

THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS

HOWARD HEINZ ENDOWMENT • VIRA I. HEINZ ENDOWMENT

Request For Proposals

Evaluation & Learning Partner: Civic Participation for Healthy Everyday Democracy

Background

About The Heinz Endowments

In an era of massive change — technological, economic, ecological — southwestern Pennsylvania has the drive and wisdom to shape our nation's future. The Heinz Endowments sustains the leaders creating this tomorrow.

The Heinz Endowments works to grow an exemplary, sustainable region where everyone prospers and belongs. We fund nonprofits, bridge divides and share what works. We catalyze a thriving future nourished by healthy air, clean water and vibrant natural spaces for all; energized by young people equipped with skills and networks to prosper in their communities; enriched by arts that create belonging; and anchored by a democracy that works for everyone.

With grantmaking that averages almost \$90 million annually, The Heinz Endowments is among the leading foundations in the United States. The impact of our grants lies in the possibilities they create, the critical need they address and the transformative change they help to bring about. Every grantee is part of that mission.

About the Strategy

In 2025, The Heinz Endowments launched a new programmatic focus on strengthening local democratic processes so that all residents engage with a durable and responsive system of governance that is of, by, and for the people. We plan to commit \$7.5 million annually through at least 2031 to advance this goal.

Data from direct engagement with community members, supported by polling and research, reveal a growing mistrust of government institutions and deep polarization that is driving people apart from their neighbors. Importantly, these feelings stretch across lines of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and ideological difference. At the same time, there is evidence that southwestern Pennsylvanians trust in *local* institutions, government, and media more than their national counterparts, though there is still much room for improvement. Residents are hungry for more productive ways to resolve the problems in their communities and to work with local government to better address material needs.

After a rigorous and expansive investigation of the system and its levers, The Heinz Endowments made a multi-year commitment to collaborative governance – mechanisms which bring residents, government leaders, and stakeholders together to identify and solve problems – and the high-quality journalism and information needed to inform that collaboration. We believe sustained investments in these areas will contribute to increased trust and belonging, help restore the consent of the governed, and enhance our capacity to solve regional problems.

Our theory of change thus centers on three core pillars of work that are closely tied to the system of everyday democracy the strategy seeks to impact:

- Stronger civic infrastructure that brings diverse people together to build bridges across difference as they identify and solve community problems collectively
- Responsive local governments equipped with the training and resources to meaningfully engage residents, deliver services more effectively, and work together across jurisdictional borders to address community needs
- Access to reliable journalism and information that keeps communities informed about the issues that matter most to them, provides timely and relevant coverage of local decisions impacting their everyday lives, and helps to combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation

The Heinz Endowments couples these interventions with research and evaluation to ensure learnings will actively shape our work, guiding strategy refinement and building a base of evidence for replicable models beyond our region.

Additional information regarding the strategy can be found in the appendix.

About Our Evaluation and Learning Philosophy

The Heinz Endowments is a strategically focused private foundation. Staff use an array of monetary and non-monetary mechanisms to partner with diverse networks of field actors to motivate systemic change.

We orient every evaluative effort toward learning so that we can continuously iterate and improve our work, maximizing our potential for impact and sharing lessons learned with our field partners.

Given the complexity of the systems in which we work, we understand that no evaluation will definitively articulate a causal connection between our interventions and the ultimate impact we seek. We broadly think of exploring evaluation questions at three levels:

- What activities, outputs, and short-term outcomes are resulting from the targeted interventions in the strategy? What is happening, for whom, and under what conditions?
- Is the system moving in the direction that we want it to? Are we seeing progress on the outcomes we intended?
- In what ways is the strategy contributing to the desired systemic outcomes?

- What contributions are our grantmaking and use of other monetary and non-monetary mechanisms making to the outcomes and impacts we see?
- Is the logic set forth in the theory of change sound? What assumptions do we need to question, and what changes might we make in response?

Our work only succeeds through effective partnerships. We engage use-oriented evaluation and learning teams that design and deliver work plans that balance participant burden with learning returns, recognize multiple sources of data and information as valuable, and deliver meaningful and accessible findings for The Heinz Endowments and for our partners. For the Civic Participation Strategy, essential partners include grantees, aligned local and national philanthropic partners, local government, community-based organizations, and local media sources.

Scope of Work

We seek an evaluation and learning team to partner with The Heinz Endowments from February 2026 to February 2029. Our partnership efforts during this timeframe will include:

- Testing and refining a theory of change
- Exploring coordination, collaboration, and cohesion among and across strategy partners
- Identifying and building mechanisms to collect, track and analyze outputs and outcomes
- Identifying progress indicators and monitoring signals of systems change in local civic, government, and media landscapes
- Establishing a cadence of learning loops which center accessible and actionable insights
- Facilitating collaborative learning engagements with program teams and partners
- Examining emerging and alternative best practices
- Iteratively adapting the strategy in response to learning

We anticipate co-creating an evaluation and learning plan that examines the three levels of questions referenced above. We are not set on any one approach or methodology but rather seek evaluation designs which will meet strategic learning and decision-making needs. We look forward to iterating on the proposed work plan with our evaluation and learning partner to build the final plan.

A preliminary budget is estimated at \$565,000 based on the scope and timeframe of this engagement.

Beyond February 2029, The Heinz Endowments will re-assess whether our chosen interventions are still the most promising pathways to promoting healthy everyday democracy. We anticipate soliciting proposals for an evaluation and learning team to engage from February 2029 through February 2031. This may or may not be the same team.

Key Deliverables

We will look to the evaluation and learning team to deliver the following key deliverables over the course of this engagement:

- Internal cycles of short-term reflection and goal setting – quarterly
- Accessible and use-oriented formative reporting such as infographics, dashboards, slide decks to include progress against identified indicators, key updates from our network of partners, key updates on the changing landscape – annually
- Forum to share and discuss findings with grantee partners – annually
- Recommendations to refine the theory of change – annually in January
- Summative reporting – February 2029

Preparing and Submitting a Proposal

Proposal Format

Interested evaluation and learning teams need to submit a description of team members' qualifications, a work plan with an associated budget, and references. Submissions should be no more than 12 pages total (including any attachments or appendices).

Be sure that your proposal addresses the following:

- **Qualifications:** a brief description of your organization with an emphasis on team members' experience and their anticipated role in this engagement
- **Work Plan:** an outline of core categories of activity that articulates a purpose, participants, and timeframe for each category
- **Budget¹:** a proposed cost accounting of time and resources to deliver the core categories of activity in the work plan; also includes hourly rates for each team member
- **References:** two references for similarly contracted services within the last 5 years including name, phone number, email address, scope and length of engagement. The Heinz Endowments will only contact references for finalists. We will alert finalists before contacting their references.

Timeline

Please submit your proposal to Talia Stol, Learning & Evaluation Officer, tstol@heinz.org using the subject line Civic Participation - ELP Submission no later than 5:00 pm ET on Tuesday, December 16. We will carefully review all submissions and follow up with applicants via email by Friday, January 9.

Finalists will be invited to interviews during the weeks of January 12 and January 19. Consider holding the following interview windows on your and your colleagues' calendars. We hope to learn more about your team's skills and expertise, as well as gauge our potential chemistry. In addition to the proposed Project Lead, please include key project contributors that would be part of this engagement.

¹ For university-based applicants, facilities and administrative (F&A) costs are capped at 5% of the total proposed budget for this engagement.

- January 15, 11:00am – 3:00pm ET
- January 16, 10:00am – 1:00pm ET
- January 20, 12:00pm – 2:00pm ET

We plan to contact references the week of January 26 and extend an engagement offer by Friday, January 30.

Selection Criteria

Our selection process will look holistically at evaluation and learning teams. We recognize the span of these areas, and welcome joint proposals from teams which reflect a collaboration among multiple evaluators or evaluation groups, with project management structure, roles and responsibilities clearly defined.

Teams must demonstrate familiarity and experience with:

- Evaluating interventions in democracy and civic participation fields, with content expertise in our targeted domains to help us see what may be on the horizon:
 - Civic infrastructure (organizing, bridge-building, advocacy, youth civic engagement)
 - Responsive local governments (improved service delivery, productive engagement with constituents, government transparency and accountability)
 - Access to reliable journalism, public media, and other channels of information
- Systems change evaluation methods and frameworks
- Facilitating theory of change development, testing, and refinement
- Designing and delivering engagements in alignment with The Endowments' evaluation and learning philosophy

We will prioritize teams who also bring:

- Lived experience or record of working with southwestern PA communities
- Experience with collaborative governance models and structures
- Experience working with local, county, and/or state government systems

Through interviews and reference discussions, we will be focused on finalists' ability to:

- Offer ongoing and critical thought partnership
- Be responsive and adapt within a dynamic and changing environment
- Co-create and iterate on the evaluation design, engagement, and deliverables
- Develop actionable recommendations
- Communicate succinctly and effectively

Questions

Please email questions to Talia Stol, Learning & Evaluation Officer, tstol@heinz.org.

Individuals and organizations with clarifying questions about this opportunity may also choose to attend a pre-submission question-and-answer session with staff from the Learning, Evaluation, and Research and Civic Participation teams on one of the following dates:

- November 18, 1:00pm – 2:00pm
- November 21, 11:00am – 12:00pm
- December 2, 3:30 – 4:30pm

All sessions can be accessed at the indicated start time by copying and pasting the following link into your browser: <https://heinz-org.zoom.us/j/5853429705>

Attendance at one of these sessions is not a prerequisite for proposal submission; this is an optional offering to further help potential candidates gauge their interest and match for this engagement.

We appreciate the resources required to create a full proposal for submission; if you review the Selection Criteria and are unsure about your team's match for this engagement, you may email team resumes to Talia using the subject line: Civic Participation - Fit for ELP, and she will respond within 3 business days. A resume review is not a prerequisite for proposal submission; this is an optional offering to further help potential candidates gauge their qualifications for this engagement.

Appendix: Civic Participation Strategy

Our Approach

The Heinz Endowments is investing in everyday democracy through collaborative governance – bringing residents, government leaders, and stakeholders together to identify and solve problems. Rather than focusing primarily on elections or systemic voting and electoral reforms, we will focus on building mechanisms that will better enable communities to shape how local government works on their behalf, creating visible improvements in people's lives, fair and inclusive processes, and restored trust in a sustained cycle where democracy works for everyone.

Our focus is on the [12-county southwestern Pennsylvania region](#) and we will also consider statewide and national opportunities when they have a clear and direct benefit for residents of southwestern PA.

1. Stronger Civic Infrastructure

Goal: Build residents' capacity to work together across lines of difference to identify shared priorities, coordinate effectively with local government, and hold officials accountable.

Hypothesis: If community members have meaningful opportunities to inform how local government addresses their needs and experience constructive results from collaborative processes, there will be increased trust in our ability to collectively solve community problems.

To achieve this goal, the Endowments will support and engage with:

- Organizations bringing diverse people together to identify and solve problems
- Bridge-building organizations which move beyond conversation to action
- Civic engagement intermediaries providing field-wide technical assistance (e.g., resources to support organizations' work), training (e.g., best practices for facilitating community conversations), and cohort-based learning.
- Piloting a model for shared youth organizing among youth-serving/youth-led organizations
- Professional development and curriculum development in civics education
- Community-school partnerships for civic education and engagement

2. Responsive Local Governments

Goal: Build local governments' capacity to meaningfully engage residents, deliver services effectively, and work across jurisdictions to address community needs.

Hypothesis: If municipal governments or authorities demonstrate commitments to collaborative governance through budgetary investments, communities will realize more inclusive and effective policy processes and outcomes, increasing community member trust in local government and establishing a durable model that does not rely on philanthropic investment.

To achieve this goal, the Endowments will support and engage with:

- Piloting forms of community engagement connecting residents with officials in multiple counties
- Training programs for elected officials and government staff
- Piloting digital democracy tools for adoption by local governments
- Peer learning opportunities for officials across multiple counties
- Piloting multi-municipal cooperation models through to adoption
- Testing new service delivery solutions using emerging technologies

3. Access to Reliable Information

Goal: Strengthen robust, financially sustainable local journalism and information infrastructure that keeps communities informed about the issues that affect them.

Hypothesis: If there is a strong local media ecosystem, community members will have more access to relevant and reliable information, increasing trust in credible sources of information as well as government accountability.

To achieve this goal, the Endowments will support and engage with:

- Strategies to grow audiences among daily news organizations and investigative journalism outlets
- Increasing media coverage of local government, especially outside of Pittsburgh
- Documenting investigative reporting which leads to government accountability actions
- Testing new business models and potential tax credit policies for sustainable journalism beyond philanthropy