

Investing in Grassroots Advocacy

A Funder's Guide

prepared for

Connecticut Health Foundation



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Executive Summary

Introduction

Grassroots advocacy organizations (GRAOs) are uniquely situated to contribute to societal change. They are community-led and informed, and they often use traditional advocacy strategies in combination with newer approaches to drive change. Their work can be especially effective when it is coupled with adequate support that allows these organizations to prioritize their work and not fundraising. Philanthropy can help communities build the power they need to amplify their voices through sharing resources in a way that allows advocates to prioritize their work, and grants them the flexibility to plan and respond to emergent opportunities to advocate. Foundations can also use convening power to bring advocates together for joint endeavors and to further build a community for advocacy.

Recognizing this, many foundations focused on equity have increased their support for Grassroots advocacy organizations (GRAOs) in recent years. Many have found that doing so requires not only finding new partners and offering grants, but rethinking how power dynamics play out in relationships and considering how to center the expertise and values of grassroots advocates in the grantmaking process.

The Connecticut Health Foundation, with a mission focused on improving health outcomes for people of color and ensuring that all Connecticut residents have access to affordable and high-quality care, started to see the importance of investing in GRAOs in addition to traditional advocacy groups as part its system change efforts. In 2021, the Connecticut Health Foundation commissioned TCC Group to help it gain a better understanding of how to build authentic relationships with and effectively support GRAOs

TCC Group has worked to evaluate complexity for decades, and we've researched and codified some clear best practices for how foundations can effectively support advocacy organizations and coalitions, much of which has stood up over time, even as some advocacy tactics have evolved. The full report is intended to answer a set of concrete questions about how funders can most effectively support GRAOs. In this executive summary, we've shared context on the seven sections of the report and high-level findings for each.

Relationship Building

Many funders are interested in broadening their relationships to expand their knowledge and challenge their assumptions as they learn how different actors approach their work. GRAOs are often small and have limited staff. It can be difficult to limit power dynamics, especially in situations where a funder is interested in meeting a GRAO but not yet committed to funding. This section provides funders a better base of knowledge about how to best mitigate these power dynamics and how GRAOs want them to show up when building new relationships.

Key Takeaways

Establishing or strengthening relationships

- Funders cannot expect to start fresh without acknowledging how they have previously related to a community. For example, funders should acknowledge and be willing to hear feedback on whether or not they have been a respectful partner, valued the expertise of community members, considered community perspectives, or harmed community members or organizations.
- Funders can work with grassroots advocates to build their credibility and establish them as a meaningful voice at the table.
- Foundations often tend toward thinking of GRAOs as proxies for community voices or presenting a community as a monolith. They should avoid this and instead bring in community voices via multiple avenues.
- Many foundations that have recently begun to focus on equity are seen as jumping on a bandwagon. Funders that are truly committed need to alter their structural practices to avoid being perceived as only “giving lip service.”

Grant funding

- General operating support and multi-year grant awards are the grantmaking practices that best accommodate GRAOs' work.
- Two ways to equalize who applies for grant funding are to simplify grant application processes and to provide materials in languages other than English (and offer translation for meetings).
- Staff and leadership at GRAOs are primed for burnout and may need specific resources to balance mental health and organizational progress.

Balancing foundation goals with grantee goals

- Funders should embed mechanisms to get community input into the grantmaking process.
- Foundations can think about balancing their goals with those of grantees in several ways – by adopting their grantees’ goals as their own, by setting a high-level vision but releasing control of execution, or by relying on advocates to fulfill the foundation’s advocacy agenda.
- Foundations have successfully used specific strategies to better align themselves with the needs of their communities, including listening tours, community advisory boards, and participatory grantmaking.

Meetings with nonprofits

- Place matters when choosing meeting locations. A place perceived by a funder as neutral may not necessarily be seen that way by others.
- Funders should be explicit about the purpose of every meeting, especially when funding may be at hand.

Finding Alignment

This section shares how funders have balanced their own advocacy goals with those of the GRAOs they fund. Foundations can legally engage in some advocacy efforts directly. Further, they can use their endowments to set up independent 501(c)4s that can engage in direct lobbying. At the same time, many advocacy-focused organizations are specialized in assessing the advocacy landscape and driving a strategy forward – and many GRAOs may be most interested in building their strategies collaboratively with their community members.

Key Takeaways

- GRAOs can be particularly inclined to interpret foundation requests as demands, and this may impact the work they do.
- Top-down organizations (e.g. those where leadership makes decisions) and bottom-up organizations (e.g. those where members make decisions) may experience dissonance in how they prefer to create advocacy agendas.

- Funders can play unique roles related to supporting GRAOs in an advocacy ecosystem, including building the capacity of GRAOs and the capacity of other actors to work with GRAOs, and playing a role in evaluation and learning.
- Advocacy funders often support their grantmaking by leveraging their foundation's name, brand, relationship, and bully pulpit, as well as coordinating with other funders.

Support Without Restrictions

Funding is the most straightforward mechanism foundations have to support the work of other organizations. This section shares how funders have approached providing grants to GRAOs, including the benefits and drawbacks of general operating support. It also shares information about how foundations should think about ending funding, a particularly important consideration for GRAOs, which tend to have smaller budgets and fewer robust funders.

Key Takeaways

- Unrestricted funding provides GRAOs budget flexibility that often determines their strategic flexibility. It can also build organizational credibility, shift power dynamics, and strengthen an overall field (if awarded at sufficient amounts).
- Ending grant support should be decided in advance – ideally when grants are first conceived. Good practices include giving multi-year and wind-down grants and having honest, explicit conversations with grantees.

Readiness for Success

Funders have to make careful decisions when awarding grant funds, including thinking about timelines for success and the types of efforts their individual grantees are ready to engage in. This section explores different ways to think about readiness and how they relate to GRAOs.

Key Takeaways

- The concept of readiness has often been used to exclude organizations from funding rather than meeting an organization where it is.

Several funders felt that instead of a standard for readiness, funders should be willing to fund organizations that are aligned with the foundation's vision of work, even if there is not yet any proof of success.

- Readiness needs may be different across an organization's lifecycle. Rather than seeing readiness as a standard to reach, some funders saw it as articulating the capacity needs an organization has at its given stage of lifecycle. It is important to construct realistic timeframes and consider where organizations are in their lifecycles when thinking about social change.

Building Advocacy Power

GRAOs often have small staffs. This section describes how funders can think about the level of grantmaking these organizations need and how to best approach capacity building.

Key Takeaways

- Funding from a single foundation should not shift focus away from a GRAO's core mission nor make up the majority of a GRAO's budget.
- Because of the size and limited capacity of GRAOs, awarding grants directly to these organizations may require more administrative time from foundation staff to support the application and due diligence process.
- All capacity building needs to be culturally relevant and accessible (including in preferred languages).
- Communications capacity and building connections and networks are particular areas where foundations can contribute to grantee capacity.
- Early-stage capacity support is critical for GRAOs, with potential impact for long-term sustainability.
- GRAOs with very few staff may struggle to engage in organizational capacity building.
- Grassroots leaders need some unique types of support, including topical skills, spaces to connect with peer leaders, support staff, and access to the resources necessary to do this work long-term.

Expanding Focus or Lens

Some funders may be committed to action in a certain topic area and want to bring advocates alongside them. This section provides guidance for these funders on how they can think about presenting an advocacy agenda to GRAOs and different strategies we've seen foundations use to effectively do this. It also shares information on the best way to choose between various organizations that are not fully aligned with a funder's goals or values.

Key Takeaways

- Foundations have interested GRAOs in their own strategic approaches in several ways, including making funding criteria explicit, asking grantees to expand their lens but not change it, supporting intermediaries, and creating new organizations.
- Foundations tend to have better success at working with a values-aligned organization and expanding this organization's topical area of focus than working with a topically aligned organization and trying to shift its values.

Facilitating Collaboration

Collaboration is important in any sector, but it is especially important for advocates who tend to operate in complex situations to keep informed of peer organizations playing complementary roles and gain knowledge they can use to shift their tactics quickly. This section shares how funders can think about supporting collaboration for advocates, including GRAOs' specific collaboration needs.

Key Takeaways

- Collaboration can- and should- be resourced. The collaboration should also be organic and allow for different types of stakeholder groups to connect.
- To the extent possible, funders should try to understand power dynamics and power imbalances within advocacy coalitions, especially between grassroots and grasstops organizations.
- Convenings should be intentional and crafted to meet specific criteria to be of value to participants, not just to funders.

- Funders should consider the dynamics that GRAOs can face when participating in coalitions or formal collaborations.
- Funders should work with other traditional organizations to help them build their own capacity to work with GRAOs.

Evaluation, Learning, and Measurement

Evaluation, learning, and measurement systems are essential for understanding how progress is being made and what is contributing to that progress. Our research has found that evaluation needs to be focused on two areas – first, outcomes and understanding what is changing in the system the foundation is focused on and second, foundation practices and understanding how the foundation is helping or hindering in its own role. Any foundation interested in shifting its own grantmaking practice needs a feedback mechanism that allows it to understand how these practice changes are being perceived among its grantee organizations.

Key Takeaways

- A portfolio-level evaluation that includes feedback about foundation practices is seen by funders as the most helpful way to understand what change is occurring and how actors, including the foundation, are contributing to that change.
- Embedding ongoing learning into portfolio work is seen as having high value for increasing both the foundation's knowledge of progress and the grantee's ability to adapt to changing situations.
- Foundations are struggling to move away from foundation-directed evaluation toward something with more community or grantee input.
- There is no clear standard around how funders expect GRAOs to evaluate their own work.
- Several methods that allow an evaluator to assess change and then understand the path to that change have been helpful for trust-based foundations. These include analyzing contributions analysis, Most Significant Change, and collecting evidence of what has changed to determine how the intervention contributed to these changes.

Introduction

Grassroots advocacy organizations (GRAOs) are uniquely situated to contribute to societal change. They are community-led and informed, and they often use traditional advocacy strategies in combination with newer approaches to drive change. Their work can be especially effective when it is coupled with adequate support. Philanthropy can help communities build the power they need to amplify their voices through sharing resources in a way that allows advocates to prioritize their work and grants them the flexibility to plan and respond to emergent opportunities to advocate. Foundations can also use convening power to bring advocates together for joint endeavors and to further build a community for advocacy.

Recognizing this, many foundations focused on equity have increased their support for GRAOs in recent years. Many have found that doing so requires not simply finding new partners and offering grants but rethinking how power dynamics play out in relationships and considering how to center the expertise and values of grassroots advocates in the grantmaking process. Some funders have come to rethink their work as they looked back and realized they have not achieved the systemic change they were hoping to. Others felt they were ready to put their foundation values, specifically those around equity, at the forefront of their grantmaking strategies and that allowing organizations and individuals who have lived experience to direct advocacy efforts was a better approach. Though the path of supporting GRAOs is seen as more resource intensive and requiring a longer time frame, it was seen by many funders as the most sustainable approach to systems-change work.

The Connecticut Health Foundation, with a mission focused on improving health outcomes for people of color and ensuring that all Connecticut residents have access to affordable and high-quality care, has had a focus on changing systems since its inception. Several years ago, the foundation started to see the importance

Throughout this report, we've put terms into a glossary. These terms are denoted using *italicization* and underlining. See footnotes for the corresponding definitions.

of investing in GRAOs in addition to traditional advocacy groups as part of its system change efforts. In 2021, the Connecticut Health Foundation commissioned TCC Group to help it gain a better understanding of how to build authentic relationships with and effectively support GRAOs. This included considering how funders should think about GRAOs in the broader picture of advocacy efforts and social change, what funders interested in equity can do tangibly to embed these values into their work practices, and how funders can better identify individuals or organizations that are led by the community and interested in advocacy to expand their grantee pool beyond the usual actors.

We set out to answer these questions using a variety of methods, including interviews with GRAOs, interviews with funders who have a history of strong engagement with grassroots organizations as an arm of their broader advocacy strategies, a benchmarking analysis examining five case studies of foundations, a literature review, and a look back into our own histories and files to reexamine our past assumptions. TCC Group has worked to evaluate complexity for decades, and we've researched and codified some clear best practices for how foundations can effectively support advocacy organizations and coalitions, much of which has stood up over time, even as some advocacy tactics have evolved.

The full report is intended to answer a set of concrete questions about how funders can most effectively support GRAOs.

This report can be used in several ways – as an evidence base to share with others who are asking questions about the relationship between foundations and grassroots organizations, as a tool to reflect on and evaluate current practices, and/or a way to highlight some concrete shifts a foundation may be interested in making. Given the complexity of how social change occurs, and the rapidity of changes happening within society, we acknowledge that these answers are neither comprehensive nor static. However, we are confident that these answers serve as the beginning for necessary conversations and an impetus to action.

Table 1: List of Study Questions by Category

<p>Relationship Building</p>	<p>1. What are the most effective ways for foundations to forge relationships with grassroots advocacy organizations?</p> <p>2. What are the grant processes and practices that are most accommodating of grassroots advocacy organizations?</p> <p>3. What are the methods, strategies, and/or processes foundations have undertaken to align themselves with or support community health equity¹ priorities? What motivated the foundations to take this direction?</p>
<p>Finding Alignment Among Advocacy Organizations and the Foundation</p>	<p>4. How have foundations balanced the desire to align missions/goals with respecting the expertise and choice of grassroots organizations to define their goals and objectives? How much do other foundations direct the goals and objectives for grassroots advocacy organization applicants? What examples exist of foundations that prescribe objectives and/or outcomes and foundations that fund advocacy organizations to determine their own desired outcomes?</p> <p>5. How do foundations that fund advocacy organizations determine their own goals and objectives to conduct their own advocacy work? Do these foundations typically have their own policy agendas, adopt the priorities of their grantees, or not participate in much direct policy work?</p>
<p>Supporting Grassroots Advocacy Organizations Without Restrictions</p>	<p>6. What are foundations' ultimate goals when they support grassroots advocacy organizations with unrestricted grant funding? What does philanthropy ultimately hope to achieve through this approach?</p> <p>7. How have philanthropic organizations managed ending grant support for an organization after several years of funding? How can funders best manage grantee expectations around continued funding?</p>
<p>Readiness for Success</p>	<p>8. What are the readiness elements of a well-developed grassroots advocacy organization that is positioned to succeed on its substantive issues? How can a foundation recognize whether an organization is ready for a significant investment? What are reasonable timeframes for organizations to develop and have meaningful impact?</p>
<p>What an Organization Needs to Build Its Advocacy Power</p>	<p>9. What amount of funding is needed for a grassroots advocacy organization to be successful?</p> <p>10. What capacities are critical to the success of grassroots organizations? What modes of technical assistance² are most helpful in building these capacities?</p>
<p>Inspiring Existing Organizations to Expand Their Focus or Lens</p>	<p>11. How can the foundation garner genuine interest in and attention to its own strategic priorities among its grantees? What steps have funders taken to influence the strategic directions of grassroots advocacy organizations?</p> <p>12. What types of organizations are most effective in shifting their focus? Is it better to pick one that just needs a little nudge to see the same issues through an equity lens or to find an effective organization and see if it might consider adding health to the issue areas of focus?</p>
<p>Facilitating Collaboration</p>	<p>13. What are the best ways for philanthropy to facilitate collaboration among grassroots organizations? What are reasonable expectations about the level of collaboration that should occur?</p>
<p>Evaluation</p>	<p>14. How are trust-based foundations thinking about evaluating their work or the work of their grantees?</p>

¹ **Community health equity** focuses on ensuring that all individuals have an equal ability to achieve positive health outcomes and on the elimination of inequitable health outcomes across communities that are often driven by social disparities.

² **Technical assistance** is support, often in the form of a specialized skill, that comes from outside an organization when it lacks internal staff capacity.

Relationship Building

Many funders are interested in broadening their relationships to expand their knowledge and challenge their assumptions as they learn how different actors approach their work. GRAOs are often small and have limited staff. It can be difficult to limit power dynamics, especially in situations where a funder is interested in meeting a GRAO but not yet committed to funding. This section provides funders a better base of knowledge about how to best mitigate these power dynamics and how GRAOs want them to show up when building new relationships.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Establishing or strengthening relationships

- Funders cannot expect to start fresh without acknowledging how they have previously related to a community. For example, funders should acknowledge and be willing to hear feedback on whether or not they have been a respectful partner, valued the expertise of community members, considered community perspectives, or harmed community members or organizations.
- Funders can work with grassroots advocates to build their credibility and establish them as a fuller voice at the table.
- Foundations often tend toward thinking of GRAOs as proxies for community voices or presenting community as a monolith. They should avoid this and instead bring in community voices via multiple avenues.
- Many foundations that have recently begun to focus on equity are seen as jumping on a bandwagon. Funders that are truly committed need to alter their structural practices to avoid being perceived as only “giving lip service.”

Grant funding

- General operating support and multi-year grant awards are the grantmaking practices that best accommodate GRAOs' work.
- Two ways to equalize who applies for grant funding are to simplify grant application processes and to provide materials in languages other than English (and offer translation for meetings).
- Staff and leadership at GRAOs are primed for burnout and may need specific resources to balance mental health and organizational progress.

Balancing foundation goals with grantee goals

- Funders should embed mechanisms to get community input into the grantmaking process.
- Foundations can think about balancing their goals with those of grantees in several ways – by adopting their grantees' goals as their own, by setting a high-level vision but releasing control of execution, or by relying on advocates to fulfill the foundation's advocacy agenda.
- Foundations have successfully used specific strategies to better align themselves with the needs of their communities, including listening tours, community advisory boards, and participatory grantmaking.

Meetings with nonprofits

- Place matters when choosing meeting locations. A place perceived by a funder as neutral may not necessarily be seen that way by others.
- Funders should be explicit about the purpose of every meeting, especially when funding may be at hand.

What are the most effective ways for foundations to forge relationships with grassroots advocacy organizations?

One-on-one conversations between the foundation and GRAOs can establish connections outside of the usual realms. GRAOs we spoke to noted how power dynamics often showed up in the “getting to know you” stage of the relationship with a new funder. For example, foundations that asked to meet at the nonprofit’s office often put pressure on the potential grantee to prepare a “dog and pony show.” This presents a challenge for potential grantees because conversations with potential funders are often most valuable for GRAOs when scheduled during their goal-setting and planning stages, which may sit outside of a foundation’s own funding cycle. Meeting in a neutral space (e.g., a local coffee shop) or at a place of the GRAO’s choosing was seen as an easy way to reduce the sensation of the organization coming to the formal foundation offices to perform. GRAOs also noted that these meetings should be used by foundation staff to better understand the organization’s unique approach and role rather than the foundation coming in with a clear-cut vetting agenda. Finally, potential grantees felt funders should make meeting goals explicit – are they considering the organization for funding, trying to expand their network or information base, or something else? This information shared in advance is appreciated to allow nonprofit staff to prepare for the meeting.

Relying on program officers alone to recommend new GRAOs for funding results in missed opportunities for broader community input. Instead of foundations relying on program officers to hear about organizations from their own networks, GRAOs emphasized the importance of hearing from community voices. Voices of those affected by or working on a certain issue were seen as having deeper insight into which organizations were doing meaningful community-driven work. Examples of how to bring community representatives into grantmaking roles include having foundations appoint some board members from the community and paying community members to play a participatory or advisory role in grantmaking. This could include making formal recommendations or reviewing proposed grants for any

gaps. One funder that does this emphasized the importance of enlisting these community representatives in powerful, and even co-equal, roles to foundation staff and providing them with necessary support staff to do the hard work of making grant recommendations. This includes meeting concrete needs such as childcare and transportation for foundation meetings. These practices allow community members to participate fully in their role rather than becoming figureheads.

Building new relationships with organizations often requires ensuring equal access for GRAOs with different language preferences. Organizations for which English is not the main operational language, or the primary language they use with their communities, often feel there is a performative effort to conversations with foundations (both oral and written). **Language justice**³, – or ensuring that people have the ability to communicate in the language with which they feel most comfortable – was emphasized by many GRAOs and seen as an oversight in the field of philanthropy. Even translation (e.g., having all materials available in multiple languages), considered one of the most basic language justice practices, was seen as underemphasized. Those we spoke to, however, saw language justice as going far beyond translation. From their perspective, it also includes providing interpretation for all foundation resources (such as convenings and networking) and shifting some of the responsibilities related to grantee-funder communication away from the grantee and towards the funder – who is typically much more resourced to do this. Examples we heard include the foundation paying for an interpreter for a site visit or virtual meeting and allowing grantees to submit grant materials in their preferred language and paying a translator to convert the materials into English.

Frank acknowledgment about previous harm, future accountability, and existing power differentials are needed to create new relationships. Several advocates saw the field of philanthropy as interested in moving forward in supporting grassroots efforts without a sufficient recounting of how the field has actively harmed some community work. One GRAO noted the pain of working for several years on the same issue as a foundation, and sometimes being asked to weigh in on issues affecting people of color, but not receiving any funding for its community-led work. This GRAO was now being pursued

³ **Language justice** ensures that people have the ability to communicate in the language with which they feel most comfortable. Examples of language justice include translation (e.g., having all materials available in multiple languages) and interpretation services. These efforts can be led by foundations that are better resourced to enable this practice.

by the same foundation as a potential grantee, but the GRAO felt this behavior tokenized its work and granted the foundation a pass on previous behavior.

This type of complex reckoning was seen as necessary from the perspective of grantees but not mentioned in any of our interviews with funders, indicating a potential disconnect between where the starting place is for foundations interested in building relationships with communities and the communities themselves. This is complicated by the fact that often the foundation as an institution retains a certain reputation while the individuals involved in those choices are no longer at the institution. Foundations were also encouraged to be explicit about where their own lines were currently drawn rather than positioning themselves as transformed. This honesty helps GRAOs understand how they can meet the foundation as a potential funder, where the foundation is interested in dialogue, where the foundation is interested in control, and where the foundation is willing to let a GRAO fully drive things.

What are the grant processes and practices that are most accommodating of grassroots advocacy organizations?

Aligned with historical research, general operating support and multi-year grant awards were the most accommodating grant practices. Both of these allow organizations the funding flexibility to identify and act on emerging opportunities. Our interviews and prior experience also found this to be true for GRAOs. general operating support, can be used by organizations to respond to emerging needs or to support work that is often not explicitly supported by more targeted funders (e.g., attending coalition meetings). Multi-year grant commitments, allow organizations to build out longer-term strategies or partnerships that may not have an immediate payoff but offer high value in the long term. Both can also allow executive directors or other staff involved in fundraising to prioritize more strategic parts of their work.

There are some caveats to consider. One caveat was offered by a foundation that also awarded the bulk of its dollars through participatory grantmaking. This foundation felt there was a tension between offering longer-term grants (with advantages for the individual grantee) and offering more frequent opportunities for participatory grantmaking to ensure the foundation was aligning with the needs of the moment. Another includes research that shows grantees often use their general support to do more of the same programming rather than changing how they are thinking about or implementing work. Therefore, a funder cannot assume that a nonprofit will necessarily use general operating support to develop new work or meet new needs and should consider awarding funds as general operating support only if it is truly willing to let the nonprofit decide how these funds will be used. If the foundation is hoping to use general support to change how a grantee organization is approaching work, this needs to be an explicit conversation. Finally, a funder interested in general operating support must still retain a way to evaluate this work and show its impact; this role will now most often be done via an externally conducted evaluation focused on assessing not just organizational impact but also field change.

Practices to build the credibility of GRAOs with more established advocacy organizations are needed. For newer and smaller GRAOs in particular, there is often a credibility gap between what the organization thinks it can deliver and the extent to which more established advocacy organizations want the new GRAO to be at the table. Funders can boost organizational credibility in a few ways. First, a funder can build time and space for participating in advocacy coalitions into the grant award, whether through formal capacity building to allow the GRAO to better participate in the coalition or simply by providing incentives to do so (e.g., building coalition participation into grant requirements and funding time spent on coalitional work). Making it explicit that a GRAO will participate in an advocacy coalition operating on a particular issue and then resourcing (whether financially or with capacity-building support) the GRAO to do so allows built-in support and accountability into the process. Another way to boost credibility is by allowing a portion of the GRAO's grant funds to go to individuals or informal entities to operationalize requests. For example, **advocacy coalitions**⁴ are often seeking stories from people impacted by a particular policy. With a pool of funds for regranting, a GRAO could support individuals to share their stories in a more compelling way. Finally, offering robust and multi-year funding can also be a signal that a GRAO can lean on to show it has support from institutions with more developed reputations.

Offering resources focused on preventing burnout among those with lived experience can also fill an essential gap. Interviewees for this research – and from previous engagements – note the burden put on those doing grassroots advocacy work. Staff at GRAOs are often asked to play a storytelling and narrative role for a broader movement, which can present as tokenizing or making performative their lived experience. Some resources targeted to meet this mental health load included:

- Integrating somatic practices into convenings to allow advocates to connect with their physical bodies and presence;
- Allowing some informal space for leaders of GRAOs to connect with each other without foundation staff present to build more authentic shared space;

⁴ **Advocacy coalitions** are groups of actors who coordinate themselves to bring attention to, and influence decision making on, shared issues. Additionally, advocacy coalitions may share findings and resources in order to promote learning on their issues.

- Hiring facilitators that are trauma-informed and experienced in working on issues related to equity, which often requires a deeper level of sensitivity to the experiences of those in the room; and,
- Providing quality childcare for meetings, which can allow caregivers to show up more fully.

One foundation centered its work in this area on Cara Page’s thinking on **healing justice**⁵. Another foundation we worked with ensured that whenever an in-person convening took place, it was held at a high-quality facility – allowing participants to experience the times outside of the convening as a personal retreat. However, some participants critiqued the use of funds toward this luxury, indicating that perhaps a best practice is to ask grassroots advocates what would be helpful and what they would prefer to do without.

An easier application process is a cornerstone of meeting the needs of individuals working at the grassroots level. Funders noted several approaches for how they worked to simplify the process. One noted a three-question narrative form that simply asked the grantee how its work was aligned with the foundation’s work. Another said its program officers would create the grant application on behalf of the grantee, and the grantee’s role would be to make any factual edits or corrections. Another said they would ask community members what technology they had access to before suggesting a medium for the grant application. Grantees also suggested a few practices we did not observe currently implemented in our research, including providing the ability to submit applications in a variety of mechanisms (e.g., video or orally instead of via a written application). Language justice, again, was seen as essential to grantees who worked with populations preferring languages other than English – with the preference being accessing and submitting the grant application in the grantee’s preferred language and having the funder aid with translation or interpretation. As with many decisions, there are potential drawbacks with the simplified application approach; for instance, some organizations feel they can’t sufficiently articulate their organization’s value with truncated applications and fear these simplified processes restrict foundations from learning about new grantees.

⁵ **Healing Justice** is term created by Cara Page, as part of the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, to create a framework that addresses generational oppression, violence, and trauma by centering on emotional, physical, spiritual, and environmental well-being for collective liberation. She created this framework in response to regressive policies toward minorities in the South and burnout among organizers in the 2000s.

What are the methods, strategies, and/or processes foundations have undertaken to align themselves with or support community health equity priorities? What motivated the foundation to take this direction?

There are several methods foundations have used to better align themselves with community health equity priorities. These include:

Listening tours

- Listening tours, sometimes facilitated by a foundation directly but more often by an independent consultant, focus on understanding what issues are impacting a community's health status and allow a funder more insight into the on-the-ground situation and the opportunity to better think through a grantmaking strategy. Listening tours often include both a curated list of individuals and an emergent list based on participant recommendations for who else the foundation should be listening to.

Community advisory boards

- Community advisory boards can provide both feedback on particular grants as well as insight into strategy, goals, and overall foundation direction. It is important to note that these boards often are biased toward professionals rather than people living directly in a particular community. To execute them meaningfully, foundations must consider the participants as bringing insight to the table and be willing to give them some decision-making power. In our experience, foundations that take a more tokenizing approach to advisory boards – asking participants to provide information in narrowly defined areas of the foundation's choosing and not allowing openness to co-setting the agenda with community advisory board members – will not reap any meaningful benefits and will marginalize the participants.

Participatory grantmaking

- Allowing community members to control grantmaking budgets and award funds is a direct way that a foundation can ensure its grantmaking work is aligned with the goals and interests of the community. For foundations grounded in specific issues like health equity, it is often worth providing the education and information participants need on a particular issue or topic to better facilitate their decision making.

Motivations toward Community Health and Equity

In all of this work, funders need to keep in mind that “community” is not a monolith. We often hear funders talk about grassroots organizations as a proxy for community voice. This disregards the fact that many GRAOs are themselves focused on a particular neighborhood, demographic, or topic, while communities are comprised of many neighborhoods, demographics, and topics. Funders should think about how GRAOs are meaningfully engaged with their own communities – to what extent are these organizations authentically listening to those they serve? Funders should also focus on trying to get as much community voice from different places as possible. This likely means that instead of doing participatory grantmaking or a community advisory board, a foundation does and assesses both to understand how the make-up of these entities reflects those living in a broader community.

Foundations view their own motivation toward equity as genuine and are increasingly coming to understand equity needs to be a driving value to bring about meaningful social change, which requires considering how equity is implicated in philanthropy operations. We spoke to several funders who have had a longer-term commitment to equity and were on the forefront of the philanthropic shift towards equity. These funders were all motivated by a growing understanding that social change, as it is traditionally accomplished, has not truly benefited all people. Often, these funders were motivated to commit to equity as a value guiding their work because they were dissatisfied with the limited social change seen with more traditional approaches to grantmaking. There was also interest in how a keen understanding of equity helps to more clearly define the roles and expertise of a funder compared to a grantee. As an equity funder, funders are concerned with their own grantmaking practices and relationships

(something pretty squarely inside their locus of control). Grantees then retain control over specific strategies and approaches, as that's where their expertise lies. This shift in roles was seen by equity funders as better reorienting the traditional power dynamics of philanthropy.

There is a perception among both GRAOs and some funders that many foundations newer to the equity movement are primarily motivated by keeping up with trends in philanthropy. Several interviewees, in this engagement and previous, have commented that the move of the philanthropic field toward equity has led to important issues being treated with a type of “lip service” that is not always matched by organizational practices. These interviewees also noted there is often a disconnect within foundations on the extent to which equity is leading its work, with foundation staff having understood the benefits of equity grantmaking well before their boards. As equity has become a more common frame in society at large, board members have also come along. Even within foundations, we've seen that a move toward equity often happens at a portfolio level; reorienting an entire foundation toward equity is seen as a much more difficult practice. The process of scaling up this practice is not entirely clear, and there are often implications of the work that are not understood until later. For example, we worked with a major global funder that shifted the majority of its grantmaking budget into rapid response grants, which had the unanticipated side effect of unmooring program officers from their traditional role serving as grantee advocates, preventing new grantees from feeling any meaningful institutional support from this major funder. These types of shifts and their unintended side effects are still very much in development in the field.

Finding Alignment Among Advocacy Organizations and the Foundation

This section shares how funders have balanced their own advocacy goals with those of the grassroots advocates they fund. Foundations can legally engage in some advocacy efforts directly. Further, they can use their endowments to set up independent 501(c)4s that can engage in direct lobbying. At the same time, many advocacy-focused organizations are specialized in assessing the advocacy landscape and driving a strategy forward – and many GRAOs may be most interested in building their strategies collaboratively with their community members.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- GRAOs can be particularly inclined to interpret foundation requests as demands, and this may impact the work they do.
- Top-down and bottom-up organizations may experience dissonance in how they prefer to create advocacy agendas.
- Funders can play unique roles related to supporting GRAOs in an advocacy ecosystem, including building the capacity of GRAOs and the capacity of other actors to work with GRAOs, and playing a role in evaluation and learning.
- Advocacy funders often support their grantmaking by leveraging their foundation's name, brand, relationship, and bully pulpit, as well as coordinating with other funders.

QUESTION

4

How have foundations balanced the desire to align missions/goals with respecting the expertise and choice of grassroots organizations to define their goals and objectives? How much do other foundations direct the goals and objectives for grassroots advocacy organization applicants? What examples exist of foundations that prescribe objectives and/or outcomes and foundations that fund advocacy organizations to determine their own desired outcomes?

There are three approaches that showcase a spectrum of how foundations can think about balancing their own goals with those of their grantees. For each of these, Table 2 (next page) shares information about who sets the goals, who sets the strategies, benefits and drawbacks to the approach, and an example to illustrate how we've seen this approach play out in real-life. These examples exist on a spectrum, and organizational approaches can fall in various places along the continuum.

Table 2. Foundation Approaches

	Approaches with LESS Control	Approaches with MORE Control	
Example Funding Scenarios	A health foundation is focused on moving toward statewide health equity. Its funding portfolio aims to empower grantees to work towards health equity in the way that grantees deem best.	A corporate foundation interested in health equity chooses to focus on diabetes prevention and treatment, an area where it can offer technical expertise. It is open to grantees proposing their own strategies as long as they are evidence-based.	A national foundation is interested in improving the number of post-secondary degrees offered in a state. It brings together existing organizations in a coalition, some of which are focused on this issue and others focused on tangentially related issues. Each grantee has pre-selected strategies, metrics, and goals.
Goals	Foundation sets a high-level goal.	Foundation sets a specific goal.	Foundation sets a specific goal and identifies goals for grantees.
Strategy	Grantee determines the strategy to achieve the goal.	Grantee determines strategy, within parameters set by the funder.	Foundation and grantee collaborate on the strategy employed.
Agenda	Driven by community input.	Co-created by foundation staff and community input.	Created entirely by the foundation.
Benefits	Closest to being community-driven.	Can allow for a foundation to carve out a niche and build expertise.	Allows a foundation to protect against mission creep and strengthen its issue-area capacity.
Drawbacks	Possibility that the work may go in an undesirable direction.	May miss emergent opportunities.	Limited sustainability and lack of engagement among grantees.
Evaluation Methods	Developmental evaluation.	Outcomes evaluation.	Outcomes evaluation.

Even relatively common practices can lead to a perception that foundations do not truly value community expertise. Hiring consultants to conduct research and engaging in activities such as **landscape scans**⁶ allows the funder to deepen its understanding but are devoid of accountability to the individuals sharing their insights. One individual we spoke to noted that they were asked to participate in eight landscape scans – conducted by eight different funders – in the last year. This lack of coordinated effort (e.g., having the foundations do the work of aligning their questions so those with the needed expertise can have one meeting instead of eight) and clear accountability from funders results in a perception that foundations involved in these efforts are not truly interested in being grantee-led, but, instead, invite grantees into their decision-making process in a more performative way.

Grassroots organizations largely felt that foundation interference into their own goals was inappropriate, and they developed mechanisms to avoid this. One example from a recent interview showed a strong illustration of such avoidance. This organization purposefully identified funders that were aware of how grassroots work happens and were willing to provide the flexibility needed to allow organizations to do their work. In return for this flexibility, it candidly shared progress and challenges along the way to its broad goals. This organization avoided funders that were seen as more rigid, including those that weren't willing to provide flexible funding via general operating support. Other organizations may need the financial support and not feel comfortable turning away funds. In these cases, funders should stay alert to power dynamics and consider how requests may be perceived by GRAOs as soft demands.

GRAOs often have a perception that a funder is interested in directing advocacy efforts when funders might disagree. We have found, almost universally, that because of the power differentials involved between funders and grantees, when foundations ask about advocacy strategies, grantees perceive an element of pressure. What a funder interprets as a casual question aimed at understanding the impact of a particular narrative campaign strategy, the GRAO may perceive as a hint to engage in more **narrative strategy**⁷ work. This perception can skew the understanding of who is setting advocacy goals. Even if a foundation is not interested in being

⁶ A **landscape scan** is an analysis method that maps the field where organizations aim to make a difference. TCC's encompassing approach involves ecosystem mapping to gather data on key actors in the field, strategies for change, and funding trends. More information on TCC's approach can be found here, on TCC's website.

⁷ A type of **strategy** that uses **narratives** and storytelling as outreach tools to build emotional relationships to help move external audiences.

overly directive, it will still likely need to work around these assumptions by building more trusting relationships and being conscientious about how funding parameters may be seen as ways to either establish trust or not (e.g., a foundation providing general support may be seen to trust an organization, whereas one dictating a scope of work with deliverables may be seen as deterring trust).

Foundations, traditional advocacy organizations, and GRAOs often use different methods and resources to set their advocacy agendas; foundations that want to support GRAOs need to allow for some bottom-up decision making. There can be some dissonance about how to most appropriately set an advocacy agenda. Philanthropies are often more top-down in decision-making, and traditional advocacy organizations can be top-down as well. How GRAOs navigate agenda-setting in these contexts can be complicated (at best) and cause direct and disruptive conflict (at worst). Foundations that use a more top-down approach to agenda setting (either directly or by empowering other grantees to do so) and who are also interested in supporting GRAOs (either directly or via regranteeing), will need to explore how to explicitly allow for some bottom-up decision making. For example, a foundation might require that a coalition it funds, in which a mix of GRAOs and non-GRAOs participates, engage in a number of listening sessions, or the foundation may use a **community advisory group**⁸ to review the relevance of the advocacy goals.

⁸ **Community advisory groups** are typically composed of diverse representatives from the same community served by the foundation to provide valuable insight into the underlying community dynamics and needs. They are used to institutionalize community engagement, broaden community participation, and foster more inclusive planning and decision-making by foundations. Each community advisory group is unique, and different groups have varying levels of decision-making authority.

How do foundations that fund advocacy organizations determine their own goals and objectives to conduct their own advocacy work? Do these foundations typically have their own policy agendas, adopt the priorities of their grantees, or not participate in much direct policy work?

Funders can support a unique role in the broader advocacy ecosystem.

The Center for Evaluation Innovation suggests five roles that funders can play when thinking about building advocacy power for the long-term. Each of these roles is somewhat unique, in that only an institution like a funder – typically financially stable with an endowment, often perceived as a power player, and with the unique ability to resource and convene other actors – could fill these roles in the advocacy ecosystem. For each of these roles, we’ve added additional context to how these roles can look in the context of working with GRAOs.

Table 3. Five Foundation Roles in Building Advocacy Power and Practices Linked to GRAOs

Foundation Role	Practices Linked to GRAOs
<p>Acting as an ecosystem partner – to look at the entire system of actors rather than narrowly at one part of the system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centering the work of GRAOs within the broader advocacy ecosystem. • Building a clarity of vision for the roles of different actors in the ecosystem.
<p>Using an ecosystem approach – to break down issue silos and address root causes of inequities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building the capacity of non-GRAOs towards equity and other related values. • Purposefully facilitating cross-actor conversation about values and approach (perhaps by hiring an expert facilitator).
<p>Championing grassroots power – to resource grassroots actors to be fully at the table.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building the credibility and capacity of GRAOs to be fully operationalized.
<p>Building long-term capacity – to plan for sustainability and the long game.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing multi-year and general operating support grants.
<p>Accelerating learning for strategy – to hold and share knowledge related to what’s changing and what’s working.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling cross-sector convenings. • Holding the role (or explicitly asking another organization to hold the role) of learning partner to decentralize learning. • Setting a learning agenda⁹ related to supporting GRAOs in a broader advocacy landscape.

⁹A **learning agenda** can include questions that address knowledge gaps, create plans to answer these questions, and collect evidence. It has structural flexibility to best match an organization’s learning needs. Ultimately, a learning agenda promotes a culture of continual learning.

Advocacy funders will often use a few core strategies to conduct their own complementary advocacy work. These strategies include:

Supporting research

- Access to rigorous research (e.g., public polling, understanding the proportion of people affected by an issue) can be a major asset to an advocacy field, because it allows advocates to provide data points in support of their issues. GRAOs, in particular, are often not resourced to engage in research. We've seen funders support research that complements GRAO work in two ways. One is to support GRAOs to conduct **participatory research**¹⁰ to better understand the context of their communities. Another is to hire a research organization to engage in the work and then resource the GRAO(s) to inform the research agenda.

Leveraging the foundation's name and brand

- Each foundation has a unique brand (though some are more well-known than others). Funders can be strategic in how they think about their brand complementing the work of advocates, when to lead with brand, and when to tuck brand away and lead with the advocates themselves. For work related to GRAOs, a foundation name and brand may lend legitimacy to the work, but it may also complicate the organization's relationships with its community.

Leveraging the foundation's relationships

- Foundations are often in a unique role to advocate with much less potential blowback than nonprofit institutions. This positions them to be a more powerful voice and utilize direct relationships with power brokers more effectively than many advocates – especially GRAOs.

Coordinating other funders

- A foundation that has a particular passion for an issue can try to coordinate other funders to join its advocacy efforts. This can be informal, through softly coordinated funding, or more formal, by establishing and inviting other funders to participate in a funders collaborative that pools and distributes resources. Again, this can leverage resources on behalf of grantees that the foundation would otherwise not be able to leverage directly.

¹⁰ **Participatory action research** is a method designed to engage the subjects of a study to research themselves rather than have research done on them from afar. These local foci form the basis for future participatory research.

Some foundations are also increasingly supporting individuals – as a parallel idea to general operating support for grassroots organizations.

- In 2020 and 2021, TCC Group partnered with a major global funder that created a fellowship program to support those who it felt had the potential to contribute to change in the policing and incarceration system in the United States. This fellowship program provided individual stipends with no strings attached and were intended to allow these individuals to create space to reflect and hopefully generate new ideas. Other large funders we've worked with have built explicit regranteeing requirements to individuals into their recent local grantmaking, creating a pathway to expand the innovation of the entire field. The Marguerite Casey Foundation and Group Health Foundation created a similar program called Freedom Scholars. In its own words:

“Marguerite Casey Foundation and Group Health Foundation have partnered to provide unrestricted support to emerging leaders in academia whose research can provide critical insight to social justice leaders and whose ideas encourage all of us to imagine how we can radically improve our democracy, economy and society.”⁷

“Philanthropy needs to use its economic resources to change the economic rules. One way to do this is to provide unrestricted, concrete financial support to people whose research, life experiences and leadership can provide critical insight to radically improve our democracy, economy and society. It’s the leadership of people of color that can help society navigate out of its hardest challenges, especially because communities of color are often closest to those problems — due to a long history of institutional racism — and they are best suited to understand the best solutions to them. Rather than setting the agenda in terms of what certain elite families want, we have an opportunity to support community leaders in setting the agenda themselves.”

- Carmen Rojas, Marguerite Casey Foundation ^{6B}

Many of these programs that we are aware of are nascent and were specifically created after racial justice work in the United States became more prominent in 2020. There may be some overlap to the field of evaluating fellowships, but as a specific purpose of these grants is to allow people to have space for rest and reflection, it's not clear if a fellowship framework (which often has more concrete achievement-related objectives) is the best match. Funders we've spoken to who award grants to individuals tend to think of the grant award itself as the practice rather than an outcome emerging from the grant award.

Supporting Grassroots Advocacy Organizations Without Restrictions

Funding is the most straightforward mechanism foundations have to support the work of other organizations. This section shares how funders have approached providing grants to GRAOs, including the benefits and drawbacks of general operating support. It also shares information about how foundations should think about ending funding, a particularly important consideration for GRAOs, which tend to have smaller budgets and fewer robust funders.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Unrestricted funding provides GRAOs budget flexibility that often determines their strategic flexibility. It can also build organizational credibility, shift power dynamics, and strengthen an overall field (if awarded at sufficient amounts).
- Ending grant support should be decided in advance – ideally when grants are first conceived. Good practices include giving multi-year and wind-down grants and having honest, explicit conversations with grantees.

What are foundations' ultimate goals when they support grassroots advocacy organizations with unrestricted grant funding? What does philanthropy ultimately hope to achieve through this approach?

There is one main goal that funders are hoping to achieve with unrestricted funded – providing nonprofit organizations the budgetary, and thus strategic, flexibility they need to move their own work forward.

The traditional grantmaking standard of awarding a grant that is pegged to metrics, a clear scope of work, and/or a timeline often does not work well for certain types of organizations, including GRAOs. These nonprofits are often engaged in more adaptive work and need to respond to emergent opportunities. For example, TCC Group worked with a coalition focused on expanding childcare that was able to take advantage of a funder converting all grant awards to general operating support in 2020 to seize the opportunity COVID-19 provided to establish additional funding for childcare and sector stability. Funders offering this type of support are aiming to provide flexible financial support to the experts or main actors in any given sector. This support is seen as allowing the nonprofit organization to fully utilize its own expertise in decision-making and strategy.

Some funders also provide unrestricted grant funding with a goal of shifting power dynamics. Funding that is fully at the control of a nonprofit allows grantees to decide the work that is most important at any given moment rather than implementing a pre-determined workplan tied to a funder's goals. As noted in question four, the philanthropic field's shift to **strategic philanthropy**¹¹ dramatically shifted power dynamics toward the funder by allowing it to set the entire strategy. The provision of general support is intended to shift back at least some of these power dynamics by holding the granted organization at a more equal level with the funder.

¹¹**Strategic philanthropy** is an approach where a funder's philanthropy defines strategy and outcomes to promote the funder's own mission, goals, and in some cases, financial bottom-line, as well as improve society.

Unrestricted funding provides several additional benefits, though these are often ancillary to the main goal.

Unrestricted funding can also build the credibility of a GRAO.

- In some respects, a general operating grant from a funder can signal a stamp of approval and ease the path for the GRAO to receive funding from other foundations. The general support acts as a sign that an organization is strong and has a base of support – and that another foundation has taken on the work of due diligence.

Unrestricted funding has the potential to strengthen the overall field and help the foundation achieve its desired mission.

- Unrestricted funding creates spaces for new opportunities by allowing grantees to have flexibility – including the flexibility to experiment – in how they do their work. Regranting is often a good example of this, with an organization receiving general support regranting some funds to build new infrastructure or seed a new idea. For example, a coalition TCC worked with was able to establish, with general support, a regranting fund that was used to help individuals in more rural areas activate their networks to support legislative efforts. This allowed members of the coalition to tap their networks in a way that foundation staff could not have supported on their own. Our evaluation of the Emergent Fund – a rapid response fund created after the 2016 election that only supported grassroots organizations with general support funds – found that grantees often used new strategies in their work to better achieve their desired changes.

Unrestricted funding can be used to deflect criticism.

- We've seen funders use unrestricted funding to deflect criticism in two ways. First, there has been a trend among large foundations that are criticized for not sufficiently supporting communities of color to award more general operating support – either directly or via regranting. This allows these foundations to demonstrate a major beneficial practice that enhances equity. Secondly, foundations have used unrestricted funding to insulate the foundation from decision making made by their grantees. Some foundations, for example, choose to support both an “inside” and “outside” game of advocacy. By providing general support, these funders can claim a certain level of distance from the actions of those they fund.

How have philanthropic organizations managed ending grant support for an organization after several years of funding? How can funders best manage grantee expectations around continued funding?

Challenges related to continued funding can be somewhat mitigated by good grantmaking practices. These include:

Multi-year grants

- This can give grantees a clearer timeframe to prepare for a grant that is ending. Rather than receiving a one-year grant for multiple years that is then not renewed, grantees can count on the amount of time left in their current multi-year grant, and funders can start a conversation about ending support in year one of the most recent grant.

Wind-down grants

- Providing some grant funding to help the grantee tie up related work can allow the nonprofit organization to think about what ending this work, or sustaining it differently, can look like. This is particularly important for grassroots organizations that often approach their work from a set of value principles. Simply ending a particular project may not be aligned with the decision-making process, so these organizations may need time to discuss with their partners what a responsible program end looks like. Winding down funding should take into account the percentage of the current budget being supported by the funder. Foundations can also offer matching funding. For example, during the wind-down phase, a foundation ending support could provide 60 percent of its original funding and match 20 percent of other funds raised.

Decide the guidelines for ending funding in advance

- Foundations can choose to hold themselves accountable to some clear guidelines for sustaining and ending grant support. What will determine if the grant is re-awarded or not? If the answer is the foundation's own shifting priorities, the foundation may want to consider how it is showing up as an accountable and trusted partner in the communities it is working in. Hal Harvey, one of the originators of the concept of strategic philanthropy, is noted for now critiquing how the concept enhances funder/grantee power dynamics by giving foundations absolute discretion and limiting their accountability.

Communicate honestly about grant ending

- We have observed several instances where foundation staff feel they have communicated clearly and explicitly about ending funding and grantee staff say the exact opposite. The institutional relationship between a foundation and a nonprofit is often, in fact, an individual relationship between a program officer and an executive director, and money can be a difficult thing to talk frankly about. We recommend that communication about grant awards always be done in writing to counteract a tendency to avoid these topics in conversation. We further recommend program officers come into grant closure conversations explicitly – being crystal clear about what the foundation's future commitment is (if any) and not expecting grantee organizations to read between the lines.

Connecting with a broader network of funders may not be sufficient

- While this is a standard practice for ending a grant, our experience working with nonprofits leads us to question how effective this practice is. In a field that is still largely focused on strategic philanthropy, it is often hard for GRAOs doing specialized work to find other major funders interested in their niche issue. Thus, the likelihood that a new funder will want to step in to fill a void that, by definition, was created by the original funder wanting to move to different work, is likely pretty slim.

Readiness for Success

Funders have to make careful decisions when awarding grant funds, including thinking about timelines for success and the types of efforts their individual grantees are ready to engage in. This section explores different ways to think about readiness and how they relate to GRAOs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The concept of readiness has often been used to exclude organizations from funding rather than meeting an organization where it is. Several funders felt that instead of a standard for readiness, funders should be willing to fund organizations that are aligned with the foundation's vision of work, even if there is not yet any proof of success.
- Readiness needs may be different across an organization's lifecycle. Rather than seeing readiness as a standard to reach, some funders saw it as articulating capacity needs that an organization has at its given stage of lifecycle. It is important to construct realistic timeframes and consider where organizations are in their lifecycles when thinking about social change.

What are the readiness elements of a well-developed grassroots advocacy organization that is positioned to succeed on its substantive issues? How can a foundation recognize whether an organization is ready for a significant investment? What are reasonable timeframes for organizations to develop and have a meaningful impact?

The concept of readiness has often been used as a means to exclude organizations from funding. Rather than drawing a hard line – before which organizations are not ready for funding and after which organizations are ready for funding – we recommend funders and grassroots advocates engage in conversations about what an organization is ready for now and what it wants to be ready for in the future. Including this orientation in conversations about **capacity building**¹³ can ensure the conversation is productive, meets the grantees where they are, and increases their future readiness.

Readiness to engage in network is different than content readiness.

GRAOs often have content or topical readiness before they have organizational readiness to engage in networks. This can create a disconnect where an organization thrives at listening to the community but struggles to situate itself in a more formal advocacy movement or coalition. Funders should work with GRAOs to help them understand both what they are bringing to the table and what other organizations will expect them to bring to the table. This could include:

- Helping GRAOs position themselves as credible (as mentioned in more detail in question six)

¹² **Capacity building** is the generation of resources or support intended to help an institution or organization enhance its ability to fulfill its mission or purpose (i.e., any activity or support that is focused on the health and sustainability of the organization rather than on specific programs). This can include a wide variety of support including, but not limited to, strategic planning, fundraising, evaluation, marketing, or human resources.

- Explicitly resourcing GRAO staff and volunteers to show up at coalition meetings and follow-up on coalitional work
- Commissioning research that builds an evidence base for the issues that the GRAO is focused on
- Helping the GRAO understand its strategic niche and advance its ability to articulate the role and arena where it can play the most important role in a broader movement

Funders must balance their desire for clear and efficient timelines with an understanding of both the complexity of how social change happens and the impact that working toward social change can have on organizational leaders and staff. Keeping a realistic timeframe in mind is important for those working on social change. Having progress measures is essential for long-term social change evaluation. This may mean that meaningful impact is not achieving a major win, such as a policy change, but a more realistic understanding of the path to getting to that change – for example, building a more representative coalition, creating a certain number of legislative champions, or getting an amount of media coverage.

A complicating factor for GRAOs is the potential for burnout, coupled with the long timeframes for social change and the sentiment that a GRAO never feels it has truly won but instead will always move on to the next most pressing issue.

“Advocacy wins take time and while funders might want to see early returns, they should instead focus on the smaller wins which pave a pathway to the overarching success.”

- Foundation Program Officer

A lifecycle approach to nonprofits may be helpful when thinking about timeframes related to organizational readiness. TCC Group has developed a lifecycle staging that refers to three stages in a nonprofit's growth:¹³

Core Program Development:

- Aligning programs with mission and vision and clarifying how these elements relate to each other.

Infrastructure Development:

- Focusing on the systems needed for an organization to operate smoothly, including having policies in place, good communication between staff, and initial evaluation.

Impact Expansion:

- Broadening the approach to achieve mission impact beyond programing, including strategic alliances, partnerships, policy work, or further community outreach.

While no stage of the lifecycle is superior to any others, determining which stage of the nonprofit lifecycle an organization is in now may help a funder think about what readiness looks like at the moment. An organization in any stage may be “ready,” just for different types of strategies and work.

What an Organization Needs to Build Its Advocacy Power

GRAOs often have a small staff. This section describes how funders can think about the level of grantmaking these organizations need and how to best approach capacity building.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Funding from a single foundation should not shift focus away from a GRAO's core mission nor make up the majority of a GRAO's budget.
- Because of the size and limited capacity of GRAOs, awarding grants directly to these organizations may require more administrative time from foundation staff to support the application and due diligence process.
- All capacity building needs to be culturally relevant and accessible (including in preferred languages).
- Communications capacity and building connections and networks are particular areas where foundations can contribute to grantee capacity.
- Early-stage capacity support is critical for GRAOs, with a potential impact on long-term sustainability.
- GRAOs with very few staff may struggle to engage in organizational capacity building.
- Grassroots leaders need some unique types of support, including topical skills, spaces to connect with peer leaders, support staff, and access to the resources necessary to do this work long-term.

What amount of funding is needed for a grassroots advocacy organization to be successful?

Funding must not shift focus away from the mission. A foundation that brings significant financial resources into a smaller organization of any type must be cautious not to shift the organization away from its core mission. We were not able to find any related research, but we offer the caution that this might be particularly true for a foundation working with a grassroots organization and asking it to bring advocacy into its fold. A foundation should, at the least, consider the impact a major influx of funding will have on an organization's core programmatic work and have explicit conversations about this with potential grantees for any large grants. This is not to say foundations cannot articulate or co-develop advocacy goals with the grantee, but it is important to think about the impact these goals will have on the GRAO's core programmatic work, especially if it is not already an active GRAO.

Funding should not distort an organization's sustainability. Funders that provide the majority of an organization's budget have to communicate transparency about their commitment to the organization, including how many years of funding at the current level the foundation is willing to sustain. While there's not necessarily a problem with a funder providing substantial budget support, this can become a problem if the foundation's strategic priorities shift such that it is no longer willing to fund the nonprofit.

A foundation should be prepared for greater administrative needs if awarding grants to GRAOs directly. Supporting GRAOs in a broader advocacy field often requires more, but smaller, grants. For many foundations, this increases the amount of compliance required. This may be particularly true with GRAOs because program officers may need to support GRAOs with keeping track of budgets and timelines. Some foundations can avoid this by supporting GRAOs via regranting, where the foundation

makes a large grant to an intermediary that then manages the grants and relationships with the grassroots advocates. While this can streamline burden, it does also prevent the original foundation from building direct relationships with the grassroots advocates.

There is some early work being done to look at grantmaking amounts in relation to organizational budgets. How much funding to award to a particular grantee is a complicated question that the field of philanthropy has tended to answer through individual decisions (e.g., what a program officer recommends to its foundation leadership). The Marguerite Casey Foundation has chosen to offer flat amounts of general support to selected organizations that are tied to the organization's budget size and history of success. Newer organizations (e.g., typically those with smaller budget size and perhaps a shorter proven history of success) are offered small, but proportionally robust, amounts to build their organizations, while established organizations are offered more financial support to correlate to their larger budgets and often more complex strategies.

What capacities are critical to the success of grassroots organizations? What modes of technical assistance are most helpful in building these capacities?

Readiness should be used as a baseline to meet organizations where they are, not for gatekeeping. Regarding capacity, the appropriate question to be asked is, “What is a GRAO ready for at the moment, and what can it be ready for next?” With this mindset, a foundation can use the lens of capacity building to meet an organization where it is rather than waiting until it can reach a pre-conceptualized state of “readiness.”

All technical assistance should be culturally relevant and accessible.

Interviewees and TCC’s previous research detail the importance of ensuring that technical assistance is delivered via culturally relevant trainers. This often means working with providers who are from a specific community, have some lived experience, and/or who are able to develop materials that meet people where they are, using accessible language. As a matter of language justice, it is essential trainers are fluent in the language that is best suited for any given nonprofit organization.

Communications capacity and building connections are a particular area where a foundation can advance a GRAO’s work. Several interviews and our previous experience have highlighted the communications capacity a well-staffed foundation can offer grantees. This can be simple – including information about a grantee in an annual report or email or possibly providing access to foundation communications staff to allow the grassroots advocate to respond to a crisis. Fostering inter-organizational connections was seen as similarly helpful. For example, a foundation can take information and relationships it already has and share these openly with a grassroots organization in a way that can greatly boost a GRAO’s work and encourage new and stronger relationships.

Early-stage capacity-building support is a critical intervention for new organizations that could affect their long-term sustainability. Several interviewees noted the importance of start-up support. One funder went as far as to say capacity-building support was often a key determinant as to

whether organizations will shut down within ten years or sustain their work over the longer-term. The type of capacity-building work that fit into this category was broad and encompassed technical systems development (e.g., hiring systems, fundraising systems) and the establishment of managerial practices (e.g., timelines for performance reviews, job descriptions). Establishing productive practices while an organization is new can allow founders to build on good bones that are primed for growth. This type of capacity building can also allow smaller, newer organizations to sit more fully at various tables. For example, a CEO experienced in sharing information from a coalition in which they participate will show up and be able to execute on coalition-related tasks differently than someone who is figuring out all organizational systems on the fly.

Literature and our own experience highlight the importance of sufficient staff or volunteer readiness for systemic capacity building. TCC has coordinated a capacity-building cohort for grassroots organizations in the South for several years. In evaluating these efforts, we have found that for the majority of these small organizations, a lack of staff is the primary driver of whether a capacity improvement will be implemented and sustained or not. Therefore, a foundation interested in supporting capacity building for a GRAO with a small number of staff will want to think carefully, and likely in direct partnership with the grassroots organization, about how capacity building will be implemented and whether it makes sense to first hire new staff (either to help the organization enhance its capacity or to bring new capacity into the organization) or, if not, how the current staff will manage the demands of capacity building work. The Grantsmanship Center notes some criteria for readiness that go beyond staffing, including an openness to learning and change, a belief among key personnel that working on organizational change will enhance the group's ability to achieve its mission, an ability to articulate that mission, and the commitment of both time and resources. For funders interested in more systemic capacity building, providing funds to hire staff may be a needed first step.

The Building Movement Project highlighted four critical needs for grassroots leaders to allow them to strengthen and sustain their roles. These included:

- 1. Skills** – strategic analysis, narrative development, base building, and conflict management, including training on building cross-racial solidarity and conflict transformation
- 2. Spaces** – formal convenings or cohort-based spaces that allow individuals to reflect on their work and deepen their thinking
- 3. Squads of support** – structuring staff in complementary roles (e.g., an administrative assistant to manage scheduling; a financial officer to manage finances) and having access to supportive networks (e.g., a group of other leaders to troubleshoot or share ideas)
- 4. Sustainability** – accessing support to do this work over the longer-term, including health insurance, paid time off, sabbaticals, and healing justice supports

Funding capacity building can be tricky. Our research has found that general operating support is often not used for capacity building, despite this being often cited as a major way general support funds are (and, at times, are intended to be) spent. We have seen two alternative approaches to successfully fund capacity building.

- Supporting time for an organization to better understand its strengths and weaknesses and create a prioritized capacity-building plan. At TCC Group, this is often done via the Core Capacity Assessment Tool (CCAT), a quantitative self-assessment taken by an organization's staff leadership and board members. Once there is clarity on where an organization is doing well and where it is struggling, it is easier to identify specific opportunities for capacity building.
- Inviting the organization to a technical assistance opportunity (e.g., a series of trainings about development) and coupling that opportunity with one-on-one coaching to address unique organizational challenges and provide customized assistance that a smaller organization often needs to implement new structures.

Inspiring Existing Organizations to Expand Their Focus or Lens

Some funders may be committed to action in a certain topic area and want to bring advocates alongside them. This section provides guidance for these funders on how they can think about presenting an advocacy agenda to GRAOs and different strategies we've seen foundations use to effectively do this. It also shares information on the best way to choose between various organizations that are not fully aligned with a funder's goals or values.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Foundations have interested GRAOs in their own strategic approaches in several ways, including making funding criteria explicit, asking grantees to expand their lens but not change it, supporting intermediaries, and creating new organizations.
- Foundations tend to have better success at working with a values-aligned organization and expanding this organization's topical area of focus than working with a topically aligned organization and trying to shift its values.

What are the best ways for foundations to think about building relationships with advocacy organizations that focus on issues that differ from the foundation's priority areas? What steps have funders taken to influence the strategic directions of grassroots advocacy organizations?

We've seen foundations take several different approaches to interest advocacy organizations in their strategic priorities. These include:

Making criteria explicit

- Setting grantmaking criteria is a major way that funders build interest across a pool of potential grantees. This often includes being clear about the goals of funding, the strategic priorities of interest, and the lenses/values that should drive the work. By setting clear criteria around who or what would be considered for funding, foundations can convey a clear message to nonprofits: "These are our priorities, and if you match these priorities, please consider applying for funding."

Asking grantees to expand their existing lens, not change it

- Many grassroots advocates are focused on a specific demographic (e.g., asset-limited low-income employed, or ALICE, populations) or topic (e.g., environmental justice). Showing potential grantees the link between their current work and the foundation's strategic priorities can allow the grantees to expand their thinking about the needs and benefits as they relate to their demographics and topics of focus. For example, we know of a funder that supported organizations engaging in advocacy on HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. This funder was also interested in tuberculosis and gathered evidence about how tuberculosis can be a major risk for those who are already at risk for HIV/AIDS and succeeded in getting several organizations to expand

their focus to include tuberculosis, providing extensive capacity-building support in the process.

Supporting intermediaries or nontraditional actors

- Funders have supported organizations or individuals aligned with their priorities but not traditionally perceived as working within the field. For example, we're aware of a foundation that had a set of policy priorities and funded various actors to participate in a campaign focused on these priorities, including those that hadn't previously been involved in this issue. The funder was able to do this by having strong relationships with different sectors and a good read of the current advocacy situation. While it was able to get the new organizations to the table, there were still some dynamics around which organizations "deserved" to be there and which were there just for the money. While this strategy can bring new perspectives into an existing field, a funder must very intentionally aim for creating an atmosphere of longer-term sustainability and interest from the new members. If the new members don't build their own buy-in to the issues (relying instead of motivation led by funder dollars), this will be a strategy with time-limited usefulness.

Creating a new organization

- We've worked with funders in the United States that have created new organizations to serve as figureheads for their work. These can be traditional 501(c)3 nonprofits that execute their own programming, but we've also seen funders create 501(c)3 nonprofits to serve as coalition leads and align a loose or formal group of actors and create 501(c)4 organizations to serve as the lobbying arm to a pre-existing field. The exact logistics of creating new, independent organizations from existing foundation endowments is extremely complicated and requires tailored legal advice but is a strategic option that can greatly expand pathways to change. The Colorado Health Foundation used some of its endowment to create an independent 501(c)4 organization and has written about its decision making. This is a way that a foundation with sufficient resources can create a new actor and emphasize a shift it wants to see in a field. However, there is some tension that can emerge from this approach. A funder-established organization will

likely take some years to build trusting relationships with community-based organizations and will need to lean heavily on the foundation's reputation and early staff. There may further be feelings among organizations working in this space that the money could have been better spent via awarding grants to allow existing organizations to expand their own work.

Providing general operating support with some strings attached

- An organization can provide a grantee with a general support grant with the explicit assumption that, if an opportunity arises, the organization will use the funding to move the funder's priority forward. This can allow for a mutually beneficial relationship in which the foundation has an allied actor in the field that may not traditionally be interested in a certain priority; and the entity has the benefit of flexible grant resources and the space to move into a new area of work.

What types of organizations are most effective in shifting their focus? Is it better to pick one that just needs a little nudge to see the same issues through an equity lens or to find a values-aligned organization and see if it might consider adding health to the issue areas of focus?

Foundations have found the most success in supporting organizations aligned with their values and bringing in a new issue area rather than trying to bring a value of equity to an organization focused on an aligned topic. There are a few reasons for this.

- Several foundations (and our own research) have shown that it is difficult to approach a value – like equity or health equity – from a capacity building or technical assistance standpoint. This type of top-down funder approach can often lead to an uptick in ideas, but a standard difficulty with any sort of technical assistance still applies – increasing knowledge is easier than changing behavior.
- Those foundations aligned with the issue of equity are often primed to see interconnections in the social factors that impact individuals. For example, many different elements interplay within social determinants of health. Convincing an equity-focused organization that advocates for safer streets that there is alignment between its existing work and the benefit that safe streets can have on individual and community health is likely easier than convincing a non-equity focused organization that an intervention like safe walking spaces can have a major impact on health outcomes.

Facilitating Collaboration

Collaboration is important in any sector, but it is especially important for advocates who tend to operate in complex situations to keep informed of peer organizations playing complementary roles and gain knowledge they can use to shift their tactics quickly. This section shares how funders can think about supporting collaboration for advocates, including GRAOs' specific collaboration needs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Collaboration can, and should be, resourced. The collaboration should also be organic and allow for different types of stakeholder groups to connect.
- To the extent possible, funders should try to understand power dynamics and power imbalances within advocacy coalitions, especially between grassroots and grassroots organizations.
- Convenings should be intentional and crafted to meet specific criteria to be of value to participants, not just to funders.
- Funders should consider the dynamics that GRAOs can face when participating in coalitions or formal collaborations.
- Funders should work with other traditional organizations to help them build their own capacity to work with GRAOs.

What are the best ways for philanthropy to facilitate collaboration among grassroots organizations? What are reasonable expectations about the level of collaboration that should occur?

Collaboration can, and should be, resourced. Collaboration often falls into a messy area where nonprofits with a certain expertise are expected to come to a table and provide their insight – whether through participating in formal coalitions or more informally in a network of organizations. This work, however, is often unrecognized and not grant supported. Previous research has noted the importance of backbone funders providing financial support for the “glue” that keeps coordinated efforts functioning. This can be via targeted support for collaboration or via general operating support, ideally provided to all organizations that will be involved in the collaborative effort (and explicit allowance of reallocating portions of grant awards may provide the easiest mechanism to do this). Organizations will often take it upon themselves to collaborate regardless, but financial compensation can provide needed support, and a funder providing this support can make tangible the value of collaborative efforts. Planning grants could also be deployed to give potential collaborators time and space to figure out if the collaboration will be mutually beneficial and allow time to jointly strategize.

Collaboration can, and should, be organic. All organizations we spoke to say the best collaborative efforts they have seen have been organic and led by a desire to meet a certain need or solve a certain problem. An organic collaboration has the benefit of intrinsic motivation and flexibility on goals and strategies (at least at the beginning). Given their preference for organic collaboration, interviewees felt it was inappropriate for funders to set an expectation on collaboration and that they should instead seek to understand how a particular organization was collaborating, what resources it needed to do that more effectively, and what benefits and challenges were associated with the particular collaboration. We have heard from previous grassroots advocates that there is a desire for a mix of breakout spaces within convenings: some time for funders to meet alone, some time

for grantees to meet alone, and some time for cross-group meeting. This type of structure is helpful in ensuring that all the needed conversations can take place and that organic relationships can be built. In a more virtual world, this may look like having multiple sets of meetings for different groups of participants or choosing the best group of participants based on the agenda for a particular meeting.

“We believe [collaboration] needs to be led by the grantees themselves, and trust takes time. It needs to be organic. We also fund the collaboration; we provide them money with convenings and events and other things that might seem outside of the traditional funding approach of a foundation (such as Karaoke or bowling) but creates spaces for people to meet as people and build trust.”

- Foundation Program Officer

Convenings should be intentional and need to meet specific criteria to be of value to participants. TCC Group has conducted previous research into convenings, including developing a framework to aid funders thinking about convening as a strategy in their work. This strategy proposes five ways to assess the reason to convene. These are:

Clear objectives

- There are tangible goals that are clear to all stakeholders attending and organizing the convening.

Stakeholder readiness

- Those involved in the issues are ready to convene and discuss or plan for work in a deeper way.

Issue salience

- The topic of focus at the convening is at a place where there is opportunity to move forward or of real relevance.

Unique strategic value

- The convening will provide a way to boost strategy that cannot be achieved otherwise.

Convening power

- The convening entity has the credibility, cachet, relationships, and physical/financial resources needed to support a convening.

Nonprofits we've spoken to have often critiqued convenings that don't have all the above elements and instead focus on foundation goals while disregarding the salience and readiness of the moment for the invited participants.

Funders should consider the dynamics that grassroots organizations can experience when participating in coalitions. Coalitions, a typical collaborative tool in the social change sphere, are often run in ways that are counter to how grassroots organizations prefer to work. They can have rigid structures and hierarchies, establish policy agendas in a top-down manner, and not leave much room for dissent. For these types of coalitions, participating grassroots organizations are often tokenized – brought in so the coalition can say it has the support of the affected community but not given any true power to set a community-led agenda.

Some GRAOs we've worked with have expressed that they experience this dynamic. To avoid this, funders need to focus on the capacity of the entire coalition to work within different styles of work. Some of this can be explicit and funder encouraged (e.g., encourage the coalition to create a set of values that guide its work and that new member organizations sign on to). Some of this may need to happen more cautiously as conversations between the program officer and staff at specific organizations to understand how the coalition is working effectively across several types of organizational styles.

We've also seen some foundations provide GRAOs with explicit capacity-building funding to ensure they have the resources and skills needed to show up fully in coalitions and assist them in building credibility (see question six for more on this) while also working with other actors to ensure they are primed to acknowledge the unique role that GRAOs are playing in a coalition.

Funders should help other organizations build their capacity to work with values-led organizations. Several grassroots organizations we interviewed noted they were often asked to modify their own stances on issues or approaches while others at the table were not. Grassroots institutions, in particular, were seen as often having an outsized role at the collaborative table and not being required to adhere to common group values. Specific to issues of equity, interviewees felt foundations should do more to make their own values explicit and engage in constructive dialogues with those who are not living up to those values, including providing formal capacity-building opportunities for these groups.

“Foundations should influence more of the grassroots organizations to adopt racial equity and probably stop funding them if there is resistance. You are not going to get equitable policy goals if you are not embracing race, AND what you are probably doing is undermining the health equity goals.”

- Foundation Program Officer

Evaluation, Learning, and Measurement

Evaluation, learning, and measurement systems are essential for understanding how progress is being made and what is contributing to that progress. Our research has found that evaluation needs to be focused on two areas – first, outcomes and understanding what is changing in the system the foundation is focused on and second, foundation practices and understanding how the foundation is helping or hindering in its own role. Any foundation interested in shifting its own grantmaking practice needs a feedback mechanism that allows it to understand how these practice changes are being perceived among its grantee organizations.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A portfolio-level evaluation that includes feedback about foundation practices is seen by funders as the most helpful way to understand what change is occurring and how actors, including the foundation, are contributing to that change.
- Embedding ongoing learning into portfolio work is seen as having high value for increasing both the foundation's knowledge of progress and the grantee's ability to adapt to changing situations.
- Foundations are struggling to move away from foundation-directed evaluation toward something with more community or grantee input.
- There is no clear standard around how funders expect GRAOs to evaluate their own work.
- Several methods that allow an evaluator to assess change and then understand the path to that change have been helpful for trust-based foundations; these include analyzing contributions, Most Significant Change, and collecting evidence of what has changed to determine how the intervention contributed to it.

How are trust-based foundations thinking about evaluating their work or the work of their grantees?

Evaluation tends to be supported by the funder at a portfolio level rather than a grantee level to provide a full picture of change. Rather than relying on grantees to evaluate their own progress or evaluating the progress of any one GRAO, funders engaged in trust-based philanthropy¹³ often evaluate a portfolio of work overall. This work most often includes feedback about the foundation's own grantmaking practices and the level of support provided to grantees.

Because trust-based funders tended to make several complementary grants in certain areas (e.g., to organizations working with certain populations or to organizations working in certain fields), a portfolio-level evaluation was seen as the best way to assess change at the landscape level, which was the level of impact most foundations were interested in. A portfolio-level evaluation has the benefit of mostly avoiding any one grantee organization feeling like the entirety of its own support was directly tied to the evaluation's findings.

Funders have varied expectations about the extent to which GRAOs should be evaluating their own organizational work. Some funders asked GRAOs to report more on what they learned than on any pre-established metrics. Others conducted evaluations entirely at the portfolio-level and didn't require grant partners to engage in any organizational-level evaluation. A few funders we interviewed saw organizational evaluation more as a tool to build organizational capacity towards learning and making sense of data.

¹³ According to the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, trust-based philanthropy is rooted in values that "help advance equity, shift power, and build mutually accountable relationships." It is associated with six grantmaking practices, including: give multi-year unrestricted funding, do the homework, simplify and streamline paperwork, be transparent and responsive, solicit and act on feedback, and offer support beyond the check. "A fully trust-based approach invites practitioners to embrace a clearly articulated set of values. Being clear on values helps funders make decisions through moments of uncertainty or change, guides relationship-building with grantee partners, fosters internal alignment among staff and board, and informs the design of organizational systems and structures."

Trust-based foundations are often interested in evaluating their own grantmaking practices. Some funders have chosen to measure their practices, and several we spoke to who identify as trust-based feel this is essential to provide them with a mechanism to understand how grantee organizations are perceiving the relationship. While some level of grantee feedback into practices has long been common in the field (the Grantee Perception Report, developed by the Center for Effective Philanthropy, is a good model of this), we are seeing a newer focus for evaluation that is lasered in on foundation practices and particularly those related to equity. A National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy article about racial equity audits identified a process looking at internal policies, website reviews, staff surveys, grantee surveys, and peer feedback, and we've seen these components increasingly embedded into evaluation work. This more in-depth audit was seen as a way that funders could hold themselves accountable for the areas of grantmaking that are squarely in their control.

Foundations are more and more including elements of learning in their evaluation work. The evaluation field as a whole has been moving to incorporate aspects of learning into its work as a response to feedback that there should be more emphasis on ongoing reflection and real-time information that allow for immediate changes. The emphasis on learning is intended to allow decision-makers to ask their own questions, quickly generate data, or simply earmark some time to reflect on what is happening and how to best respond to a changing situation. Learning can be formal and implemented via a staff person or consultant trained on accelerating learning, or it can be more informal and focus on taking time to reflect and think critically about the next stage of work.

Similar to goal-setting and grantmaking, foundations can assume control over the approach to evaluation or can coordinate the parameters of evaluation with grantees. Foundations we interviewed, while participatory in many elements of their work, still tended to be fairly directive when it came to evaluation. Part of this was because the unique role that funders play in a grantmaking ecosystem – while funders were often very interested in an ecosystem-level evaluation, they often felt that grantee organizations would not be interested in contributing to such an evaluation, or they wanted to be able to control the evaluation goals fully, as they felt that was necessary to the foundation's own work. Some funders have utilized

this broader feedback but often in ways where they establish an advisory committee that is asked to provide insight into a few specific evaluation questions rather than serve as true partners or shepherds of the evaluation. Sharing back data was an area of particular difficulty – foundations struggle to share back information in a way that engages grantees as partners in making sense of this information and deciding how to move forward. While some foundations engage in webinars or “making meaning” sessions with grantees, there is often a sense that grantees are brought in towards the end of the work where they have limited influence, and this may be partly because grantees are not provided the opportunity to co-design evaluations with funders.

Several methodologies are seen as particularly helpful for monitoring progress. These tend to be methodologies that allow for a comprehensive level of data collection while retaining some responsiveness to the perspectives of different stakeholders. Funders who are trust-based appreciated that these methodologies gave them clear insight into the landscape and how changes are being made, and they often gave feedback on to what extent the funder, directly or indirectly, contributed to those changes. Three specific methodologies are below, all of which have some overlapping components focused on a broad collection of outcomes and then on working to better understand the path by which these outcomes were achieved. These include:

- **Contribution Analysis** focuses on working with a wide variety of stakeholders to identify changes in the landscape and then engages these same stakeholders in facilitated discussions that identify what contributed to these changes. Often, contribution analysis starts with a theory of change that identifies what changes actors were working towards and what strategies were used to achieve the desired changes. The theory of change is then updated based on stakeholder feedback around what actually changed and how.
- **Most Significant Change** is an emergent technique that asks stakeholders to share stories related to the Most Significant Change they see related to a particular topic. The topic might be narrow in nature (e.g., changes related to how the coalition is functioning) or broader (e.g., changes related to health equity). Stakeholders are asked

to submit stories related to changes that they've seen, and an external partner facilitates a process to denote the Most Significant Changes. The process is intended to have dual outcomes: identifying stories of what has changed in the environment and identifying how different stakeholders may value different types of changes.

- **Outcomes Harvesting** focuses first on identifying changes to outcomes and then on working through various sources of evidence to understand how these changes came about. Data sources used often include interviews with key actors as well as thorough document reviews (e.g., reviews of meeting notes, email chains, secondary data). The goal is to more clearly articulate the pathway to change.

Conclusion

While it can be time consuming to adapt practices to work effectively with GRAOs, this type of partnership can be incredibly rewarding and effective for funders, GRAOs, and communities. Challenges regarding power dynamics may never go away, but there are clear practices that can help mitigate these challenges and allow for more collaborative and mutually beneficial relationships, such as:

- Providing flexible funding and reporting structures (e.g., general operating support, language justice practices, shorter applications).
- Focusing less on readiness to engage in the work and instead supporting capacity building directly.
- Partnering with GRAOs that are similarly aligned or that could easily expand their lens to include your issue area rather than expecting an organization to pivot its mission.
- Communicating clearly about intent and expectations.

In return, the work of GRAOs can bring significant value to a foundation's overall work, whether a foundation is using GRAO work to add community perspectives to an overall strategy or simply wants to support a strong local or regional advocacy ecosystem.

This report consists of findings drawing from data collected specifically for this report, data collected as part of other engagements, and existing literature. Despite this, gaps in the research remain, and we recommend further research into additional areas of work: funding individuals/non-fiscally sponsored programs, best practices for reporting, and unintended consequences of funding shifts (e.g., a participatory grantmaking process making it harder to have long-term funding).

Appendix A: Methodology

TCC Group used five methods to collect data that we synthesized for this report. This allowed us to triangulate data from a variety of sources. A summary of each method and how we analyzed the data is shared below.

- **Interviews** - We conducted ten hour-long interviews. Five of these were with grassroots advocates and five were with funders of grassroots advocates. Each interview was semi-structured, with TCC Group asking a core set of questions but also following specific conversational turns. Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to assess trends and pull out any unique insights.
- **Field research** - TCC did research into what's already been published related to supporting grassroots advocacy organizations so we could build on already established field trends.
- **Grantee survey** - TCC sent a short survey to five grassroots advocacy organizations that the Connecticut Health Foundation currently supports. Given that the number of survey respondents was so small, that data was separated out from these field findings.
- **Benchmarking data collection** - We identified five funders with interesting practices around grassroots support and did a thorough review of their publicly available information on grantmaking practices. Where it made sense, that information was added to this report, with a separate benchmarking analysis also prepared for the Connecticut Health Foundation.
- **TCC Group's extant knowledge** - The team TCC assembled for this engagement cumulatively has several decades of experience working with grassroots advocacy organizations and their funders. We've conducted numerous evaluation and learning engagements focused on working with these actors in the field. Where relevant, we pulled upon the lessons we have learned in our work to complement findings gained from other sources.

Limitations

Limitations of our methodology include:

- **A small sample size for interviews** - We interviewed five foundations that support grassroots advocacy organizations and five leaders of grassroots advocacy organizations. These interviews provided a lot of concordance, but a wider pool of data collection may have illuminated different findings.
- **Lack of peer review** - While several staff at TCC provided input into the findings in this report, we were unable to share it with an external audience and with those doing direct grassroots advocacy work or funders of that work.

Endnotes

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About TCC Group

TCC Group collaborates with leaders to solve complex social problems. As a certified B Corporation and with nearly 40 years of experience as a mission-driven firm, TCC Group partners with foundations, nonprofits, and companies to propel positive social change through strategy, capacity building, initiative design, strategic communication, management, and evaluation. We design and implement solutions for social impact by immersing ourselves in interconnected communities and systems, co-creating innovative and effective processes, and applying and sharing our experience with the field.

About the Authors

Jared Raynor, Director of Evaluation and Learning

Jared has worked extensively on evaluating policy and advocacy work, including working with The California Endowment to evaluate their general operating support grants to advocacy organizations, evaluating The Atlantic Philanthropies' post-9/11 funding to civil liberties organizations and the Rockefeller Foundation's efforts to inform national transportation policy. In addition to his expertise in policy and advocacy evaluation, Jared specializes in evaluation and organizational development of innovative and complex efforts and has worked with hundreds of diverse organizations throughout the world. He is sought after for his expertise in a variety of areas, including capacity-building initiatives, convening effectiveness, prizes and competitions, policy and advocacy evaluation, and networks and coalitions.

Deepti Sood, Associate Director, Evaluation and Learning

Deepti utilizes data in a clear, intentional way that leads to engaged learning for her clients. Highly responsive to changing environments with unwavering focus on key goals, she is an effective communicator, willing to raise up difficult issues and address them head on. With a background in advocacy and working with grassroots organizations, Deepti is inspired by opportunities to proactively partner with communities to impact change. Trained in Emergent Learning techniques, she excels at asking hard questions and moving clients towards a deeper place of understanding. She has partnered with numerous TCC Group clients including Women Donors Network, One Justice, the Democracy Alliance, and the Center for Reproductive Rights.

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