

The Improve Group
Public Benefit Corporation
2020 Annual Report

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The **Improve** Group

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- About The Improve Group..... 1
 - What is our public benefit?..... 1
 - What did 2020 mean for us?..... 1
- How did we pursue our public benefit in 2020? 1
 - Consulting practice 1
 - Community and partnership..... 2
 - Internal equity and inclusion work..... 3
- What public benefits did we see?..... 3
- What helped us or got in our way?..... 4
- What’s on the horizon? 4

ABOUT THE IMPROVE GROUP

[The Improve Group](#) (IG) is a woman-owned, full-service evaluation, research, and strategic planning consulting firm based in St. Paul, Minnesota. Leah Goldstein Moses founded IG in 2000 with a vision to improve programs and organizations that impact the world. Over the past two decades, our powerhouse staff has grown to more than 20 people committed to creating a more inclusive, supportive environment in which all people—but particularly those from vulnerable or underserved communities—can flourish.

In 2016, IG became a Public Benefit Corporation to better reflect our organizational commitment to supporting partners in creating and sustaining meaningful change. This report describes how we pursued our public benefit mission in 2020, the public benefit we saw from our clients during the year, the factors that helped our work or got in our way, and our plans for the future.

What is our public benefit?

IG helps mission-driven organizations make the most of information, navigate complexity, and ensure their investments of time and money lead to meaningful, sustained impact. To think about it another way, communities are better served by their nonprofit, public, and private organizations through our work together.

What did 2020 mean for us?

IG marked our 20th anniversary, providing a chance to celebrate our connections and develop strategies to serve our organization into the future, even as we grappled with the uncertainty, grief, and hope that defined 2020. Compassion, connection, and equity emerged as the year's central themes.

HOW DID WE PURSUE OUR PUBLIC BENEFIT IN 2020?

We pursued our public benefit mission through several avenues, including our consulting practice, community and partnership, internal equity and inclusion work, and planning that will guide how we work toward our public benefit in the coming years.

Consulting practice

We had nearly 30 projects wrap up in 2020. As our consulting practice shifted with the COVID-19 pandemic and the uprising for racial justice, we helped clients be creative and agile; serve their communities better; and navigate uncertainty to make decisions that reflect their communities' needs and preferences. This work involved managing a lot of change for both IG and our clients—in project timelines, methods, and even how we came together. We appreciated how our team, partners, and clients stepped up to the series of challenges and opportunities that 2020 brought.

We partnered with clients to help them flex their creativity and agility. This showed up in a variety of ways, including:

- Helping the Minnesota Department of Education identify what the agency needed to support schools in providing services when moving to virtual learning.
- Shifting to more virtual tools and supports, such as supporting the Anoka County Plan of Safe Care Collaborative to transition into an entirely online workgroup.
- Collaborating with clients to know when work should be put on hold—or approached in new ways. For example, we initially paused work with the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) to

engage stakeholders about improvements to the disability services system, eventually resuming the [Waiver Reimagine](#) project with virtual engagement events.

We supported clients to serve their communities better:

- Moving to virtual spaces opened up opportunities to engage people who would not have been able to participate in projects in person. For example, we helped the Minnesota Department of Transportation hear from more greater Minnesota residents than the agency otherwise would have—all through online engagement.
- We partnered with clients to do sensitive, thoughtful analysis of whether community members' experiences were pandemic-related or happening regardless. One example is our work conducting the [Olmstead Quality of Life Survey](#) of people with disabilities. We worked to understand where people's freedoms had been unnecessarily restricted due to the pandemic and how that subsequently affected quality of life.

We also helped clients to navigate complexity and uncertainty to make decisions reflective of their communities' preferences and needs. During the Waiver Reimagine project, we first surveyed the people DHS sought to hear from about their readiness and preferences for engagement—and then adapted the project to meet them.

Community and partnership

We strive to be a good partner—working together in ways that are open, thoughtful, and collaborative. The year brought many opportunities to collaborate with and learn from experts and partners. We stepped back when other partners stepped forward, and vice versa. For example, when a partner took medical leave, we helped with support and changes to planned work.

We sought to forge stronger connections throughout the year. As we planned our 20th-anniversary celebration, our team agreed that the great joy of our work is the opportunity to make connections with clients, partners, staff, and the community members we serve. In that spirit, we created and carried out "[IG2020: Connections](#)" to deepen relationships and tell stories that connect happy memories of the past to our exciting future! And while the pandemic transformed our anniversary plans, it also made celebrating our connections feel more vital than ever.

The connections we made and deepened in 2020 brought joy to our hearts and tears to our eyes. In a year that presented so many challenges and hardships, these connections

We had more than 100 engagements from our community for IG2020 Connections:

- Some clients and partners [submitted video greetings](#) and contributed celebratory entries in our [virtual guestbook](#).
- Staff [shared stories](#) about IG's past, present, and what excites them about the future.
- Several clients and partners participated in [IG Storycast video interviews](#).
- More than 50 members of our community got together for a virtual anniversary party!
- People contributed to [a playlist of songs](#) that remind them of their connections with IG.

Clients also shared their unexpected joys in working with IG... "you've unlocked something [among stakeholders] where they're able to share things in a way that they maybe hadn't before. And they are saying 'I want people to hear my story. I want people to be inspired.' "

reinforced the importance of the work that our clients and communities accomplish, and the role IG plays in enhancing those impacts.

We also continued to deepen our community work by more regularly embedding community members with direct decision-making and expertise into our projects. We worked with partners, community liaisons, or subcontractors in 24 percent of the 29 projects that closed in 2020. These partners extended the community, cultural, and diversity depth of our team in 16 percent of those projects.

Internal equity and inclusion work

We worked to center equity and inclusion in our organization in new ways. We adopted [diversity, equity, and inclusion guiding principles](#) and facilitated listening sessions, making space for co-creation and feedback.

We navigated the turbulent year with compassion, care, and collaboration. This ranged from giving staff space with time off for the George Floyd memorial and the presidential election, to encouraging staff to use dedicated paid time off to volunteer, to being responsive to our team as we adapted to different work locations and needs.

Staff continued to guide much of our work, informing the opportunities that we pursued. Additionally, we were excited to host two students for summer internships with our staff through a partnership with the [Step Up](#) program.

WHAT PUBLIC BENEFITS DID WE SEE?

As we celebrated connections all year, our clients' commitment to engaging their communities and adapting their work to serve community members better energized our team. We took pride in and learned lessons from our connections' successes in deftly navigating the difficulties and opportunities of 2020. Several clients adapted their services, delved into the impacts of the pandemic on their communities, or forged stronger community connections:

- The pandemic caused [End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin](#) teen dating violence prevention grantees to shift focus to meeting the basic needs of the families in their communities. Since then, we have helped End Abuse maintain continuity with evaluation and supported End Abuse's transition to a youth-led program starting in 2021.
- Spurred by concern for the entrepreneurs they fund, [African Economic Development Solutions](#) (AEDS) sought to assess the impact of the pandemic on small businesses owned by African immigrants in the Twin Cities. The organization's survey of small businesses uncovered profound pandemic impacts, which were deepened after the murder of George Floyd. AEDS' work has helped strengthen the organization's case for securing funding and support to meet the needs of these local small businesses to weather the pandemic.
- We were also excited to see opportunities for community voices to be more present in decision-making. For example, the Olmstead Quality of Life survey explored how the pandemic has affected people with disabilities. We hope these insights will be used to further support policy changes that improve people's quality of life and strengthen their decision-making power.

WHAT HELPED US OR GOT IN OUR WAY?

The pandemic presented operational challenges for IG similar to those experienced by other organizations. COVID-19, racial injustice and other inequities, and political upheaval took a toll on our team, our clients, and our communities. We were often tired and anxious, but we also felt our place in these larger systems become clearer, and we rededicated ourselves to the positive change we hope to see.

WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON?

Our entire team engaged in strategic planning starting in 2020. We have identified three strategies that will guide us in the year ahead:

- Deepen, solidify, and expand internal and external equity work.
- Grow relationships, grow our business.
- Propel capacity for learning, reflection, and shared leadership.