



# Archived Content

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# Heartland Democracy Center

Grant Number | EMW-2016-CH-00401-S0  
Lead agency name | Heartland Democracy Center  
Location | Minneapolis, MN  
Award period of performance | August 2017 – January 2020



This document focuses on the work that Heartland Democracy Center completed under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate grant award for its project, also called Heartland Democracy Center. To understand the Heartland organization and project, one must first look more broadly at the national climate and the local community.

## Violent Extremism and the Creation of the Department of Homeland Security

The September 11, 2001, attacks dramatically altered Americans' perceptions about the threat of terrorism. The attacks also prompted major shifts in public policy, including the creation of the DHS in November 2002 as a cabinet-level agency. The new agency became one of the federal hubs for addressing the threat of terrorism under the 2002 Homeland Security Act. Early efforts focused primarily on intelligence gathering and analysis and the suppression of terrorism using military and law enforcement strategies, but over time, a shift toward terrorism prevention—or what became more widely known as “countering violent extremism” (CVE)—emerged as an important component of the federal response to this problem. As such, in 2016, Congress allocated \$10 million to fund the DHS CVE grant

award program to help local, state, and nongovernmental entities design and implement prevention and intervention strategies focused on the reduction of domestic violent extremism.

## Minneapolis: A Somali Refuge

Minneapolis and neighboring St. Paul, Minnesota, are known as the Twin Cities. More than 3 million people reside in the metropolitan area. Consistent with trends nationwide, the demographic composition of Minneapolis—the third largest economic center in the Midwest, behind Chicago and Detroit—is increasingly diverse. Minneapolis is home to the largest Somali population in the world outside of Mogadishu, Somalia. According to recent U.S. Census Bureau estimates, nearly 74,000 Minnesotans speak Somali, making Somalis the second largest minority after Hispanics.

## The Heartland Democracy Center: Building Engagement and Resilience

Heartland, founded by Tom Vellanga in 2005, is the prime grant recipient. Mary McKinley was appointed executive director in 2014. Mary previously worked in philanthropy and nonprofit management and uses this experience to

guide Heartland's focus on building engagement and resilience in the Minneapolis community. Mary is the sole fulltime employee. To carry out its work, Heartland relies on numerous subcontractors and community actors, including educators, interpreters, and leaders of existing cultural groups. A volunteer board of directors is also integral to Heartland's operation.

**"Countering Violent Extremism" has proven to be a controversial term in Minneapolis, stemming in part from two separate terrorism-related federal criminal cases and broader concerns related to the War on Terror.**

### **Heartland Democracy Center: Project Development**

In 2016, Heartland submitted a proposal requesting grant funding from DHS to prevent violent extremism among youth in Minnesota. Mary had recently worked with Abdullahi Yusuf, a young Somali immigrant who was arrested while attempting to join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Mary's innovative work with Abdullahi included recognizing that he was in crisis, providing him with education, and promoting his resilience and eventual engagement in the community; she also engaged with his parents and others in the local Somali population. Having successfully helped to deradicalize Abdullahi through these efforts, Mary centered her CVE proposal along the same concepts of preemptive engagement and resilience-building in her community, especially among recent refugees and immigrant youth.

### **Resistance to the CVE Grant Award**

Heartland has struggled, both before and throughout its period of performance with public concerns related to the CVE language and its association with law enforcement surveillance and other suppression efforts. To provide some important local background information, it is necessary to briefly describe the two major terrorism-related trials that stemmed from two multiyear criminal investigations in the Minneapolis area. They took place during the decade preceding Heartland's receipt of the DHS CVE grant.

In both cases, the arrests primarily involved terrorist organization recruitment within the local Somali community. The first concerned a group of 20 young

## **Heartland Focus Areas**

**Heartland curriculum** – Curriculum presented and formalized in local middle schools, with the aim of increasing resilience, promoting a cohesive community, and ultimately preventing disenfranchisement among youth.

**Facilitated community groups** – Several parental groups at local middle schools; several cultural groups (including Latin, Somali, and Bhutanese communities); a group focused on the role of white women aimed at the reduction of white extremist violence; and a summer camp for middle-school children, among others.

**Anti-violence presentations** – Former extremists and extremism experts invited for panel discussions at local universities.

**Shared experiences (*Kid Connect*)** – Focus groups with children to discuss and compile feelings and experiences, and art created and presented to the community based on these compilations.

Somali men who were recruited by al-Shabab, an affiliate of al-Qaeda, from 2007 through 2009. Over the course of a 4-year investigation, 18 men were charged in federal court for terrorism-related crimes. Although 10 of those 18 are thought to have died in Somalia while fighting for al-Shabab, the remaining 8 were convicted.

In 2016, a similar trial involved multiple young Somali men charged with attempting to join the terrorist group ISIL/ISIS. Nine were convicted in November 2016. The perceived leader of the group received a 35 year sentence in federal prison, and two others received 30-year sentences. Four others received either 10 or 15 years; one served only 30 months. The final individual, Abdullahi—a man who

was later considered deradicalized—served 2 years in jail awaiting his trial. During this time, he worked with a team composed of several Heartland partners, who developed and implemented a mentoring and civic education-related program with the goal of promoting disengagement and deradicalization. At the time of Abdullahi's trial, Judge Michael Davis, who authorized the deradicalization effort, agreed that Abdullahi had made significant changes and ultimately sentenced him to time served and 20 years of probation.

Both investigations and prosecutions helped further a sense among some segments of Somali and other residents in Minneapolis that counterterrorism efforts unfairly target Muslim communities and people of color while neglecting other types of violent extremist threats. This point is relevant for understanding some of the anti-CVE sentiment in Minneapolis and nationwide.

The CVE grant solicitation was released soon after the second federal trial, and multiple local communities—especially the Somali community—were wary of federal funding associated with DHS. In fact, even Mary was initially reluctant to apply for CVE funding. She and other Heartland associates had worked to establish trust with the Somali community, and they did not want to jeopardize those relationships. After outreach from a DHS representative encouraging Heartland to submit a proposal, Mary reconsidered and eventually applied for the grant funds.

**“Heartland Democracy has been engaged in very meaningful and important work. I cannot praise enough the education that the grant has offered both K–12 students and community members. This is challenging work with a goal that cannot be easily measured. [Heartland] has been successful in varying their efforts so that many different communities benefit.”**

## Activities Supported by Heartland



**Cultural Groups**



**Women's Groups**



**Literacy Classes**



**Summer Camp**



**Theater Classes and Performances**



**Presentations by Former Extremists**

## Areas Where Heartland Acted



**Middle School**



**Neighborhoods and Community Centers**



**Local Universities**

## Key Partners Connecting with the Community

Under the CVE grant, Heartland continued its work with multiple nonprofit partners. Roles of these partners included assisting Mary in building and managing the grant itself; creating and maintaining groups promoting resilience and education in children; and expanding outreach to different adult communities in the area, with a focus on refugees and immigrants.

**Minneapolis Public Schools** – Ahmed Amin, the assistant principal at Sanford Middle School, is also the creator and leader of Heartland's resilience-building school curriculum. Ahmed implemented the curriculum at Sanford Middle School for the past 2 years and will be presenting segments at several upcoming educational conferences.

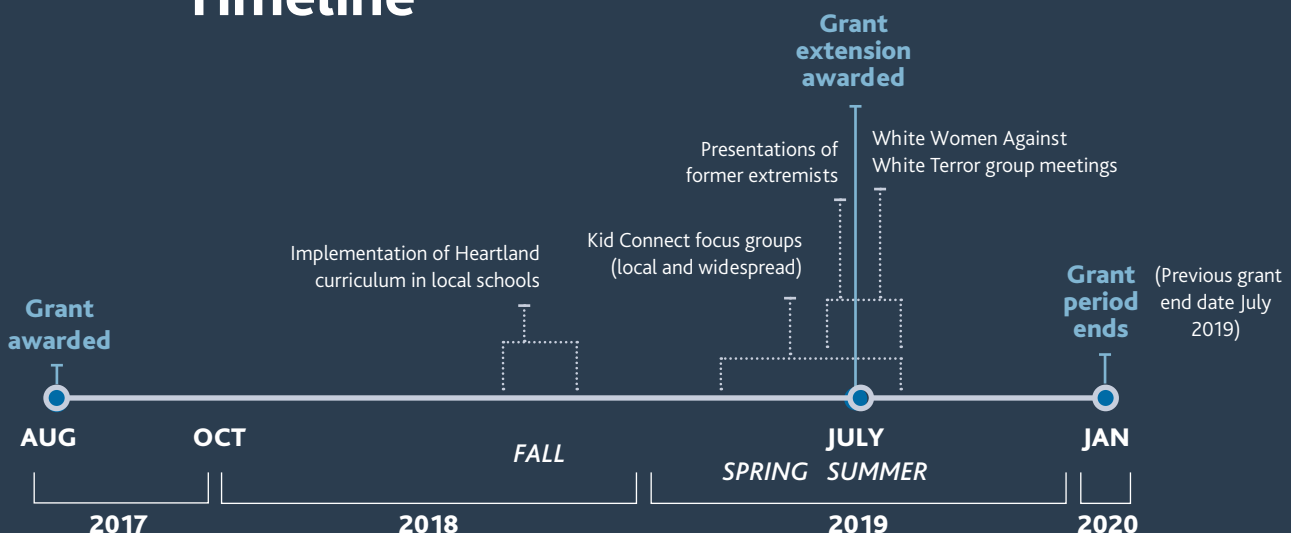
**Mangala Sharma** – Mangala works with Heartland as the co-facilitator of several community groups funded through the grant. She leads a support group for parents at the Justice Page Middle School, a Somali women's group, and a Bhutanese women's group. Mangala has extensive experience working with refugee and immigrant women.

**Hennepin County** – Vinodh (Vinnie) Kutty works for Hennepin County as a philanthropic liaison. His work with Heartland has involved helping develop grant proposals, direct and coordinate county resources toward Heartland, and engage in other community efforts to assist local immigrant/refugee populations in their career and life trajectories.

**Kid Connect** – Kathy Anlauf, Chris Fisher, and Rick Thompson work together as Kid Connect. They create and share theater productions and other forms of art, based on the children's own experiences, with Minnesota children. By presenting the stories of their students, the program intends to inspire empathy and resilience in the audiences for which they perform as well as provide the children creating the art with a potentially transformative form of self-expression.

**Betsy Sitkoff** – Betsy is an independent consultant who specializes in addressing restorative justice and the prevention of violence within the Minneapolis community. Betsy is the outreach lead for Heartland and operates several community groups. She co-facilitates a Bhutanese women's group, along with Mangala Sharma (below); she also leads several groups for adult refugee/immigrant women and is involved in the Heartland-funded group White Women Against White Extremist Violence.

## Timeline

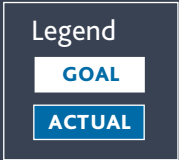




## Performance and Outcome Indicators

Throughout Heartland's period of performance, several challenges emerged related to submitting data through DHS's Project Implementation & Evaluation Plan (PIEP) system. According to Mary, while the anonymity of the system provides a useful protection for confidential information, these safeguards also make it difficult to determine whether data has been previously submitted. Mary and Ahmed, who collaborated on the Heartland curriculum, have also faced difficulties creating a generalizable curriculum that can be used more broadly.

Although most of the program implemented in the Minneapolis schools focuses on empowering middle school students by building their resilience, each program is tailored to the specific location, which the team fears will make it difficult to implement elsewhere. Ahmed spends much of his free time at the middle school to implement and manage the program. A review of the PIEP data yielded quantitative outcome data regarding the amount of work that was completed on the grant. These tables relate these data to outcomes developed by the site.



### Building Student Relationships

Outcome indicators for Heartland's Outcome 1 support building relationships with adults and students. Throughout the four sites that Heartland established, associates trained multiple cohorts of mentors, educators, and other adults interested in helping the youth participants. No data were available to show connectedness or self-organization of programs.

Adults Trained



Youth Participants



## Outcome 1: Train and observe coaches; build mentor capacity for group and individual programs; develop relationship with diverse groups of students; educate students at pilot programs across service area.

### Outcome indicators

- Participants moving in a positive direction toward more connection with their self-identified focus or interest
- Educator/mentor/coach engaging in program; developing curriculum; establishing healthy new connections with administrators, parents, and principals; building systems; working to find prevention strategies through humanities-based civic engagement curriculum
- Participation by students, staff, parents—positive movement toward self-organization of programs

Midterm Outcome 1.1: "Students and teachers see new connections and possibilities—with colleagues, with each other, with curriculum rubric points and with school settings."

Midterm Outcome 1.2: "Schools and partner organizations engage in new and meaningful connections with institution-building, community connections, and with Heartland, around a series of topics not addressed in traditional settings."

### Results

- Heartland identified four sites (two schools and two community organizations) in which to run their curriculum, 14 mentors and educators, and seven educators for summer youth programs
- Programs were launched at three of the four sites
- Sites conducted pre- and postprogram surveys of participants and group leaders and requested observations by outside evaluators
- Heartland edited three modules of its curriculum

**Outcome 2: Practitioners create agenda and engage in new conversation around emerging issues and vulnerabilities in community and practice. Heartland is seen as key partner with established organizations (mental health and primary care clinics, schools, county agencies, community organizations) to improve networks, communications, and training of practitioners and service providers. Parents work to empower each other and selves around community and personal issues—including youth disparities and vulnerabilities, educational attainment and engagement, and community empowerment.**

**Outcome indicators**

- Parents committed to participation in regular, on-going cohort. Parents empowered to engage in iterative and organic process for agenda and goal setting for group
- Partner organizations identify need and urgency around convening (memorandum of understanding indicates shared contribution and commitment)
- Providers move toward self-organizing in clinical settings toward trainings, outreach, and capacity building initiatives around cultural competencies and systems-wide methods for identifying emerging trends, challenges, and issues
- Outreach by partners and providers indicates additional potential health care provider participants (clinics and individual providers, as well as health care industry leadership)
- Clinics participate in design and implementation of pilot program to improve services and response to culturally diverse patient community
- Parents and youth indicate improved communication within family around issues of education, school life, communication between school and family, and addressing issues both within school and within wider community

Midterm Outcome 2.1: "Practitioners identify group participants to engage in meaningful dialogue over period of 12 months; Parents Connect groups move from expectation of government-led lecture structure toward self organizing and agenda-creating empowerment group with detailed year-long agenda of needs, information-seeking, supports."

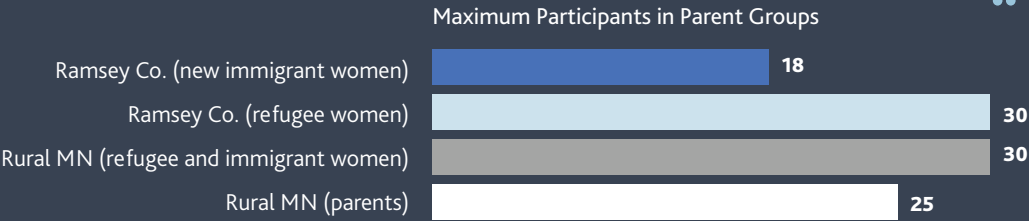
Midterm Outcome 2.2: "Practitioner network develops systems for communication around emerging threats and vulnerabilities; Parent/Kid Connect groups find meaningful communication among selves, among generations, with educators and institutions, and ways to engage more concretely in community."

**Results**

- Heartland identified community project leads, youth clinics, and other partner organizations
- Heartland scheduled internal group practitioner meetings and had one-on-one meetings between practitioners and Heartland leaders to identify needs of group participants
- Heartland began a youth engagement project, involving the development of an artistic curriculum and presentations
- Program dates for Site 1 students established (6-week pilot); cohort set (9–12 middle school students)
- Initial parent groups convened. Participant demographics recorded. Program dates for parents established (10 meetings in 12 months):
  - Two meetings of refugee women in Ramsey County: urban setting, 15–30 women each time, similar group, consistent participation
  - Two meetings of new immigrant women in Ramsey County: urban setting, 12–18 women each time, similar group, consistent participation
  - Two meetings of parents (refugee and new immigrant women in rural Minnesota): 15–30 women each time, similar participation
  - Three meetings of parents in rural Minnesota (20–25 participants, same participants each time)
  - Holiday celebration for Southeast Asian refugee women supported by Heartland: approximately 350 women participated in an afternoon cultural event

**Parent Groups**

As part of its objective for Outcome 2, Heartland created parent groups to help connect and integrate parents with educators and clinics. No data were available to show parent or partner engagement, commitment, or self-organization, though it was mentioned that mostly the same people attended the meetings for their respective groups and locations.



### **Outcome 3: Develop communications, new networks, and training for interventions and crisis management around youth and families in [the] community.**

#### **Outcome indicators**

- Large event to be held in 2019, with general audience of community leaders, elected officials, experts and professionals with interest in violence prevention and youth and family wellness - noticeable change in local conversation around issues of violence, youth, and emerging challenges
- Local network of interested and committed individuals and organizations will grow to sustain work after grant period – to include future donors and funders as well

**Midterm outcome 3.1:** "Convene new network of local professionals working to increase violence prevention programming for youth and families, with a focus on one-to-one prevention services and crisis management."

**Midterm Outcome 3.2:** "Lead and collaborate to provide outside supports and information specific to community needs and prevalence indicated by educators, families, law enforcement, community leaders and health providers."

**Midterm Outcome 3.3:** "Establish national and international resources for Heartland efforts, including individuals and organizations working on violence prevention, community outreach and empowerment, youth education strategies, women's leadership, racial equity."

#### **Results**

- An initial small group of community leaders and interested partners was identified
- Outside resources and experts were contacted to plan training sessions and information-sharing in 2018 - existing partnerships continued, and meetings were held to secure commitments for 2018
- New partnerships were explored
- Community leaders engaged in crisis management discussion
- Heartland investigated and reached out to potential partners worldwide
  - Site leaders traveled to New York to meet with individuals behind recently released Preventing Violent Extremism reports

The data represented above were extracted from the PIEP system, where Heartland's leaders entered various metrics. Only two quarterly reports were obtained for review. The limited amount and type of data received makes it difficult to report on the extent to which Heartland reached its stated goals. Heartland staff and their partners acknowledge the limited quantitative data collected as part of the grant award. Heartland identified the number of programs established, the number of meetings held,

### **Outcome 4: Engage a diverse set of youth and professional voices around issues of violence prevention, hate, youth engagement and empowerment, [and] local and national networks.**

#### **Outcome indicators**

- Regular and invested participation by groups of vulnerable refugee and immigrant women
- Sustained movement of participants (parents) from expectation of direct service need met to self advocacy and self exploration of community and self, leading to improved problem identification and solving
- Regular, consistent, and invested participation by students at school sites
- Consistent and energetic participation and leadership by teachers and outside educators who provide creative and innovative direction on programs and curriculum; deliberate and productive collaboration on curriculum and vision
- Increased partnership with Minneapolis and other public and private schools; continuation of training programs for school staff, especially culturally specific family liaisons; - surveys of participants

**Midterm Outcome 4.1:** "Convene youth, educators, parents, local leadership around new events and networks."

**Midterm Outcome 4.2:** "Establish and continue Heartland programs and curriculum among national and international network of programming to combat hate, extremism, youth violence, marginalization, discrimination and lack of civic engagement."

#### **Results**

- Heartland convened three programs for mothers, drawing 60 participants
- Bjørn Ihler, a Norwegian peace activist who survived a mass shooting in 2011, visited for a week
- Heartland hosted booths at two cultural festivals (FroFest and Somali Festival)
- A 2-day facilitator training attracted 15 participants
- Heartland partnered with arts organizations like Third Place Gallery and StoryCorps for interaction with students and parent groups

and overall progress related to each effort (e.g., success under Outcome 2 in identifying a training schedule and agendas for upcoming parent group meetings). Heartland was unable to quantify the numbers of children who spent time in a Heartland-related program or to provide metrics related to the outcomes of the Justice Page Middle School artistic expression program. The quarterly progress reports, however, clearly document a wide variety of activities that were undertaken and completed during the award period.



## Results from Partner Surveys about the Heartland Project

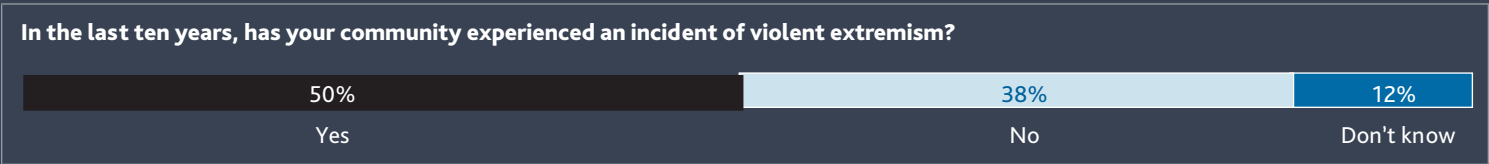
To help supplement the monthly calls and site visits, the evaluation team also conducted a comprehensive survey.<sup>1</sup> Partner surveys were sent to contacts identified by the prime grantee. The purpose was to obtain feedback on partner interactions with the prime and each other regarding the grant. Eight people completed the partner survey.

These tables highlight selected survey items. The first item addresses perceptions of community experiences with violent extremism. The second item gauges whether partners felt valued and utilized by Heartland. The third and fourth items address the local and national political climate and how it may affect CVE-related work.

<sup>1</sup> These survey results are a summation of received partner responses; most grantees had a small number of partners. These responses are representative of partner perspectives; they are not intended to be generalized to the broader population.

### Perception of Community Experiences with Violent Extremism

When asked whether the community had experienced a recent incident of violent extremism, responses varied. One individual selected "Don't know." Three other individuals reported there had been no violent extremism in the last decade, whereas four claimed there had been. One of the individuals who responded "Yes" mentioned arrests following an attempt to join ISIS. The two other respondents who selected "Yes" also elaborated on their replies. Both noted a "mosque bombing" and one respondent also referenced "graffiti on Jewish synagogues."



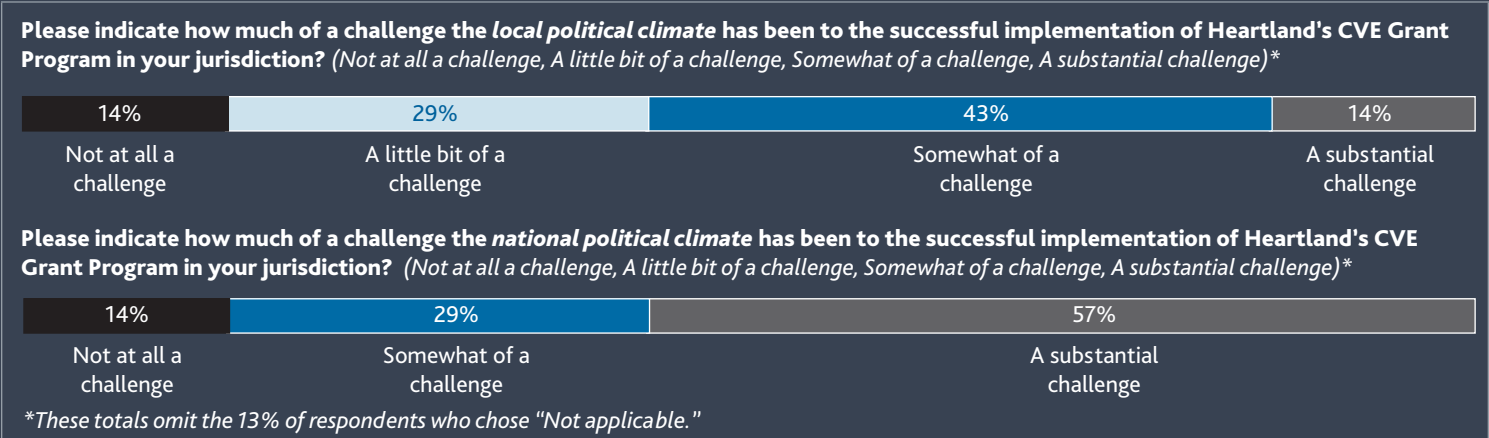
### Whether Partners Felt Valued and Utilized

The responses to the survey item about whether partners' contributions were valued and utilized reflected a generally high level of satisfaction. Within the grant program team, most felt that their contributions were valued and used to either a moderate or great extent.



### Local and National Political Climate and How It May Affect Related Work

Last, two survey items were selected that measured perceived challenges related to local and national political climate. Overall, respondents perceived more political challenges at the national level than at the local level. This result may reflect growing polarization at the national level. Six of seven respondents thought the national political climate was at least "somewhat of a challenge"; of these, two-thirds thought it was a "substantial challenge." In terms of local political climate, four of seven thought it was at least "somewhat of a challenge," but only one respondent thought it a "substantial challenge."



## Recommendations

In this section, we rely on information the evaluation team collected during monthly calls, site visits, review of PIEP data, and the survey results to discuss several recommendations. Each recommendation is followed by a further explanation of why we think these changes would enhance the DHS CVE grant program.

### **Recommendation 1: Allocate evaluation funds to support involving an evaluation team from the beginning of the grant award to measure program performance.**

The current outcome measures are helpful in terms of establishing the frequency of activities but are unsuitable for establishing any type of change in attitude or behavior. Many of Heartland's outcome measures included descriptions of key aspects of program development such as securing school sites. This type of information is important, but earlier involvement of an evaluation team could have helped Heartland develop additional measurable outcomes.

### **Recommendation 2: Rename the CVE grant program in a way that highlights emphasis on building community resilience and harm reduction.**

In varying degrees, the use of CVE terminology resulted in political opposition across multiple award sites, including Heartland. Heartland's location in Minneapolis has been characterized by substantial concerns related to CVE due, in part, to the two major terrorism investigations and indictments. As such, Heartland experienced opposition related to its participation in the DHS grant award program.

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