

Not-for-Profit Industry

COVID-19 Response: Which Changes in Grantmaking Practice Should Be Here to Stay?

Recently PEAK Grantmaking and Candid teamed up on a Community Conversation as part of an ongoing PEAK series designed to provide a forum for peer learning and knowledge exchange on COVID-19 response practices. Melissa Sines, programs and knowledge director for PEAK Grantmaking, and Janet Camarena, director of Candid learning, hosted the session at the end of April, to invite grants management professionals to reflect on what they are learning from changes made to streamline grants processes that may inform how they hope to improve overall practices post-pandemic. Here we share highlights of the takeaways from the session. A complete recap of the full program appears on the [PEAK blog](#).

In the weeks since the crisis began, we all have been learning what it is like to bring our humanity to our work. Barriers to communication and collaboration that seemed insurmountable just a month ago have been erased. More funders are embracing practices that are allowing them to narrow the power gap and build strong and trusting relationships with their grantees.

MORE TRANSPARENCY & COMMUNICATION

Program participants report that they are adopting streamlined and flexible workflows, which are freeing them up to be more available to connect with grantees. During phone calls to check in on needs and progress, stronger relationships are being forged, leading to greater empathy and understanding about which adjustments might be most helpful. For example, many funders have started to repurpose existing project grants to unrestricted support, as well as to allocate a larger portion of their overall budgets to general support. [An earlier GlassPockets blog delves into this further.](#)



COVID-19 RESPONSE

STREAMLINED AND FLEXIBLE WORKFLOWS

As the world continues to adjust to the ongoing strains of sheltering in place and the stress of the extended public health and economic crisis, philanthropy is beginning to understand how its own practices can help or hurt the situation. And the burden you lift may be your own, as several participants reminded us that streamlined application and reporting processes and workflow shortcuts are reducing burden not only for nonprofit partners but also for grantmaking staff.

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In applications: There is increased attention to the labor standard foundation applications require, greater scrutiny on which information is really needed in order for funders to make decisions, and questioning whether the work of collecting that information should fall to the grantee or to the funder. Some funders have started taking on more of the due-diligence burden, using a variety of sources readily available to them, such as organization information already available in their own databases; grantee websites; and websites like Candid’s [GuideStar](#) profiles to find the information they need.

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They are also taking applications via phone—asking questions of the grantee verbally and recording answers in their grants management system. Some are also taking applications created for another funder or banding together in funder collaboratives to agree on one application and one report format and submission for emergency response grants. As one funder put it, they are “short on what we ask from the nonprofit—long on us documenting what we know about the nonprofit.”

In decision making: Grantmakers are convening decision-making bodies (staff, boards, grant review committees) in creative ways. Online meeting software is being utilized to convene decision makers, work through decisions, and rapidly deploy funds. Detailed grant summaries and packages are being reduced to quick emails and spreadsheet overviews that actively prompt in-depth questions and discussions that engage decision makers in meaningful work and promote good decisions. These quick meetings in virtual environments could be a great way to democratize the grantmaking process by utilizing a more participatory grantmaking structure.

In agreements and payments: As one of our participants declared: “We moved to electronic checks and electronic award letters and we are NEVER going back!” For many grantmakers, this crisis has led them to embrace electronic processing in place of printing and mailing agreements and checks. One funder reported that they had been advocating for wire payments for a year and a half, and now as a result of the crisis they had it up and running within a few weeks. Award letters, grant agreements, and grant modifications are all being accepted in simplified formats such as a short email, electronic signature software, or a phone call. Another funder reported that using electronic signature software had resulted in over half of signed grant agreements being returned within 30 minutes.

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In reporting: On the reporting side, funders are accepting quick updates via email or phone, extending reporting deadlines for interim and final reports, even suspending reporting altogether. Some are adjusting evaluation plans and reducing report requirements. Education funders are realizing they will need to entirely rethink evaluation for their grantees given the disruption in that part of the sector.

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LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

Call participants admitted to feeling a lot of stress around implementing and iterating these changing practices and processes, but also say that overall, they are amazed at what they have been able to accomplish in just a few weeks. Specific takeaways from participants making such changes include:

- > Streamline applications and reporting processes and use conversation to build stronger relationships with your grantees.
- > Closely examine all pieces of information that you ask of applicants to make sure you are using this information.
- > Take on more of the burden of doing the homework and due diligence about your grantees.
- > Consider eliminating the use of customized narrative and budget templates and encouraging applicants to submit applications used for other funders.
- > Move to mobile-friendly, accessible, online applications if you haven't previously, and make accommodations for people with disabilities.
- > Take the leap and go electronic for grant agreements, payments, and reports.
- > Change mindset on general operating support by increasing its frequency of use.
- > Consider the role of participatory grantmaking in how philanthropy might shift the power now to traditionally under-served and under-represented groups.
- > Reconsider evaluation and data requirements and remove requirements for advertising or brand opportunities that require a certain threshold of participation.
- > Consider which metrics and decision-making frameworks should be used to guide decision making now, and whether you can use an equity or values-based framework to make better decisions.
- > Remember, operationalizing and standardizing all of the changes is a lot of work, so write down how you are making decisions and why you are making specific decisions.
- > Change can be intimidating and you may encounter resistance. So make the case that this is a pilot or part of iterative change, and it can always be changed back or changed again in the future if it is not working.

Which changes are you implementing? Which of them would you like to see carried forward to make your future grantmaking more efficient and effective?

The preceding is an article by Melissa Sines, programs and knowledge director, at [PEAK Grantmaking](#) and Janet Camarena, director of [Candid Learning](#), at [Candid](#).

Contact Us

If you would like to discuss how Cole, Newton & Duran's not-for-profit team can help your organization with its tax, accounting, or consulting needs, please feel free to give me a call.

Pat Koepke, CPA
Not-for-Profit Practice Leader
734.427.2030
pkoepe@cndcpa.com

CND Cole, Newton
& Duran
Certified Public Accountants

Cole, Newton & Duran CPAs
33762 Schoolcraft Road
Livonia, MI 48150
P: 734.427.2030
F: 734.427.3004
W: www.cndcpa.com