



## **Michigan's Foundation Liaison Forging New Partnerships For A Better Tomorrow**

**By: Mike Gallagher**

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Like a master juggler, Foundation Liaison Karen Aldridge-Eason keeps her eye on the numerous balls of societal needs such as early childhood education, corrections' reform and strategic food policy while bringing together public and private leaders, dollars and expertise to help create new solutions to age-old problems.

Since its inception in 2003, the Office of Foundation Liaison (OFL) to the Governor has brokered almost \$45 million in foundation investment for initiatives designed to help increase Michigan's economic competitiveness through reforms in K-16 education, economic development – including workforce development – health, early childhood and land use.

The non-partisan OFL was created at the suggestion of Michigan foundation leaders with the support of then-newly elected Governor Jennifer Granholm who embraced the vision of the grantmakers by making it a cabinet-level position – for but not of the government – and a role that is unique in the nation today.

Aided by her two-person staff of program associate Maura Dewan and administrative assistant Amanda Collins, Aldridge-Eason says the ultimate goal of the OFL is system reform through policy change.

The office is overseen by an Advisory Committee of contributing funders, the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) and a member of the governor's executive staff.

The Foundation Liaison makes it clear the office does not serve as a fundraiser for state government, but is a facilitator in bringing together public, private and nonprofit leaders to discuss – and create – positive change that will benefit society.

"We see ourselves as a way of making those connections happen," she says. "We are facilitators, conveners and problem solvers. A connector if you will. But we are not project managers. We think it works best when people form enough of a relationship that we can step out. That is our goal. And then we can go on to another issue that we need to work on."

Each new conversation, public policy briefing, cabinet meeting or CMF-sponsored event brings another opportunity for Aldridge-Eason to share her knowledge of the foundation community, state government and nonprofit agencies with those people who are seeking help in addressing myriad problems facing Michigan today.

When asked what is the key to making her office work, Aldridge-Eason smiles and says, "Developing relationships and having a very supportive staff. Also, the role of CMF and the OFL Advisory Committee in providing the strategic direction and support for the office has been extraordinary. They have put us on a path for success."

"We set up this office with the hope of making strategic partnerships and effecting social policy change, but we learned this gets accomplished over time with focus, patience and persistence," she notes. "There are relationships you have to create, continuously develop and eventually you will build trust and confidence. These are some of the building blocks toward systemic change."

Through almost five, tireless years of one-on-one and group meetings with governors, federal and state policymakers, foundation leaders in Michigan and throughout the nation, corporate executives, local and regional government officials, nonprofit agency executives and the public, Aldridge-Eason has earned the respect and cooperation of those in a position to impact the social policy change she is intent on achieving.

One of her biggest boosters is Governor Granholm.

“Through the great work of the OFL and Karen, we are now opening the doors to governmental reforms that would never have occurred five years ago,” says Granholm. “Michigan is in tumultuous times and it is through the great, strategic work of the OFL and others that we can now see a light of change and hope.

“All the priority issues the OFL is working on, especially economic development and corrections’ reform through the Michigan Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative, will invariably help us all to move Michigan forward and regain our position as a vibrant and dynamic 21<sup>st</sup> century locale in which to live and work,” says the governor.

## **EARLY SUCCESSES**

The Michigan Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative is one of the OFL’s ongoing success stories.

With the state’s sprawling prison system costs gobbling up more than one-fifth of the general fund, the governor and Michigan Department of Corrections Director Patricia Caruso joined forces with the foundation community to help look for ways to reduce inmate recidivism and its related billion dollar costs.

The New York-based JEHT Foundation is continually seeking new ways to address the financial and social devastation of prisoner recidivism throughout the U.S.

Looking to forge a new prisoner rehabilitation program in Michigan, JEHT officials reached out to the OFL to help them build relationships with state Department of Corrections officials and Michigan grantmakers in this effort.

By initiating and facilitating dialogue between JEHT and like-minded Michigan foundation leaders such as the Hudson-Webber Foundation and the Grand Rapids Community Foundation – and convening meetings with state corrections officials - a unique partnership was created that is piloting a seamless system of services that start when individuals enter prison and supports them through their release and re-entry into society.

JEHT Foundation President Robert Crane credits the OFL with forging the strong relationships between the public and private sector players that enabled the visionary program to get off the ground.

“It is only through the OFL’s ability to bring together its foundation community with such a clarity of purpose, commitment and dedication have we been able to enjoy this remarkable collaboration in the field of prisoner rehabilitation,” says Crane.

Director Patricia Caruso is even more profuse in her praise of Aldridge-Eason’s work.

“By bringing together the foundation community to help us find and implement new, innovative ways to deal with our recidivism problem, the OFL is in reality part of the solution to such related issues as crime, neighborhood deterioration, workforce development and reducing government’s budget deficit,” says Caruso.

Another success for the OFL, this time on the education front, is its work in bringing together the key constituent groups and funders in development of K-16 reform.

Committed to a goal of effecting positive and sustainable programmatic changes to improve learning and employment outcomes for K-16 students, the OFL brought together state policymakers, grantmakers and educational advisors to discuss reform projects while at the same time leveraging more than \$5.7 million in new grants for strategic studies, pilot programs and services.

Some of the results?

Administrators, teachers and students are now enjoying the fruits of such successful initiatives as the MDRC Study of High School Strategies for Success; revamped Detroit Public Schools Transition planning; and creation of the Kent School Services Network which includes a new Family Resource Center in Kent County.

Another OFL accomplishment through its forging strategic partnerships between the state and foundation sector is the ongoing multi-year community college initiative called “Achieving the Dream” with leadership and initial funding in Michigan by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and later support by the Kresge Foundation.

The project emphasizes the use of data to drive change and focus on measurable outcomes for students with a priority of closing achievement gaps.

“The work of the Foundation Liaison is instrumental in bridging the divide between the state, foundations and those interested in positive, sustained reform in Michigan,” says Sterling Speirn, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Still another success of the OFL centers on preparing young children for school through its efforts of building multi-sector support for early childhood education.

State education leaders, including Michigan Board of Education President Kathleen N. Strauss, credits the OFL with bringing together legislators, the governor’s executive staff and foundation leaders to help secure a \$1 million state appropriation to create the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC).

The mission of the ECIC is “connecting community to promote the well being of children.” It was through the work of the OFL that foundation leaders became engaged in supporting the organization’s work, including serving as its first two board chairs and helping secure a \$6.5 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation.

“The OFL’s ability to bring together those with diverse ideas and goals for Michigan’s educational system and facilitating important and sometimes contentious dialogue around reform is extraordinary and should be applauded,” says Strauss.

ECIC CEO Judy Samelson calls the work of Aldridge-Eason and her staff and CMF around early childhood matters “a remarkable example of how those dedicated to systemic and successful change can really make a difference. Karen is an expert at forging these strategic partnerships and getting the dialogue going which is where everything begins. She is a relationship builder who understands the process. The OFL is invaluable to us all.”

These successes – with more in the works – demonstrate the OFL’s commitment to the objectives created by the foundation leaders who partnered to launch the office almost five years ago, says Robert S. Collier, CMF’s president and CEO.

“The OFL was created to educate state officials about foundations; forge relationships and support development of partnerships between the state and foundations; attract new national grant dollars to Michigan; respond to opportunities for new local and regional public/private partnerships to serve people; and promote the implementation of new government programs to address society’s needs,” says Collier.

## EVALUATION

The lessons learned from engaging new partners to create new models of efficiency for success aren’t lost on Aldridge-Eason, her staff, and the OFL Advisory Committee. “Critical review is important for self-examination, effective change and growth,” she says.

As such, the Community Research Institute (CRI) at the Dorothy Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership at Grand Valley State University was hired to evaluate the work of the OFL from June 2006 to May 2007.

Three phases of evaluation have now been completed by Mary McDonald, director of the CRI, who headed the effort.

“We looked at many aspects of the OFL’s work and operations and what we found was a very successful organization,” says McDonald. “The function of the office has matured over the years and most of its work is about networking between participants. Prospecting for possible partners and outreach efforts were done in later years ... and this is a success.”

McDonald says she conducted extensive interviews with the OFL Advisory Committee in June 2007 and found that “people talked about how their expectations in starting the office have been realized, such as making the OFL the one-stop shop for initiating connections, educating state government about philanthropy and creating opportunities for synergy between the public and private sectors.”

“The evaluation found that the OFL’s convening role has been strong and that it has developed a clearer understanding between state officials and foundation leaders about each other’s respective roles while clarifying agendas on both sides,” adds McDonald.

Aldridge-Eason says the CRI evaluation has helped her office “measure the partnerships we’ve helped create and the networks that now exist.”

“Mary created those measurements that help us define our work through six categories – networking, facilitation, outreach, research, administration and something we call ‘prospecting’ which is how we assign time spent uncovering issues, figuring out government and foundation priorities and identifying experts or successful models,” she notes.

“CRI also helped us compare the amount of time we spend on each activity and with our goals and objectives. It’s a kind of continuous ‘learning loop’ that helps us understand where we can be more efficient. Additionally, the evaluation prompted us to create a database and enhance our contacts, which has proved valuable in building and strengthening relationships.

“CRI also conducts regular surveys of both government and foundation partners and, so far, there have been strong indications that the OFL has been useful to them and their work. If your constituents and clients value you, I believe that’s the best indicator of your effectiveness.”

## **REPLICATING THE SUCCESS**

The work, collaborative partnerships and successes are not going unnoticed by both governmental and foundation leaders across the country.

The old adage “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” certainly applies to the OFL.

There is growing interest from other cities, regions and states in replicating the OFL’s work. For example, officials from Newark, New Jersey and the state’s foundation leaders there talked to Aldridge-Eason several times and patterned the first Newark Philanthropic Liaison office after Michigan’s OFL.

“The work of Karen and the structure of the OFL are just incredible ... and they are what persuaded us to create our own office for the City of Newark and it has been a huge success for us,” says Jeremy Johnson, the first Newark Philanthropic Liaison. “The work we are now able to do for the public good ... is testament to how great (Michigan’s) foundation leadership is in creating the model all others will now try to emulate.”

Aldridge-Eason is now being invited to other states, like Wisconsin and Florida, to speak on the OFL’s success and help their foundation leaders get similar offices off the ground.

“I am now scheduled to go to Florida in April to do a presentation to the Donors Forum of South Florida,” she says. “They are very interested in replicating us. We were in Wisconsin in October and that went very well. The Wisconsin Donors Forum said my presentation received the highest feedback ever on their evaluations and scores.”

“We also went out to Philanthropy Northwest in Seattle a couple years ago – an association of community, private and public foundations, corporations and individuals committed to improving the quality of life in a five-state region – and their CEO Carol Lewis said if it takes them two years they are going to have an office like ours.”

“Even the African American Forum on Race & Regionalism in Washington D.C. – supported by the Ford Foundation among others – has asked me to talk about our office and the role we might play in their important work,” says the Foundation Liaison.

Aldridge-Eason says she always counsels those interested in replicating the Michigan OFL that “patience and persistence are essential; you are building a network of relationships. Trust takes time to develop. Our first victory was a \$25,000 grant to create the infrastructure for early childhood advocacy.”

## **NEW PROJECTS & DREAMS**

Aldridge-Eason is not one to stand on the laurels of the OFL.

She is now using its many successes as a lever to foment dialogue and possible social policy change through formation of strategic partnerships in areas that government, foundation and corporate leaders say will help propel Michigan out of its economic quagmire and into renewed growth and economic prosperity.

For example, the OFL joined in conversations with the Joyce Foundation, Ford Foundation, The Skillman Foundation, the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Ruth Mott Foundation and the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan on the topic of African-American males as a disenfranchised group.

"I am committed to this effort and I look forward to working with this group to move this strategic initiative forward," says the Foundation Liaison. "I think there are opportunities for matching and leveraging this with some of the workforce development efforts at the state level."

"Foundations also will have the option of leveraging those efforts in communities where they are involved in workforce development projects, along with the Department of Labor and Economic Growth and various statewide Michigan Works agencies."

Another area being worked on by the OFL is a government improvement project which foundations have agreed to support at the governor's request.

"This is all about initiating change in the way state government operates starting with business reforms," said Aldridge-Eason. "The business community is concerned that there is no consistency in government requirements and service delivery. For example, when someone is trying to get a permit or a license there is no one, single place to go. So we're helping develop a single portal for businesses to work through."

"The foundation community is holding the state accountable for real change on this issue," says Aldridge-Eason. "The foundations are requiring the state to work with the legislators to get their buy-in and support."

Yet another effort of the OFL is to link the foundation community to state officials looking at how to bring effective, cost-saving alternative energy projects to Michigan.

"Some experts say Michigan has all of the necessary components to be a premier state in alternative energy, but the government will need some help in figuring out the opportunities and challenges and how to begin an effective and productive process," says the Foundation Liaison.

"We need to determine how to effectively, efficiently and strategically approach the issues ahead without negatively affecting our natural resources."

As a starting point, Aldridge-Eason has connected The Kresge Foundation – a leader in the effort to fund alternative energy studies and projects – with

the governor's alternative energy staff to set up initial conversations.

"Again, we help facilitate this type of dialogue as a way of generating new ideas and new ways of thinking," she says.

Another exciting initiative assisted by the OFL focuses on new food systems and related urban and rural economic development policies and projects.

With the OFL's help, a wide-ranging set of ideas to spur economic development while meeting the food production needs of citizens is being shared between state officials and foundation leaders interested in this area of research.

When the governor's Director of Human Services Ismael Ahmed and other state department heads shared their concerns and desire to tackle head-on the issues of poverty and related food issues in Michigan, the Foundation Liaison saw an opportunity to bring the ongoing work of foundations to the table.

Aldridge-Eason focused the government leaders' attention on the work of Oran Hesterman, president and CEO of the Fair Food Foundation, a new philanthropic organization located in Ann Arbor with a core mission to help create equity in access to fresh, healthy and sustainably grown food in Michigan's most vulnerable urban communities.

"We brought together the executive office staff, the new director of the Department of Agriculture (Don Koivisto) and people from the governor's Detroit office, along with residents of Detroit, to talk about the needs and opportunities," says Aldridge-Eason.

"It is so much more than just the issue of 'food deserts in Detroit.' There are neighborhoods with few or no grocery stores or supermarkets for residents to purchase healthy foods at a reasonable cost," she notes. "It all ties into such things as economic development opportunities for niche specialty agriculture products, rural development, transportation, job growth and cultural diversity."

To facilitate further discussion, the OFL co-sponsored a mini-retreat, featuring Hesterman in an initial effort to begin shaping a state agenda on the topic.

“There is also a link to land that is being banked in urban communities that might be used for viable agri-businesses so we are bringing Michigan State University in to talk about that as well,” she adds. “What we (OFL) are trying to do is create the network and make sure the right folks are at the table.”

It is this type of dynamic bridge-building and success-oriented efforts that have solidified the OFL as a major player and facilitator in the halls of state government and throughout the foundation sector.

“One of the advantages we have is we can cross all the silos that people – both government and foundations – have built up,” says Aldridge-Eason. “We can say to the governor or state policymakers ‘you need to be at this meeting’ and they are likely to attend.”

That is “the level of credibility Karen and her staff have developed over the past few years and it is a remarkable testament to her both her political and social skills,” says David O. Egner, chair of the OFL Advisory Committee and president of the Hudson-Webber Foundation.

“These are the successes we were hoping for when we first created the OFL,” notes Egner, referring to the office’s funders.

That group includes:

The C.S. Mott Foundation, the Hudson-Webber Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, The McGregor Fund, The Skillman Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Battle Creek Community Foundation, the Community Foundation for Muskegon County, the Community Foundation for St. Clair County, the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, the Fremont Area Community Foundation, the Frey Foundation, the Grand Rapids Community Foundation, The JEHT Foundation and Steelcase Foundation

With all that is on her plate, Aldridge-Eason, her staff and the OFL Advisory Committee are keeping an eye on the changing landscape for Michigan.

“What I see happening in the next couple of years is working on the relationships we have formed and maximizing the knowledge we have developed and the partnerships that have been created,” says the Foundation Liaison.

“We will continue to look for ways to implement new policies and ways to better serve Michigan.”

For the future, Aldridge-Eason notes there will be a change in administrations in 2011 with Granholm being term-limited but that is not expected to impact the ongoing work of the OFL.

“The foundations, my Advisory Committee and I recognize the current administration has 2 ½ years left in its final term,” she notes. “There will be new challenges and opportunities with a new administration. Hopefully, we will be able to build upon the great works that have been established by the current administration and the OFL office.”

Noting that the OFL is celebrating its fifth birthday this year, CMF President & CEO Collier says, “It has been an extraordinary journey for Karen and her team, filled with many successes that have not only moved Michigan forward, but impacted the lives of many citizens for the better.

“The OFL has met – and exceeded – all the expectations the founding organizations had when they began this unique and dynamic venture in 2003,” he says.