



CASE STUDY

FAMILY INDEPENDENCE INITIATIVE – DETROIT

About Family Independence Initiative – Detroit

Family Independence Initiative (FII) partners with and directly invests in low-income families, trusting them to come up with solutions for themselves and their communities. Founded in 2001, FII currently has eight sites across the country. It strives to make poverty escapable and to change society's perception of low-income families, in part by providing families with direct access to capital. Families meet in cohorts, and FII uses technology to track progress. This case study focuses on the Detroit, MI, site, which has served 520 families since its inception in 2014.

FII serves families who are in or near poverty—with an average baseline income of about \$23,000 per year at the Detroit site—but not families in immediate crisis. FII “recognize[s] families as the experts of their own situation” and seeks to help families move toward self-sufficiency by encouraging them to leverage and nurture their existing social capital and by providing direct access to financial capital.

To access funds, families complete monthly journal entries setting out their goals, tracking the initiatives they are taking in their lives, and answering FII's questions about a variety of topics, including their finances, children, home, health care, and social capital. Using the journal entries, FII-Detroit compiles an “Initiative Score” for each family based on information related to their community, youth/family, finances, and health. Initiative Scores allow families to access up to \$2,400 in funds over the 2 years, which can be used at their complete discretion and which is meant to accelerate their economic mobility. FII tracks how they use the funds based on self-reports. Common uses of these funds by FII-Detroit families include paying off debt and addressing other financial health matters, supporting transportation, and addressing housing needs.

“Our best investment is people. [But we as a society] don't invest in people, we invest in things.”

– FII family member



Program Overview

FII-Detroit views itself as a partnership with families, rather than a program. To recognize and build social capital, it partners with low-income families who form cohorts of around 6–8 people each. FII requests that families enroll in cohorts to help demonstrate the power of relationships, connections, community, and social capital. For 2 years, they typically meet monthly and self-determine what they want to do with their time together. FII staff are not allowed to facilitate or guide the discussion. An FII staff member who attends a meeting can only answer clarifying questions about the partnership with FII and take notes about the discussion taking place. Some groups discuss their goals and struggles and hold each other accountable to those discussions, while other groups use the space to step back from daily life and engage in conversation.

UpTogether is FII's national social media and technology platform, which is another key part of FII's partnership with families to help them build social capital. This is where FII families not only journal and request funds, but also engage in discussion boards; “friend” and direct message other FII families; share updates and pictures; and access a feature to “Find/Be the Expert,” in which families can connect with other families who have resources or expertise in any given area.

Social Capital: Components in Practice and Innovative Approaches

Social capital is at the core of FII-Detroit's approach, which believes that low-income families and communities have long relied on deep, meaningful networks and connections to survive. Through family cohorts and the UpTogether platform, FII encourages families to continue building and leveraging their existing social capital, particularly with people with similar backgrounds and experiences (bonding social capital). The families that participate already have and leverage social capital on their own, but by partnering with FII they can track the power of community and demonstrate it to stakeholders while accelerating economic mobility.

Bonding: Connections with People Like Me. FII asks family partners to enroll in cohorts to enable families to intentionally build and leverage their existing connections with others like them in their own communities and to demonstrate the power of relationships and social capital. FII-Detroit families continue being engaged community members, often aiding their neighbors, friends, and families through actions such as offering babysitting or a ride to a job interview, shoveling a neighbor's sidewalk, or giving other informal help. The cohorts also allow families to work together and serve their neighborhoods and communities in meaningful ways. For example, one FII-Detroit cohort pooled the funds they accessed through FII to purchase and distribute aluminum blankets to those in the community who were experiencing homelessness.

UpTogether can also be a resource for bonding with other individuals of similar backgrounds. On the platform, families can connect with and support one another. Staff noted that the platform allows families to see others with similar backgrounds succeed, which can be a source of hope and can strengthen families' confidence in their own ability to succeed and achieve economic mobility.

Bridging: Connections with People Different from Me.

While UpTogether can be a source of bonding social capital, it can also be a resource for developing connections with those from different backgrounds. Families can connect with other FII families from sites all over the country, and the “Find/Be the Expert” feature allows them to find families from different backgrounds to tap into diverse expertise. For example, someone might seek a family member from another FII site who is a home health worker to access that knowledge.

FII-Detroit staff noted that one group of families with a higher-than-typical income range applied and was initially rejected. However, the cohort felt that partnering with FII would benefit the families and FII, so they asked staff to reconsider their application, noting that they had financial planning expertise that could be shared with other family partners. FII-Detroit then approved the cohort, which has attended meetings of other cohorts to share their financial planning knowledge and built relationships with these other cohorts.

Key Measures and Outcomes

FII tracks a number of metrics through the monthly journals that families complete, including information about:

- finances;
- children;
- home;
- health care; and
- social capital.

To assess social capital, FII asks families who they helped that month and who helped them. Families choose from a drop-down menu of categories (e.g., transportation, child care, information sharing, helping a sick/elderly neighbor, lending/donating money or food) and estimate the dollar value of that help. Families often find this difficult at first; as one family member noted, “I didn't really think about [volunteering at food banks] as anything other than just what I do.” FII-Detroit families have estimated that they have used their social capital to exchange over \$2.8 million worth of assistance with others in the community.

Data collected in the monthly journals show that, on average, FII-Detroit families experience increases in income and total liquid assets as well as decreases in the use of public benefits, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and

Outcomes

On average, families who have been engaged with FII-Detroit for the full 2 years experience:

- a 23% increase in monthly income;
- an increase from an average of \$321 to \$1,315 in total liquid assets; and
- a 42% decrease in subsidies such as TANF and SNAP.

After the 2-year commitment ends, many families keep using the journal:

- at Year 3, 80% are still journaling; and
- at Year 4, 50% are still journaling.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps).¹ The decrease in subsidies due to increased economic mobility highlights how FII-Detroit is disrupting the cycle of poverty for families on public benefits. In addition to FII's typical data collection and outcomes tracking, the University of Michigan will also be working with FII families and data to understand how online relationships can move offline.

Lessons Learned and Key Considerations for Social Capital Integration

FII-Detroit families, staff, and funders noted several important lessons that are critical to the success of the partnership between FII and the families it works with.

Recognize Families as the Experts. Families know what solutions are needed in their community, but they don't always have the resources to make them happen. By directly investing in families, FII challenges notions embedded in many social

services, such as the idea that poor people most need professional assistance. FII-Detroit family members noted that having another cohort member or friend show them how to do something is preferable to having a case manager do it for them.

The Composition of Cohorts Is Important. FII's approach to poverty reduction is not intended for families in immediate crisis, such as those currently experiencing domestic violence or unsheltered homelessness. FII-Detroit also reported that entrepreneurial-minded cohorts and cohorts where most people already know at least one other member (but usually not all other members) tend to succeed more often. Additionally, while it might not be typical, groups with a higher-income outlier—who has access to different networks and resources and who can demonstrate that the path to self-sufficiency is achievable—also tend to do well.

Accountability Matters. Families often say that accountability is the most important aspect of FII. Regular journaling encourages families to stay accountable to themselves by reminding them of their goals, and cohorts keep families accountable to one another. If someone has not made progress on a goal, other cohort members will ask about it. One family member said that FII gives families a way to have conversations about goals and struggles that everyone wants to have but is afraid to. This model allows families to hold themselves and each other accountable while also providing emotional and social support.

Social Capital Comes Naturally to Families. FII-Detroit has found that people in low-income communities have always relied on bonding social capital because they often cannot access resources otherwise. Social capital is not something families necessarily think about because providing and tapping into it is just something they already do in their communities. Thus, there's no need to start from scratch. As one family member noted, "I've seen neighborhoods where nobody had nothin', but [people are] always helping each other." FII partners with families that are already leveraging their social capital or are being inspired by others to further strengthen that asset to reduce poverty and improve family well-being.

"In a lot of ways, social capital networks of lower-income neighborhoods are denser and richer than social capital networks of richer neighborhoods."

— FII-Detroit funder

¹ For data on changes in public benefit use, liquid assets, and income among FII families across the country, visit <http://2018.fii.org/analytics/>.
For information on FII-Detroit families, visit <https://www.fii.org/sites/detroit/>.