

Health Philanthropy and Communities:

Grantmakers Share Their Views

Health foundations, both old and new, must answer some difficult questions in order to do their work effectively. How do we find our grant-making niche? Once we have found this niche, how can we develop and maintain healthy relationships with our grantees?

On March 1, 2000, Grantmakers In Health hosted a pre-conference session at its Annual Meeting to address questions like these. Approximately 70 grantmakers gathered together for a lively discussion about who we are and how we do our work.

Facilitated by Ann Monroe from the California HealthCare Foundation, the session featured two panels. The first panel addressed the role of foundations in communities, and featured Sue Bunting (Foundation for Seacoast Health), Ed Meehan (The Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust), and Patricia O'Connor (The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati). The following are panelists' comments on various topics.

ON FINDING YOUR FOUNDATION'S NICHE IN THE COMMUNITY

Sue: Essentially, the niche was decided for us. When the nonprofit hospital [from which the foundation emerged] was sold, it was a controversial issue. We conducted a comprehensive needs assessment, held 40 focus groups in our nine town service area and commissioned a demographic and marketing study. We continue to convene breakfast forums and listen to our advisory coalitions to insure that our grants are addressing unmet health needs.

Pat: We went through a repositioning process. It was important to us to not get involved in a niche that someone else had already filled. We were involved in active community consultation, including phone and opinion leader surveys, focus groups, and expert panels. We examined and [used] available data. The board identified issues from their experience. And we visited other foundations and came away with a lot of information about what we liked and didn't like. We also changed our name from that of the managed care company to reflect our new grant-making – that was a part of repositioning ourselves as well.

ON FUNDING CORE OPERATING SUPPORT

Ed: We found that many nonprofits were trying to reinvent their programs with a little pizzazz for proposals, when in fact what they really wanted was ongoing operating support. We try not to be the evergreen – in other words, the primary source of long term operating support – for an organization. . . we want to say to them, “we are willing to hang in there with you for ten years, but we need to see some measurable short-term results”.

Pat: We do not want to do core operating support. . . but we are very comfortable with a three-year grant. Four years in the health care field is a long time to look ahead, but we have an emphasis with our grantees for sustainability. We are also pragmatic, and are not as cut and dried in rural areas as in urban areas [where sustainability may be easier to achieve]. If you have rules, you have to know when it is okay to bend them, to make exceptions.

Sue: Because we state that we do not fund ongoing operating expenses, we unwittingly force grantees to reframe

PANELISTS' PEARLS OF WISDOM

- None of us can do it alone, and it is important to collaborate.
- The use of advisory groups – groups of providers, consumers, and family members for each program area – can be helpful.
- I remember two things every day: it is not my money, and I am not always going to be a funder.
- For those of you who are just beginning, take advantage of the 12-month grace period and the phase-in rules provided by the IRS. Don't be pressured by your communities to do something quickly without thinking it through.
- We are never as overworked or stretched as our best advocacy organizations and grantees.
- Return phone calls promptly – it sounds simple, but really makes a difference.

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existing programs to qualify for continued support. . .this is ridiculous. They are doing really important things [that deserve operating support] and filling a critical need in our communities. Now we develop long term partnerships with grantees and impose ceilings of support on those programs which we will probably be funding in perpetuity. One of the resources at our Community Campus [a facility built by the foundation to house nonprofits] is a resource librarian who works with grantees to find additional funding for them.



The second panel pulled together foundation staff to talk about healthy relationships between grantmakers and grantees, and featured Michael Balaoing (The California Wellness Foundation), Margaret O'Bryon (Consumer Health Foundation), and Marni Rosen (The Jenifer Altman Foundation).

ON COMING TO THE FIELD OF PHILANTHROPY FROM COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Marni: When I started [as a grantmaker]. . . I had that feeling of being a parent who used to be a teenager and remembering saying “when I am a parent I will never do this, and I will never do that.” Moving from the nonprofit community to the foundation community shifts the dynamic in many of my professional relationships and it is my responsibility to remember and be sensitive to that.

Margaret: I think this is about the ethics of philanthropy. Money in this society is power. And asking for money is really hard. . . how do [we] make these grantmaker/grantee relationships as balanced as they can be, and how do we level the playing field so others are brought in? . . . It seems to me that it is important who you are as a person and what you adopt as your ethical standards. . . because you are the face of the foundation [in the community].

Michael: I told Gary [Yates, President of TCWF] that part of the reason that I wanted this job was to be able to demystify philanthropy for those on the other side looking for resources. We sit in a very privileged setting and it is easy to lose sight of how different it is on the other side, looking for funding. It humbles me to know how hard it is to raise money.

ON STAYING CONNECTED TO THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE

Marni: I have found that one way to maintain contact and stay engaged is to work on issues that I am also passionate about but that don't fall within my [funding areas]. It is a safe space for me to get involved, but does not put any [potential] grantees in a compromising position.

Margaret: Go out on site visits. Intentionally keep doing

that, even if you are not a program officer. Also, maintain regular contact with people out in the community who can be honest with you – people you might not fund, but who will get together with you and share information. Set the table for people to come to the foundation. Serve a great lunch, and don't have an agenda. The true sharing that [will go] on is amazing.

Michael: I find three pitfalls among people in philanthropy. The first is arrogance – we know it all or are expected to know it all. The second is cynicism. The third is the isolation we face trying to get our job done. In addition, [some of us have] what some call “poor me syndrome”. Nonprofits have the same kind of workloads, they are understaffed too. . . and I [should not be] whining about my job when I don't have to raise my own salary every year.

Margaret: A more formal way to get honest feedback is through the evaluation process. . . there is much more participation in evaluation [than before] and evaluation turns the mirror on the foundation to help us look at what we are doing.

Michael: As a statewide foundation, we also depend on local foundations to be our eyes and ears about local organizations and communities.

Ann: I would add that honesty goes both ways. While saying no or hearing no is not what [nonprofits] want, they would rather hear it now than six months from now because you did not want to say no to them or did not read their proposal with the rigor it deserved. We have a responsibility to be crisp, honest, and clear in what we communicate as well.

Marni: The first thing I learned on this job is that the most important rule above all is to be kind and then be truthful but helpful. Even if you are not making a grant. . . [display] a kindness to people who are really trying to do good work. I remember some colleagues [in philanthropy] when I was a grantseeker not returning my phone calls. Ever.

Other suggestions from the session participants of ways to promote healthy grantmaker/community relationships:

- Each month, call one potential grantee who did not get funded and spend some time giving honest and critical feedback.
- Use your trustees as your eyes and ears. Make site visits a part of their job descriptions.
- When visiting grantees, pose the following question, “If your services were funded in full, what other unmet needs would be the most pressing in your community?”
- Have externally conducted interviews with grantees periodically. You will learn a lot about your foundation processes and the ways in which you work with people.