

1. Grant Outcomes

The aim of the Connecting Communities program was to narrow the digital divide among immigrant and refugee populations and to create a connection point for diverse individuals to interact with others in our community and beyond. Our outcomes, as stated in our original proposal were:

- 40 participants will attend in-depth training sessions focused on internet resources and skills
- At least 20 participants will create their own blog or social networking page
- 100% of participants will have a home computer by the end of the grant period
- 90% of participants will have an internet connection and maintain that connection for six months
- By the end of the grant period, the Hmong and Hispanic/Latino Facebook sites will have 100 likes each
- At least 20 participants will access personalized training at Project FINE's dedicated tutoring station
- In addition to the outcomes listed above, we estimate that the positive effects of the Connecting Communities program will impact the lives of over 250 individuals, including our participants and their friends and family members.

2. Community Improvement Conditions

a. What messages motivated people to become and stay involved with this effort?

The topic of social media and internet access was developed based on requests from individuals who participated in our previous technology education. This community need shaped the outreach and communication for this program, which focused on personal interaction. Participants were contacted individually to share program goals and encourage them to attend training sessions and program staff maintained contact throughout the grant period, using social media whenever possible.

b. How did working on this effort help develop new relationships or strengthen existing ones that contributed to overcoming obstacles?

Connecting Communities contributed greatly to the development and strengthening of relationships, both between Project FINE and participants and within the community. The creation of Facebook pages for Latino and Hmong individuals in our area opened up a whole new avenue for communication and has proved to be a successful and positive way to interact and share information and resources.

c. What resources were leveraged from sources other than the Blandin Foundation?

Monetary Contributions:	<u>\$7,398</u>
In-kind:	
Volunteer Hours	<u>\$4,300</u>
Space	<u>\$1,050</u>
Equipment and material	<u>\$5,028</u>

3. Healthy Community Indicators

The Connecting Communities program addresses several of the Expand Opportunity outcomes by providing technology-based education, increasing access to computers and broadband and supporting digital interaction for refugees and immigrants in Winona County, MN. A detailed description of progress made and impact indicators are included below.

Greater educational and economic opportunities for people of all backgrounds.

During the grant period, activities focused on social media and internet applications, including online safety. We found that this topic was of high interest, as many of our participants were adults age 30+ and they were very eager to access the internet and learn about the sites and tools their children and grandchildren are using to connect. While there was high interest, the learning curve was often frustrating. Many of our participants are not familiar with technology and have limited English skills and education. Connecting Communities supports the indicator “reduced achievement gaps, especially for low income, minority and other populations facing historical barriers” by providing technology training designed for participants’ skill level in their first language.

The Connecting Communities program had 40 participants in 2014 and was very successful engaging refugees and immigrants in our region to improve their skills and become digitally connected. To accomplish this goal, large group sessions were held in Winona and St. Charles on social media. The sessions began with a review of basic computer functions and internet applications, as most of our participants are at a beginner skill level. Training sessions continued with an introduction to Social Media and the benefits and drawbacks of connecting with others via the internet. Our next session focused on online safety, particularly ensuring privacy on social media sites. During this session, participants were very impressed to learn that once you upload something to the internet it is difficult to remove. This was an important lesson that helped to underscore the risks of sharing personal information online.

The remaining sessions focused on sites for connecting, visual and learning. Through the sessions, participants learned the purpose of many different social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, Whats App, dating websites, YouTube, Instagram, Snap Chat, and Tumblr. The training session focused on learning included information about podcasts, online forums and blogs. After visiting each of the sites listed above, participants chose to focus on creating Facebook accounts. At the end of the grant period, 30 participants had created their own Facebook page.

Reduced structural barriers that prevent people from reaching their full potential.

In addition to large group sessions, Connecting Communities activities addressed the ongoing issue of technology cost and access. Participants were eligible for low-cost broadband service and during the grant period, laptops were distributed to 4 families. By the end of 2014, 100% of participants had a home computer and 92% (37 of 40) had an internet connection.

These activities coincide with the indicator “all segments of the population experience their communities as welcoming and inclusive” as our participants have low income and would not be able to afford a computer or internet. This access was possible through collaboration with Hiawatha Broadband Communications who offered a reduced rate for internet services, and donations of computers from the community. Participants also experienced inclusiveness during their training sessions, as they provided an avenue for participants to develop relationships with people from other cultures and backgrounds. Many of them became “friends” both in-person and digitally by connecting through Facebook. As part of our program goals, staff developed both a Hmong and Latino Facebook site to provide an avenue for interaction. Our goal was to have 100 friendson each site, which was achieved during the first month. As of January 2015, our Hispanos Unidos de Winona page has 451 likes and the Hmong Sib Txaus Lug page has 1,587. These sites have been a successful platform for developing connections and sharing information with the community. It has also been beneficial for our organization, as the pages are a great tool for promoting various events. Our reach has extended well beyond our community as well – after a post to our Hmong Sib Txuas Lug page on jobs available in Winona, we received several messages from individuals in Michigan and Wisconsin who were interested in learning more.

Increased self-determination.

Through Connecting Communities, participants had many opportunities to gain skills and practice self-determination. Learning how to use the various social media applications was difficult at times, especially for those with very limited technology skills or experience. Their interest in learning about this topic provided the motivation for them to learn more. Program activities also supported this ongoing learning, particularly through a tutoring station at the Project FINE office. This station was accessed by 50% of participants during the grant period and allowed program staff to provide information and additional training on an individual basis.

4. Lessons Learned:

a. What lessons learned have you drawn from this effort?

The biggest lesson we learned from the Connecting Communities program was the topic of social media. Through our past programming, we knew that people were interested in learning about computers but we experienced even more positive feedback on the social media focus. This grant period marked our fourth year of technology-focused training and community interest remained very strong. Participants who opened Facebook accounts were thrilled when they started connecting with family members or friends from their home country. Several also opened Skype accounts and learned how to make video calls from their home computer. This was very rewarding, as their technology skills have improved greatly and they are now able to use technology independently. Many of them were able to see relatives for the first time in years and some were able to video chat with their nieces, nephews and even grandchildren they have never met.

b. Have you made significant revisions to your goals as a consequence?

No significant revisions were made to the program goals.

c. If you were to do things over, what would you do differently?

Connecting Communities was very successful and if possible, we would maintain the program structure and focus on social media. We are grateful to be able to continue offering technology-based education in 2015 through the .COM program, which will reach out to diverse business owners and support e-commerce in our community.

d. Is there anything else you would like the Foundation to be aware of?

Thank you for your continued support and partnership, as a result of our technology-based programming for refugees and immigrants, 98 families now have a home computer and over 100 have broadband internet access. We estimated that this increased access to technology has a positive impact on over 600 individuals by providing access to participants' families. Thank you for the opportunity to increase connectedness and skills of refugees and immigrants in our region.