

CommUnity Conversations

Nonprofit Funders

April 23rd, 2020

This event was the fourth in a series of virtual conversations bringing together service organizations and allies from around Wisconsin to discuss the impacts of COVID-19 on their work. Twenty professionals from across the funding spectrum were in attendance. Tony Shields, CEO of the Wisconsin Philanthropy Network, offered reflections from the funders community of Wisconsin. The conversation focused on funding responses to COVID-19, relationship building, and next steps.

Funder Responses to COVID-19

COVID-19 rapidly changed the landscape of philanthropy. For some nonprofits, funded programs are now on hold or online. Others are exploring a pivot to needed housing, food, or employment resources. Responsive emergency efforts include streamlining grant making, getting resources out the door to meet the greatest needs. Funders are also looking to understand where emergency funds are needed and how best to get them there. Previous natural disaster relief efforts suggest that funding grassroots efforts is critical, since community members are well equipped to identify and address local needs.

Relationship Building and Trust

Funders can play a key role in COVID-19 responses, but strong relationships with grantees are essential to making this happen. Given the broad impacts and urgency of the crisis, funders may be more open to authentic conversations about organizational financial instability and adapting to changing circumstances.

In light of this, funders and grantees with existing relationships are starting to talk the need for unrestricted operational funds to help organizations weather the unexpected. Whether this extension of trust persists remains to be seen, but there is an opening for advocacy to that end.

Small and new nonprofits may face greater barriers to receiving adequate operating funds during this time, as many lack long-term and trust-based relationships with funders. These organizations should be a priority for emergency funding, since they are often the grassroots groups closest to those most impacted.

Sustainability and Next Steps

Though the full economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis are not yet clear, funders are beginning to consider their own sustainability in new market conditions. But for now, the more pressing goal is to help partner organizations and communities emerge from the immediate crisis.

Call for Action from the Field

- Funders have an opportunity to extend trust to grantees, making possible needed program adjustments.
- Funders and front lines organizations alike should advocate for the expansion of operations support in the long term.
- Grant funding should be made available to support grassroots and community-level responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Extension

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