



ROTARY
CHARITIES
Resources for change.

From Seed Grant to Systems Change

by Miriam | March 1, 2021



We know that changemakers and their partners have the capacity to create enduring impacts in their community. They think big and tackle complex issues — like poverty, health inequities, homelessness, addiction, and climate change — by addressing the causes of those issues and changing outcomes. The work to create lasting change requires deep collaboration, leverage existing community resources, and remain adaptable to changing circumstances (like a pandemic, for example). They put in the work to map out the factors that contribute to systemic issues, as well as the successes and assets in their

communities.

"But that work is super messy. We knew the system was complex and that it would be challenging to come out of the process with a digestible system map," says Sarna Salzman, Executive Director of SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers. She's one of the core group participants focusing on an effort to divert organic waste away from landfills in Northern Michigan. In 2018, four organizations — Bay Area Recycling for Charities (BARC), SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers, Grand Traverse County Resource Recovery, and the Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) — formed a cohort to intensively study the regional waste system in Northern Michigan.

Through a 10-week Systems Practice course, they began by mapping out the region's complex recycling system. From there, they zoomed in on specific waste streams to investigate further. The group was "looking for high-probability solutions", and settled on organic waste because those solutions are attainable from a regional perspective, for a number of reasons. Unlike other waste streams (plastics, for example) resources needed in order to collect and process organic waste already exist in our region or could be created. In

the case of heavy material that is inefficient to transport outside of the area where it's generated, the best solutions are local. BARC, SEEDS, and other local organizations have been involved in small-scale composting efforts for years. They could sense how scaling organics diversion can become a viable social enterprise. Statewide partners, like the Michigan Recycling Coalition and EGLE, also expressed strong support and interest in collaborating towards solutions.

What does the Northern Michigan Waste System map look like?

Keeping the focus on organic waste, the cycle begins with the generators — those are households and restaurants producing food waste, as well as landscaping companies and municipalities dealing with yard waste. Haulers and interim handlers bring that waste to processors, which may be a landfill in some cases, but can also be commercial composters or some new emergent solution. Distribution networks bring finished compost to the end-user, contributing to a circular economy. When understood in this way, many of the things we usually think of as waste can actually become valuable materials. The key, says Salzman, is to shift mindsets to see organic waste as a resource that shouldn't end up in landfills. "We can turn trash into treasure".

The group was awarded a Seed Grant in early 2020, and the Michigan Recycling Coalition, Emmet County Recycling, IRIS Waste Diversion Specialists, Networks Northwest, and Michigan Organics Council joined the effort. "We have a cohesive and committed group of collaborators who represent significant segments of the recycling community across the state," the group commented in their preliminary Seed Grant report. They've met as an entire group several times, and convened as smaller groups or one-on-one to collect data and test their assumptions. "As we connect with other local leaders around the state, we're finding out how much of an appetite for this type of work in other regions. The knowledge gaps are similar in other places, and even where the knowledge exists, networks haven't been formed yet. What we solve here will absolutely serve the rest of the state," says Nick Beadleston, founding partner of Good Impacts and the group's Learning Officer for their Rotary Charities grant. "We're not the first Michigan group to try and tackle food waste. But we're more likely to succeed than our peers because we have a unique regional asset: a forward-focused funding partner like Rotary Charities to support our efforts as we learn and test solutions."

The Seed Grant funding was intended to help this group of dedicated stakeholders narrow their focus from tackling the region's entire recycling system down to the organic waste stream (which is a system in itself!) and identify leverage points within markets, policy, access, culture, and education. This focus allowed the group to write a competitive grant proposal to the State of Michigan, with matching funds from Rotary Charities. They've also been awarded a **Systems Change Accelerator** grant to continue their work.

"There's so much pre-work that has to happen before you can put together a more traditionally actionable project that funders will understand. The support of a regional funder like Rotary Charities in this space, where the necessary work is a little bit messy and there aren't clear deliverables, is so valuable", says Salzman, as she expressed gratitude to Rotarians and the community for trusting the process toward lasting impact.

○ ——— ○ **Seed Grant Basics** ○ ——— ○

Applications for Seed Grants are considered year-round and are due on the 1st of each month. A pre-grant meeting to discuss your initiative with one of our staff is required. Grants of up to \$10,000 require a 25% match (a combination of cash and in-kind), with a duration of 1 year. [**Learn more here.**](#)