



CASE STUDY | SHIFTING FROM A FUNDER-DRIVEN TO COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PROCESS

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The Elmina B. Sewall Foundation (Sewall) has been engaged in a learning journey—both internally and externally—to deepen equity. That learning has informed the foundation’s thinking about what they do and how they do it and sparked their desire to shift towards more community-driven processes.

BACKGROUND

The Elmina B. Sewall Foundation supports work in Maine to improve the well-being of people, animals and the environment while fostering relationships that strive for social equity and community resilience.

One of Sewall’s hallmarks is a relationship-centered practice through programs that are designed in conversation with community members and peer funders. Influenced in part by [Being the Change](#), Sewall has been exploring different ways they can transform themselves to increase their impact. In addition to providing grants for general operations, projects, and capital expenses, Sewall employs other strategies, including capacity building, impact investment, and support for policy and advocacy, to achieve transformative impacts in communities across the state of Maine.

In 2015, Sewall launched its Healthy People Healthy Places (HPHP) program, which focuses on improving the interconnected health and wellbeing of people and the environment in Maine. In the first three years over 300 HPHP grants were made to about 200 organizations addressing a broad range of issues. In 2018, staff reviewed grantee and community data.

They identified seven “circles of energy” – communities or issue areas in which they saw synergy among HPHP grants and readiness and potential for building deeper connections with organizations working in those communities. The foundation has committed resources to those focus areas, to explore how deeper, longer-term investment in relationships and resources might boost those efforts.

Lewiston-Auburn (L-A), one of HPHP’s seven focus areas, is a vibrant and diverse twin cities community on the banks of Maine’s Androscoggin River. It was selected as one of Sewall’s Healthy People Healthy Places focus

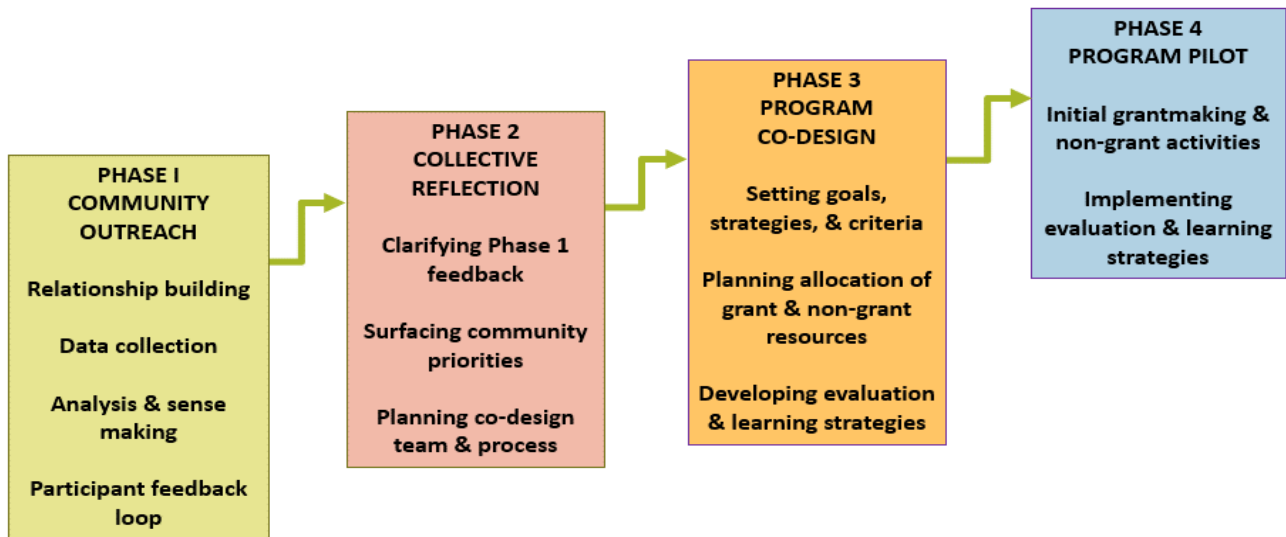


[Listen to voices from the community sharing about Lewiston-Auburn.](#)

areas because of a culture of collaboration that was already developing there, providing fertile soil for organizations from different sectors and populations, to create equitable and sustainable solutions to pressing issues.

The proposed process to refine the HPHP program in L-A is illustrated in the graphic below.

HPHP Focus Area Planning Process



COMMUNITY ENGAGED PROGRAM REFINEMENT PROCESS

The program refinement process for Lewiston-Auburn was rooted in community engagement—developing relationships, learning from community stakeholders, and inviting them into decision-making processes. The timeline below illustrates the steps in the L-A community engagement process.



PHASE 1: 2018-2019

Sewall staff, together with their developmental evaluator Susan Foster, created the planning process, which started with sixty 1:1 interviews with L-A stakeholders. The interviews revealed broad and overlapping themes.

PHASE 2: DECEMBER 2019–MARCH 2020

Themes identified in Phase 1 were used to organize in-person working sessions (40 participants) that provided additional community context and recommendations for action. The developmental evaluator analyzed the content of all early community conversations and found that the most common topics across groups were housing, food systems, equity/racism/inclusion in municipal systems, health, and economic development. A thematic report was shared with community stakeholders.



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CO-DESIGN

PHASE 3: MARCH-SEPTEMBER 2020

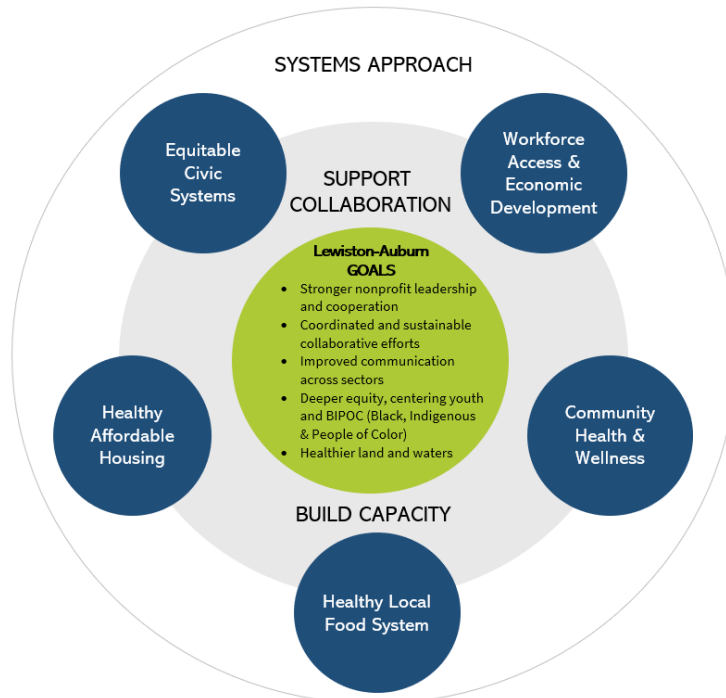
Sewall hired Lisa Attygalle of Tamarack Institute as Community Engagement Consultant to design, facilitate, and report on subsequent community sessions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all meetings and engagements became virtual.

Eleven members of the L-A community were nominated by community organizations to **co-design** Sewall’s Healthy People Healthy Places program in L-A. [Learn more about the co-design recruitment process.](#)

The co-design team met virtually 5 times to review Phase 1 and 2 themes and develop a proposed program overview for HPHP. The focus questions were:

- What kind of community is L-A? What do we need to pay attention to now and over the next five years?
- What is Sewall’s role in L-A? What are new ways of working that Sewall is exploring as a foundation?
- What should HPHP focus on in L-A to achieve the greatest impact?
- How will the program work? What is highest priority?
- What kind of impact are we seeking?
- How will we know if it’s making a difference?
- What recommendations do we have for how HPHP is implemented?

The co-design team affirmed **five priority areas** to be addressed through a systems approach. They also identified two general strategies that would be necessary for systemic impact: to **support collaboration** and **build capacity** of organizations to work effectively together.



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SYSTEMS
MAPPING

Key recommendations for shifting towards a community-driven process include:

- Setting up a community advisory body
- Beginning systems alignment work
- Prioritizing resource allocation based on community needs
- Work towards community-based decision-making for grant allocation
- Continue working with other funders to align resources and reduce competition
- Ensure Sewall is connected to Lewiston-Auburn

A [report](#) on the process and recommendations of the co-design team was shared publicly in October 2020.

SYSTEM MAPPING: FEBRUARY-MAY 2021

One recommendation from the co-design team was to convene a systems-mapping process to better understand how stakeholders were connected to and interacted with each other, and as a way to foster more collaboration and less competition among non-profit organizations.

The systems mapping began in March 2021 in four of the priority areas. (To avoid duplicating previous work, food systems were not mapped, but partners from that sector were invited to participate in other sessions relevant to their work.)

About 80 different organizations participated in one or more of the systems-mapping sessions. With a focus on diversity and representation from both cities, each session included organizations that were well established as well as grassroots community-based organizations. City agencies and school systems were also represented, as were youth-serving organizations.

In designing the sessions, the core team determined that they should be relational and emergent—to meet, to share, to discuss, learn, and see what arises—rather than a more conventional survey-driven approach. This decision had pros and cons; most significantly, the team gave up the quest for the ‘perfect’ map in favor of building awareness, energy, and community connection.

System Mapping Defined

A systems map is a visual depiction of the parts, interactions, and relationships between people, organizations, and other components of a system.

The L-A systems mapping process was designed to bring awareness to the work being done within the priority areas to assess gaps and duplication, to uncover opportunities to align and maximize resources, reduce competition and duplication, and help groups find new ways to work together.

The sessions sought to increase understanding and alignment by creating the maps and then overlaying them onto different levels of system change.

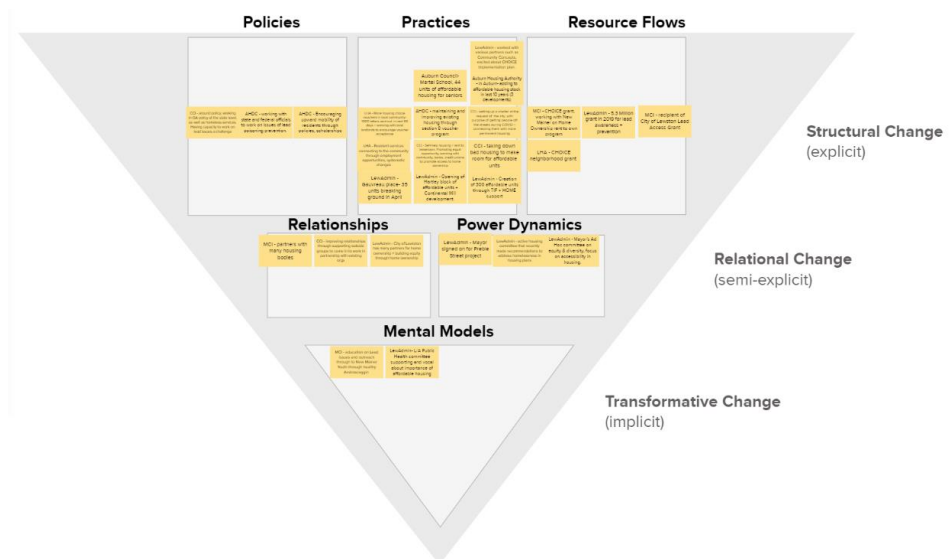


In each priority area, two virtual sessions were held that were designed to build on one another:

SESSION 1	SESSION 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building awareness – Who are the key actors working in that priority area? • Mapping impacts – What are the main ways that organizations are working to improve that priority area? • Mapping connections – Which organizations are working on joint programs/initiatives? Which organizations are sharing information and resources? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session 1 Insights – Where is the work focused and what opportunities are there at each level of systems change? • Opportunities – What opportunities are there to increase the impact of the collective work, and improve connections and collaboration within these systems?

The team hired Tamarack in part because of its demonstrated skill in using virtual platforms to facilitate complex processes. The meetings were hosted on Zoom with a virtual white board platform—Mural—to map and visualize impacts, connections, and opportunities.

Through small group discussions, participants identified which organizations were working, individually and collaboratively, in the system they were mapping. They also identified the kinds of work those organizations were doing, locating on a “map” of the system—based on the [Water of Systems Change](#)—where efforts were focused on structural (resources, practices, and policies), relational (relationships and power dynamics), and transformational (mental models) levels of the system. Opportunities to **shift systems** and **strengthen connections** among organizations working in them were identified for each priority area.



[A report](#) on the systems mapping process, including links to the lists of participants and to the Mural visualizations of connections and levels of systems impacts, was shared publicly in July 2021.



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PROPOSED
WORKPLAN**Centering Youth and BIPOC**

Two common themes emerged in the co-design process and were echoed in all of the systems mapping sessions. One is “youth at the center” – meaning that youth need to be included in planning and carrying out the proposed initiatives, not just as a short-term fix, but as a step toward building a future for generations to come.

The other is building equity, especially regarding L-A’s BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). These two themes shape the lens through which all the work is seen, not to the exclusion of other populations (e.g., seniors and American-born residents), but rather as focal points for an approach called Targeted Universalism, which proposes that, if measures are taken to ensure equity for certain groups experiencing negative impacts from existing conditions, then those measures will benefit all others as well. (Learn more about [Targeted Universalism](#).)

WORKPLAN: SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2021

In September 2021, Sewall used the outputs from both the co-design and systems mapping processes to create a community-informed work plan for a 3-year pilot. The draft workplan was then vetted at a virtual open house in October 2021. In December 2021, the Sewall board approved a budget that will support work plan implementation.

The process of drafting the proposed workplan revealed a vision for the Lewiston and Auburn communities that spans the work of many organizations across sectors and issue areas, and that invites further partnership and coordination among philanthropic and public-sector entities, including Sewall, who are supporting it.

The 3-year program pilot will begin in 2022 and includes a facilitated process for each priority area to determine for themselves how they want to collaborate, what structures are needed (e.g., steering or advisory teams, specific communications channels, etc.), and what form of community-based decision-making process for granting is most suitable.

Participation and Compensation

At each stage of this community-engaged planning process, participants were compensated for their time. Participants represented a diverse array of ethnic-based community organizations, mainstream organizations, schools, and city agencies. Because outreach started with and built upon existing relationships with HPHP grantees, most of which were based in Lewiston, Auburn was less well represented in the early phases. This imbalance was addressed in Phase 3. An attempt to organize a youth-specific session was not successful and a different approach will be developed for Phase 4.



PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK ON THE SYSTEM MAPPING PROCESS

Looking only at participation in the process, Sewall could reasonably conclude that the process was a success. While the process reached many stakeholders in L-A, sessions did not provide the space or opportunity for participants to share their reactions to the process. Therefore, we decided to conduct individual one-hour interviews to gather feedback. We reached out to 20 participants who had attended more than one session, with the idea that they would be in a better position to speak to the overall experience. Thirteen (13) agreed to be interviewed, and 12 completed interviews. Participants were given an honorarium of \$50 that went either to them as individuals or to their organizations.

The interview included questions about people's reasons for participating in the process, what it took to be a part of the process, their experience and satisfaction with the experience, and their observations and recommendations to the foundation. Themes from the interviews are summarized below.

WHY PEOPLE PARTICIPATED IN THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The most common reasons people gave for participating was their trust of Sewall staff and their long relationship with the foundation. One participant said they would "do anything" for the Sewall staff they work with. Several people said that their positive experience with the 2019 in-person listening sessions piqued their interest, and others cited their desire to meet more people and/or recruit for existing collaboratives. Commonly mentioned was a desire to reduce competition among organizations and to change systems. For small organizations in particular, the compensation made a difference.

"The number and type of organizations that came was vast."

- interview participant

"The process felt like it was directed by us."

- interview participant

WHAT PEOPLE LIKED ABOUT THE PROCESS

Almost every person we interviewed spoke about how inclusive and diverse the process was.

Participants generally liked the overall methodology of using a whiteboard (Mural) to gather data, visualize the maps and document ideas. One person observed that the facilitator managed the virtual space better than anyone they had seen before; another said that by writing down individual ideas in Mural, people felt that their perspectives mattered.

Breakouts were engaging and spurred conversation among people who didn't know each other, although some felt that the breakouts were too short. People also appreciated Sewall's clear messaging that focusing on systems and reducing competition were priorities.



The system mapping exercises were valuable to most of the participants, who talked about a variety of benefits:

- Helped see where they fit in the system, how connected they were to each other. Some organizations and agencies became aware of how disconnected they were from grassroots organizations.
- Revealed the overlap among competing organizations doing similar things.
- Helped increase connections. Some people identified and recruited new potential partners and collaborative members after meeting them in system mapping sessions. One participant particularly appreciated making new contacts in childcare.
- Helped them understand Sewall's funding priorities.
- Enabled them to see potential areas of interest, aligned goals and learning opportunities.

One person observed that by placing no judgement on the *quality of connection among actors* in the system, this was a more inviting process than it would have been if it had challenged people for lack of connectedness.

The second theme was about the *slow and careful pace of the process preceding the system mapping* sessions. By taking the time to listen carefully to many stakeholders, the priority areas were relevant and came from the community.

The third major theme was around *communication*. According to one participant, Sewall was “wonderful” about staying connected and transparent. Their “genuine interest in learning” encouraged openness and honesty. Providing syntheses of the process on a regular basis helped new people get engaged and caught up. Some participants expressed their appreciation for the work plan that came out of the process, which can be widely used as a guide going forward.

WHAT PEOPLE LIKED LESS ABOUT THE PROCESS

While many participants appreciated the care that went into the community engagement, several people felt that the process was overly lengthy. A few people thought that the size of the groups was too big, making it difficult for some people to be heard. Although they valued the inclusivity of the process (which resulted in the large groups), some would have preferred a more intimate, streamlined process. A few participants would have liked to see more community members instead of only organizational representatives. One participant acknowledged that COVID-19 played a key role in making the experience longer, less relational, and harder to participate in: “There were times when I couldn't give as much as I would have.” Several participants remain unclear as to where schools and youth will fit into Sewall's engagement in Lewiston-Auburn, as neither are priority areas. One person cautioned that the open house, during which the work plan was discussed, revealed that the community has a lot of work to do.



WHAT SEWALL NEEDS TO PAY ATTENTION TO DURING IMPLEMENTATION

We asked participants to talk about what Sewall staff should be aware of as they take the next steps in their engagement in Lewiston-Auburn. By far the most common concern was related to lack of time and resources:

- It is hard to find the time to collaborate.
- It is hard to find the time to build capacity and to use Catchafire (a Sewall-funded organizational capacity-building program).
- People are exhausted by planning.
- Wealthier organizations and people can afford to be on Zoom doing planning, while others need to prioritize the direct work in the community; be aware of the tension between planning and action.

Some people cautioned Sewall to stay aware of power dynamics:

- If Sewall funds one organization, think about how others will be affected.
- Asking people to work together and merge their efforts will entail difficult conversations.

Regarding systems change:

- Systems need to be rebuilt, not just repaired.
- There is an appetite to change systems, but organizations will sometimes find this difficult and will need assistance to “make changes systematically, not just program-wise.”

Regarding the priority areas:

- With no priority area devoted to youth, some youth-serving organizations expressed concern that they may not fit into one of the other priority areas.
- Some people whose organizations focus strictly on direct services wondered how their work would fit in to a program dedicated to system change.
- It is hard for some organizations to pick one priority area; some people expressed the hope that Sewall will find a way for organizations to be part of all priorities, either by having different representatives in different areas or a strong communication process.

Regarding youth engagement:

- Increase youth voice by putting youth-centered organizations at the center.
- Don't tokenize youth. Rather than making them attend meetings, use them to pitch ideas. Respect their intellect by giving them veto power over youth-centered strategies.
- Support a platform for youth to exchange ideas and share talents across generations.
- Invest in growing local leaders, especially BIPOC.
- Help youth with networking, resume building, connections to employers.
- Increase social media outreach, especially Snapchat and Instagram. Keep messages simple.
- Invest in growing local leaders; encourage young people to engage in civic platforms, esp. BIPOC: “A lot of young men and women want to be involved in politics but need mentoring.”



ONGOING PARTICIPATION

Almost every person interviewed said that they would be willing to continue participating in this effort in 2022. About half said that they wanted to participate in more than one priority area, or in a priority area and with youth. People saw the interconnectedness among the priority areas and said they would have difficulty choosing one.

OBSERVATIONS

It was clear that this engagement process was successful in large measure due to Sewall's many years of involvement in Lewiston and Auburn, which built trust in the community. The curiosity, positive spirit, and willingness of Laress Lawrence (Sewall staff lead for L-A) to seek guidance from community members again and again, were greatly appreciated and prompted people to get involved and stay engaged in the process. The interviews confirmed that the process was indeed inclusive. No one mentioned people who should have been there who weren't. A few who would have liked to see either more private-sector employers or non-organization-affiliated community members at the sessions.

This process was an experiment in virtual community engagement. By all accounts, people were very satisfied with the process. Most felt like they were heard and that their ideas were represented in the Murals. Several were not sure how they would use the Murals going forward, but they appreciated the continual feedback and syntheses they received. Organizations and their leaders were under significant stress in 2020-2021 due to the pandemic, so it was encouraging that so many attended multiple sessions. People seemed to stay involved because the sessions were an opportunity to learn more about each other, make connections, and share their ideas with Sewall.

The tension between those who thrive on planning processes and those who promote immediate action was apparent in the interviews. Most people thought that building collaborative structures and funding projects could happen simultaneously. In fact, collaborative bodies in each priority area could come up with small projects for 2022.

Several people had specific ideas about the roles youth like to play in planning processes that may help Sewall center youth during the implementation phase. Youth-serving organizations seem to be well positioned to reach out to youth in creative ways and they want youth to be treated as wise peers rather than tokenized.

Conducting individual interviews provided much-needed feedback on the community engagement process, but also afforded the opportunity to learn more about what skills and experiences individual leaders can bring to the implementation phase of Sewall's work in L-A. Sewall is using the information and recommendations people shared to shape its work in 2022.



REFLECTIONS FROM THE SEWALL FOUNDATION

In 2019, as Sewall Foundation began exploring what a deeper investment in Lewiston and Auburn might look like, one community member they interviewed quoted this African proverb: If you want to go far, go together; if you want to go fast, go alone. That wisdom is seen in the remarkable work that is taking shape, as dozens of organizations in L-A are embarking on a journey together, to develop a new way of working. Sewall is convening organizations in Lewiston and Auburn to develop a systems approach that will build their capacity for collaboration, in part by defusing the frenetic drive of competition which often hinders trust-based relationships needed for a community to work together toward shared goals.

The systems approach that is being developed in L-A, in partnership with Sewall and other funders, offers enormous benefit. This approach builds on amazing work that has been happening in L-A for many years. The potential for true transformation now exists because this approach urges all actors to participate in developing coordinated, inclusive, and equitable strategies that not only address systems at the structural level (focused on programs, policies, and resource flows), but that also address underlying factors – relationships, power dynamics, and the way people think about themselves, each other, and their communities – that can make systemic problems seem unsolvable.

Sewall Foundation is learning many lessons through their work in and with Lewiston-Auburn (and elsewhere in Maine). One is about how to use their ability as a funder to convene actors working at different levels of a system to work together in a systems-change initiative. So many systems-change efforts are undertaken by large “grass-tops” organizations whose work, while important, is often designed and managed by people whose lived experiences are different from those of the communities they are serving. By supporting a “We’re all in this together” mindset, with funders providing disproportionate support to enable intentional inclusion of those most impacted in the system – especially small, grassroots and mid-sized organizations – this approach is more likely to create conditions that bring about far-reaching, long-lasting change.

Another lesson Sewall is learning is the value of shifting power so that a community gradually takes both leadership and ownership of the work the foundation supports. What started as, in effect, a strategic planning process for the foundation’s work has become a strategic planning process for the L-A community. Sewall is supporting and is learning, but is not determining, the direction and priorities that the community is setting. As this process unfolds, new relationships are forming, new visions are being created, clearer priorities are being set, and more groups are working together in a more coordinated and collaborative way, to achieve shared goals.

A third lesson from this approach in Lewiston and Auburn is the importance of both listening to community priorities and following through to put what they hear into action. For example, through each phase of the community engagement process, L-A organizations identified a clear equity lens that prioritizes leadership by Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) and keeps “youth at the center.” Having heard that message, the foundation is supporting structures and processes that ensure that BIPOC and youth leaders play a central role in shaping the work across L-A’s priority areas.

Lisa Attygalle will continue facilitating the process for L-A organizations to work together to set priorities, coordinate their efforts, and learn to share resources and decision making. The goal is to shift the relational and transformational levels of systems prioritized by the L-A community, and to deepen the foundation’s role not only as a funder but also as a committed partner with L-A, in building resilience for the people, and



the land and waters where they live. Developmental evaluator Susan Foster will design tools to ensure a continual feedback loop to guide the three-year pilot.

The willingness and enthusiasm of organizations in Lewiston and Auburn to join Sewall in this effort gives the foundation an extraordinary opportunity to explore how to transform relationships, processes, and structures in ways that deepen equity and center community voice. Sewall is delighted to share this learning journey together with other private and community foundations, local financial institutions, and public-sector agencies, to explore what more collaboration among funders could enable for the Lewiston-Auburn community. Sewall is deeply grateful to Susan Foster and Lisa Attygalle who co-authored this case study, and to members of the L-A community who contributed their insights for this article.

This is not a quick-fix approach, and Sewall recognizes that easily measurable results may not be achieved in a single grant cycle, or even in a three-year pilot. But Sewall is committed to “going far together,” with the Lewiston-Auburn community and with other funders, to see how this transformational process unfolds.

About the writing of this case study

The summary of community engagement processes was written by Lisa Attygalle, Consulting Director, Tamarack Institute.

The evaluation of the process was conducted and written by Susan Foster, Developmental Evaluator, S.E. Foster Associates.

Reflections from the Sewall Foundation were written by Laress Lawrence, Community and Equity Learning Partner, Sewall Foundation.

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