

The 2016 Innovation in Governance Awards Program

Contact Information:	Stacy Kaplan	
Municipality:	Borough of Highland Park	
Population:	14,381	County: Middlesex
Address:	221 South Fifth Ave	
City:	Highland Park	Zip: 08904
Contact Name:	Stacy Kaplan	
Title:	Communications Coordinator	
Telephone:	732-819-3781	Fax:
Email:	SKaplan@hpboro.com	

Project Information

Initiative Title:	"HP Gives a Hoot"
Description:	Community-wide fund to support our children

The judges will be looking for successful innovative efforts by a municipality or a partnership among several municipalities or a municipal/county joint effort. Innovations must have been implemented during the time period June 1, 2015 - September 30, 2016

Project Specific Details: (Please explain your innovation. Include up to 3 supplemental attachments if needed.)

- How has this initiative successfully met the local needs of your municipality?
- How have the stakeholders benefited & responded to this initiative?
- Are there any measured savings or program improvements?
- Please include whether the innovation is temporary or permanent.
- How can this innovation be replicated in other communities across the state?

Please Attach a Supplemental Sheet(s) Noting the Details of Your Initiative.
(Supplemental Attachments NOT to exceed 3 pages)

Application Deadline: Applications must be received no later than Monday, October 3, 2016. Mail applications to NJLM Innovation in Government 222 West State St., Trenton, NJ 08608 or send by email to CBradley@njslom.org

If you have any questions, please contact Ciara Bradley at the League of Municipalities
609-695-3481 ext 128 or CBradley@njslom.org

Innovation in Governance

“HP Gives a Hoot”

In the summer of 2015, the mayor and Borough employees noticed a group of young children wandering outside the municipal building, looking bored. At lunchtime each day, they would enter the building and ask employees for snacks. Of course, we all obliged.

It didn't take long to realize that these children, whose parents were working during the day, did not have access to healthy lunches when school was not in session. Instead, they would often either skip lunch or have fast-food or snacks during the day. With more than 36% of our students on free or reduced lunch at school, the severity of this issue became quite apparent.

Highland Park is not only an ethnically diverse community, but it is also economically diverse. Our sense of responsibility to our neighbors in need is evident in our large Community Food Pantry, which provides food and supplies to more than 300 families each year. Programs such as clothing drives, food drives, and volunteer-driven efforts help support families throughout the year. However, the presence of these young children at Borough Hall led the mayor to realize the necessity to focus on our children.

Childhood hunger is not just a Highland Park issue; it is a nationwide problem that is in desperate need of a solution. According to a 2014 survey from the National Center for Children in Poverty, 31% of children in New Jersey live in low income homes. Talkpoverty.org reported in 2015 that 15.7% of children in New Jersey lived in families who had incomes below the poverty line. Additionally, a 2015 NJ School Breakfast Report found that 237,000 students are enrolled in free or reduced-price meal programs, up from 136,000 children in 2010. This problem is real, and relevant to many communities throughout New Jersey and the nation.

Highland Park's commitment to all of our children led to Mayor Gayle Brill Mittler's idea to create a town-wide fund called “HP Gives a Hoot” (representing our school's mascot of an owl). This fund, a nonprofit run by a committee comprised of Borough employees and volunteers, was created to provide lunches for children when school was not in session. It has grown rapidly, raising enough money to also help source funds for our Highland Park Recreation Summer Camp as well as scholarships for four high school students to attend a YouthROOTS mentorship camp this past summer.

“HP Gives a Hoot” began with a written appeal from the mayor to a select group of Highland Park residents and businesses, asking for support to start this fund. After this successful appeal, a special event was held for the public at a local restaurant. Residents were invited to an evening of musical performances by some of our high school musical groups, along with refreshments provided at a discounted rate by the restaurant. In July, the Borough rolled out a large-scale campaign, collecting donations at our Independence Day Fireworks celebration, and subsequently at our Police Department's National Night Out event in August. More than \$2,000 was raised, mostly through contributions of \$1 or so, through these efforts and events, and “HP Gives a Hoot” continues to receive donations throughout the year. The goal is to encourage our residents to help one another – to enable them to feel like they are part of a greater, common good. This provides an opportunity for any resident to donate

whatever they can, from \$1.00 to \$1,000, to be a part of this grassroots, but municipally-encouraged, program of neighbors helping neighbors.

During the 2015-2016 school year, "HP Gives a Hoot" worked with Elijah's Promise Soup Kitchen in New Brunswick to provide bagged lunches for the children on days when school was not in session. Elijah's Promise generously donated the lunches, which were available at our Senior/Youth Center. Children were also treated to a movie or games to entertain them for a few hours, and volunteers from our high school supervised the children, alongside volunteers from our senior population. On an average day, approximately 20 students attended this program and received a bagged lunch. This program was only publicized through word-of-mouth in the beginning to gauge the numbers of children who would be participating, and throughout the year, the number of children participating grew.

Due to the abundance of children who required healthy lunches, the Borough recognized the need to establish a long-term lunch program. Through a partnership with our school district, we were able to identify children who would benefit from the program. This cooperation also helped maintain the confidentiality of the children and families that participate in the program. During the summer of 2016, the Borough partnered with the Global Grace Café, a cafeteria-type dining establishment operated out of a local church in Highland Park. The Borough was given discounted vouchers, paid for by the "HP Gives a Hoot" fund, which children could bring to the café for a free lunch. In exchange, our Community Food Pantry helped make this partnership possible by donating ingredients and supplies to the Global Grace Café, thereby lowering their product costs and enabling them to offer discounted lunches. Because of the contributions from these two organizations, we were able to provide more than 150 lunches to children during the summer. The program was not only beneficial to the children, but helped increase traffic and revenue to the café, and it will continue through the school year when school is not in session.

This partnership epitomizes Highland Park's commitment to sustainability. Employees at the Global Grace Café are recent refugees who are housed by a local church. By working as chefs and staff at the café, they earn an income to support themselves and their families. Therefore, not only does the program provide healthy food to our children, but it helps support the assimilation of refugees into our society, as well.

While the initial focus of the fund was to provide a lunch program, as "HP Gives a Hoot" funds grew, so did our commitment to supporting the wellbeing and success of our students. To this end, the fund has been able to provide opportunities that would otherwise not be available to some of our most vulnerable students. This past summer the fund helped to send ten students to our recreational summer camp at no cost to their families. Families whose children participate in the free or reduced lunch program could apply for the scholarships, which were granted based on lottery. Recipients could attend four weeks of camp for free, with lunch included. This opportunity enabled these ten children to be occupied throughout the day and receive a healthy lunch while their parents were working.

In addition to the summer camp, "HP Gives a Hoot" was able to send four high school students to the YouthROOTS mentorship camp and grounds this summer. This motivational camp encourages students to combat bias and intolerance in their communities. Participants learn self-esteem and self-awareness, and are challenged with creating programs to promote tolerance upon their return to school. The student participants from Highland Park were teens

who would otherwise not have the ability to attend a camp or any summer program, let alone a sleepaway experience. "HP Gives a Hoot" gave them the opportunity to gain leadership skills, which they are utilizing in school by planning programs for their fellow students.

Feedback from this fund has not only been positive from residents and the growing number of resident donors and volunteers, but its success is evident in the affect it has had on our children. Numerous children who would not normally have access to a healthy lunch meal have been provided one through donations to the fund. Children who do not have opportunities to attend camp have been given the chance to do that, not only keeping them occupied during the summer, but giving them a meaningful social experience.

The success of the program is also a lesson in cooperation between government and citizens. "HP Gives a Hoot" is the quintessential example of a successful government/citizen/philanthropic/business cooperative effort. It utilizes the organization of municipal support and is run by both municipal employee volunteers and a committee of volunteer residents. This committee makes decisions regarding fund distribution and coordination, food venues and daily execution of the program. The committee of volunteers includes clergy, food pantry workers, and our Human Relations Commission members, among others (including senior citizens), as well as a member of our communications staff at the Borough. This committee meets on a monthly basis to discuss issues and opportunities to help the children. Aside from the committee, residents and local businesses have contributed generously through donations or volunteer efforts. Our high school students and senior citizens volunteer to entertain and supervise the children on days when lunch is provided, while several restaurants, our municipal Food Pantry, and our local Stop & Shop supermarket have contributed food or supplies. Organizations in both Highland Park and New Brunswick have helped in our efforts to support our children. This is truly an inspirational community-wide effort.

"HP Gives a Hoot" is a nonprofit fund that depends on the generous contributions of our residents and local businesses and organizations. This ongoing program can be replicated in communities throughout New Jersey, as the childhood poverty numbers increase and the welfare of our children is becoming more critical. With the help of volunteers, and the coordination with local soup kitchens or food pantry organizations, towns throughout New Jersey can help feed their children healthy meals when schools are closed and these meals are not available to them. Municipalities can set up a trust fund, made up of donations, which was done through the Borough's finance department.

Our committee, spearheaded by a Borough employee, is well-organized and committed to their mission. Our mayor plays an active role in this program and keeps the Borough Councilmembers advised of the fund's programs. Our partnerships with Elijah's Promise Soup Kitchen and the Global Grace Café were cultivated by our committee, and support from our Community Food Pantry is also an important factor in the success of this program. The program is a perfect example of how municipal leadership can encourage resident volunteer efforts. This community cooperation has already benefitted numerous children throughout the Borough, and is an important step in our ongoing efforts to combat childhood hunger.