

# How a Mich. Community Foundation Used Data About the Transfer of Wealth to Spark Giving

By Heather Joslyn



FACEBOOK

Barry Community Enrichment Center, home to a community foundation and nearly a dozen charities makes it easy for residents to find a variety social services in one place. The center was made possible after a philanthropic push when the county discovered huge sums of charitable money might be possible from the wealth transfer.

Sometimes all it takes to lift the spirits — and philanthropy — of a community is a little data.

Take the story of Barry County, Mich.

Just shy of 60,000 residents, according to the latest census, "we have more jobs than we have people," says Bonnie Gettys, president of the Barry Community Foundation. But the mostly rural county sometimes struggles to maintain a sense of community: Most working-age residents, Gettys says, commute to jobs outside the county.

About a decade ago, Barry County learned something about itself: It had loads of untapped wealth. And it's using that information to help unify and lift up its community.

A 2007 report released by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship estimated household wealth in every Michigan county as of 2005 and how much would likely transfer between generations by 2015. For Barry County, the report estimated that roughly \$860 million would change hands. Five percent of that, if captured for philanthropy, could create a \$43 million endowment for the community foundation.

Gettys and her organization talked up that news at service clubs and its annual donor meeting: "We began to have the conversation: What would you do if you had \$43 million?"

Among the results of those conversations and the decisions that followed: a nonprofit hub in the community foundation's hometown of Hastings; a plethora of new programs aimed at setting Barry County's children up for success; and a philanthropic endowment that went from \$350,000 when it began in 1995 to almost \$35 million today.

That endowment, Gettys says, has been built without any estate gift larger than \$2 million. She believes bigger bequests and other planned gifts will start arriving over the next decade because of relationships and discussions sparked by the transfer-of-wealth data.

Gettys says, "I have barely had a month when someone doesn't call me about opening a fund" or asking for help wording their will or gift agreement.

## Setting a Strategy

The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, now a partner of Locus Impact Investing, has since 2002 conducted transfer-of-wealth studies for roughly 60 percent of all U.S. counties. In April, it released [new national projections](#) in conjunction with the *Chronicle* estimating that [nearly \\$9 trillion](#) would pass from Americans' estates by 2027. If 5 percent of that wealth were captured for charity, the report said, it could total \$441 billion over the next decade.

The Michigan study was commissioned by the Council of Michigan Foundations and the Midwest Community Foundations' Ventures. In addition to giving Barry Community Foundation a tantalizing glimpse of the potential for gifts, it also sparked some soul-searching.

"The data from the transfer-of-wealth report is one conversation," Gettys says. "But if you're not doing relevant things, people are not willing to invest."

So the Barry Community Foundation set about making sure it asked people to support things that were relevant to them. Adapting work done by the Seattle Foundation, the Barry Community Foundation identified seven elements for a healthy community: arts and culture, basic needs, economy, education, the environment, health, and neighborhoods. A vision statement was crafted for each of the elements.

The seven elements served as a framework for conversations about philanthropy, Gettys says. The pitch for supporters to [commit 5 percent](#) of their wealth to local philanthropy was coupled with concrete talk about the foundation's vision for fostering a better community.

The group's board checks in every year, Gettys says, on how much progress has been made in each area to help modify programs and get results. It examines demographic and other data to see what's changing in the county.

"It's not about what grant we can give," she says. "It's about moving the needle."

## A Sweet Idea

Economic development was a focus of the first year of this approach. The community foundation invested \$1.3 million in a chain hotel — the county's first. "The money is now being repaid, and we're using that money as microloans," Gettys says.

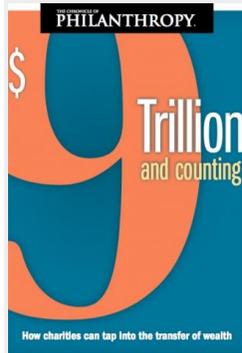
The organization has awarded grants of \$500 to \$1,000 to towns and villages in Barry County, aiming to increase civic participation. The residents formed giving circles and decided how to spark involvement.

Fueled by one of those \$500 grants, an idea blossomed in Nashville, Mich., where "they have 800 people in their town, and that's on a good day," Gettys says. About 250 volunteers, with the help of local business Moo-Ville Creamery, set about creating the [world's biggest ice-cream sundae](#). The 3,656-foot long dessert, devoured in two minutes by area residents, won certification as a Guinness World Record in December 2016.

The event organizers sold souvenir spoons that changed color when they touched the ice cream. The money not only helped pay for the food but also helped start a fund to create the Nashville Route 66 Business District association.

## Under One Roof

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Five years ago, the Barry Community Foundation bought and restored an old church in downtown Hastings. The Barry Community Enrichment Center now houses not only the foundation but also nearly a dozen other local charities, including a Humane Society chapter and the Barry County United Way.

The impact, says Lani Forbes, leader of the United Way, has been to make social services a "one-stop shopping" experience for local residents.

"Say a mom comes in. She has a baby who needs a crib. We can walk them down the hall and help them get a crib and a mattress," Forbes says. "We can register them for the Bridge card program — food assistance. If they have a dog they can't feed, we can take them down the hall to the Humane Society and get them some pet food."

The community's stepped-up philanthropy has helped make the enrichment center possible, Forbes says. Previously, the United Way was three miles outside of town, and the other organizations now under the old church's roof were scattered around the area. Transportation, she notes, "can be difficult for a rural community." Thirty-five percent more people have come to the United Way's office since the move.

The establishment of an endowment, which pays for the United Way's overhead, allowing new gifts to go straight to programs, has also helped it expand its Family Economic Support program, offering financial mentoring services to local residents in need. The community foundation produced a \$10,000 match for the organization to start the endowment, which the United Way successfully met. The charity has continued increasing the endowment with more gifts, including a big contribution from a board member for both organizations, Forbes says.

Not only is the close collaboration with other charities helpful in fulfilling those groups' missions, Forbes says, but "it's fun. This is hard work, and it can be very helpful having other nonprofit leaders in the same building."

## **Skills and Savings**

Scott McKeown has deep roots in Barry County; his family has been there since 1913, when his Irish-immigrant grandfather settled there.

A board member of the Barry Community Foundation, where he and his wife recently started a donor-advised fund, McKeown is a partner in an accounting firm in Middleville. His six adult children all live in the area; his son Kyle is board president of the nearby Thornapple Area Enrichment Foundation.

"We're farmers, so once we started acquiring land, that was a good reason to stay," says Scott McKeown, who lives on his father's old farm.

He worries, though, about whether there will continue to be opportunities in the county for younger residents to get jobs that pay well, acquire land, or start businesses.

"I graduated from high school in 1973, and only about 25 percent of us went on to college, and 15 percent finished it," he says. "In 25 years, when my boys were graduating from high school, the needle hadn't moved very much."

Through the Barry Community Foundation, he helped start a program for high-school students, training them for jobs in skilled manufacturing. The program began with eight students; he hopes to enroll 40 in next year's class.

He and Gettys also point to another new effort: KickStart to Career, a savings program fueled by community-foundation donors. A savings account with \$50 already in it is opened at a local bank for each kindergartener in Barry County, the idea being that the money will be available for the child when he or she is ready for college or vocational training. The community foundation follows each kid's progress and visits the schools to allow the youngsters to make deposits.

Donors love supporting the KickStart to Career fund, Gettys says: "For what they could give for a scholarship for one child, they can give to impact every single child in Barry County."