

Long-term general support: The elusive Bigfoot in philanthropy

For most nonprofits, getting a flexible multi-year grant is as probable as spotting the mythical creature. So we asked our nonprofit members to share why they think grantmakers shy away from awarding these grants and how they would respond to funders' concerns.

I SUSPECT ONE REASON FUNDERS don't do multi-year grants is that they have lots of requests and want to support more groups – to say no to fewer people. This is laudable, but since flexible, multi-year support is so valuable in building up a viable organization, it would be better to invite groups to apply together, present fewer rounds of funding or simply choose carefully what groups to invest in for the longer haul.



– Kevin Whelan, Executive Director
MN350

I THINK IT'S HARD FOR FUNDERS TO trust organizations to stay mission-, metric- and client-focused over a series of years. Nonprofits can be prone to reactionary rather than responsive action according to situations as they arise in their communities.



However, a nonprofit's lack of funding is as much a product of short-term funding as a reason for it. Without a steady source of funding, nonprofits may move away from their mission according to a new funder's interest. As a result, their impact is convoluted, their ability to go to scale waxes and wanes over the years rather than growing steadily and their clients cease to trust their services.

Flexible, multi-year funding allows organizations to grow according to their mission, become excellent in their field and track their impact on a more consistent basis. Long-term funding partnerships pave the way for long-term progress.

– Ivy Sjöholm, Engagement Coordinator
Bayview/Hunter Point Community Legal

SOME FUNDERS MAY BE CONCERNED that flexible, multi-year grants could lead to funds being spent in ways funders don't anticipate or are controversial for funders. However, flexible, multi-year grants provide the greatest social impact, as they allow grantees to effectively plan programs for the long term and implement them strategically.



Funders can mitigate concerns by providing multi-year grants to organizations they know well and trust. Funders can also explicitly recognize and accept that giving greater control to grantees does present some risk to the funder, but this risk is worth the certainty of greater grantee effectiveness and greater social impact.

– Daniel Newman, President,
MapLight

IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE THAT FUNDERS would enjoy the flexibility to re-evaluate and shift priorities in their grantmaking strategies from year to year. However, this short-term mindset often results in non-strategic, temporary fixes, rather than addressing the root causes of an issue.



In truth, the issues of our time – bridging race and class divides, gender inequality, the Future of Work, universal health care, immigration and democracy itself – will require expansive, intersectional visions and long-term work. Funders interested in building a just and equitable world must trust those on the frontlines and invest in their leadership and vision for the long haul through flexible, multi-year grants.

– Sarita Gupta, Co-Director
Caring Across Generations

FUNDERS, QUITE UNDERSTANDABLY, want to be sure their dollars are directly linked to specific initiatives that promote good in the community and program-specific grants make that feel more attainable. However, often when organizations lack general operating funding, they can't fully support the time, focus and resources necessary to truly work strategically and smartly to achieve their mission.



– Karen LaShelle, Executive Director
Creative Action

OFTEN, FUNDERS ARE INTERESTED in short-term impact projects that can be achieved through annual grants. Flexible, multi-year grants offer a greater investment that bears richer fruit because organizations have the funding stability to build their capacity and to be more visionary in their approaches.



–Rev. Jennifer Butler, CEO
Faith in Public Life

That's why I'd argue that taking a risk on flexible multi-year grants actually achieves greater impact in the long run and is more effective in helping organizations grow and be sustainable.

WE ARE OPERATING IN AN INCREDIBLY complex, dynamic policy environment where the only certainty is that our work to advance equity is essential. Flexible, multi-year grants – which are traditionally difficult to get – are especially important to those of us engaging in legal and policy advocacy at this time.



– Kevin Prindiville, Executive Director
Justice in Aging

Flexible support empowers us to use our expertise and experience to respond quickly to emerging threats. Multi-year grants encourage us to think big and strategically instead of looking for quick but likely smaller wins. They also allow us to invest in staff and focus on the programmatic work instead of the next grant deadline.

I CAN'T SAY WHY FUNDERS SHY away from multi-year concerns for sure, since I'm not a funder. But as a non-profit with a longstanding and ever-increasing mission, we sure need ongoing, long-term funding we can count on. Funders who provide ongoing support become partners not only in the projects and programs they fund from year to year, but also in the long-term mission and societal commitments of the organization. In the Center for Medicare Advocacy's case, our work to protect a comprehensive Medicare program and quality health care for older and disabled people is increasingly urgent. The needs of the people we serve are expanding, while government support is diminishing.



– Judith Stein, Founder and Executive Director,
Center for Medicare Advocacy

THERE'S ALWAYS A DISCONNECT between the grantee's work and the funder's objectives. Often, funders feel their responsibility is not to sustain organizations but to change them. One-year grants give funders more leverage to do that.



If we really believe that the nonprofits we fund drive social change, then we have to place faith in their vision and their judgment. It's also fair for funders to disagree with or question what grantees are doing. A lot of times nonprofits can get stuck in ineffective or inefficient ways of working because of funders' requirements. Between the extremes of blind trust in nonprofits and deep funder control, there's room for powerful partnership rooted in the knowledge and expertise of both parties.

– Tamir Novotny, Executive Director,
Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy