

OPINION
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As the White House Changes Hands, Philanthropy Must Change Too

By Allison R. Brown and Liz Sak

Donald Trump's inauguration today changes our world in ways we cannot yet predict, but one thing is certain: We will depend more than ever on nonprofits to guide us.

That means those of us who give money away need to do all we can to help nonprofits thrive — an imperative that requires entirely different approaches than we have taken in the past.

In this moment, philanthropy has to let go — give up some control, streamline the grant-making process, trust the strongest organizations, and devote resources to helping all the nonprofits we support thrive and move nimbly to meet the needs that emerge.

We've seen grant makers make changes that help local nonprofits struggling with urgent challenges succeed. At its heart, each approach involves asking ourselves tough questions about why grant makers act the way they do and what nonprofits most need to achieve their missions. Here are four steps grant makers can consider:

Ease up on the burdens of reporting.

How do you want your grantees spending their time?

It probably isn't doing paperwork.

Our grantees often spend 10 to 15 hours compiling complex proposals and interim, year-end, and final reports that then get skimmed at best and, in some cases, go completely unread.

If they receive support from multiple foundations and other grant makers, this can suck hundreds of hours out of their lives, hours that could be better spent organizing communities, leading advocacy efforts, connecting with young people, and setting us all on a path toward freedom.

If you know the nonprofits you're working with, skip the reporting requirements. Sit down for a conversation with your grantees about the challenges ahead. Talk about what they need to grow and succeed. Then, for your institution's records, document what you learn and observe in a write-up that details how what they shared fits with what you expect and what your organization requires. Share your written notes and observations with the grantees as feedback so they can adjust if and when need be, not to meet foundations' expectations but so they can serve their communities better.

Offer multiyear, general-support grants.

How long does change take?

The answer is almost never only one year. Yet philanthropy often provides one-year grants for specific projects to organizations with a track record of sustained success.

If those same organizations received long-term funding, they would have room to take on challenges in a way that makes a real difference. The one-year grant cycle locks nonprofits into inertia, leaving them uncertain about hiring new employees or undertaking broader and more ambitious efforts to change society. Even when grants are renewable, grantees still need to pause and reapply.

Our goal should be to give our grantees breathing room so they can become stronger and more sustainable. General-support grants, in particular, give them the flexibility they need to pursue new approaches and meet emerging needs.

In Chicago, multiyear, general-support funding from several foundations allowed Communities United, a coalition that seeks to keep kids out of prison, to become more sustainable. The organization was able to expand from working in a set of neighborhoods to developing connections statewide. Young people pushed for policy changes aimed at helping middle- and high-school students avoid prison, and this statewide network of organizations is now helping to figure out ways to carry out these policies. Since the November election, the group has brought together more than 30 organizations united behind a set of specific activities designed to advance community investment that will help young people get the opportunities they need to stay in school and get good jobs.

Treat your grantees like experts.

Who really knows what is going on in the communities we are trying to reach?

Many foundations hire experts whom they ask to guide their grantees. But often it's local organizations that have the best sense of how to create change in a community.

In New Orleans, for instance, local nonprofits like the Grow Dat Youth Farm have a taste of what the future could look like under the Trump administration. In the years since Hurricane Katrina, the city has become a testing ground for much of what the new administration embraces: charter schools, stepped-up incarceration, a disregard for the environment, the hegemony of the oil and gas industry. Given their history, these nonprofits can help shape the response to Trump better than a foundation with little experience in neighborhoods. Philanthropy shouldn't just develop strategies and ask grantees to fall in line.

Invest in the grass roots.

Where should our dollars go?

One thing we all learned in this election cycle is that our work needs to be better connected across states and that philanthropy can't keep funding only what it already knows works for sure. We need to take risks to help build the future that we want and need to see.

That includes looking for leaders and emerging groups in communities that, for generations, have been purposely and structurally exploited, abused, and deprived of opportunity. Taking risks means that philanthropy must identify those who are working to promote and expand the strength of communities of color, protect LGBTQ teenagers from warped mind-sets about who they are and who they should be, and make the education system respond to its clientele — the children.

It means being ready to support unorthodox methods of advocacy that aim to both expand and energize the "choir" and reinforce support systems to protect communities of color and help them sustain themselves. Frontline groups do the most difficult work; that's why philanthropic investment in the grass roots is essential.

None of this means foundations must give up on achieving a return on their investments or on measuring success. It simply means that grant makers should take back some of the burden and work more collaboratively with their grantees. And, when necessary, they must work with other foundations to foster a conversation that will help us become stronger and more resilient and protect the progress we've made.

The money in foundations, donor-advised funds, and elsewhere has grown exponentially over the past few decades. Philanthropy's sense of responsibility for, and accountability to nonprofits, must grow as well, with donors providing funding in the background while organizers and advocates lead. With the current state of play, however, philanthropy's response is too often to turn inward, revise or create strategies for allocating funding, and then move dollars.

We've seen several such emergencies before — 9/11, Katrina, Sandy, Ferguson; sadly, the list goes on — where we haven't acted to put nonprofit needs and expertise first. As a new administration takes over, this must be a moment for action.

Allison R. Brown is executive director of the Communities for Just Schools Fund, a national donor network working to foster supportive learning environments and end the school-to-prison pipeline. Liz Sak is executive director of the Cricket Island Foundation, which supports youth-led social change.

