

# COMMUNITY SHARES *of Wisconsin* WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE A BETTER WORLD

BY ERIN ABLER

Madison has a rich history of nonprofit organizations that have worked hard to support and improve our local communities. There are nonprofits that advocate for better legislation, that help identify and address social and environmental problems, and that produce meaningful research on important policies. These are the

groups driven to change the kinds of circumstances that keep people from living healthy, productive lives. But, you might wonder, do these organizations ever find ways to help each other? What keeps a particular group from drowning in the noise of all the other messages we receive about the world around us? Beyond the resources that each nonprofit



Member groups such as Wisconsin Democracy Campaign work for reforms that make people matter more than money in politics.

makes for itself, it's not obvious what a network of support would look like for these organizations. Fortunately, Madison has a longstanding tradition of knitting together a broader resource base for its nonprofits. That tradition is known as the Community Shares of Wisconsin.

We recently spoke with Crystal Anders, Executive Director of the organization. "Community Shares of Wisconsin was the first and is the oldest social action fund in the country, so it really is an 'original,'" she says. "Our history goes back to 1971—this is our 40th anniversary—and our focus goes back to the issues of that time. We were founded by a number of individuals tied to the peace movement who felt they'd made a lot of inroads. They'd met lots of people from really kind of different backgrounds, and they thought it made sense to pull people together to address issues that make a difference in our community. They thought that through working together, they really could make more change, more social change, in our community. That was

the vision that our founders had. To this day, that is the vision. We work through fundraising and networking—our ability to collaborate with different kinds of people is crucial." From 1971 to the present, the Community Shares model has grown considerably, and not just in Wisconsin. There are now 35 similar groups across the country, representing more than 1,000 nonprofits.

## VISIBLE CHANGE

In Wisconsin, the effects of this growth are notable. "Since the beginning, we've distributed over \$13 million to nonprofit organizations that work on environmental and social justice concerns in our community," Crystal says. The organization expects its revenue in the next year to be just over a million dollars, including operating costs. Offering this level of support, says Crystal, "enables groups to create some amazing change in our communities. We're looking this year at what really has happened over the last 40 years. There have been some amazing changes that we've seen in that time."

The 40-year anniversary has afforded Community Shares a special opportunity for broader perspective. "When you are



CSW has long supported groups that advocate for women's and children's safety. The Walk a Mile in Her Shoes event is co-sponsored in part by CSW members Wisconsin Coalition for Domestic Violence and UNIDOS Against Domestic Violence.

Among the member groups that work on justice issues is Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice: here kids attend Friendship Camp.



working on social change, and you create this lasting change in the community, it's sometimes hard to measure your success because it takes a long time," Crystal says. "But in looking back, it's really inspiring in terms of how much progress we've made. In the early 70s, sexual assault laws in Wisconsin were such that the woman had to prove that she used 'utmost resistance' for them to even consider it rape in prosecution. As of 1976, all of those sexual assault laws had been changed, and offenders could be charged with anywhere from 1st to 4th degree [sexual assault]."

From these and other early efforts, the organization built strong partnerships with groundbreaking environmental and human rights advocates. "The first Earth Day was in 1970," Crystal says. "Community Shares started covering

environmental issues very early on, recognizing that social justice and environmental issues are very closely tied." Other work has included anti-discrimination advocacy. "Wisconsin was the first state in the country to pass legislation, in 1982, that prohibited the discrimination in housing and in employment for gays and lesbians," says Crystal. "That was really significant. Prior to that point in time, you could be dismissed from a job, you could be evicted for being gay or lesbian."

Of course, Community Shares of Wisconsin also tracks some more tangible benchmarks of progress. "Every year we produce an annual report," says Crystal. "Part of that report is identifying what significant gains we've made in the last year. We seek out that information from our member organizations, and it's different every year in terms of the

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progress we see. That is how we try to measure the activity and success of our work.”

## CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

The Community Shares website notes that true social change doesn't happen within “society's existing framework.” The group differentiates itself in part through its ultimate goal of preventing problems, since many groups talk about addressing a particular issue, and not necessarily preventing it. So how does Community Shares pursue this kind of change?

“One of the things that Community Shares has really been trying to do is look out for the critical issues of the day,” says Crystel. “Some of those issues are controversial. We remain firmly committed to our organizations, regardless of how controversial their work is perceived to be.” As an example, Crystel mentions the group's work on sexual assault prevention. “When we funded that work in the early 1970s, that was considered extremely unusual. The same was the case for domestic violence prevention, which involved starting shelters up around the country for victims of domestic violence. We look around and say, that's the way things are now, but that's not the way they were 40 years ago. In another 10 or 20 years, people are not going to look at things the same way they do today.”



Member groups such as Community GroundWorks work on food sustainability: gardening, urban farming, and healthy eating.

Part of that change, Crystel explains, means identifying and confronting broken systems and unbalanced norms. “Our organizations address problems in the community by taking a look at what are the systems that in our society actually might lead to people keeping out of work, keeping out of a home, or out of other opportunities,” she says. “We are firmly embedded in this notion that through allocation of resources and support, you can either correct those problems or make them worse. For so many people, some of the situations that they're in are beyond their control—I think there are systems that exist within our society that promote that. We support groups that really are working with people in their own communities, who try to figure out, ‘what are the solutions that really make a difference?’”

## COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS

To enable positive change on this level, the support that Community Shares offers varies, depending on the context and needs of its member organizations. “I think they really come to us in terms of how we can help them best,” Crystel

says. “Our funding is what we define as ‘donor-driven.’ Most of our money comes through workplace giving campaigns. [Employers] select from our list one or more groups that they would like to support. We act as a funding vehicle to connect others in the community based on their values. With regard to training, technical assistance, we try to be responsive to what their individual needs might be.”

Some Community Shares collaborations have a long history in the local community. One example is the CHIP, a method of fundraising that involves teamwork with neighborhood institution Willy Street Co-op. “We've had a partnership with them for a long time where they work with us to fundraise,” says Crystel. “The CHIP is our oldest fundraising mechanism; we've been using it since 1971. At the cashier, you're asked if you want a CHIP, and if you say yes, a 1% donation is put on top of your groceries. Last year we raised \$100,000 that way.” With the recent opening of a second Willy St. Co-Op location, Crystel anticipates CHIP



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funds will soon reach \$140,000. “It's a great example of what we can do when we work together.”

All of these factors, says Crystel, contribute to the value Community Shares of Wisconsin provides to the Madison area. “I think Community Shares is really important to the Madison community because I believe that through our work, we create a sense of community that really takes an innovative approach to creating real justice in our community. I think that in the long-term, we're a part of why Madison is such a great place to live.”

Among the 15 environmental groups as members of CSW is River Alliance, which trains citizens to monitor the health of rivers.



Among the earliest member groups of CSW were those that focused on women's equality, sexual assault prevention, and health issues. Today many more groups continue to focus on these and other issues.

Another aspect of the Community Shares difference is even more concrete. “We provide a forum for people to come together on issues and work together to create real change in our community,” Crystel says. With 62 member nonprofits and thousands of donors, Crystel feels confident about the success

and future direction of the Community Shares network. “I think there really is a vision for a better world that's shared among those people,” she says.

Find out more about Community Shares of Wisconsin and see their list of 40 Ways You Can Create change at [communityshares.com](http://communityshares.com) or call (608) 256-1066.

*Erin Abler is a freelance writer.  
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