in a long-term low interest loan.

Home of Our Own - New Glarus

The vision of Home of Our Own, a housing program for adults with limitations in south central Wisconsin, began to take shape more than two decades ago when two mothers of young children with autism started sharing their experiences. Mary Anne Oemichen and Susan Wallitsch were concerned about how their children, now in their mid-20s, would manage in the bigger world when they became adults. Those conversations transitioned into an effort to build an apartment complex, scheduled to open in the fall of 2020 in New Glarus. The complex will contain a mix of housing for adults with disabilities and low-income housing for the community.

Housing Initiatives - Madison

People with mental illness face unique challenges that are compounded if they become homeless. Housing Initiatives focuses on providing safe, permanent homes for Madison’s most vulnerable because homes translate into stability. Housing Initiatives’ apartment homes are four- to eight-unit buildings located throughout the community, bringing clients closer to the support systems that can make all the difference in their lives. Client John said: “After 40 years, I am finally beginning to recover. Without Housing Initiatives, I wouldn’t have gotten off the streets, I wouldn’t be managing my illness, and I don’t believe I’d still be alive.”