Grant Makers Give Money Fast to Challenge Trump Policies

By Rebecca Koenig

The unprecedented sums individual donors have given to progressive nonprofits since the presidential election have drawn ample attention. The American Civil Liberties Union alone raised $24 million in one weekend after it took on Donald Trump’s travel ban, earning the venerable charity headlines in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *Politico*.

Foundation responses to the new administration’s policies have flown under the radar. But grant makers worried about how the change in leadership might affect the issues and people they support have indeed been making plans for the Trump era, creating rapid-response funds, hosting webinars, and listening to recommendations from grantees for how to best back their work.

Some have made donations outright. The Rockefeller Foundation gave $500,000 each to the ACLU, the Anti-Defamation League, and the International Rescue Committee for their work on behalf of refugees and immigrants. The Open Society Foundations put up $10 million to protect “those targeted by hateful acts” and government policies.

The NoVo Foundation pledged $20 million over the next four years to new grantees supporting "communities under attack." And the California Wellness Foundation is shifting its $35 million budget to "advance and defend" work on access to health care, the wellness of immigrant communities, the social safety net, and preventing violence and hate crimes.

"Right now, foundations have a responsibility to step up with courage," says Pamela Shifman, executive director of the NoVo Foundation. "Our social-justice values and missions demand that."

Still, there are those who contend the response from foundations has been too muted. That may be partly because, rather than announce grand new plans, grant makers are quietly doubling down on support for groups and programs that challenge or mitigate the Trump administration’s actions on immigration, abortion rights, health care, and other issues.

It can be difficult to balance urgency with thoughtfulness, says Maria De La Cruz, associate executive director of the Headwaters Foundation for Justice. "How are we responding to the needs of today, and how is our work as a funder really helping to build an infrastructure that’s going to be durable and strong in the future?"

Rapid Response

Grant makers are facing rising demands for money and other resources. Third Wave Fund, which supports youth-led activism on gender-justice issues, reported a 225 percent increase in the three months since the election in proposals for grants from its rapid-response Mobilize Power Fund.

And new organizations are springing up in search of support. Indivisible Guide, an online playbook created by former congressional staffers in December to help members of the public more effectively lobby government officials, is taking steps to become a 501(c)(4) nonprofit and raise money from individuals and institutions.

In response, networks like the Grantmakers Income Security Task Force and the Neighborhood Funders Group are hosting webinars about how to creatively finance social movements and provide sanctuary to immigrants.

Reflecting widespread concern about the well-being of immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and women, several grant makers have created rapid-response funds to support nonprofits doing front-line work on behalf of vulnerable populations. These funds use expedited decision-making processes to provide relatively small amounts of money, often to grass-roots groups.
To help New Yorkers "living in greater fear of hate crimes, deportation, discrimination, arrest, and poverty," the New York Community Trust and the New York Foundation created the Liberty Fund to provide quick grants of $10,000 to $100,000 for projects that protect immigrant rights, promote health-care access, and address discrimination.

The Brooklyn Community Foundation is raising money for a $1 million Immigrant Rights Fund to support immediate and long-term needs in local immigrant communities and "civil resistance" efforts to challenge administration policies. Eight nonprofits have already received grants totaling more than $100,000, among them the Arab American Association of New York, Make the Road New York, and Jews for Racial & Economic Justice.

The Chicago Foundation for Women made 29 grants totaling $50,000 through its new 100 Day Fund, created to support gender-equity advocacy during the first 100 days of the Trump administration. Recipients include organizations working to prevent sexual assault, help working immigrant women, and organize communities to participate in civic life.

The San Francisco Foundation created a Rapid Response Fund for Movement Building that will give one-time grants of $3,000 to $15,000 to emerging grass-roots nonprofits for projects that provide a "timely and urgent" opportunity to support racial and economic equity.

The foundation also committed $750,000 to a coalition of groups working to prevent immigrants from being deported, including Centro Legal de la Raza, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, the California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance, Causa Justa, and Catholic Charities of the East Bay.

Three progressive donor networks — Solidaire, the Women Donors Network, and the Threshold Foundation — have raised more than $500,000 for their Emergent Fund, a new pool of money created right after the election. The fund has made seven grants so far, typically of $30,000, to groups including the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative, Mijente, and the Center for Media Justice as well as projects to protect undocumented immigrants in Texas and train black activists in media communication.

Already There

Some observers have been underwhelmed by the number of grant makers and major donors using their megaphones and millions to protect those most profoundly affected the President Trump’s actions.

"Silence is not an acceptable response" to the administration's policies regarding immigrants, wrote Ben Barge, senior associate for learning and engagement for the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, in a letter to his peers.

In a recent post in his popular blog, Nonprofit With Balls, Seattle charity leader Vu Le called on grant makers to provide more and faster financial support to organizations led by members of marginalized populations.

But the relatively restrained response from big funders may actually point to their pre-existing support for nonprofits tackling these challenges, leaders say.

"Ideally, organizations have enough of a budget that when there’s a crisis, they have enough resources to respond," says Leah Hunt-Hendrix, executive director of Solidaire. "We don’t want to emphasize rapid response. We want to emphasize long-term commitment to progressive-movement organizations. I think the best of the progressive philanthropists have been doing that already."

For example, Solidaire was already donating to immigrant-rights organizations like Mijente and Muslim groups like MPower Change; its response to the administration’s policies is, in part, to simply continue that support, or perhaps increase it.

Similarly, the California Wellness Foundation will be "bolstering and infusing more resources to grantees we already have," says Fatima Angeles, the foundation’s vice president of programs.

"We have the right partners on the ground. I don’t think we’re scrambling to figure that out," she says. "They just need more capacity, more money."

Still, the foundation is adjusting. "We haven’t done this kind of funding in the past, but we are looking at naturalization and citizenship work," Ms. Angeles says. It is also broadening its anti-violence work, traditionally focused on gun and youth violence, to target hate crimes.

Ultimately, foundations should ask nonprofits what they need and "make them feel like we have their backs," Ms. Angeles says.

"They're the heroes of this," she says. "We need them for the long haul."

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