

Advancing Empathy Grant Program

Round 4 Grants Summary Report

Final Report: April 23, 2025



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BACKGROUND

Purpose & Process

Since 2020, the Woodland Park Zoo's (WPZ) Advancing Empathy Grant Program has supported AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums in a seven-state region (Alaska, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin) in their efforts to plan, build, and/or expand programs and exhibits that advance empathy for animals and wildlife. This fourth granting cycle (2024-25) saw \$1 million in total funds distributed to 15 organizations representing 21 unique projects.

This report summarizes the results of a systematic analysis of the work and impacts of Round 4 grantee efforts, based on project reports and documentation submitted to WPZ.

Round 4 Grantees

15 organizations implementing 21 unique projects* were included in this evaluation analysis.

- Como Park Zoo & Conservatory (MN)
- Dakota Zoo (ND)
- Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center (MT)
- Henry Vilas Zoo (WI)
- Idaho Falls Zoo (ID)
- International Crane Foundation (WI)[†]
- Lake Superior Zoo (MN)[†]
- Minnesota Zoo (MN)[†]
- Northwest Trek Wildlife Park (WA)
- Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium (WA)
- Racine Zoo (WI)
- Seattle Aquarium (WA)[†]
- Zoo Boise (ID)[†]
- Zoological Society of Milwaukee (WI)[†]
- ZooMontana (MT)

* Project descriptions are provided in the Appendix

[†] Organizations who were funded for two projects in Round 4



Lake Superior Zoo

Analysis Approach & Process

1

Aggregate Grantee Data*

All Round 4 grantee materials submitted by February 28, 2025, were collected for analysis. **Final reports were the primary source of information.** Webinar transcripts were appended to these reports, if available. Because supplemental materials varied in content, they were not directly incorporated into the analysis process but were instead reviewed to understand project context and specific results (e.g., evaluation report).

2

Review of Previous Analysis

JSC reviewed WPZ's Round 1-3 Culminating Report and coding structures used to previously synthesize grant materials. JSC met with the WPZ team to reflect on the approach, identify analysis priorities, and focus on useful strategies. Next, a preliminary review of a sample of available reports was used to assess strengths, gaps, and opportunities to revise the existing categorization framework.

3

Refine & Apply New Coding Framework

JSC updated the final coding framework. This final framework was applied to code the full set of 21 grant reports for evidence of themes reported in each. Analysis of coded data led to reporting of aggregated patterns of impact achieved across the body of funded projects as a whole.** During analysis, minor adjustments to the code book ensured codes and descriptions were precise, distinct from one another, and reflective of the content.

*Throughout this report, grantee materials submitted for Round 4 and used for this analysis will be referred to as *grant reports* or *final reports*.

**For detailed insights into any single project's experience, we encourage review of individual grantee reports, which contain rich detail.

Central Coding Categories

The coding framework was organized into three main sections to reflect the narrative of project work and impact.

- CREATE:** This section describes the work that was completed. Specifically, it analyzes: (1) the type of project funded and (2) what was created as a result of this effort (outputs). These categories reflect the ‘tangible’ products, tools, and programs of the grants.
- CHANGE:** This section describes evidence of the audiences and benefits that resulted from the grantees’ work. This analysis encompasses both (internal) organizational impacts and (external) public audience outcomes.
- REFLECT:** This section analyzed evidence of process-related insights, growth, and persistence by grantees throughout their project journey. Specifically, reports were analyzed to identify common challenges, lessons learned, and intention to continue their projects and empathy work beyond the grant period.

Using MAXQDA software, each grant report was reviewed in full, identifying meaningful segments and tagging each to code(s) evident in the description provided. This was conducted by two evaluators, and any disagreements were reconciled to ensure consistency in how categories were applied. Coding was limited to descriptions provided by grantees’ reports, with efforts made not to over-interpret data. **Absence of a theme in a report does not definitively mean it did not occur in a project, simply that it wasn’t clearly reported.** From this coding, evaluators computed the total number of projects (out of 21) that expressed each category in their reporting.



This report presents the results of this analysis organized within this framework and provides an overview of the full range of work and accomplishments of grantees.

RESULTS

CREATE: Projects & Project Outputs



Round 4 Projects Funded

Grant-funded projects ranged in scope and purpose, with over one-third specifically supporting the development of school and youth programs.

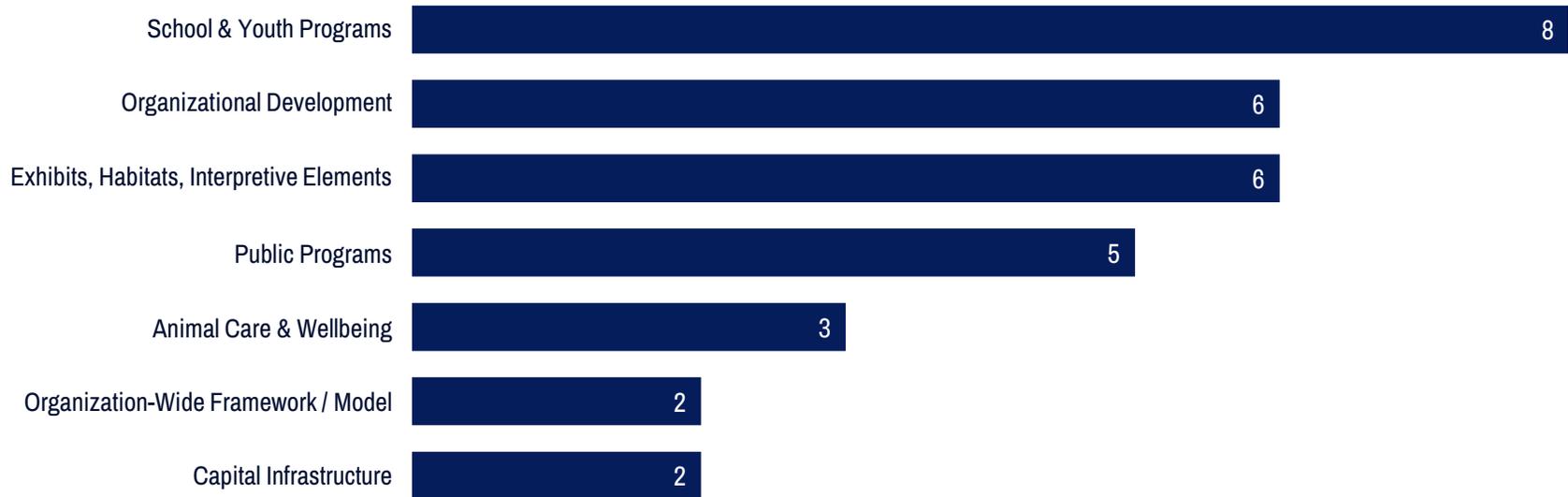
Eight projects said their initiatives focused on creating new or expanding current offerings for K-12 students, youth, or teen audiences through classroom or out-of-school programs. Six projects focused on increasing empathy-based organizational capacity, via staff development, training, and adopting empathy-based practices. Six projects involved designing new or improving existing exhibit spaces, habitats or other physical interpretive elements such as signs, displays, and interactives.

Five projects were funded to create public programs, such as hands-on experiences, virtual programs, and special events for general visitors. Three projects focused on delivering empathy-informed animal care and related programming that was essential to the organization’s empathy efforts, including efforts such as animal training and support as well as the development or expansion of animal ambassador programs.

Two projects described their purpose as developing empathy-related frameworks and models that impact broader organizational thinking and practice. Two projects described non-exhibit capital investments in buildings, landscape or facilities that support empathy-related efforts.

Grantees described projects that ranged from developing programming to infrastructure investments.

An existing coding rubric was revised and used to organize projects into broad categories. Projects could be included in more than one category. (n=21)



Funded Projects by Organization Size

Projects at larger institutions mostly focused on creating programs and organizational development. In contrast, small and mid-sized institutions engaged in a wider variety of work, with a larger emphasis on exhibits and capital infrastructure.

Project categories were examined based on zoo/aquarium size to look for any patterns in project focus. Results show that larger organizations, with annual budgets of \$5 million or more, engaged in more **human-centered, programmatic initiatives** such as school and public programming, professional and organizational development.

Smaller organizations, those with annual budgets of less than \$5 million, had more variation in the types of projects they pursued. In contrast to large organizations, they had far more emphasis on **initiatives that would result in physical assets** like interpretive elements, exhibits, and facilities.

This contrast suggests that smaller organizations saw this funding opportunity as a means to do “big things,” perhaps undertaking work that would have otherwise been out of reach. It is also possible that the typical scale, timeline, and budgets of capital projects at larger organizations exceed what this grant program can support.

Comparing the types of Round 4 funded projects by organizational size.

Organizational size was categorized based on Annual Budget figures for 2024 provided by the Woodland Park Zoo. (n=21)



Project Outputs Generated by Grantees

Types of project outputs generally aligned with the project categories, with projects resulting in infrastructure, training tools, and a suite of programs.

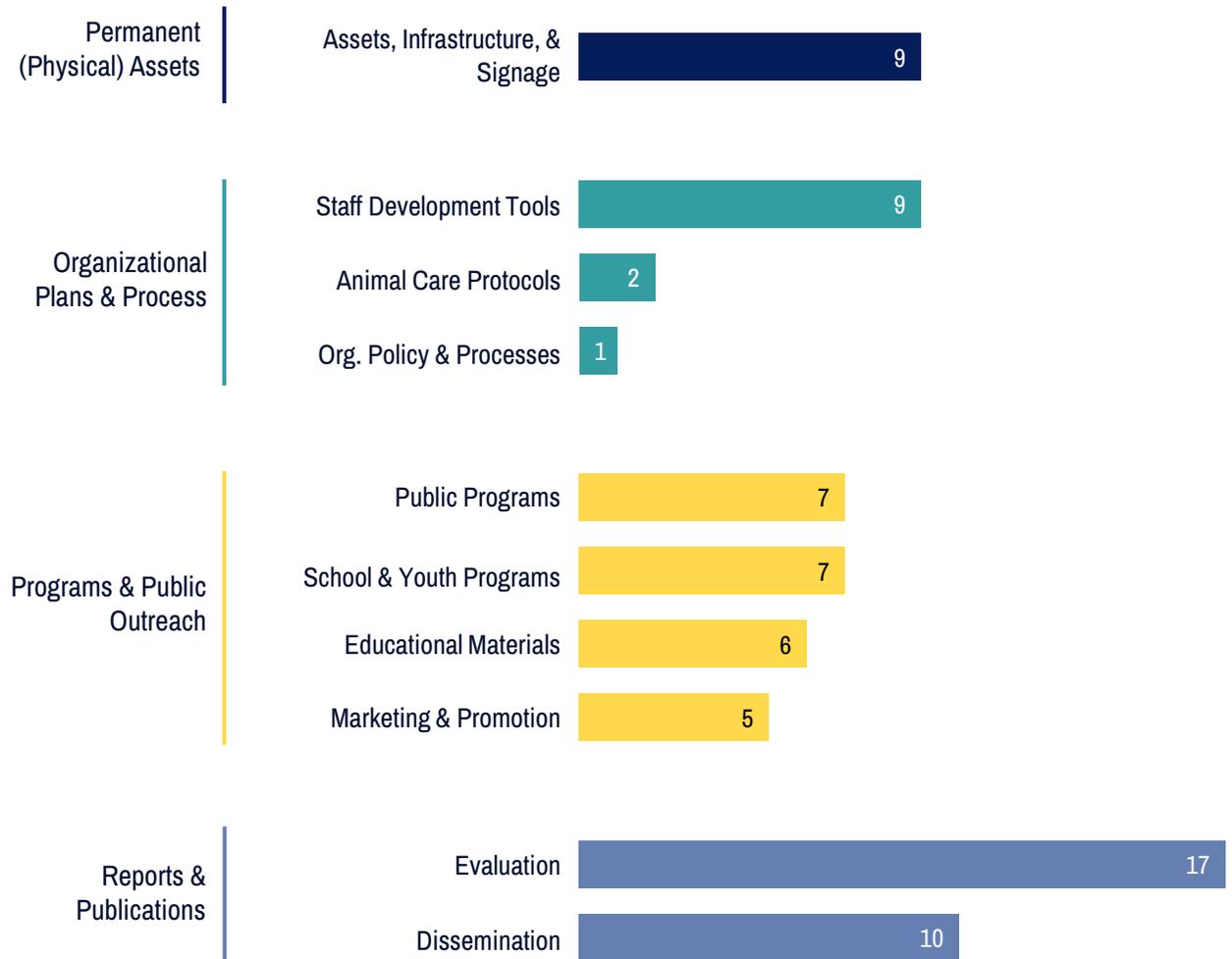
It is important to note that projects often created outputs *beyond* the specific type of project they were funded to complete. For example, nine grantees generated staff development tools and training, but only six were funded as Organizational Development projects (see p. 8). Other plans that resulted included empathy-informed animal care protocols (n=2), and one site codified processes to promote empathy-based practices at their zoo.

Nine projects created new or updated **permanent physical assets and/or infrastructure** such as exhibits and habitats, buildings, facilities, signage and displays. **Programmatic projects** resulted in public (n=7) and school/youth (n=7) programs, the design of educational materials (n=6), and marketing campaigns that promoted empathy-based initiatives to communities (n=6).

In addition, almost all projects created evaluation reports or tools (n=17), and **10 projects developed materials such as toolkits, training, or journal articles intended for the wider field.**

Grantees engaged in a variety of activities during their grant period that produced a range of tangible deliverables.

Grant reports were analyzed for emergent themes (n=21). Data was coded and organized into broader categories that represented the types of outputs generated.





Seattle Aquarium

RESULTS: PROJECTS & OUTPUTS

Resources & References Used to Create Outputs

Grantees were successful at leveraging and building upon existing work and expertise in the field to support their projects.

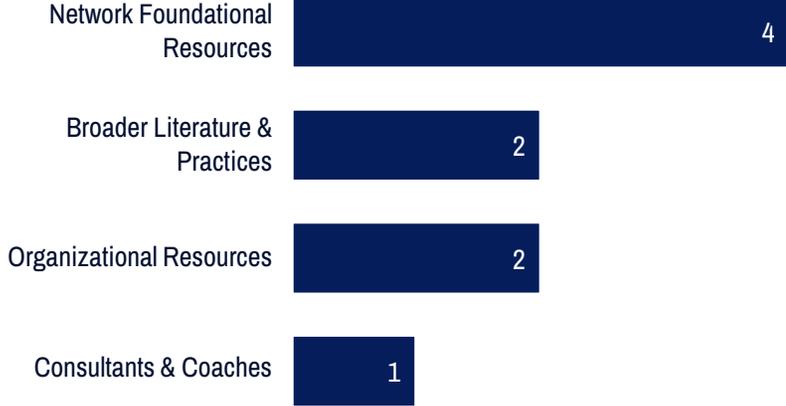
Most often, grantees leveraged the frameworks and tools developed by their zoo and aquarium colleagues such as the Measuring Empathy Collaborative Assessment Project, Empathy Bridge, and Empathy Wheel approaches (4 projects).

Two projects, both from the same site, used broader literature and practices, such as the Two-Worlds approach of recognizing Indigenous and Western ways of knowing; the Natural Curiosity framework to support children’s environmental inquiry through an Indigenous lens; and other resources from the Children and Nature Network.

Two projects extended frameworks created by their organization in previous years (including through other Advancing Empathy grants), and one project acknowledged the value of an animal wellbeing consultant.

Grantees mentioned resources used for their project work.

Eight project reports referenced specific resources used for their project. These responses were organized into the following categories (n=8).

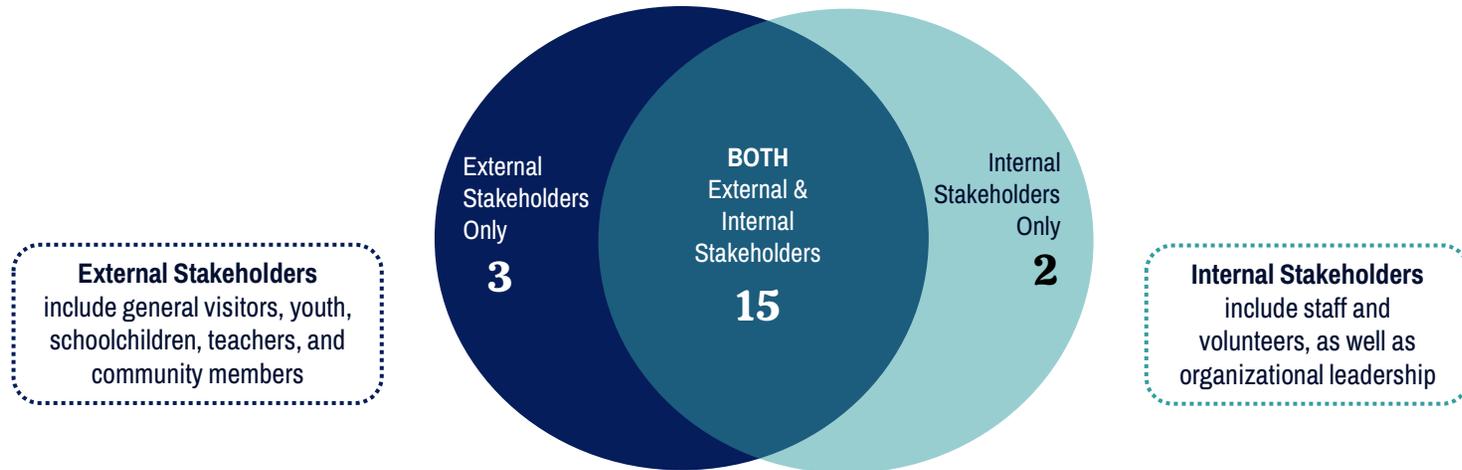


RESULTS

CHANGE: Audiences & Outcomes

Overview: Audiences Reached & Outcomes Achieved

Visual summary of the two types of audiences for grantee projects with the reported impacts for each type of audience.



EXTERNAL: Public Audience Impacts 18 projects	INTERNAL: Organizational Impacts 17 projects
Greater Satisfaction & Engagement 14	Grew Empathy-based Capacity 12
Gains in Awareness & Knowledge 14	Strengthened Organizational Values 10
Increased Expressions of Empathy 13	Greater Organizational Engagement 10
More Interest in Conservation Action 11	7 Deeper Understanding of Community
4 Greater Appreciation & Awe	4 Improved Animal Care & Wellbeing
2 Changes in Practice	Building Evaluation Capacity 10



Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center

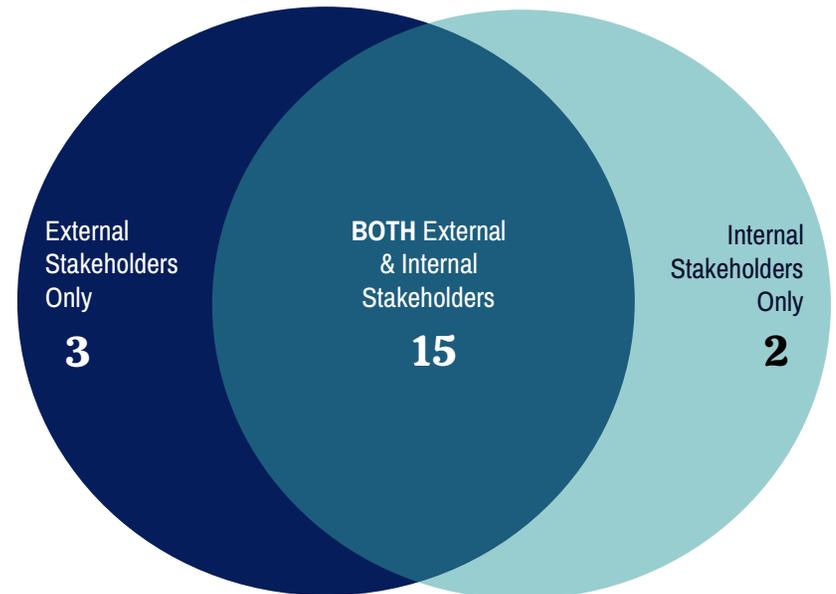
RESULTS: GRANT OUTCOMES

Beneficiaries of Grant Efforts

The majority of funded projects served both external and internal audiences – publics, including teens, schoolchildren, teachers, and community members, as well as organizational stakeholders, including staff members and volunteers.

Of the 21 grant reports analyzed, **15 indicated their projects resulted in outcomes for both internal and external stakeholders**, reflecting the importance of staff growth to achieve audience outcomes. For example, an empathy-based program developed for autistic youth required staff to learn about ways these youth could express empathy before developing or delivering programs. Similarly, organizational departments were trained in empathy-based practices that they then applied to the development of interpretive elements or educational materials for the public.

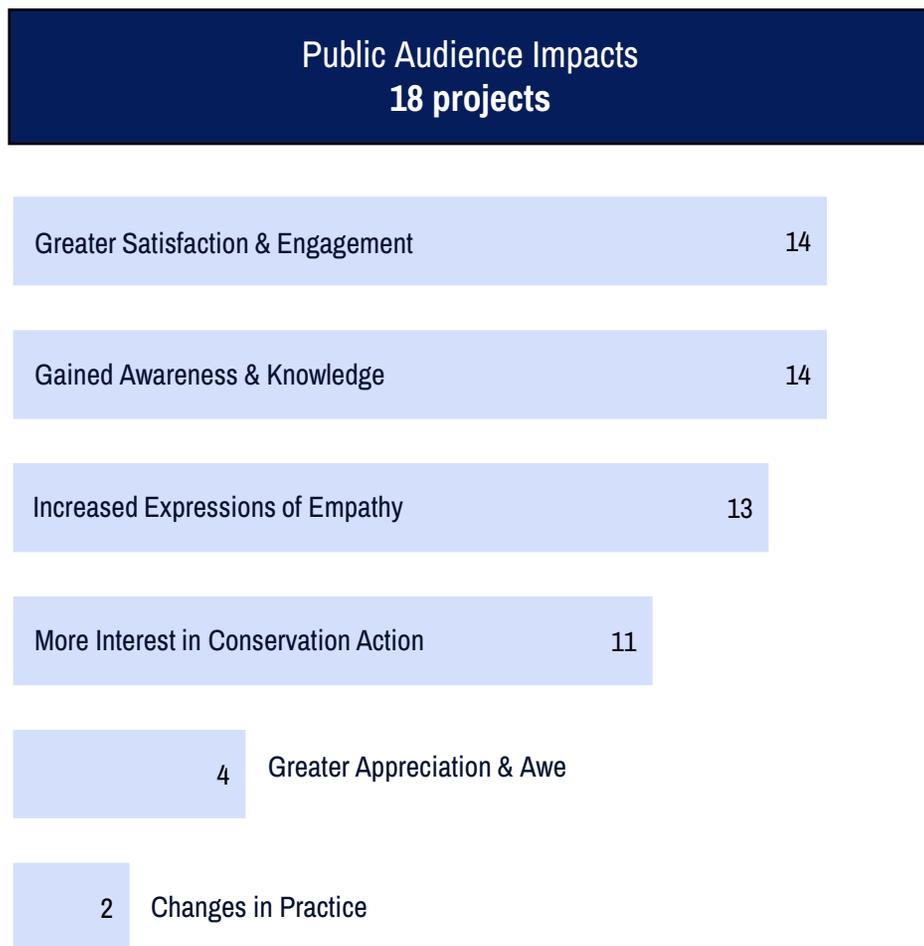
Only a few projects had only one set of stakeholders identified in grant reports. But, as noted earlier, analysis was limited to what was described; there could have been beneficiaries not specifically articulated in reports.



Public Impacts of Grant-Funded Efforts

Distribution of how frequently each external audience outcome was described within the 21 grant reports

Grant reports were analyzed for emergent themes (n=21). Report segments could be coded into more than one category. Descriptions of each category and accompanying report excerpts are provided in the following pages.



In addition to providing the visitors with more ways to encounter and connect with animals—in zoos, aquariums, or in the wild—projects achieved a variety of empathy-based outcomes with public audiences. Outcomes reflect cognitive and affective empathy, compassion, and empathic action.

14 projects resulted in visitor experiences within the zoo/aquarium that were more inclusive, accessible, and enjoyable. This category largely includes grantee work that offered ways for the public to engage with, and connect to, animals (e.g., new exhibits, programs, or outreach activities) that resulted in visitors expressing greater satisfaction and engagement.

Equally common was 14 projects where the public gained awareness or knowledge, typically about animals and their habitats, how they are cared for, and how their wild counterparts live. Projects also reported that these visitors were more observant of animals and animal behavior. People expressed (greater) empathy and compassion for animals in 13 projects. These projects reported stories and comments from guests that reflect perspective-taking as well as an array of emotions, concern, and kindness towards animals. 11 projects indicated visitors reported knowing more about ways to act and seemed more interested in taking some type of conservation action.

Less common outcomes were from four projects reporting that visitors demonstrated empathetic appreciation or consideration for the natural world by expressing awe, curiosity, and admiration for nature. And two teacher-centered projects resulted in changes in participants' practices—how they engage, teach, model, and promote empathy in their classroom.

Ways the Public Benefits from Funded Projects

Report excerpts offer examples of the ways grantees expressed public impacts achieved through their projects.

Themes and descriptions expand on the categories presented on p. 15 and include examples from grantee reports (n=21). Webinar transcripts were lightly edited for readability.



Greater Satisfaction & Engagement (14 reports):

Public audiences feel greater satisfaction and higher levels of engagement as they discover more ways to encounter and connect with animals. Experiences are more inclusive, accessible, enjoyable.

“Our behind-the-scenes program was expanded and has allowed for unmatched defining moments with our animals, staff, and guests... This expansion has allowed for more dynamic connections with our guests as most of the cards that we added this year are tied directly into programs we had built through both grants.”

“Guest involvement with the animals at the zoo increased because of this project. There was a great amount of guest involvement in the surveys, and responses also indicated that guests were reading signs and medical notices around the habitats.”

“And we also measured our summer campers and 85% of the students expressed an empathetic behavior towards wildlife, which is a 17% increase from the beginning of camp, when at the beginning of camp, only 68% expressed an empathetic behavior.”



Gained Awareness & Knowledge (14 reports):

People become (more) aware of or gain a better understanding of animals, how they're cared for, and how their wild counterparts live. They become more observant of animals and animal behavior.

“Many survey takers (87%) were able to answer the question, ‘What is one thing you learned from the [program]?’ Additionally, high numbers of survey takers agreed that the [program] improved their knowledge of [animals] and interest in [animals] (100% and 90%, respectively).”

“So the kids got to see the world through the animal's perspective. They were learning about their likes and dislikes. They were learning about their needs and their health concerns and things like that... And they learned about how science can help educate the public about the specific needs of that animal.”



Increased Expressions of Empathy (13 reports):

People express (greater) empathy and compassion for animals and nature. Expressions may include perspective-taking and sharing of feelings.

“What we found was guests were already responding with empathetic markers, commenting on how an animal may feel and comparing the animal to themselves. We believe these signs increased the capacity to foster empathy for animals in our guests by having them step into the behavioral husbandry role, where they had to identify individuals and comment on their behaviors.”

Ways the Public Benefits from Funded Projects

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More Interest in Conservation Action (11 reports):

People indicate a greater interest or intention to take conservation action. They may also report knowing more about wildlife conservation efforts and activities.

"It doesn't always have to be by the numbers. One of the biggest ways that we know that we're moving empathy is the way that the kids talk about going out to the park, how they talk about the ownership of their park... You know, these kids are really taking what we're teaching them to heart and really wanting to act on it. And that's one of the things I think is really influential in this program, is that we're seeing kids who typically just walk through the park to go to school, and they're actually stopping, taking a moment, looking at the things and actually helping the environment by picking up trash, pulling ivy, those kinds of things."

"Almost 34% of zoo guests had taken conservation action to help animals and their habitats. Several guests shared what actions they have taken to help animals and their habitats such as:

- "Planted flowers around our home for bees."
- "I donated to conservation while at our local aquarium."
- "I go out and pick up trash in the forest."
- "Educate myself on sustainable seafood."



Greater Appreciation & Awe (4 reports):

People show empathetic appreciation or consideration for the natural world, expressing awe, curiosity, and admiration for animals and nature.

"Wildlife and other more-than-human beings are given the space they need and are respected. Children and teachers make space for all the voices and beings of the forest."

"I think it's cool that they're so world-renowned and they're in our backyard... Maybe you can see them every now and then and you can just enjoy their beauty."

Comment from student program participant



Changes in Practice (2 reports):

Teachers learn new ways to engage, teach, promote empathy in classrooms or programs. They are more mindful of empathy as a principle of their practice.

"Regarding the impact of CoP participation on teachers' capacity, our results suggest that CoP participation influenced teachers' dispositions, knowledge; skills; and importantly, their teaching practices (or phrased from an Indigenous framework, participation influenced teachers' ways of being, knowing, and doing)."

Evaluation Findings:

- [Animals] are more special to me after attending this [program] – 77% (agree or strongly agree)."
- Amazement and appreciation – 17 remarks or verbal expressions of amazement – "Ohhhh, they're beautiful, oh wow."

Organizational Impact of Grant-Funded Efforts

Over half of grantee projects improved their organization’s ability to understand and adopt empathy-based principles. Moreover, grantees reported positive changes in organizational attitudes towards empathy, a willingness by more staff to embrace empathy-based practices, and a deeper appreciation for their community, partners, and audiences.

12 projects resulted in **staff feeling more knowledgeable, prepared, and confident in using empathy-based practices**. Through professional development, trainings, and onboarding protocols, staff were instilled with not just a better understanding of empathy-based principles but were more confident in their ability to apply it to their work.

Beyond skills, 10 projects reported **changes in organizational attitudes and practices**. These impacts reflected a shift towards an empathy-based mindset and systemic changes in how the organization prioritizes empathy and sets expectations. 10 projects reported an **increase in participation in empathy-related efforts**—departments not typically involved in empathy-based efforts becoming involved. For example, a project described keeper staff interested in learning about empathy-based program assessments. From seven projects, teams **gained a deeper understanding and empathy for their community, partners, and audiences**. And four projects resulted in greater **awareness, understanding and use of empathy-based practices in animal care**, resulting in improved quality of life for animals.

Ten project reports noted increases in staff knowledge, confidence, and ability to plan and conduct evaluation, as well as organizational willingness to adopt an evaluative thinking mindset into their practices and processes.

Distribution of how frequently each internal audience outcome was described within the 21 grant reports

Grant reports were analyzed for emergent themes (n=21). Report segments could be coded into more than one category. Descriptions of each category and accompanying report excerpts are provided in the following pages.



Organizational Shifts Resulting from Projects

Report excerpts provide insights on how organizations described internal changes as a result of their project initiatives.

Themes and descriptions expand on the categories presented on p. 18 and include examples from grantee reports (n=21). Webinar transcripts were lightly edited for readability.



Grew Empathy-based Capacity (12 reports):

Staff feel more knowledgeable, prepared, and confident in empathy-based mindset / practices. Growth in awareness and understanding of empathy-based practices. Increased confidence in their ability to adopt and integrate empathy-based practices into their work. Development of an empathy-forward mindset.

“When asked if the [program] training provided them with the skills needed to incorporate empathy in conversations with visitors, 92% of the 161 volunteer respondents said yes (66% strongly agreed and 26% agreed).”

“I feel confident I can help connect people with our [local] environment.”
– Comment from training program participant

“...We were able to highlight empathy best practices for both Zoo staff and our volunteers when engaging with the community and program participants. Infusing empathy during biofact interpretation encourages Zoo guests and program participants to make emotional connections with the animals (such as expressing concern)...”

“Initially, we envisioned meeting with other department stakeholders only to gather goals and initial ideas. We quickly learned how beneficial those voices were to the whole project. We were able to adapt to including those stakeholders in multiple aspects of the process, which enhanced the final product.”



Strengthened Organizational Values (10 reports):

Change in organizational attitudes and practices towards greater empathy-based thinking and effort. This may include setting empathy-centered expectations within the organization and/or a require an empathy-forward standard of practice.

“This grant expanded the focus on ‘defining moments’ and empathy for our guests in general, giving more opportunities for connection. Staff continue to develop their storytelling skills and improve upon the structure of their programs.”

“Recognizing that our work thus far had been grounded in Western perspectives, we shifted the focus of our work to deepen our understanding of empathy and practices for fostering empathy through respectful engagement with Indigenous peoples and perspectives.”



Greater Organizational Engagement (10 reports):

Greater organizational participation and involvement in the project and processes related to the empathy-based work. May also include greater collaboration with internal and external groups in empathy-based work.

“...even having all of our keepers and gardeners and maintenance staff and visitor services staff and admin staff come to the exhibit design showcase, they got to see first-hand how the interaction they had three days ago, behind the scenes, or the enrichment that they helped us scheduled with the animals impacted those kids in such a strong way. They saw the benefit of this work.”

Organizational Shifts Resulting from Projects

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Deeper Understanding of Community (7 reports):

Increase in empathy for others. Organizations gained a better understanding of their community, audiences, and project partners and their values, beliefs, practices, and perspectives.

“At the core we have changed the staff’s perspective of guests. Attitudes continue to increase in public receptivity as staff understand the crucial role guests play in the success of the zoo and conservation initiatives. In general, among animal care staff there is a desire to be solely animal facing, focusing only on animal care and being indifferent or apathetic to the public. As we continue to build on Empathy for Animals it has become apparent to them that it includes empathy for people.”

“...it also helped us understand how our guests like to learn and how they like to interact with things at the zoo. And we also were able to have deeper discussions about their desire to actually take action.”

“We were able to conduct the first-ever survey on our popular [children’s] program. We have always known this program to be well-received and popular – due to it always filling up twice a day in the summer and based on conversations with guests, however, this grant afforded us the time and money to follow the steps and methodology of a proper research project.”



Building Evaluation Capacity (10 reports):

Increase in staff knowledge, confidence, and ability to plan and conduct evaluation. May include growth in evaluative thinking mindset within the organization and an interest in continuing evaluation work.

“We plan on using this as a tool for ongoing development. I think as people start out and as they learn this process, it’ll be a great opportunity to see growth and to hopefully see them implementing more and more of these best practices and feeling more and more confident with them.”



Improved Animal Care & Wellbeing (4 reports):

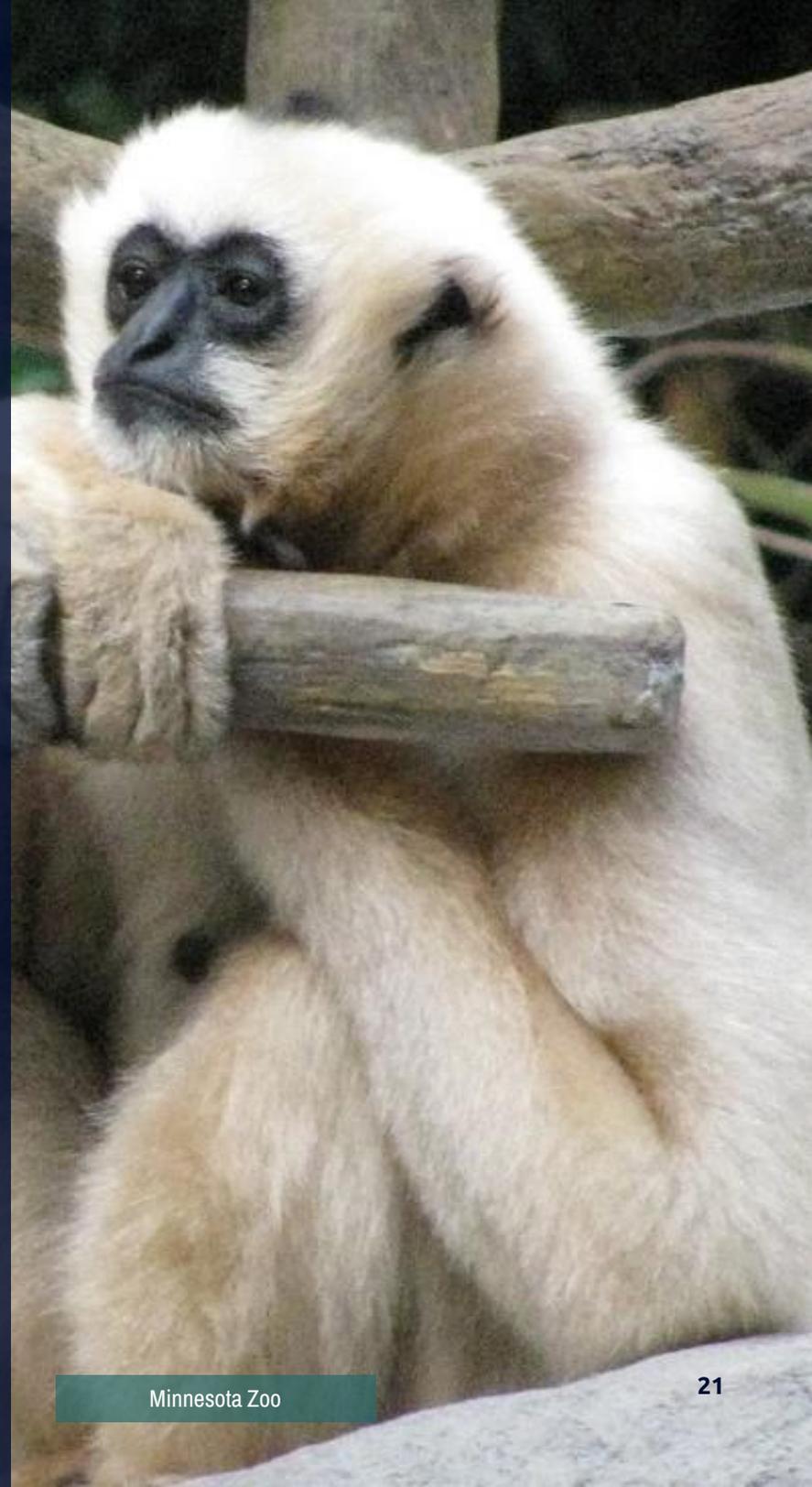
Growth in awareness, understanding, and use of empathy-based best practices in animal care. Zoo animals experience an improved quality-of-life, express positive naturalistic behaviors and generally benefit from empathy-based practices.

“The best output for our project was that animal care staff gets real-time data that could help them make informed decisions about the animals’ care and welfare.”

“Animal wellbeing and resiliency has increased across the board. When we evaluate our [programs], we see engaged and resilient animals. We cannot over-emphasize how we have observed our animals change for the better through the training process. The animals are just as eager to be involved as we are to involve them.”

RESULTS

REFLECT: Growth & Persistence



Project Challenges: Insights about Obstacles

In describing project journeys, 75% of projects reported some challenges experienced, but these largely did not impact project completion or general success. On average, projects that reported challenges named two coded issues, which ranged from common internal issues (e.g., staffing) to larger barriers that impacted timeline.

10 projects reported navigating some type of **internal challenge** (yellow highlighted rows, right). These included staffing capacity challenges, due to hiring/retention, availability, or turnover (n=8) – all common issues for zoos and aquariums. A few projects (n=3) described shifts in organizational processes and/or priorities that affected, but did not stop the project work.

Externally-based challenges occurred for six projects that dealt with **larger-scale disruptions**, with things like construction or physical assets, such as signage, displays, or other materials. Additionally, six projects noted limits to their ability to **reach the public**, including low awareness, participation, opportunities, or limits to the program design. One project cited broader **external factors** that impeded their project implementation.

It is important to note that the majority of projects that described challenges, **in only seven instances were the issues significant enough to delay their ability to achieve all goals within the timeline.** The majority of grantees were able to adapt and respond to challenges successfully. A related effect that emerged for just five projects was that they experienced difficulty with conducting or completing evaluation. More details of project challenges will be shared in delayed grantees' supplemental reports, which will be submitted to WPZ at the final completion of the projects.

Frequency counts of how often each type of challenge was mentioned within 16 grant reports that mentioned obstacles

Themes expressed by grantees when describing the challenges their projects encountered. Report segments could be coded into more than one category. (n=16 projects as reported by 13 organizations)

(n=16)	Code Categories & Descriptions
8	Staff / Human Resources Issues with staff capacity. Includes challenges with staff availability, hiring/retention, salaries/payroll, scheduling, turnover, and other limitations.
3	Organizational Priorities & Process Shifts in organizational priority arising from existing commitments and/or other empathy investments; or challenges with internal processes.
6	Infrastructure & Assets Impacts on building construction or other (physical) asset acquisition or development. Includes technology investments and cost increases.
6	Public Awareness & Engagement Public audiences are not engaging with the project due to lack of awareness or program limitations (i.e., inability to connect directly with animals). May also include challenges with external partners and community.
1	External Factors Environmental, economic, or social issues outside the control the organization (e.g., weather events, labor disruptions, COVID-19, etc.).
5	Evaluation Inability to conduct or complete evaluation of the initiative due to project delays, staff capacity, etc.
7	Project Timeline Challenges unanticipated delays or disruptions to work required to fulfill grant requirements.

In Their Words: Managing Project Challenges

The following are excerpts from final reports that describe various challenges grantees experienced during their projects.

Excerpts from webinar transcripts were lightly edited for readability (n=16).

“We had to adjust our original project plan due to construction delays. Construction was delayed because we had to complete additional infrastructure work (new water line, new power line) before the construction of the exhibit.”

“Just a key challenge that we found just through this project was mainly our timeline and when schools are in season.”

“The most significant challenge we faced throughout the course of this project was the loss of the lead of the project... Though efforts were made to try to fill [staff member]’s place, we struggled to find someone to adequately fill his shoes for the remainder of the project.”

“The biggest challenge at this point was both animal and staff retention. Of the above-mentioned staff members, we now only have one remaining of the original team. This set training back; not to mention the relationships with animals had to be rebuilt. As for the above-mentioned animals, we unexpectedly had to say goodbye to [staff member] during the project period, and [ambassador animal] moved on to a different home. While these circumstances are always a possibility when working in the field, it was an unexpected challenge to work with.”

“...the hiring process took longer than we thought. And so instead of having months and months and months and months and months of program development before summer camps started, we ended up developing camps while camps were running, which was insane.”

“One clear unexpected challenge for us was the advertising of programs... We recognize it takes time for word to spread, and we continue to advocate for this program on the news, in social media, and in person with guests. We are looking to create a brochure this year to distribute other zoo materials around the community.”

“One challenge of this cross-departmental collaboration—particularly with a focus on early-career employees—was the limited time available for training and practice.”

“The challenges we faced in this area were in working within the busy schedules of [department] apprentices who have daily demands in caring for the cranes. This made finding more time for training and imparting knowledge on common visitor questions difficult at times”

“The [organization] recently rebranded. Extra coordination with our marketing team was required to ensure the empathy signage incorporated updated colors, fonts and visual themes while maintaining the durability and high visibility needs of these outdoor signs.”

“With delays on the new education building, we will not be able to evaluate program participants until fall 2026.”

Project Insights: Lessons Learned from Experiences

Frequency counts of how often each type of lesson learned was mentioned within 17 grant reports that named insights.

Themes described by organizations as lessons learned during the grant process. Report segments could be coded into more than one category. (n=17 projects as reported by 13 organizations)

(n=17)	Code Categories & Descriptions
6	Staff Engagement & Development Grantees learned strategies to engage more people in their organization in empathy-based efforts.
5	Program Tactics Grantees learned strategies to develop and implement more effective empathy-based programs.
5	Approach to Empathy Grantees reflected on how empathy can be best used at their organization, and that there is no prescriptive approach.
5	Project Flexibility Grantees recognized the complexity of projects and the need to be flexible and adapt to change and challenges.
4	Community / Partner Engagement Grantees gained new understanding for how to successfully work with, engage, and support project stakeholders.
3	Internal Frameworks & Processes Grantees gained insight into the plans and processes they developed or used as part of their project.
3	Evaluation Mindset Grantees expressed a better understanding and appreciation for evaluation and how this practice contributes to their work.

Grantees described ways they and their organization grew in thought and practice, beyond the specific outcomes noted earlier. Some remarked on how their organizations learned to more actively engage in empathy-based work, while others recalled lessons of how they could work more effectively internally and externally. Grantees also acknowledged how this process has helped them see the impact of evaluation on their practice, an added benefit of the process.

As a result of their grant project, eight organizations (from nine projects) gained **new insight on how empathy can be a more integrated organizational principle** (light yellow rows, left). These organizations described learning strategies to engage more of their staff in empathy-based activities (n=6) and to apply more empathy-based practices into their programming and processes (n=5). They also came to recognize that empathy work isn't prescriptive or one-size-fits-all, and that organizations need to find approaches that work best for them (n=5).

Other lessons learned were very practical and process-related. This included learning the importance of being flexible and adapting to the complexities of a project (n=5), gaining a better understanding of how to successfully work with project stakeholders (n=4), and refining their project plans and processes for greater efficiency and use (n=3).

Of note, three grantees expressed **an appreciation for evaluation** and how this process has contributed to improving their project and organizational initiatives more broadly.

In Their Words: Lessons, Advice, & Aha Moments

Grantees shared words of advice and lessons they learned through the grant project experience.

Excerpts from webinar transcripts were lightly edited for readability (n=17).

“...we would recommend that organizations build empathy best practices and approaches into their existing program development processes and tools, instead of having them exist outside the normal system. This strategy could help further institutionalize empathy as a tool to advance conservation for wildlife.”

“...emphasize empathy and collaboration while considering the scalability of the program. Begin with empathy by inquiring about the school's needs and assessing whether there is a shared goal or value with your partner. Each partner, including different schools, is unique; therefore, it is important to invest time in understanding them before implementing a program.”

“I think one of the mistakes that we made early on was sort of selling empathy as a silver bullet – that it was the best practice for every type of engagement and that it was going to solve all the world's problems as far as conservation. And that's not the case. So, I think one of the things we did, especially with our non-education staff, was be really clear that this is a tool in your tool belt and that there's ways, there's best practices for engaging with audiences and for educating different types of audiences... once we said it's just one strategy and if it seems like the best fit, let's go for it. But it might not be. I think people kind of relaxed a little bit and then got excited when it made sense...”

“Working closely with educators was key to the success of this project. Our flexibility to adapt to the front-end evaluation has resulted in materials more suited to address what educators are looking for. Adjusting to create more support for teachers while visiting a local beach has the potential to build empathy for wildlife well beyond the [organization]'s walls.”

“Based on observation and survey results, further progress could be gained by establishing more introductory information and context for the audience, providing concrete examples and fun stories... These results and realizations were made known to our apprentices during our monthly check-ins and helped improve each person's program.”

“We lack the staffing capacity to be able to always do observations, but embedded assessments can be more flexible in terms of when the person does the work.”

“It can be hard to keep empathy at the forefront when focused on the daily construction tasks. But if you can ensure empathy is infused throughout the design phase, it should naturally follow into the construction elements.”

“...we are mindful that while the CoP approach can be deeply impactful, it is a professional learning approach that takes time—time for the group to become a community and time for that trust and deep engagement to unfold.”

“Key lessons for a construction project include maintaining open and frequent communication with your contractor and their team, being present on-site to ensure the work aligns with your vision, and staying flexible—because unexpected challenges, including budget constraints, are almost inevitable. Anticipate running out of money at some point, but be ready to adapt, problem solve and find creative solutions to keep the project moving forward.”

Intentions for Project Durability

All grantees indicated that Round 4 projects would continue in some form, beyond the grant period. Some described sustained efforts, including changes in organizational mindset and empathy-based practice and programming, broader dissemination of their learning and experiences, and continued work in evaluation and fund-raising.

Although not all final reports included specific references to project sustainability, all 15 grantee organizations* indicated that they would continue the work they began with their projects (described in 17 individual grant reports).

Other signals of lasting impact included grantees who reported the project created lasting shift in the way their organization thinks about empathy work (n=9), and/or that they are committed to providing staff and volunteers with more empathy-based professional development and support (n=8). Other efforts included opportunities to innovate and expand public program offerings for more empathy-based experiences (n=8). Looking to the field, grantees are eager to further share the work they've developed and learning that they've gained through their project (n=8), and at the time of reporting, 550 registrations and 194 individuals attended seven webinar events.

Eight reports said their organization plans to continue conducting evaluation (on their project and on other programs), refining their evaluation tools, and incorporating more data-driven practices into their organizational culture. Finally, four reports indicated an intention to seek additional funding streams to continue the work they began with this grant.

* This number accounts for grantee organizations hosting two projects.

Frequency counts of how often each theme was mentioned within all 21 grant reports that mentioned durability

Themes described by organizations on how they plan to sustain project momentum beyond the grant period. Report segments could be coded into more than one category. (n=21 projects as reported by 15 organizations)

(n=21)	Code Categories & Descriptions
17	Continue and/or Enhance the Funded Project Support the current project as-is, modify elements of the project (including adding more empathy-based practices), or expand the reach of the existing project.
9	Shift in Organizational Mindset towards Empathy Change in organizational approach to empathy and empathy-based practices.
8	Ongoing Organizational Development Provide staff and volunteers with empathy-based professional development and opportunities.
8	More Empathy-based Engagement Programs Develop additional opportunities for visitors to encounter and engage in empathy-based experiences – efforts that are different from current project.
8	Dissemination & Knowledge Sharing Interest and commitment to sharing lessons and practices with the field; advocating for their work and empathy-based practices
8	Ongoing Evaluation Interest and/or intention to conduct future evaluations on the funded project and with other organization initiatives and programs.
4	Seeking Future Funding Explore additional funding streams to continue work started with this grant.

In their Words: Sustaining Project Momentum

The following are excerpts from final reports that reflect ways grantees plan to continue their grant funded work.

Excerpts from webinar transcripts were lightly edited for readability (n=21).

“As we continue to build on Empathy for Animals it has become apparent to them [staff] that it includes empathy for people. We all want to see positive change for conservation but no one person can do it alone. Through both of our grants, our work has built on awareness of impact. Seeing how many people keeper staff encounter and interact with through our attendance records shows the number of people they could be impacting for positive conservation change. Every interaction is an opportunity and seeing the numbers and the positive stories and quotes shows the big picture of the real change we are making in the community.”

“This project has helped to create substantial buy-in across the organization, not only for use of biofacts but also for the empathy for wildlife approach. We will continue to leverage these in our work.”

“The most significant accomplishment is the shift in animal transport and training in our ambassador section. All new and incoming staff members are now trained in hands-off presentation and crating methods for applicable ambassadors. This has begun an entire culture shift in this department that we see carried on.”

“The opportunities to further use these materials will continue to emerge as we deepen community engagement with [program] partners and on the city’s waterfront.”

“...we want this to be something that’s hopefully really replicable for other institutions. We are creating it, but it wasn’t something that was just for us... really thinking about how can this be useful for other organizations because we are not the only ones trying to figure out conservation action messaging. That is a widespread need for every zoo and aquarium.”

“At this time, we do not have a physical formal training, but it is something that has been identified as both a need and a want from staff and volunteers. This will continue to be expanded on and created in the future.”

“...we’ll also encourage keeper staff to incorporate a larger variety of learning practices such as the use of props and demonstrations audience focused questions and potentially even small games that would allow visitors to practice that empathy.”

“We saw a high value in evaluation of the program this year, and we plan on continuing this evaluation with our full-time staff. This evaluation will help us continue to improve current programs and the skills of the presenters, as well as ensure that our organization has the knowledge to guide program decisions and work towards new goals.”

“In this next year, we plan to do evaluation related to our empathy display and make the case for expanding these types of displays throughout the zoo.”

“...our preschool has access to grants that can fund future material replacements and activity enhancements. Additionally, revenue from preschool enrollment will be allocated for ongoing repairs and maintenance, ensuring the playscape remains a vibrant and engaging space for years to come.”

CONCLUSIONS

Implications of Results





Zoological Society of Milwaukee

Conclusions

>> Impact of Round 4 Grantees

Taken together, the evidence available in Advancing Empathy Round 4 grantees' final report materials indicates that all projects achieved impacts with intended audiences. While some projects encountered difficulties in completing their work within the timeframe (and were consequently limited in ability to document achievements), most were able to report who they served and what resulted. The patterns of outcomes that occurred across projects emphasize the critical importance of both internal impacts and external outcomes, and highlight a tight relationship between the two audiences. And while each project was very distinct, the types of outcomes achieved show that this group of grantees is covering a broad spectrum of building empathy with the greater public.



1

Internal Impacts Drive Public Impacts

In general, projects reported achieving impacts with *both* staff/volunteers and public audiences – regardless of the type of project that was funded. There is an implicit theory of change in the Advancing Empathy initiative, illustrated in grantee outcomes, that increasing institutional capacity for empathy work is inextricably linked with successfully impacting empathy in public audiences.

2

Public Outcomes Span Empathy Types

18 of the 21 grantee projects described some types of public audience(s) and outcomes achieved. Across the portfolio, the projects achieved public cognitive, affective, and motivational empathy as well as evidence of inclination toward empathy action. Evidence of impact was conveyed through participant feedback, staff observations, and evaluation reports.

3

Organizational Outcomes that Last

For the 17 grantee projects that identified internal outcomes achieved, those results indicated substantial depth of impact. The work was reported to tangibly build skills, values, and broader staff engagement in empathy initiatives. Combining the reports of project-level outcomes with reflections about project durability – how work would be sustained beyond the funding period – there is an indication that this funding initiative is catalyzing lasting shifts within organizations.

Future Considerations for WPZ Evaluation System

In reviewing this analysis, the WPZ team raised questions and decision-points that should be weighed as potential factors to include in WPZ’s ongoing evaluation systems.

- **Classification by Size:** The results comparing project types by organizational size raised a question about classifying size based on staffing in addition to annual budget. If desired, systematic reporting and verification of FTE will need to be incorporated into processes.
- **Coding for Evidence Source:** This analysis was based on what was reported by grantees as evidence for analysis of achievements. Some discussion centered on further coding for the type, quality, and/or presence of evidence used by grantees to support each assertion. If implemented, this would require an additional layer of coding be applied to reports. That would benefit from clear coding parameters and articulating what types of findings this effort aims to achieve.
- **Longitudinal Analysis:** Anecdotally, grant staff can see threads of how results from any given round were the result of cumulative investment at a given institution—with one project building on the foundation laid by the last. It would be possible to engage in an analysis that is longitudinal or cumulative in nature, given the troves of reports on hand. However, as it is a substantial undertaking, clear questions for inquiry and strategies would need to be developed.
- **Grant Staff Involvement in Coding:** As grant staff have deeper contextual knowledge of grantee organizations and projects, it may be useful to have them be trained to participate in the coding process to bolster connections to the results of analysis.
- **Data for Evaluation versus Support:** Discussion highlighted that some reported data may not be relevant to an analysis of grant-making impact. For example, grantees sometimes described challenges as part of their journey, even if they overcame them. While this information is useful to inform grant staff about future areas for support and troubleshooting, it may not be as useful in evaluative analysis. This is especially true if it is viewed as a critique of the projects, rather than a source of information for coaching.
- **Evaluation Timelines for Data Exploration:** Many rich questions were raised within the data interpretation process that raised ideas for new analyses, comparisons, or explorations of underlying relationships. To fully accommodate this process, the timeline between data submission by grantees and final evaluation report creation would need to be expanded. The process would need to allow space for preliminary analysis and data exploration to be conducted (prior to any report drafting). This, in turn, would ensure the final analysis and reports address priority questions identified by the team.
- **Case Study vs. Aggregate Tension:** There is commonly a tension in analysis of data like these between presenting a picture of the aggregate – what the collective body of project achieved as a whole – and the individual, highly unique stories of each grantee. This can be especially difficult when submitted reports only provide a slice of information, driving those who have greater project context to account for individual variations that lead to the aggregate data patterns. The Round 4 analysis can be the foundation for future decisions about the grain-size to use for future impact analysis and storytelling to find the right point on that continuum before analysis begins.



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