

How Minnesota Non-Profits Use Government Data to Help People

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(TNS) — Jens Werner has long suspected people in her St. Paul, Minn., neighborhood didn't live as long as people elsewhere in the state.

Now, she has new data, compiled by a national foundation and detailed all the way down to census tracts, to back up her hunch. A pocket of her Summit-University neighborhood has the lowest life expectancy in the state — just less than 65 years.

“People have been saying it for a long time,” said Werner, executive director of the nonprofit [neighborhood planning council](#), who says residents point to several factors and inequities that cut life short. “Sometimes, people don't trust lived experience. I think this data backs it up, which helps them be heard.”

The notion of helping others and giving back may be inspired by the heart, but increasingly, foundations and nonprofits are turning to numbers and data to set priorities, make funding and policy decisions and measure results. It's also increasingly necessary to lure donors who have grown used to seeing “big data” explain what's happening around them.

The [Minneapolis Foundation](#) created a new position — director for impact, analysis, evaluation and learning — to better use data to identify needs and chart a path forward. The [St. Paul & Minnesota Foundations](#) created [East Metro Pulse](#) to survey residents and gather data to better inform their work. And nonprofit leaders and policymakers focused on childhood hunger who met in Minneapolis last week for a

national conference didn't just swap success stories of kids eating fruits and vegetables. They heard a panel, moderated by a representative of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, discuss "return on investment."

R.T. Rybak, CEO of the Minneapolis Foundation, said the push for data aims to address a plea he hears often from donors: "Show me something that works. I am exhausted by funding things that don't seem to be moving the dial."

Catalyst for Change

The [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), based in Princeton, N.J., and focused on health, examined the [life expectancy data nationwide](#) to support groups working on those issues where they live. Werner, for example, plans to use the foundation's data as she pushes for improvements when the [Dale Street bridge](#) over Interstate 94 is reconstructed.

"Data can be a catalyst in changing policies that benefit the whole community," said Abbey Cofsky, a managing director with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Minnesota Compass, which just celebrated its 10th anniversary, was an early leader locally in data work. Its seven-member staff, part of nonprofit [Wilder Research](#), crunches data in a variety of areas, from education to housing to economy and workforce issues, and feeds those results to foundations, nonprofits and lawmakers. Allison Liuzzi, Compass project director, said appetite for the information and analysis continues to grow.

"When you can take data, use it to tell stories, create strategy around it and move it into action, it's beautiful to watch," Liuzzi said.

The St. Paul and Minnesota Foundations launched the East Metro Pulse a few ago. The voluntary survey asks residents how they feel about community connectedness, economic opportunity and security and education. The data are then shared publicly, ensuring that community leaders, policymakers and others have access to comprehensive and meaningful information about the region.

It also gives community members a voice in philanthropy instead of subjecting them to prescribed solutions, said Nadege Souvenir, St. Paul and Minnesota Foundations' associate vice president of community impact.

"The community is in the best position to articulate its priorities," Souvenir said.

Nonprofit [Hunger Impact Partners](#), founded in 2015, wants to feed children in need, but it doesn't serve meals. Instead, it compares data sets from the Minnesota health, education and human services departments to find neighborhoods and schools where there is high need but low participation in federally funded meal programs. Then it works with schools and nonprofits to start or expand meal programs, said CEO Ellie Lucas.

"Nobody was doing what we were doing — looking at the issue from 30,000 feet and trying to drill down and figure out the best strategies," said Lucas, whose organization co-hosted the national conference in Minneapolis last week.

Since the nonprofit began pushing access to summer meal programs across the state two years ago, the number of sites serving meals has jumped by more than 100 to 662. Summer meals served climbed by 400,000 to 3.4 million. That's an additional \$1.3 million in federal reimbursements coming to Minnesota just for summer meals, Lucas said. Those numbers wow donors and policymakers more than anecdotal talk of hungry kids, Lucas said.

"Our supporters want to be able to see some return on their investment," Lucas said. "Those hard numbers are very impactful."

Mapping Healthy Lives

In the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation analysis of life expectancy, the data lay bare the stark differences among parts of Minnesota.

While residents in part of Werner's St. Paul area have a life expectancy shy of 65 years, residents in the west metro city of Medina can expect to live to almost 92. In many cases, residents live longer in places where people are wealthier — and, some believe, may have more access to nature and healthy food.

Libby Starling, director of regional planning at the Metropolitan Council, cautioned against using just one measure. For instance, the presence of a nursing home may skew life expectancy results from a neighborhood because death certificates are issued according to a last place of residence.

Still, she said, "The life expectancy data are meaningful because it really encapsulates to what degree people are living healthy lives."

That's why Werner sees it as supporting her case for bridge improvements. With better sidewalks and crosswalks, the Dale Street bridge could be a connector, giving residents an active path to the library or the grocery store, instead of deterring people and dividing them from amenities because crossing seems unsafe.

"The report is important because it helps illustrate a story we have been trying to tell for a long time," Werner said. "From a community standpoint, it's a good opportunity to consider where we are investing, to consider how we've gotten to where we are and figure out a way to ensure all people in St. Paul, in Minnesota and this country can live very long and happy lives."

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