

Faster grants set for charities

Weinberg Foundation expediting some aid

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A major local foundation is launching a grants program that aims to quickly give up to \$100,000 apiece to nonprofits across Maryland.

The \$2.3 billion Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, one of the country's biggest private foundations, will announce the new Maryland Small Grants Program at an event today. Nonprofit advocates are calling it an unusual and welcome twist on grant-making because it simplifies the application process and reduces the wait for a response.

Charities that provide direct services to "poor and vulnerable" residents in the state, and that meet other basic guidelines such as least three years in operation, can apply for as much as \$50,000 annually for the next two years, the Owings Mills-based Weinberg Foundation said. Nonprofits that fill out the 12-question application should hear within 50 days if they got the OK and have a check coming to them in the mail.

The wait for its traditional grant process is about 90 days, not including the time it takes to get the go-ahead to submit a full application, the foundation said.

"This is a way of encouraging these smaller organizations that do good work to apply and not have to go through the normal turmoil," said Shale D. Stiller, president of the foundation.

The foundation said there is no deadline to apply, and it has set no cap on the total it will hand out under the program. There's an effective ceiling, however, because its charter prevents it from spending more than 5 percent of its assets, or about \$110 million. The foundation will also vet applicants to avoid giving to those with continual budget deficits or other signs of organizational problems, which means some charities might find themselves disqualified.

"But it could be a very large amount of money," Stiller said.

The foundation will begin reviewing the first applications Dec. 1. It intends to regroup after two years to decide whether to continue the effort.

Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, a foundation watchdog based in Washington, said the idea is "fantastic."

"A 50-day turnaround is phenomenally responsive and will be a great help to nonprofits," Dorfman said. "Most foundations, you're looking at a five- to six-month turnaround. So this is a huge improvement, and I hope other foundations copy them."

Peter V. Berns, executive director of the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations, which has a national reach thanks to its charity certification program, agreed that there are "very few good examples of really streamlined grant processes across the United States."

"There is a lot of inefficiency built into the grant-seeking process," said Berns, who sits on a task force trying to deal with the problem of wasted time and funds in grant application and management. "To the extent that that can be streamlined, it means more of the money actually goes toward supporting the cause - supporting the mission of the organization."

Some foundations think their normal process is quick. The Baltimore-based Abell Foundation makes grant decisions every other month. It says nonprofits that apply on the deadline for the next meeting will hear in six weeks or so - about 42 days.

Robert C. Embry Jr., Abell's president, noted that a number of local foundations have also agreed to use the same application form to make life easier for charities.

But Weinberg's new program excited Bill McLennan, executive director of Paul's Place Inc., an outreach center in Southwest Baltimore that offers hot lunches, after-school programs, literacy classes and similar services. The nonprofit has gotten funding in the past from Weinberg.

"This is an amazing opportunity to have a simplified process that one can clearly demonstrate need and be able to receive a quick response," McLennan said. For many nonprofits, he said, \$50,000 "would be a substantial amount."

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