



RESEARCH REPORT

Balancing Speed, Equity, and Impact during a Crisis

The Greater Washington Community Foundation's Response to COVID-19

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Cover image provided by the Office of Prince George's County Council Member Dannielle Glaros. Glaros leads Get Shift Done workers and community volunteers in a safety orientation before distributing 1,200 boxes of shelf-stable groceries from CAFB and several pallets of fresh produce from Coastal Sunbelt Produce at an event coordinated by County Council Member Dannielle Glaros and Brighter Bites, hosted at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Landover Hills on May 2. Get Shift Done is supported in the DMV by Greater Washington Community Foundation and Washington Nationals Philanthropies.

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Foreword

The COVID-19 public health and economic crisis has changed our world as we know it. As employers moved to remote work, schools shifted to distance learning, and businesses closed completely, it became clear that the impact on residents, nonprofits, and businesses was far greater than anyone could have ever imagined.

In response to the growing and evolving needs of our region, the Greater Washington Community Foundation established the COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund to raise and rapidly deploy funding to local nonprofits providing food, shelter, educational supports, and other critical services.

From the beginning our goal was clear: to address the immediate needs and reach adversely affected communities, particularly low-income households and communities of color. We know all too well that in a crisis like this, these marginalized communities are hit the hardest, and often take the longest to recover.

In times of crises, The Community Foundation is our region's philanthropic first responder, bringing together individuals and families, philanthropic peers, corporate partners, and local government advisors to address community issues. Building on our rich history of emergency response work, we grounded our COVID-19 response efforts in a similar coordinated approach.

This report chronicles the steps taken, under immense pressure, to develop a coordinated emergency response effort to support a broad range of needs across the region. Once again this effort has demonstrated that working in partnership and close collaboration with our philanthropic peers and local government advisors is an effective way to manage a response to both urgent and longer-term needs.

While this process was at times chaotic, the ability to adapt during the pandemic was a critical component to our success. With this report, we hope to continue learning and adjusting how we support our community in times of need. Our aim is to always be prepared and ready to take on the next crisis.

We are incredibly grateful to our donors who have supported this effort, our Steering Committee who provided strategic guidance on our grantmaking and priorities, Working Group members who reviewed more than 1,600 proposals for funding across 5 issues areas, and our Community Investment team who effortlessly managed it all.

We're so proud of the work we have accomplished together, and we could not have done it without your support and partnership. Thank you for standing with us during our community's time of need.

We know that the impacts of this pandemic and the resulting economic crisis will be felt for years to come. And as we continue to support emergency needs in the region, we are also preparing for longer-term reconstruction efforts to ensure our region comes out of this stronger and more resilient.

Tonia Wellons
President and CEO
Greater Washington Community Foundation

Executive Summary

This report chronicles the genesis and evolution of the Greater Washington Community Foundation's efforts to raise and coordinate funding from a wide range of individual and institutional donors to address the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a particular focus on The Community Foundation's COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund, the largest of its kind in the region, this account highlights the balance of various grantmaking imperatives that characterized Greater Washington's philanthropic response to the pandemic more generally.

We highlight the COVID-19 Fund's commitment to urgent action and deliberateness; to crafting a targeted response that could address a widespread public health emergency as well as an economic crisis; to addressing immediate *and* longer-term needs; to recognizing the novelty of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the way it exacerbated racial and geographic inequities with deep historical roots in the region; and to appreciating the pandemic as both emergency and opportunity. We also discuss how the COVID-19 Fund was established; the fund's success in attracting local and national donors; the creation of a steering committee, comprising donors who contributed \$50,000 or more; the decisionmaking behind the issuance of the first and second requests for proposals; the fund's development of priorities and areas of focus and the creation of working groups to oversee the selection of applicants based on those priority areas; the changing relationship between the steering committee and working groups; and the perspective of a few grantee organizations that received support. This account pays particular attention to how the COVID-19 Fund sought to incorporate racial equity into the grantmaking process, balancing the need for speed, equity, and impact. Lastly, in this report, we situate The Community Foundation's stewardship of the COVID-19 Fund alongside its broader efforts to coordinate and promote a philanthropic response to the crisis in the Greater Washington region.

Ultimately, the successful aspects of this initiative came from the ability to adapt, learn from mistakes and past experiences, and listen to stakeholders and peers, including both trusted partners and new voices. But this initiative also underscores the importance of decisive leadership and of maintaining a few constant values and priorities as a guide. For The Community Foundation, this meant centering racial equity and determining how best to do so in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. This report highlights these key lessons of flexibility and responsiveness, partnerships and trust, and leadership and vision, lessons that can guide future philanthropic efforts to respond, recover, and rebuild during and after a large-scale crisis.

Balancing Speed, Equity, and Impact during a Crisis

The week of March 9, 2020, was supposed to be one of celebration for the Greater Washington Community Foundation (The Community Foundation), which was holding its annual fundraising event that Thursday, with 600 guests confirmed. Instead, that week marked the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in the Greater Washington region,¹ as the first case of coronavirus was confirmed in Washington, DC, that Sunday. By the following Monday, The Community Foundation had made the difficult decision to cancel the gala—donating the food and florals that had been ordered to a local homeless shelter—and announced an institutional pivot to emergency response. By that Friday, it had launched the COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund (the COVID-19 Fund), seeding it with a portion of the proceeds from ticket sales from the canceled gala. As of the end of September 2020, the COVID-19 Fund had raised \$10 million and distributed nearly \$8.2 million through 210 grants, made possible by contributions from more than 1,100 donors.

This report is an account of that pivot. It chronicles The Community Foundation's work to raise and coordinate funding in the region from individual and institutional donors to address the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular attention to its disproportionate impact on households with low incomes and communities of color. It also managed more than a dozen aligned efforts with partners, who set up separate COVID-19-related response funds. (Although we examine several funds housed at The Community Foundation, we pay particularly close attention in this report to the COVID-19 Fund, chronicling its genesis and evolution.) Not only was it the largest emergency response fund focused on the Greater Washington region, but it reflects the balance of various grantmaking imperatives that characterized the regional philanthropic response to the pandemic more generally.

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¹ The Community Foundation defines the Greater Washington region as the District of Columbia, Northern Virginia, Montgomery County, Maryland, and Prince George's County, Maryland.

the region; and to appreciating the pandemic as both emergency and opportunity. We also discuss how the COVID-19 Fund was established; the fund's success in attracting local and national donors; the creation of a steering committee, comprising donors who contributed \$50,000 or more; the decisionmaking behind the issuance of the first and second requests for proposals (RFPs); the fund's development of priorities and areas of focus and the creation of working groups to oversee the selection of applicants based on those priority areas; the changing relationship between the steering committee and working groups; and the perspective of a few grantee organizations that received support. This account pays particular attention to how the COVID-19 Fund sought to incorporate racial equity into the grantmaking process, balancing the need for speed, equity, and impact. Lastly, in this report, we situate The Community Foundation's stewardship of the COVID-19 Fund alongside its broader efforts to coordinate and promote a philanthropic response to the crisis in the Greater Washington region, both through the weekly calls it organized with an array of regional stakeholders and the additional COVID-related funds it managed.

If there is an overarching theme to this report, it is the importance of balance to grantmaking during a crisis. In particular, the report underscores the need, under severe time constraints, to meet various priorities and imperatives (including speed) not by choosing one over another, but by finding constantly changing points of equilibrium between them. This can be a messy process, as this report shows. Ultimately, the successful aspects of this initiative came from the ability to adapt, learn from mistakes and past experiences, and listen to stakeholders and peers. But this initiative also underscores the importance of decisive leadership and of maintaining a few constant values and priorities as a guide. For The Community Foundation, this meant centering racial equity and determining how best to do so in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. This report highlights these key lessons of flexibility and responsiveness, partnerships and trust, and leadership and vision, lessons that can guide future philanthropic efforts to respond, recover, and rebuild during and after a large-scale crisis.

Building on Leadership and Experience

Notably, The Community Foundation faced the COVID-19 crisis while finalizing the decision of who would lead the organization. Tonia Wellons, who had served as vice president for community investment at The Community Foundation for four years and had been named interim CEO in October 2019, did not become permanent CEO until early April 2020. She completed her final interviews for the position just a few days before The Community Foundation initiated its COVID-19 crisis response pivot. There would be no grace period. Yet participants in The Community Foundation's response to the

pandemic offered near-universal praise for how Wellons met the challenge. As one stated, “The right leader at the right moment with the resources available, that can result in something really transformative.”

In meeting that challenge, Wellons and The Community Foundation team could turn to the foundation’s significant past experience with crisis response. Nearly two decades ago, in the wake of the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, it established the Survivors’ Fund, raising \$25 million to assist the victims of the attack and their families. During the Great Recession, it led a group of funders and stakeholders to establish the Neighbors in Need Fund, which raised \$5 million to support the residents hit hardest by the financial crisis. In 2017, it established the Resilience Fund in partnership with local donors and foundations to address the consequences of the Trump administration’s policy and budgetary decisions on local nonprofits, communities of color, and immigrant and refugee communities. The Resilience Fund supplied resources for The Community Foundation’s response to the federal government shutdown in December 2018 and January 2019, coordinating with a core group of local funders (in mid-April 2020 it decided to spend down the Resilience Fund and direct its remaining resources to emergency COVID-19 response).

The experiences gained from managing those funds helped provide a “rhythm for emergency response,” as Wellons recalled. The insights they provided point to the importance of leveraging past experience—as well as financial resources—in meeting crises. The Community Foundation staff also paid close attention to emergency response funds that other community foundations were launching at the same time around the country for inspiration and insight.

Attracting and Engaging Donors

The COVID-19 Fund was designed to be a collaborative effort to mobilize support from community members and engage philanthropic and government partners. It gained an early boost of publicity from Wellons’s announcement and from media coverage of The Community Foundation’s donation of the food and florals from the canceled gala to grantee partners. Donations came in quickly. “Fortunately, we had forwarded our phones,” Wellons joked. (There is actually a serious lesson about maintaining an official presence in the midst of crisis embedded in the quip.)

The COVID-19 Fund gained support quickly, providing an effective vehicle for large and small donors looking for opportunities to respond to the crisis. Soon after The Community Foundation announced the COVID-19 Fund, The Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation—one of the region’s

largest funders, which had worked closely with The Community Foundation for decades—approved a \$1 million grant to the fund, \$750,000 as an outright grant and \$250,000 as a matching grant. Soon after, Amazon announced a \$1 million donation to address the region’s pandemic response in the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia, which included \$350,000 to the COVID-19 Fund as well as grants to the other community foundations in Northern Virginia. A few days later, the A. James & Alice B. Clark Foundation followed with a matching challenge grant of \$500,000 that was quickly met.

TABLE 1
Donors and Funding by Donation Size

Donation size	Share of donors	Share of funds
Less than \$5,000	91%	2%
\$5,000–\$49,999	5%	6%
\$50,000–\$249,999	3%	28%
More than \$250,000	1%	63%

Notes: Names and donor levels were provided to the Urban Institute research team by The Community Foundation on September 28, 2020. The funding levels are totaled across Phase 1 and Phase 2 because donors may have given in one or both phases. For the purposes of this table, multiple donations by one donor were counted as one donation in total.

By the end of June 2020, more than 700 donors had contributed to the COVID-19 Fund, with donations ranging from \$5.00 to \$1 million, coming from a mix of individuals and institutions (including corporate and private philanthropy) from local and national funders. This mix was one of the fund’s most striking characteristics. Individual donors included Sam Brin, who made personal contributions to give back to the Prince George’s County community where he was raised and where his family called home, as well as a local florist who sold \$35 bouquets to community members and donated all of the proceeds (\$10,000) to the fund. Many of the funders had collaborated with or funded The Community Foundation before and valued that they could make a donation to the fund quickly because of preexisting high levels of trust. Many also appreciated The Community Foundation’s experience with crisis grantmaking; some had even worked with it on the Neighbors in Need Fund and the Resilience Fund and understood the value of a funding collaborative that engaged a variety of philanthropists to collectively contribute resources and make grantmaking decisions.

Although some donors to the COVID-19 Fund had deep relationships in and/or knowledge of the Greater Washington region, or expertise in supporting the types of direct service organizations the crisis would likely call upon, others were attracted to the fund because they lacked such knowledge and experience and wanted to “make their money smarter,” as one donor said. One of the steering committee members representing an organization that had not given to organizations serving the Greater Washington region before remarked that the COVID-19 Fund provided “an opportunity to

support one of the communities in which we live and work, in a way that was informed by people who have worked in that community for a long time. We recognized that we didn't have a full view of the ecosystem and where there were gaps, so we were looking for a way to be responsive to the community's urgent needs in a responsible and coordinated way."

These remarks point to another of the key early decisions made by The Community Foundation with regards to the COVID-19 Fund: as a funding collaborative, the donors would have a stake in the decisionmaking process. The foundation decided that it would invite major donors and external issue-area experts to participate in grantmaking. Any donor that provided a gift of \$50,000 or more to the COVID-19 Fund would be invited to join the steering committee that would oversee the general strategy and direction of the fund. This committee included individual donors and representatives from institutional philanthropy, some of whom had close previous ties with The Community Foundation and some of whom had never worked with it before. The committee's precise role in the grantmaking process evolved; ultimately, it was tasked with approving the selections made by five working groups comprising The Community Foundation staff and outside experts and organized by issue areas. The composition of the committee and working groups reflects both The Community Foundation's decision to turn to established partners to help guide the COVID-19 Fund and its willingness to encourage participation beyond their trusted network to ensure new voices had a place at the table.

Establishing Priorities

Another key early decision was that the COVID-19 Fund would be bounded by priority issue areas. This meant making difficult decisions about what to include in the fund and what to leave out. "We didn't have the whole plan figured out on the front end, but we knew that we needed to raise capital while we figured it out," Wellons explained. "We were raising the money on the one hand and were doing the due diligence on the other."

The Community Foundation consulted government partners and tapped into its grantee network, as did the steering committee and working group members, to determine community needs for support and services and learn how grantees' own needs were changing accordingly. (The team coordinated queries among funders so grantee partners were not inundated with requests for information.) "In those early days, we were on the phone with everybody," Wellons recalled. Having strong preexisting relationships throughout the region allowed The Community Foundation to survey the field expeditiously.

Several initial priorities developed from this early survey. Critical to the goal of centering equity, the COVID-19 Fund would prioritize low-income communities of color, historically underresourced communities, and populations at high risk of contracting COVID-19, all of which would be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Given the urgency of need, the COVID-19 Fund would prioritize speed to place resources directly in the hands of impacted communities as quickly as possible. It would also concentrate support on frontline workers, which meant prioritizing groups that were actively providing services to address the emergency over groups that had not yet reopened.

Lastly, the fund would extend broadly geographically (reflecting The Community Foundation's scope) to Montgomery County, Prince George's County, the District of Columbia, and Northern Virginia (though in Northern Virginia, The Community Foundation would largely recommend proposals to the community foundations located in that region). The foundation coordinated closely with the city and county governments of Montgomery and Prince George's Counties and the District of Columbia as well as with the leaders of the four Northern Virginia community foundations (who in turn coordinated with their local governments).

Based on consultations with funders and grantee partners, The Community Foundation team ultimately decided on five priority giving areas (which would in turn be assessed by the five working groups): Medical Care and Access, Employment and Small Business, Housing and Homelessness, Education and Youth, and General Operating Support (a category that was initially meant to cover nonprofits that had lost fundraising revenue because of the crisis, but that eventually focused on food security, domestic violence, and legal aid). Even though the COVID-19 Fund comprised a wide range of issue areas, it required leaving certain areas out. To cite the most prominent example, the fund did not initially include food security as a stand-alone issue, because The Community Foundation team determined that other funders were addressing it and because they wanted donors to give directly to food banks. (After analyzing the situation after the first round of grants, the team realized that food banks were not adequately resourced to meet the profound and ever-growing need of the Greater Washington region, and so decided to include food security in the second phase of grants.) Similarly, it was decided that arts groups would be excluded in favor of more immediate and urgent needs (eventually, with the help of The Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation and eight other funders, the Arts Forward Fund, housed at The Community Foundation, was launched in August 2020 with \$1 million in initial funding).

TABLE 2

Comparison of Asset Size and Applicants

Asset size	Applicants	
	Share	Total
Under \$250,000	33%	270
\$250,000-\$499,999	12%	95
\$500,000-\$999,999	12%	95
\$1 million and over	43%	351

Notes: Applicant information was provided by The Community Foundation as of August 12, 2020. Asset size figures were calculated using National Center for Charitable Statistics data. The Community Foundation received 1,339 applications; of those, 811 were tied to financial records in the National Center for Charitable Statistics database and analyzed.

In the face of urgent health needs, The Community Foundation approved \$775,000 in solicited grants soon after launching the COVID-19 Fund and then used an open and competitive process, employing an RFP that went live on Thursday, March 26, 2020, which featured a streamlined application process and consisted of just five questions. In the first week, The Community Foundation received 308 applications requesting \$15.7 million in funds. After three weeks, it had received 700 applications. In fact, the response was so overwhelming, it was forced to close the application for a few weeks while the working groups completed the backlog of proposal reviews.

The Community Foundation team deliberately established the COVID-19 Fund with an acknowledgement that their funding priorities would likely evolve. Although this meant (as one staff member conceded) that applicants might be frustrated that the fund’s priorities presented a “moving target,” that openness to revision was necessary given the fluidity of the situation on the ground.

A second RFP, issued in May 2020, allowed The Community Foundation to formally implement some of these revisions and to refine some of its priorities. It moved away from prioritizing the general operating support for area organizations that had lost significant revenue because of the crisis (though all grants from the fund remained in the form of unrestricted funds) and instead developed a more specific focus on food security, domestic violence, and legal services. The COVID-19 Fund also opened up to organizations that funded advocacy and community organizing, which were not supported during Phase 1, with an eye to longer-term recovery and reconstruction. Lastly, the Phase 2 RFP asked applicants about the race, ethnicity, and gender of applicants’ senior leadership and board members, reflecting a more explicit focus on funding organizations led by people of color.

In total, the fund received more than 1,600 applications requesting more than \$60 million in support, which represents more than six times the funds raised to date.

BOX 1

Grantee Perspective: Impact Silver Spring

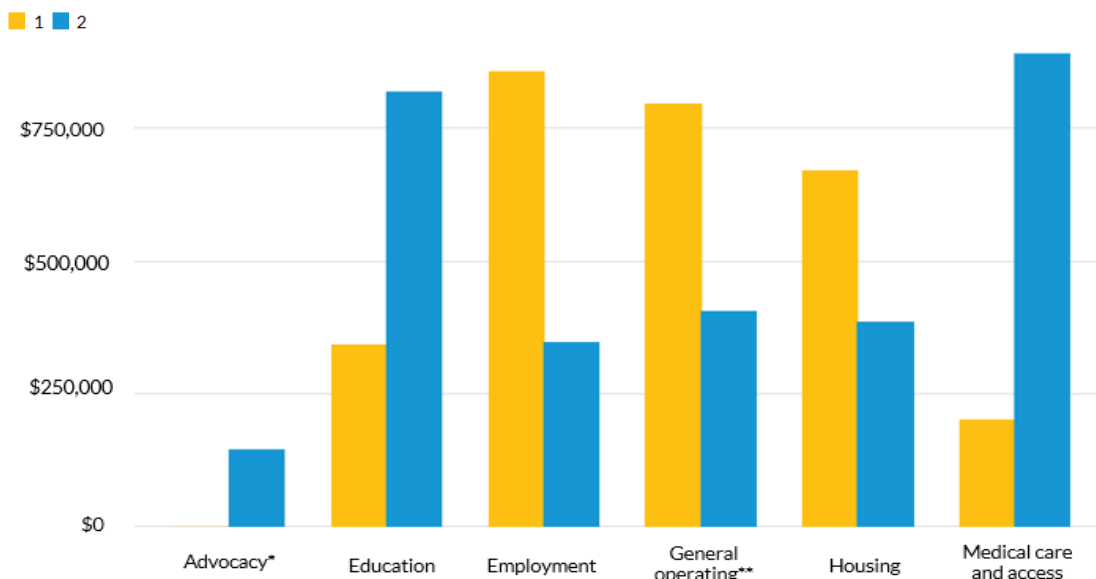
When the COVID-19 crisis began, the frontline community builders at [IMPACT Silver Spring](#) worked day and night to stay in touch with residents in their network who had participated in the organization's programs to build a racially and economically equitable Montgomery County. The public health crisis was exposing the disparities, injustices, and inequities marginalized communities (including immigrants and communities of color) faced. The undocumented families in their network were losing jobs and income and lacked savings to buy food and pay rent. Unlike other residents in Montgomery County, they did not qualify for unemployment benefits or stimulus money provided by the state and federal government because of their immigration status. IMPACT, an organization that does not typically provide direct services to residents, saw a pressing need to connect undocumented residents with emergency cash relief and services. It started communicating the challenges it was seeing on the ground to partners in philanthropy and government.

IMPACT was awarded \$50,000 to provide 42 cash payments of \$1,200 to vulnerable undocumented residents who do not qualify for government resources and desperately needed to make it through the immediate economic devastation of the emerging public health crisis. For one family with three young children that received funds, both parents tested positive for COVID-19, with one hospitalized for a week and the other losing work in construction. They were grateful for the assistance, which enabled them to pay rent during this challenging time. In addition, IMPACT connected 350 community members to Montgomery County relief funds, which ranged from \$500 to \$1,450.

The Work of the Working Groups

Rather than using existing internal organizational structures within The Community Foundation, the foundation created a new one that served as the core for the COVID-19 Fund selection process. The applications to each issue area were reviewed by a team comprising volunteer working group members—including local funders and other subject-matter experts, including representatives from local government—and was cochaired by The Community Foundation staff and another funder or issue area expert. This structure drew inspiration from other past efforts, including the Neighbors in Need Fund. That blend of internal foundation staff and external partners and experts was a distinguishing feature of the fund. For all 52 working group members, sifting through hundreds of applications was a serious commitment. As one remarked, “This was a second job for me for five months.”

FIGURE 1
Total Dollars Awarded, by Working Group and Phase



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Notes: Grant awards, working group, and phase data and analysis provided by The Community Foundation on October 2, 2020. Yellow columns represent Phase 1, and blue columns represent Phase 2. * Advocacy was not an official working group but was a grant category added in Phase 2. ** In Phase 2, the General Operating Support working group focused on legal aid, food security, and domestic violence.

Several of the working groups included representatives from local government, and so were able to make grant recommendations with an eye toward existing gaps in public funding. On occasions when a working group lacked specific knowledge to address certain groups of applicants, its members would often bring in outside experts to advise them. One working group, for instance, received numerous proposals from church groups in Prince George’s County, but its members had little familiarity with them. So the group invited someone with deep knowledge of religious institutions and organizations in the county to assist with the selection decisions for several sessions.

The working group members took the crucial initial steps in ensuring that the COVID-19 Fund was targeted to the region’s most vulnerable populations. The Homelessness and Housing working group, for instance, prioritized populations and neighborhoods at increased risk of contracting COVID-19, such as people who were formerly incarcerated and people who are undocumented. Working groups initiated much of the balancing that would define the COVID-19 Fund. They balanced, for instance, between relying on a network of trusted, direct-service providers and organizations that had little previous relationship with the foundation or the members of the working groups. As one working group

leader explained, “We are advancing a blend of larger groups that provide critical infrastructure and coordination support as well as many smaller organizations with deeper reach into the community.”

The working groups also provided the COVID-19 Fund with sight lines to gaps in its own funding processes. The Medical Care and Access group, for instance, received fewer applications than several of the other working groups, perhaps because the foundation had done comparatively little grantmaking in that space and had not developed connections to potential grantees that were as strong as those it had with others. Working groups were also the first to register a lack of applications from certain geographic areas (such as Prince George’s County), which led to a concerted effort to recruit and fund more applicants from those locales. When making selections, they also considered existing funds and grants in process through other funds and channels at The Community Foundation.

BOX 2

Grantee Perspective: Black Swan Academy

The Executive Director of [Black Swan Academy](#), a DC-based nonprofit that empowers Black youth through civic leadership and engagement, received notice on March 15, 2020, that it could no longer access its office building because of COVID-19 restrictions. The organization already knew the pandemic would make it difficult for the Black youth it serves in Wards 7 and 8 to access food, technology, transportation, and child care, so it decided to shift some of its work to providing mutual aid support to these communities. However, it also had to figure out telework arrangements for staff and determine how to switch its programming with middle school and high school students to a virtual setting. It also needed to enhance its digital organizing capacity and overall technology infrastructure to keep up the work that it knew would be critical during the pandemic.

The Black Swan Academy received a grant for \$20,000 to support mutual aid efforts and to help shift its work and digital organizing to a virtual format. The funds enabled it to deliver toiletry kits, groceries, and art supplies to residents in Wards 7 and 8. It also provided stipends to its youth leaders, organized a town hall for girls of color to discuss how the pandemic affects their lives and strategize about how to bring about positive change to their community, and hosted the only candidates’ forum this primary election season that centered youth voices. It also met with city council members and gave Black youth a voice in policy and budget discussions, and it hosted a caravan (a socially distanced in-person direct action event) to advocate for police-free schools. The [funding the Black Swan Academy received](#) enabled it to meet basic needs during a crisis while continuing its work to build the advocacy capacity of Black youth in DC.

Guiding the Steering Committee

The steering committee convened weekly to review and approve the grants recommended by the working groups each week (representatives from the working groups were on call to answer questions). By some accounts, the expansive nature of the committee—often, as many as 20 members participated in calls—made it “unwieldy.” All participants, whether they gave \$50,000 or \$1 million, were granted equal voice. And because many of those funders did not know each other well, “It was a tower of babel early on,” as one member explained. Moreover, the severity of the emergency meant committee members lacked the time to get to know each other before grantmaking. Instead, they would get to know each other *through* grantmaking.

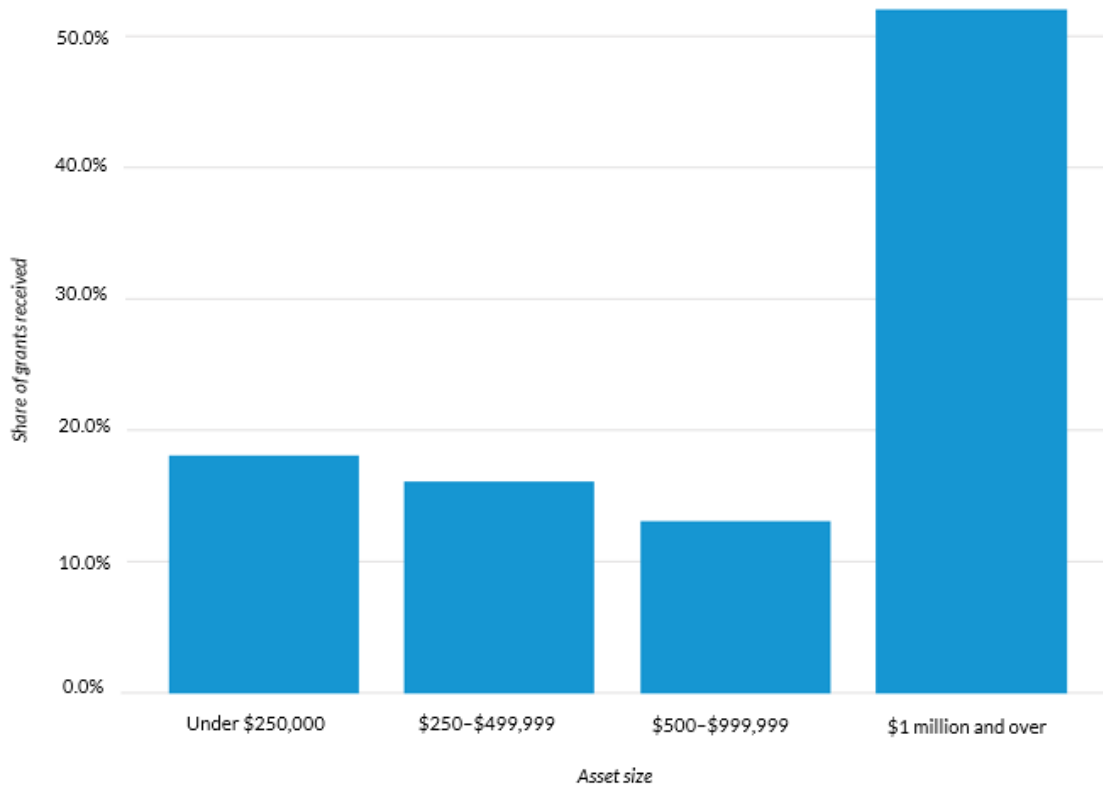
It is not surprising, then, that steering committee members generally considered these early meetings “messy.” Some complained there was not adequate direction from The Community Foundation leadership regarding the committee’s role.

During the first few meetings, many committee members weighed in on nearly every grant on the slate, even if they had little expertise in the issue areas involved. There was not much time for the steering committee to do actual due diligence, because it often received application materials on the grants recommended by the working groups the night before the meeting. Yet some members initially believed they were meant to take an active role in the selection process and did not understand their responsibilities as requiring them to defer to the decisions of the working groups.

Ultimately, The Community Foundation leadership defined the division of labor between the steering committee and the working groups more clearly. The working groups would rank and prioritize organizations through their recommendations, which they would pass on to the steering committee. The committee would quickly review the organizations in each working group slate, based on a high-level cache of information—total size of grants and of budgets, geography of populations served, any red flags that might attend certain organizations—that the committee had determined it needed to feel comfortable and confident in the slate. The committee would then vote up or down on the slate.

This allowed the steering committee to focus more on the “macro-level” work of coordinating funds and maintaining the nonprofit ecosystem in the Greater Washington region. “It allowed us to think not just about the actual proposals themselves, but about some of the other benchmarks on institutional stability and geography gaps,” one steering committee member recalled.

FIGURE 2
Comparison of Grantee Asset Size



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Note: Asset size figures were calculated for 183 out of 203 grantees (as of August 5, 2020) using available National Center for Charitable Statistics financial information.

BOX 3

GRANTEE PERSPECTIVE: MARY'S CENTER

Mary's Center, a nonprofit community health center, faced operations challenges in its Prince George's County location as it lost revenue owing to fewer patient encounters at the start of the COVID-19 crisis. It needed resources to acquire personal protective equipment (PPE) to keep its staff and patients safe for in-person visits and to expand its telehealth capacity. A grant from the COVID-19 Fund allowed it to meet the increased demand. The grant enhanced the health center's ability to see pediatric patients and keep children up to date on vaccines. Mary's Center also provided COVID-19 testing for more than 600 residents of Prince George's County. It also increased its capacity to provide critical prenatal services to 568 expectant mothers who had lost their jobs and health insurance. One postpartum

patient credited the center’s telemedicine outreach with saving her life: “If she hadn’t stayed on me and hadn’t kept calling and hadn’t kept texting, you know, I could have died with a newborn.”

Coordinating Partners

Perhaps because the Greater Washington region lacks a large national or global foundation that dominates the landscape (such as the Ford Foundation in New York City), philanthropies in the region have long cultivated a [strong culture](#) of collaboration. The region has an active affinity group, the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers, where funders convene to learn from one another. As have past crises, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the region’s philanthropic community to share information on emerging community needs and on each institution’s giving strategies to meet those needs. Community Foundation staff devoted a great deal of time early in the crisis to connect with peer funding institutions (including the region’s United Way, community foundations in Northern Virginia, and private foundations) and representatives of local intermediaries (such as the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments and the Center for Nonprofit Advancement) that had most recently convened around the 2019 government shutdown.

Given the importance of coordination during a crisis and given that some of the region’s funders did not have strong working relationships with each other, one of the key aims of The Community Foundation’s response was to provide a space where funders in the region could learn about each other’s responses to the pandemic. This became an opportunity to create a community out of crisis. Every Friday (and by July 2020, every other Friday), The Community Foundation hosted a video call with funders across the region—including individual donors and corporate, private, and community foundations—as well as representatives from DC, Prince George’s County and Montgomery County governments, and the four Northern Virginia community foundations to discuss the coordination of emergency COVID-19 response. The Community Foundation occasionally invited nonprofit partners to provide updates on their work and on their understanding of emerging needs. At its largest, the call included more than 70 participants. The weekly meetings provided many of those participating in the COVID-19 Fund grantmaking process (as well as many funders who were not) with key insights about how the broader nonprofit ecosystem in the Greater Washington region as well as the public sector were responding to the crisis. Given that the situation on the ground was so fluid, especially with respect to the response of local and county government, such weekly “intelligence” proved crucial in highlighting opportunities for philanthropy to serve as bridge funding for organizations that could not

or did not know whether they would be able to access government relief funds and services, and for instances when those supports were clearly inadequate.

The weekly and biweekly calls also provided participating funders an understanding of other funders' priority areas and approaches, which proved valuable with respect to their own grantmaking. At least one funder noted that they directed applicants that were not right for their foundation to another in the region, based on information they gleaned during the calls. (Other grantmakers reported providing funding for unsuccessful applicants to the COVID-19 Fund.)

Many of those who participated in the calls believe they can encourage coordination and information sharing after the COVID-19 crisis subsides and that they should become a permanent part of Greater Washington philanthropy. In fact, Wellons has brought in the leader of the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers to cofacilitate the meetings going forward, further expanding their reach.

Advancing Racial Equity

Having the COVID-19 Fund prioritize racial equity was perhaps the most consequential decision made by The Community Foundation and those involved with the Fund. However, for many members of the steering committee and working groups, there was a significant gap between naming racial equity and understanding how an equity lens would be applied in practice. The urgency of the crisis and the demand for a rapid response meant that the gap had to be narrowed during grantmaking.

Though the working groups grappled with these issues and were the first line of implementation, this narrowing was ultimately formalized by the steering committee. This process was complicated by the committee's size and heterogeneity. For committee members who did not know each other well, centering racial equity could be especially uncomfortable. The wide range of perspectives and experience with equitable grantmaking practices was also a challenge.

Racial equity had been central to The Community Foundation's work and to Wellons's vision of her new role as a foundation leader. The COVID-19 Fund was not launched as a racial equity fund, but given that the pandemic would likely disproportionately harm communities of color in the Greater Washington region, the foundation knew that racial equity would need to be incorporated in the fund. How precisely this would be done was more difficult to determine.

During the first few weeks after the COVID-19 Fund was established, Wellons had conversations with philanthropic leaders in the region with significant experience centering racial equity on how such a commitment could be applied to the fund. As the steering committee began deliberating on the working groups' recommendations, committee members struggled with the question of whether the fact that an organization predominantly served a lower-income community of color fully satisfied the terms of racial equity. For some members, in the midst of a public health crisis, the most important criteria with respect to equity were reach, scale, and efficiency, and especially the ability to serve people of color and lower-income populations disproportionately harmed by COVID-19.

Wellons, foundation staff, and several other steering committee members understood that these criteria often translated into supporting white-led "anchor" institutions with strong preexisting relationships with funders. They were also keenly aware of the precarious financial health of many of the smaller organizations led by people of color. Applying a racial equity lens to COVID-19 response would mean actively addressing those inequities and that precarity. It also meant including as one of the responsibilities of the COVID-19 Fund considerations of the longer-term composition of the nonprofit landscape in the region postpandemic. This entailed valuing the need to both respond to the demands of the present and to invest in the future. As one committee member explained, "If we want the ecosystem to include some of these smaller groups on the back end of this, then we can't just deny them funding because they haven't been around for 40 years."

Wellons and other steering committee members realized that such a vision required applying a more explicit benchmark to racial equity—more specifically, a target of funded organizations led by people of color to guide the steering committee and working groups. A publicly announced benchmark would also send more of a signal to grantees and address an oversight in the Phase 1 RFP, which did not ask applicants about the racial composition of their leadership. Although there was not a wide divergence in the rates of funding going to organizations led by people of color between the two phases (with Phase 1 at slightly less than half and Phase 2 at a little more than half), one grantee stressed that racial equity language and intent in the RFP matter to applicants, especially those at organizations led by people of color.

The Community Foundation believed it was crucial to have general buy-in for a racial equity strategy centered on supporting organizations led by people of color. It also appreciated the educational opportunity that the steering committee presented for working with members who had less experience applying a racial equity lens to their grantmaking. As Wellons explained, The Community Foundation's long experience advising individual donors prepared it for this sort of dynamic. "We're not quick to run because someone doesn't get where we want to go," she said. "We are trained to stay in it

with them. We understand that it’s a journey.” Yet Wellons also understood that the journey had to be bounded by the urgency of the moment. So she and her team also resisted getting bogged down, setting some “toplines” of why the approach to racial equity they were advocating was important and making clear they would be moving ahead with the strategy. It was a powerful illustration of how the urgency imposed by emergency response requires flexible but firm leadership.

Two steering committee members with considerable experience in centering racial equity in grantmaking worked closely with Wellons to hone that definition. After some pushing and pulling, they agreed that at least half of the organizations supported by the fund would be led by people of color. These organizations would be those with an executive director or chief executive officer who was a person of color and with some representation of people of color on the board. Ultimately, the full steering committee signed off on the guidelines, which Wellons characterized as a “both/and” as opposed to an “either/or” position. The COVID-19 Fund would support organizations led by people of color *and* anchor institutions led predominantly by white people. Reflecting these guidelines, the Phase 2 RFP (released in May 2020) asked applicants to share the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of their senior leadership team and board of directors. At the conclusion of Phase 2, The Community Foundation announced that 52 percent of grantee organizations throughout the entirety of the fund were led by people of color. Significantly, those proportions align relatively closely with the average grant size and total dollars awarded to organizations that were and were not led by people of color.

TABLE 3
Average Award Size by Phase and Leadership

	Led by people of color			Not led by people of color		
	Average award size	Share of funding	Share of grants	Average award size	Share of funding	Share of grants
Phase 1	\$41,859.81	49%	50%	\$42,782.60	51%	50%
Phase 2	\$21,067.94	47%	51%	\$24,951.93	53%	49%
Total	\$31,879.71	48%	50%	\$34,497.65	52%	50%

Notes: Award size, total funding, phase, and data on leadership composition were provided by The Community Foundation on August 5, 2020. Whether or not an organization was led by people of color was an indicator determined by The Community Foundation based on whether the organization executive leadership or board was led by people of color.

The killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the subsequent global protests against anti-Black violence, only strengthened the COVID-19 Fund leadership’s commitment to racial equity. As Wellons explained, as the national philanthropic community began to focus more on disparities in COVID-19-related funding, the steering committee and working group members took some solace in the fact “that we had taken that time and struggled through it at the front end, so we weren’t reacting. We had already made the decision [to center racial equity].”

The sector's increased focus on racial equity also heightened some of the tensions in the COVID-19 Fund's internal processes, because the steering committee was largely white and did not fully reflect the communities it sought to serve. With respect to racial equity, the fund had focused largely on the grantees, and several committee members insisted that funders must turn the equity lens on themselves. As one committee member noted, "The most critical population to serve was poor whites and people of color, and I didn't see them in the room. I didn't see people with lived experience at the table." Several members noted that moving forward, The Community Foundation would need to reckon with this dimension of racial equity. This is work, they agreed, that cannot begin in the midst of crisis, but inevitably relies on preexisting investments in ideas, infrastructure, and institutions.

Fostering Parallel COVID-Related Funds

In addition to the COVID-19 Fund, The Community Foundation housed 13 other funds related to COVID-19 that had more than \$25 million in total resources. These funds played a key role in the foundation's regional philanthropic coordination, and several of their leaders participated in the Friday calls and/or participated in working groups. Some funds were small and closely targeted—for example, several restaurant groups established funds to provide support to laid-off and furloughed workers. Others were broader but focused on a particular form of support, such as cash assistance or personal protective equipment. Much like the COVID-19 Fund, these funds prioritized rapid response, sought to address people disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and emphasized adaptability, often responding to the changing nature of the crisis and the community needs it provoked. In this section, we provide three case studies of COVID-19-related funds managed by The Community Foundation.

BMC Cares Fund

As the scale of the COVID-19 crisis in the Greater Washington region became clear, the leadership of Bernstein Management Corporation (BMC) and the Diane & Norman Bernstein Foundation began to plan their philanthropic response. The first priority was to make sure that all their employees were safe and cared for. Beyond that, they also wanted to help the broader community, and particularly the 6,500 residents of the apartment buildings the company manages.

Kelly Lynch, who holds senior positions at the management company and the foundation, reached out to Tonia Wellons about the possibility of establishing a fund at The Community Foundation, which helped the management company and the family foundation set up the BMC Cares Fund. The fund

launched on April 4, 2020, supporting commercial and residential tenants and directing aid to the broader community. Between contributions from BMC and the family foundation and matching funds from BMC's investment partner, BDC Properties, a combined \$1 million was gifted to launch the fund.

The Community Foundation helped develop the application and selection process for BMC Cares, whittling it down to a few basic questions: Have you lost income because of COVID-19? And have you incurred additional expenses because of the crisis? Representatives from The Community Foundation also sat on the fund's steering committee and connected BMC Cares with Capital Area Asset Builders (a community-based group that promotes financial independence) to quickly review hundreds of applications and help distribute funds. To date, the BMC Cares Fund has sent out more than 400 relief grants to BMC residents who applied for support. The fund also supported Mary's Center for Maternal and Child Care, a community health organization, so they could provide cash assistance to a growing list of vulnerable patients. When the committee made plans to offer assistance to small retail and nonprofit tenants hit hard by the shutdown, The Community Foundation connected them with the Latino Economic Development Center for assistance in developing the application and processing of grants. The BMC Cares Fund was able to provide microgrants to 22 tenants as well as a grant to the Latino Economic Development Center so it could provide emergency relief grants to its clients.

The Community Foundation offered BMC Cares technical assistance and guidance navigating the nonprofit landscape in Washington, DC. Perhaps most importantly, it helped to balance the commitment to get money out the door with a careful, deliberative approach. "Tonia was exactly the right leader at exactly the right time," said Kelly Lynch. "She has incredible vision and strikes the perfect balance of listening and leading."

DC Education Equity Fund

At the end of March 2020, as Mayor Muriel Bowser was preparing to announce that DC public schools would be closing and students would be transitioning to full distance learning for the rest of the school year, her staff reached out to Maura Marino, head of Education Forward DC, a nonprofit that supports DC public and charter schools. The mayor wanted to use the opportunity of the announcement to issue a call to the public for charitable support for schools and students, especially considering the likelihood that the pandemic would disproportionately affect lower-income families and exacerbate educational inequities in the school system. Would it be possible, she asked, to create a charitable vehicle designated for COVID-19 response that would allow donations to go directly to schools and families, in time for the mayor's announcement?

Marino, working closely with the leadership of the DC Public Education Fund, an entity that raises private funds to support DC Public Schools' start-up initiatives, reached out to the Greater Washington Community Foundation to determine whether it could set such a fund up so quickly. "I honestly thought it was a long shot," recalls Marino. But within 24 hours, the DC Education Equity Fund was established, and on March 24, 2020, the mayor announced the fund at her press conference.

The DC Education Equity Fund is jointly governed by Marino, Bisi Oyedele (a partner at Education Forward DC), and Jeanie Lee (DC Public Education Fund's executive director). After consulting with school administrators and teachers, parent advocacy groups and the leaders of education nonprofits, Marino, Oyedele, and Lee decided to focus the fund on meeting students' basic needs and providing devices to support distance learning. The fund would support traditional public schools and public charter schools and would be targeted to the most vulnerable students in those schools (including at-risk students, students with undocumented parents, and students in the care of the city). The Community Foundation housed and managed the fund, taking in donations and distributing payments to schools (a task that proved especially challenging given schools were shuttered).

Within a few months, the fund raised more than \$2.2 million (coming mostly from major donations), and as of September 2020, it had spent \$1.6 million. Forty-six percent of the funding was directed to provide computers and other devices for more than 3,000 students, 41 percent was used to provide internet access to the households of more than 4,000 students, and 12 percent was used to meet the basic needs of students' families, including food, toiletries, and transportation (with 1 percent going to other expenses, such as information technology support and online licenses). With the 2020 school year starting, the fund is focusing on helping students successfully transition when school buildings reopen.

CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield PPE Response Fund

In the first weeks of March 2020, Brian Pieninck, president and chief executive officer of CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, the largest health care insurer in the Greater Washington region, mobilized a high-level team to plan a response to the COVID-19 crisis. He quickly identified the difficulty in securing personal protective equipment for the region's health care and social service workers as a key challenge the insurer could address.

However, as Destiny-Simone Ramjohn, CareFirst's vice president of community health and social impact, recalls, the team appreciated that "the PPE supply chain problem necessitated a coordinated response and very early on we sought to join forces with trusted partners who could help offer solutions

to the issue.” CareFirst had an existing relationship with The Community Foundation, which had served as the sponsor of its donor-advised fund for more than a decade, and so reached out to it as a partner.

The Community Foundation helped CareFirst set up the \$5 million CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield PPE Response Fund, which formally launched in July 2020, to provide PPE to community-based organizations, federally qualified health centers, and small, independent primary care providers in the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Northern Virginia. CareFirst procured 1.6 million PPE units, including face shields, gowns, gloves, and most recently, filtering face masks, from an international supply network. These units are being distributed to some 200 health care and social service organizations in the first wave of funding. Senior Community Foundation leaders assisted with compliance and documentation issues and ensured that the fund could receive and make donations, even helping to recruit donors. The Community Foundation also helped to identify intermediary project management organizations and recipient organizations and to convene a group of several dozen external stakeholders that reviewed the fund’s goals and distribution criteria.

Planning for the Next Crisis and Lessons Learned

Although emergency philanthropic response often requires establishing new funds, developing novel procedures, and engaging with new partners, emergency response is also shaped by preexisting relationships, expertise, and institutional structures. This is not only because funders often turn to previous crises for instruction, as The Community Foundation did. It is also because the demands of rapid response often direct philanthropic action into channels representing patterns of grantmaking that lead funders are already accustomed to. This dynamic emphasizes the importance of having an infrastructure in place before crises occur so that organizations can activate partners across issue areas rather than spend time developing relationships from scratch.

This mix of novelty and continuity suggests that it is vitally important to prepare for the next crisis well before it hits. The Community Foundation has even begun to do so during the COVID-19 crisis. Tonia Wellons is considering incorporating emergency response more definitively in the foundation’s strategic plan as well as how the foundation will continue the work in several areas by leveraging its relationship to other grantmaking intermediaries in the region, like the United Way of the National Capital Area and Washington Area Women’s Foundation.

The Community Foundation’s experience incorporating racial equity in emergency grantmaking highlights the important work that philanthropy in the Greater Washington region did before the crisis.

However, it also highlights the need for continued work and reflection on how to balance the different imperatives that a racial equity lens demands. The work done during the COVID-19 pandemic (which must continue after the crisis) will pay dividends when the next crisis arrives, regardless of what shape it takes.

Lastly, The Community Foundation's experience responding to the COVID-19 emergency in the Greater Washington region illustrates key themes and lessons for any philanthropic effort to respond, recover, and rebuild during and after a large-scale crisis. Those themes and lessons are as follows:

- **Partnerships and trust:** engage trusted partners and bring in new ones in respectful ways.
 - » Even when it involves more effort, be open to working with a variety of partners at all stages of the grantmaking process to benefit from a diversity of ideas and perspectives.
 - » Take advantage of the opportunity to build new donor and grantee partnerships and value how they enrich your understanding of the community.
 - » Recognize how the crisis affects the time and availability of nonprofit partners, and be mindful of their time when reaching out to learn more about needs.
 - » Streamline the application process to show trust in the nonprofit community and save time for people completing and reviewing the application.
 - » Determine whether you want to leverage partner expertise for advice or decisionmaking before engagement, and communicate this to partners so they know their roles and have appropriate expectations.
 - » Stay in close touch with local government leaders to ensure the community's needs are met through a combination of public and philanthropic resources.

- **Flexibility and responsiveness:** establish priorities but be willing to adapt them.
 - » Build strong lines of communication throughout the application review process, especially when multiple people and groups play different roles throughout.
 - » Be clear about what is in and out of scope for grant support so that nonprofit partners do not waste time applying and people reviewing the applications understand what to prioritize.
 - » Adjust and clearly communicate priorities as the crisis evolves, recognizing the importance of transparency so as not to confuse partners.
 - » Be open to emerging needs and changes in priorities.

- **Leadership and vision:** empower a strong leader with a clear vision for the community.

- » Support a leader who can provide steady guidance as processes and priorities are determined and develop.
- » Find the right balance between meeting immediate needs and working toward long-term priorities, including supporting direct service and advocacy efforts.
- » Make space for tough conversations that elicit divergent views and be prepared to choose what you consider the best path forward, even when some disagree.

Appendix. Notes on Narrative and Data Analysis

Narrative Account

The research team at the Urban Institute's Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy prepared the narrative account of The Community Foundation's response to the COVID-19 crisis based on the following sources:

- internal documents from and materials published by The Community Foundation, provided by the Greater Washington Community Foundation
- an interview with the entire COVID-19 Fund steering committee by the Urban research team on July 28, 2020
- sixteen additional one-on-one interviews with COVID-19 Fund steering committee members and grantees, selected by The Community Foundation, as well as with leaders of COVID-19-related funds and with Community Foundation staff and leadership
- recordings of steering committee meetings
- published media accounts of Community Foundation COVID-19-related funds and the COVID-19 Fund

Data Analysis

The Greater Washington Community Foundation provided us with several datasets related to grants distributed by the COVID-19 Fund. In sum, these datasets provided the following:

- all grant applicants and grantees, by status of application
- all grantees, by issue area
- all grantees, by past funding status (whether they had ever received funding from The Community Foundation before)
- all grantees, by phase
- all grantee EIN numbers

- all grantees, by POC-led (defined as whether the executive leadership or board composition was POC-led)
- all grantees, by proposed service area
- all grantees, by grant amount

We used grantee Employer Identification Numbers (EINs) to join applicants and grantees to the National Center for Charitable Statistics nonprofit business master files. Of the 1,339 applicants, 814 (66 percent) of applicants matched to the database based on EIN. Of the 893 that matched, another 58 did not have any asset information.

Of the 203 grantees (as of August 5, 2020), 183 matched by their EIN. For those that we matched we were able to determine the organizational assets for 177 of the 183. It is important to note that organizations that are smaller are less likely to include asset information in National Center for Charitable Statistics data. Using this information, we were then able to group grantees by characteristics like their phase, or assets, or issue areas and analyze the distribution of grants across organizations.

About the Authors

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