

**Elmina B. Sewall Foundation Integrated Well-Being Forum**  
**Discussion Themes and Lessons Learned**  
***September, 2015***

On September 18, 2015, the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation hosted a gathering of individuals representing organizations funded by the Foundation under its Healthy People Healthy Places program. The purpose of the gathering was two-fold:

- to explore together the concept and the practice of connecting human and environmental well-being in work across Maine, and
- to begin fostering relationships among people doing important work in Maine who may not otherwise cross paths due to barriers of time, geography, culture, organizational focus, and/or perceptions that their field of work has minimal relevance to that of others.

A total of 155 participants representing 63 non-profit grantee organizations attended the gathering. Attendees included teams of two to three program staff and board members from each organization. The gathering was intentionally designed to include those leaders within organizations best positioned to contribute to the discussion at hand and take home learnings to share throughout their organizations. Although the Foundation's preference would have been to include all interested participants from all of its Healthy People Healthy Places grantee organizations, space limitations dictated a maximum number of attendees chosen on a modified first-come/first-served basis. The forum was open to the Foundation's Healthy People Healthy Places program grantees qualifying under both the "Integration of Environment and Human Well-Being" and "Improving Systems to Meet Basic Human Needs" grant categories. While the forum was focused on "Integration", the Foundation was intentional in its desire to include the voices of those addressing "Basic Human Needs" in the discussion. The whole, healthy and inclusive vision we hold for Maine cannot be achieved if basic human needs are not being met. We also believe that integrated work is part of the solution for meeting basic human needs. And, very importantly, those striving to meet basic needs have a knowledge and perspective that people working in other endeavors would benefit from understanding. The 63 organizations represented at the forum constituted 52% of total 2015 Healthy People Healthy Places grantees.

In addition to those representing grantee organizations, the Board of Directors and staff of the Sewall Foundation were in attendance. This forum was intended as a learning and connecting opportunity for both the Foundation and grantees. Carol Wishcamper, Sewall board member, opened the forum with a welcome and introductions. Jay Espy, executive director, described the Foundation's intentions and hopes emerging from the day. Brad Gentry, Associate Dean for Professional Practice at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies introduced the topic of integrated well-being with an opening presentation and served as a learning guide throughout the day. Carole Martin, consultant, served as

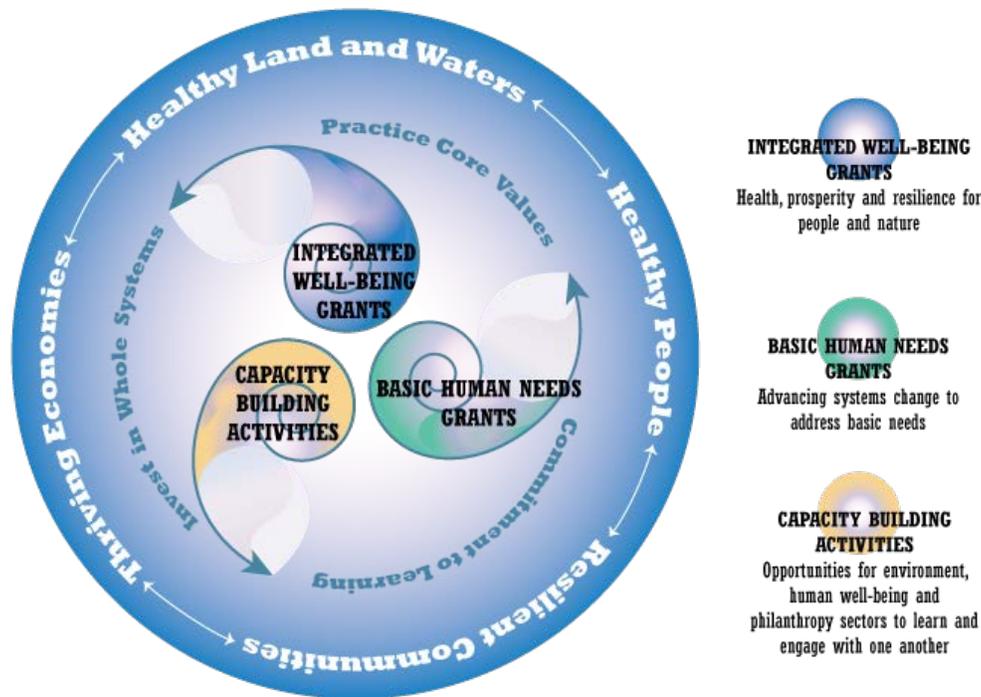
facilitator, discussion guide and thought synthesizer. Megan Shore, senior program officer, closed the forum with reflections from the day and Shanna Cox, consultant, recorded comments made throughout the forum. Copies of the forum agenda, Jay Espy’s opening remarks and Brad Gentry’s presentation are included as appendices.

In reviewing the remarks, agenda, presentation and summary of themes it will be helpful to consider the hypothesis grounding the Sewall Foundation’s Healthy People Healthy Places program:

*In summary, the long-term goal of this program is to improve the well-being and prosperity of all Maine people and the environment in which they live. Among the most pressing issues currently facing Maine and negatively impacting the well-being of both people and the environment are: limited economic opportunity, environmental degradation, and the existence of barriers that create inequities and separation among people.*

*The Sewall Foundation believes that the well-being of people and the environment are inextricably linked. That neither can thrive while the other suffers. As the connections between people and their environment are strengthened, both become healthier, more resilient and more vibrant. Further, we believe that more positive relationships between people across socioeconomic and cultural boundaries can bridge differences, reduce inequities, and contribute to community health.*

We find the following image to be a helpful depiction of the Healthy People Healthy Places program.



Additional information on the Healthy People Healthy Places program can be found [here](#).

What follows is a summary of themes and ideas emerging from the day's discussions, some lessons learned by the Sewall Foundation in conceiving and hosting the event, and initial thoughts concerning possible next steps the Foundation might take to further learning and sharing.

## **Themes and Related Takeaways**

### **The importance of our network of connections in achieving outcomes**

In his talk, Brad Gentry emphasized the power of “weak ties” in achieving community connectedness and the other outcomes one seeks. He noted that strong ties exist between those who routinely connect (families, friends, colleagues). Weak ties are essentially secondary connections. They exist between people who are connected through a strong tie but that would not otherwise be routinely connected. The cultivation of relationships and exploration of sharing ideas and resources with weak ties often holds the greatest promise for working differently and addressing complex problems in new ways as these connections tend to bring together individuals with different perspectives and experiences. This concept resonated with many session participants:

- There is a desire to learn more about how to recognize the value and potential of weak ties - and how to meaningfully cultivate relationships with them.
- Sessions designed to allow for region-wide exploration of weak tie possibilities are appealing.

Another facet of cultivating the connections needed to re-think and address complex problems involves learning how to engage meaningfully with others whose focus and life experiences are vastly different from our own:

- Learning often happens most naturally through the telling of stories. Increasing our reliance on stories as a primary vehicle for conveying what matters and why will help all of us deepen our connections and understanding. Finding common language that is understood by all is an important part of this process.
- There is a desire to learn more about the best practices and ways of working that cultivate meaningful engagement. This is valuable regardless of the types or degrees of difference that exist amongst those seeking to explore possibilities for working together.
- Listening deeply, and building our practice to do so, is essential.
- Being able to recognize, in ourselves and others, when power and privilege, equity and other related issues are impacting our perspectives and work is critical to our success. We must also be prepared to skillfully navigate these experiences.
- Collective/shared leadership looks very different from hierarchical leadership. Enhancing skills and understanding of the differences is important.
- The wider the range of differences among those desiring to connect, the more varied the learning needs. Feeling adequately equipped to work across language, geography, culture,

systems and sectors requires acquiring new skills. It also requires that we give one another benefit of the doubt.

- Understanding ways in which one can effectively engage given that many of us perceive ourselves to be overworked, overtired, and overcommitted is essential.

### **The realities and implications of seeking community change**

In order for real community change to take place, we need to understand more about change as a process and its impact on individuals and community.

- Many of us have no training in how change happens and what is needed to advance and support such change.
- Deep community and social change requires working in different ways and many of us do not know what to expect when actively seeking new ways of working.
- We must factor in that many of us have experienced some form of trauma and loss as a result of change.
- Being prepared to recognize, make sense of, and work with one another's reactions to change is important.

### **The role of geography and how we maximize knowledge sharing and problem solving**

Rural and urban settings have valuable learning to offer one another. With proper structure we can transfer useful knowledge to one another. That structure should take into consideration session and document design, and development of the right set of questions.

- We can work together to consider how learning can be sized to the scale of the geography or populations involved.
- We will need to factor in pride of place, strength of social ties and support systems and amount of funding, along with the obvious consideration of proximity.

### **The essentialness of connecting basic needs to integrated well-being**

Two grant making categories were represented by grantees at the session ([Integration of Environment and Human Well-being](#) grants and [Improving Systems for Meeting Basic Human Needs](#) grants) both of which are part of the Sewall Foundation's [Healthy People Healthy Places](#) program. The session reinforced the recognition that there is a clear need for better understanding across sectors of basic human needs issues and opportunities, environmental needs and opportunities, and how they are connected.

The wide array of organizations represented resulted in the realization that, just as there is a need to better understand community-based issues and opportunities, there is also a need for deeper understanding of one another's missions and ways of working - including organizational culture - if organizations are going to work together in new ways. This knowledge will allow for deeper, more meaningful examination of the possibilities and challenges at hand:

- Meeting basic needs and better understanding how these needs inform the larger system of action and change in a community often means first being able to "see" the need. Visualizing

the system of influencers and contributors and how they are connected allows for better development of strategies and use of resources.

- Methods and tools for assessing community conditions - health, wellness, economic conditions, and the role of poverty, for instance, on systems change readiness - are needed. Ideally, coalitions and regions could deploy similar approaches to understanding these elements to increase the likelihood of larger cross-system learning and change.

### **The role of policy in what we seek to accomplish**

Altering how we define and explain the issues as well as how we engage community and collaborate are necessary. In addition to these changes we must be prepared to recognize and advance needed policy changes. To that end:

- Better understanding the role of policy in systems change is an important readiness factor for all of us.
- Learning how meaningful engagement with legislators and others occurs will help us in our overall efforts.
- Increasing connections across sectors may impact the manner in which advocacy is pursued for increased impact.

### **Examples of Integration Opportunities**

Throughout the session, examples of “integration in action” – work where environment and human well-being are evident and/or clearly possible – were provided by participants. The following were frequently cited:

- Hunger, access to healthy food, land base, sustainable agriculture, economy
- Natural resource based economy
- Health of people – food, recreation, clean air and water

### **Lessons Learned by the Sewall Foundation**

We entered this convening with the desire to learn and the recognition that in order to do so, we must open up and be vulnerable to being misunderstood and getting some things wrong. All three of these became realities during the convening. What matters most is what we learned. Here is a summary of those things. Our learning goes beyond this; for practical purposes, we are including the topics we consider to be most important in an immediate sense:

- Differences in viewpoint, assumptions, and expectations about the convening abound. We must find clearer ways to communicate; we must also accept that imperfection or misperceptions are inevitable.

- There is learning to be done by all of us. Non-profits are eager to increase their understanding, effectiveness and contributions. They are eager for us to learn and increase our effectiveness, as well.
- Our goal of helping build relationships and increase inclusivity is a long process with many steps to meaningfully advance it. We must keep in mind our - and grantee - capacity to achieve this.
- The tendency to put different areas of work into silos is strong. Working across silos is complex at many levels and requires vigilance to strengthen connections. There is much to be done to strengthen the connections among equity, basic human needs, resilient communities and a healthy environment.

### **Potential Next Steps**

We are still in the process of absorbing all there is to learn from the convening. All next steps are rooted in a commitment to learn alongside the nonprofit community and to share learning between organizations. Some elements we are already contemplating include:

- Additional subject matter learning and skills development - at the regional and statewide levels. We are considering designing a year's worth of learning for nonprofits and ourselves, based on feedback from this session and other communications and experiences.
- Regional convenings designed to have open space for discussion and informal learning, problem solving and information sharing related to integrated work and basic human needs
- Focused discussion with groups of nonprofit organizations in order for Sewall to better understand operating realities and aspirations
- Sharing lessons learned and approaches undertaken with other funders and foundations
- Sharing lessons learned with other sectors, including government, business, and community institutions