June 23, 2016

Cambridge MA

Cambridge Community Foundation announces funding for the Family Independence Initiative

Investment seeks to create greater access to opportunity

The work of the Cambridge Community Foundation is shaped by a vision of “A vibrant, diverse and inclusive Cambridge with a culture of giving and opportunity for all.” That drives a commitment to finding and fostering strategies to improve the lives of low-income Cambridge residents with a focus on families and children. One recent grant – and a related gift from a local donor – will expand a program that gives concrete expression to that vision.

The recipient of this investment is Family Independence Initiative (FII), a national nonprofit that listens to, learns from and invests in the solutions to poverty that struggling families discover on their own. The Foundation announced a grant of $30,000 to FII at its June board of directors meeting. An additional $80,000 gifted from a local donor through the Foundation will provide support to FII in two installments paid over a two-year period.

“This support shows our commitment to addressing issues of economic mobility for people in our city,” said Geeta Pradhan, president of Cambridge Community Foundation. “FII presents a new model that supports and respects members of low-income communities, activating their networks and their talents to build greater opportunities.”

This is the start of a multi-year commitment designed to increase the number of Cambridge families taking part in the city’s local FII program, to an inspirational goal of 300-400 participants.

The Family Independence Initiative does away with the traditional top-down approach to helping people struggling with poverty. Rather than promoting a new program, service or intervention, families are the change agents, and FII’s model is to invest in them as well as the solutions they discover.

FII families come together organically -- at a housing complex, at schools or through the workplace -- to find ways to support each other and solve the problems that keep them from leading more successful and economically secure lives.
The organization then tracks the progress of individual families and uses the data to identify and invest in the strategies that are working for families. FII literally matches financial investments that families make in whatever is proven to be working for them.

Almost 5,000 individuals are part of FII networks nationwide, including 650 families in the local region. Collectively, they have demonstrated an incredibly successful track record. FII families consistently increase earnings, build savings, create small businesses, reduce dependence on outside subsidies and strengthen existing social networks of friends and family members. Even the youngest family members report positive results, with almost 80 percent of children in FII families earning better grades. More information about FII is available here.

The initiative was founded by Mauricio Lim Miller, who was awarded a MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship in 2012 for his work with FII and was subsequently named to the White House Council for Community Solutions by U.S. President Barack Obama.

The astounding success of the Family Independence Initiative has made it a popular subject for reports analyzing its methodology and impact. A New Approach to Help Families Exit Poverty, written by the New America Foundation, reviews how the FII model works. Melanie Moore also released a white paper titled Unleashing Intrinsic Motivation Through Social Signaling, Feedback Loops and Access to Resources, detailing how FII works, including an extensive bibliography of research on related topics.

Cambridge Community Foundation was established in 1916, making it one of the oldest community foundations in the country. The only foundation with the whole city of Cambridge in its purview, it is a civic leader and a key supporter of nonprofit organizations, distributing $1.2 million in grants in 2015 to meet local needs and support the aspirations of Cambridge residents. The Foundation provides advocacy and leadership support to deal with urgent local challenges and partners with donors to provide a permanent source of charitable funds for the community.