



Social Innovator Accelerator Program: Social Issue Track Partnership

WHAT IS THE ACCELERATOR PROGRAM?

The Social Innovator Accelerator helps nonprofit organizations gain visibility, expand their networks, and connect with philanthropic and in-kind resources to accelerate their work. Each year, the Social Innovation Forum (SIF) brings together funders, practitioners, and subject matter experts with both lived and learned experience, to develop “**Social Issue Tracks**” focused on the most pressing issues in Eastern Massachusetts, and to select a cohort of Social Innovators whose work directly addresses each issue. SIF offers the selected Social Innovators two years of consulting, coaching, financial support, as well as ongoing access to SIF’s Alumni & Nonprofit Network, to help build sustainability and generate long-lasting change.

Social Issue Track Partners are the key funding partners for the Accelerator program. They are involved throughout the program. Track Partners play an integral role during the selection process as they help select impactful local nonprofit organizations – Social Innovators – working on social issues.

BENEFITS OF BEING SELECTED FOR THE ACCELERATOR PROGRAM

The Accelerator Program offers Social Innovators, six to eight organizations, a unique opportunity to amplify and deepen their social change impact, and additionally provides support to 10-15 Social Innovator Finalists each year, as follows:

Capacity Building & Network Building - Once selected, the nonprofit Social Innovators receive two years of support from SIF, including six months of consulting services and executive coaching, presentation advising, performance measurement and relationship-building assistance, professional graphic design and photography services, and access to other types of support (e.g., legal, data analytics, fundraising) through SIF’s in-kind partner network. The process focuses on enhancing the organization’s ability to gain visibility, expand their networks, and connect with philanthropic and in-kind resources in order to support its work and strengthen its impact. By leveraging resources from in-kind partners, SIF provides support beyond what a traditional grant can offer.

Unrestricted Funding - In addition, each Social Innovator is guaranteed to receive at least \$30,000 in unrestricted funding through the Accelerator, \$10,000 of which comes from the initial Track Partner commitment and \$20,000 of which comes from a new source: the Social Innovator Fund. In 2023, SIF launched the Social Innovator Fund as a new vehicle for directing high-impact gifts to local grassroots nonprofit organizations. A five-year anchor gift provided seed money for the fund, and the SIF team continuously raises new money for it. At the end of each calendar year, the funds are distributed equally among the participating Social Innovator organizations. The goal is to continue to build the fund and ensure the SIF Social Innovators, typically small, local organizations, get maximized funding to build and expand their work.

Support for Nonprofit Leaders in SIF’s Broader Network - The benefits of the Accelerator Program go beyond those selected as Social Innovators. Those that make it to the finalist round but are not ultimately selected (10-15 per year) receive \$2,500 to compensate for their time. Additionally, they are offered the opportunity to join the SIF’s Alumni & Nonprofit Network. The network’s workshops, in-kind resources, roundtables, and learning cohorts provide a chance to come together, build a peer support network, and grapple with issues impacting the nonprofit sector. The selected Innovators gain permanent access to this same network when they finish their two-year Accelerator program.



BENEFITS OF SOCIAL ISSUE TRACK PARTNERSHIP

As a Social Issue Track Partner, you are asked to provide a lead gift to sponsor a Social Issue Track of the Accelerator Program. Funding a Social Issue Track has many benefits, including a range of learning and networking opportunities. Social Issue Track Partners are able to:

- Have an impact in the social change sector beyond giving dollars
- Call attention to and learn more deeply about a range of social issues in Eastern Massachusetts and help promote proven solutions to the problem
- Network with a range of business leaders, foundation representatives, and philanthropists at SIF events throughout the year, including the Warm Winter Welcome and the Showcase
- Get access to SIF's Funder Learning program which offers a range of ways for funders to learn, engage, and grow
- Gain recognition as someone committed to spreading social innovation and advancing solutions to social problems
- Participate in a collaborative funding experience that will multiply your per-dollar impact and provide guidance on complex decision-making processes
- Learn about various nonprofit organizations doing important work in the issue area of interest
- Build deep, long-lasting relationships with Social Innovators and finalist organizations
- Get involved in SIF's evaluation process, from reviewing applications to attending site visits, and assisting with the due diligence process. SIF has a range of ways to be actively involved and continue to grow your own learning
- Join the broader philanthropic community at SIF

THREE MODELS FOR TRACK PARTNERSHIP

SIF offers three models of track partnership, each of which offers funders different approaches to learning and collaboration.

Traditional Track Process

Track Partners work with SIF and a number of issue experts to learn more about the social issue as a whole and what the potential solutions and best practices might be before SIF launches the application process. SIF Track Partners actively participate in the selection process, including reviewing applications and attending site visits.

By staying involved throughout this process, Track Partners have the opportunity to learn about a range of approaches to the social issue, integrating expertise from those closest to the issues, as well as meet the leaders of some of the most effective organizations in the sector. Track Partners are also able to meet and network with other funders and stakeholders, and engage in collaborative decision-making together with SIF and other evaluators. In this model, the funding partner and SIF staff together select the Innovator on the track, after integrating feedback from the evaluation committee.

Participatory Track Process

In 2021, SIF piloted a new iteration of the traditional Social Issue Track selection process, with a focus on participatory decision-making. SIF wanted to acknowledge and address the power dynamic in philanthropic relationships, and thus, they acted on the belief that people who are the most impacted by the issue should be making decisions about the solutions.

Given the Track Partners' financial support and commitment to learning, SIF hired six nonprofit consultants – leaders working at alumni Innovator organizations – to hold decision-making power throughout the process. Moving beyond the pilot stage, SIF now seeks to integrate at least two participatory selection tracks into the annual selection process.



In the participatory track model, Track Partners will work together with three to four nonprofit consultants, hired by SIF, to devise a track topic and identify key characteristics to look for in applicants. Throughout the evaluation process, Track Partners will be encouraged to read applications, ask questions, participate in discussions, and learn from and alongside the consultants, who bring deep subject matter expertise as well as experience leading grassroots organizations. This model is a great option for funders interested in exploring participatory models of philanthropy and who are ready to try ceding decision-making power to those closest to the issues.

Collaborative Track Process

The driving force behind SIF's work is to build and facilitate meaningful, long-lasting connections between funders and nonprofit organizations founded on equity, trust, and intentional collaboration. This means identifying ways in which SIF can improve on existing practices and processes to be more equitable and inclusive.

SIF piloted a selection process in 2023 that prioritized cross-sector collaboration, continuous learning, and collective decision-making. SIF invited three Track Partners and hired four nonprofit consultants to work with SIF as partners to collectively and jointly move through the selection process. In this model, a track is built around a broader topical area (e.g. youth & education) and three Social Innovators working in that area are ultimately selected for the Accelerator. This model gives funding partners an opportunity to make decisions with and learn from other funders as well as nonprofit leaders with expertise in both subject matter and leading grassroots organizations.

BECOMING A SOCIAL ISSUE TRACK PARTNER: INVESTMENT REQUIRED

The Track Partners each year provide foundational financial support for SIF's flagship program, a two-year Accelerator, which then transitions into long-term ongoing technical assistance and other support once Social Innovators become alumni.

SIF has continued to invest in program improvement and innovation in response to the changing needs of nonprofit organizations and SIF's partners, including the following:

- The Innovator experience is now inclusive of a number of additional technical supports that will help the Innovators with critical branding and marketing tools and resources
- SIF now includes many former Innovators as evaluation consultants and pay market rates for their services, as opposed to previous models where some evaluator services were provided free of charge or at significantly reduced rates
- Because SIF has increased the frequency and intensity with which they engage the funding partners and the Social Innovators as part of the Accelerator Program, additional costs related to the full scope of program implementation have also been considered
- The SIF team has invested time and resources in designing, administering, and promoting the new Social Innovator Fund, which brings significant additional unrestricted funding to the Innovator cohort each year

Investment Required: The full cost of running the Social Issue Tracks is \$140,000 for traditional, \$150,000 for participatory, and \$160,000 for collaborative. SIF absorbs a portion of these costs from general operating resources. This year, with an eye towards price flexibility, SIF is asking Track Partners for a \$125,000 commitment on a traditional track, a \$125,000 commitment per partner on a collaborative track, and a \$150,000 commitment for a participatory track.

TRACK PARTNERSHIP TIMELINE

September 2024 to January 2025 – SIF leadership works with prospective track partners to talk through ideas for social issue tracks for the coming year and assures a good match.

February 2025 – Verbal commitments for track partnerships for the coming year.

March 2025 – Formal track commitment agreements for track partners for the coming year signed. On participatory and collaborative tracks, nonprofit consultants are hired for the upcoming process.



April/May 2025 – SIF creates a list of key characteristics for potential applicants to the social issue track, incorporating learnings from issue experts or nonprofit consultants to shape the collective vision for the upcoming process. On traditional tracks, external issue experts are often consulted during this process to get a better sense of what the pressing needs in a particular social issue area are. On participatory and collaborative tracks, the nonprofit consultants help shape the characteristics.

June 2025 – Application process launches. SIF team and partners conduct active outreach to organizations focused on social change in the Eastern MA community.

August/September 2025 – SIF receives written applications from local nonprofit organizations. Together with the track partners, evaluation committee of issue experts, (and nonprofit consultants where applicable), SIF reviews the applications and identifies two to three Finalists who will move forward to the final stage of the process for site visits.

October/November 2025 – SIF, along with the track partners, and nonprofit consultants (on collaborative and participatory tracks) invite Finalists to guide them on an interactive site visit, where attendees can learn about the work of the applicant organizations and ask questions about the organization’s work. Track partners, along with the SIF team (and nonprofit consultants in the participatory and collaborative processes) meet to debrief the full process and make final selections.

December 2025 – SIF hosts a Warm Winter Welcome to announce and meet the Social Innovators. This event will provide opportunities to network and meet new and past Social Innovators who are leaders in promoting social change.

January 2026 to April 2026 – The SIF team matches each Innovator with a consultant to work together over the course of 6 months on preparation of a five-minute presentation and a four-page prospectus for potential funders, partners, and supporters to be shared at the May Showcase.

May 2026 – The SIF Showcase event highlights the chosen Innovator’s work for an audience of over 300 business and philanthropic leaders in Eastern Massachusetts.

June 2026 – Innovators and their team members are offered an opportunity to work with an executive coach and focus on individual professional development over the course of six months. Innovators also begin quarterly progress calls with SIF staff and get access to a number of in-kind partners who can help address specific needs.

July 2025 to July 2026 – Innovators undergo a year of ongoing coaching and support.

January 2027 – The 2026 Innovator Cohort receives the payout from the 2026 Innovator’s Fund.

January 2028 – Innovators officially graduate the Accelerator program at SIF’s Graduation event.

Long term – After graduating from the two-year Accelerator program, the Social Innovators enter the Alumni Program, which provides ongoing leadership development, skill-building, and network-building support, receiving access to workshops, learning cohorts, in-kind partners, attendance at SIF events, and ongoing support from SIF staff.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

The SIF team would be delighted to meet with funders interested in learning more about track partnership models. Please contact bmamlet@socialinnovationforum.org for more information or to set up a meeting.