

How to Use this Resource

This resource provides background on power-sharing in philanthropy as an approach to promote health equity. Use this resource to understand the foundational concepts and strategies for implementing power-sharing practices in your philanthropic efforts to achieve better health for all.

For more context on philanthropy and health equity

To get the most out of this resource, Partners for Advancing Health Equity (P4HE Collaborative) recommends reviewing the level-setting resources provided to participants during the workshop sprint. For practical applications of the lessons shared during this workshop series, see [Moving to Action: Better Health for All](#).

Level Setting

New to the intersection of philanthropy and health equity? Below are level-setting resources recommended by the workshop facilitators.

Read

- › [Case Study: Headwaters Foundation - Redefining How Philanthropies Evaluate](#)
- › [Trust-Based Evaluation: Honoring Community Wisdom](#)
- › [A Journey from Traditional Grantmaking to Trust-Based Philanthropy](#)
- › [Trust-Based Philanthropy is Grounded in Mutual Accountability and Learning](#)
- › [Practicing Trust-Based Philanthropy](#)
- › [The Origins of Trust-Based Philanthropy: An Interview with Pia Infante](#)

Listen

- › [Trust-Based Philanthropy Resources](#)
- › [The Future is Trust-Based](#)

Watch

- › [What is Trust-Based Philanthropy?](#)
- › ["In the Right Hands" Documentary](#)

Workshop Focus

The Partners for Advancing Health Equity Collaborative partnered with Grantmakers In Health (GIH) to host a three series workshop sprint on health equity, community engagement, and power sharing in philanthropy. GIH is a national nonprofit educational organization dedicated to improving the health of all people.

- › **Session 1** speakers introduced trust-based philanthropy as a tool to make grantmaking more equitable. Speakers included [Jill Miller](#), president and CEO of [Bethesda Inc.](#) and the [bi3 fund](#), and [Erin Switalski](#), program director at [the Headwaters Foundation](#).
- › **Session 2** speakers discussed organizational practices to meaningfully engage communities. Speakers included [Earl Lui](#), managing director at [The California Wellness Foundation](#); [Nikki Highsmith Vernick](#), president and CEO at [the Horizon Foundation](#); and [Kenitra Fokwa Kengne](#), program director at [the Horizon Foundation](#).
- › **Session 3** speakers explored how funders can meaningfully engage with communities. Speakers included [Brenda Sharpe](#), president and CEO at [REACH Healthcare Foundation](#), and [Damon Daniel](#), president and CEO at [AdHoc Group Against Crime](#).



Moving to Action

Below is a summary of the three sessions which explored trust-based philanthropy and strategies for meaningful community engagement.





What is the role of philanthropy in health?

Foundations, community-based organizations (CBOs), and governmental health agencies may share the same health goals and may fund the same organizations, programs, and people. It is the role of foundations to use their resources strategically to build long lasting partnerships with a wide range of collaborators. In addition to funding core initiatives, philanthropy allows for the leveraging of many different tools to advance health by funding convenings, providing technical assistance, facilitating relationships, and building the capacity of grantees.

What is Trust-Based Philanthropy?

Trust-based philanthropy (TBP) centers relationships and calls on funders to collaborate with humility and pursue systemic equity. It addresses inherent power imbalances that exist between foundations and their grantees. Applying this trust-based approach allows funders to systematically redistribute power, both organizationally and interpersonally.

> The Four Dimensions of Trust-Based Philanthropy

- 1 Values:**
Leading with values helps guide a foundation's relationships with its partners, guide their decision making, and helps foster alignment – particularly among the board and the staff.

- 2 Culture:**
Trust-based culture centers relationship building and addresses inequitable power dynamics requiring funders to intentionally and continuously foster a sense of trust. This extends to relationships with their board, their staff, partner organizations, and with community members.

- 3 Practices:**
A foundation's practices reflect those values and its culture. TBP invites foundations to assess their internal policies, practices, and decision-making to really look at how they align with their values and adjust if needed.

- 4 Leadership:**
Trust based leadership embodies the values of humility, equity, and transparency, reinforcing values and culture through decision-making. Leaders are collaborative and prioritize the well-being of those doing the work, striving to uplift the entire team – both internally and in partnership.




Why are foundations embracing a trust-based approach?

Foundations are adopting trust-based approaches to build more effective working relationships with their grantees. Trust-based approaches open the door for more innovative solutions and equitable grantmaking.

What approaches can funders apply to build trust-based partnerships?

“There are so many ways we can help beyond just applications, cutting checks, and reading reports.” – Jill Miller, President and CEO, Bethesda Inc.

Funders can be better partners by intentionally building relationships with grantees and asking more about their challenges. This approach centers mutual accountability and a shift for funders from *“What are the expectations of the grantee?”* to *“What are our expectations as a partner to our grantees?”*

> Infusing trust in funding agreements

Infusing trust in funding agreements requires funders to consider ways they can be clearer about what they do and do not fund and look for ways to reduce undue burden on grantees. Consider rewriting funding agreements to focus on partnership expectations rather than grantee deliverables.

> Leveraging spheres of influence

Funders have a sphere of influence that their grantees may not. Funders and other partners can strengthen initiatives by building partnerships that leverage each other’s skillsets and social capital. Consider:

- › What opportunities do we have to share what is being learned?
- › What opportunities do we have to work together to achieve those larger outcomes?”

> Providing multi-year funding

Non-profit organizations need to know that funders are committed to solving long-term problems. A willingness to give multi-year grants is critical for foundations that are looking to make effective change, particularly for those aiming to tackle systemic problems such as poverty, infant mortality, climate change, or health equity.

> Focusing on learning

“The learning mindset is critically important – it’s really important that funders pause and say, ‘what are the needs of our community’ and talk with those on the ground to understand how the community needs align with your interests, your passions, and your strengths in that particular area.” – Jill Miller, President and CEO, Bethesda Inc.



Trust-based partnerships focus on learning to advance the broader goals of a grantee's initiatives. This includes educating staff and board members about the benefits of a trust-based approach and the systems underlying the core issues their mission is aiming to address, as well as learning from non-profits and communities. Take time to educate your board, your communities, and your partners about prioritizing policy and systems change and why focusing on root causes and structural racism matter. When establishing a framework for learning, consider:

- › How are we thinking about learning along the way?
- › How are we using those learnings to keep iterating and building upon the foundation we have set?
- › What successful strategies can we leverage and implement?
- › How can we uplift strategies that are working within the community?

› Responding to the needs of the grantees and communities

Funders can build strong relationships with community partners through responsive offerings that go beyond typical funding. While these priorities should be community-led, examples include hosting convenings and collaboration spaces, providing trainings, facilitating workshops, and engaging additional support partners.

What is the responsibility of the funding organization?

Funding organizations should consider their responsibility in shaping and supporting equitable and sustainable initiatives. The way foundations view this responsibility has changed over time, with foundations now taking it upon themselves to intentionally share power with communities and ensure equity within their grantmaking. Moving from a funder-led approach to a more participatory grantmaking approach values input from communities, and intentionally creating opportunities for them to indicate their priorities and co-design programs.

"These systems of oppression didn't just come out nowhere. It will take time to think about how we go up against them." – Kenitra Fokwa Kengne, Program Director, Horizon Foundation



Case Study: Aligning Culture with Mission

It is the responsibility of a funding organization to align its practices with its mission and values. One significant challenge to changing internal practices is the perception that changes must occur immediately. It requires substantial time and often several iterations to implement significant cultural changes. California Wellness Foundation's grantmaking strategies, practices of community engagement, and internal practices are an example of an iterative evolution. From 1992-2001, the California Wellness Foundation funded grants through a competitive Request for Proposal (RFP) process, focusing on public policy, research, and communications. The initiatives funded through this process were for specific work on Foundation-determined initiatives, with very little flexibility and minimal community and partner input. Feedback indicated that grantees wished the funding was more responsive what they needed such as unrestricted, multi-year operating support that supported their initiatives, rather than ones determined by the Foundation.

- › In 2001, a shift to an open application process allowed for more organic development that promoted work that was valued by the communities. This positioned the non-profits as the experts rather than the Foundation.
- › In 2014, the Foundation sought to improve their community engagement and customer services through grant programs that intentionally centered race. In alignment with this shift, they also changed their internal practices, endowments, assets, and investments. For example, they sought to diversify their investment managers and the racial makeup of their vendors, consultants, and contractors. They started leveraging the Foundation's impact more externally on social media and websites to become better allies and supporters of their grantees' work on racial equity and justice.
- › Starting in 2026, a new strategic framework will be implemented, with equal representation of community and foundation staff on the strategic planning committee. The framework will focus on longer, unrestricted grants and address racial injustice as a

What is power sharing in philanthropy?

Power sharing in philanthropy requires deep reflection and intentionality in defining the roles of each funding partner. This approach shifts the decision-making power to the grantees and the community by overhauling grantmaking processes and applications, reducing burden on grantees, and providing opportunities for communities to share their priorities.



Case Study: Power Sharing

A funding organization successfully partnered with a leader from [Cradle Cincinnati](#) and used a power sharing approach to co-develop programs that support maternal and child health. Initially, the funder did not have a specific vision for the program. However, they entrusted Cradle Cincinnati to design the program, showing their dedication to enhancing the healthcare system for Black women and infants. Traditional reporting or compliance monitoring often imply a lack of trust in nonprofits. To shift away from this approach, the funder replaced the conventional legally binding contract model with a partnership based on trust. They also developed more comprehensive methods for assessing the impact of their grantees on the community at large. Incorporate this model by:

- › Trusting grantees with programming development decisions.
- › Considering replacing contracts with trust-based relationships.
- › Posting board meeting minutes to your website when possible to foster transparency.
- › Posting about failures, lessons learned, and changes to the organization’s theory of change to your website.

What does community engagement look like in philanthropy?

Effectively engaging communities means intentionally earning trust through listening to and learning from communities. Ways to engage communities in partnership for identifying, prioritizing, and strategizing around their health goals include:

- › Hosting virtual or in-person events.
- › Implementing large-scale convenings with partners for knowledge-sharing and one-on-one meetings with individual entities for problem-solving and relationship-building.
- › Engaging in participatory grantmaking.

› Fostering a collaboration-based culture

“Deeply engaging with the community has to be in your organization’s DNA. It has to live and breath in the documents that are agreed upon from the community to the staff, to the board of trustees. It creates a sense of community agreement we can all live by and hold each other accountable to. It’s a way of building trust with community saying these are the new values we want to lean into and if we’re not upholding them we want to know.” –Nikki Highsmith Vernick, President and CEO at the Horizon Foundation

Create a set a values that indicate how you will show up in the community. These values are important in creating new relationships and repairing old relationships. They offer a guide for behavior and a way for partners to be held mutually accountable. Establishing these values and



providing ways for communities to provide feedback and hold foundations accountable sets the stage for trust-based collaborations.

› Engaging trusted partners

“[It’s not] about who we trusted, it’s about who the community trusted and who they routinely went to for help, assistance, and support.” – Brenda Sharpe, President and CEO, REACH Healthcare Foundation

Learning from organizations who is in the community, their priority issue areas, and what they have experienced helps to identify how funders and organizations can work together. Engage trusted subject matter experts in the community to advance equity. Brainstorm ways to strengthen community organizing principles and develop new activities and trainings. To build relationships at the neighborhood level, partner with local initiatives that have ongoing relationships with non-profits and grassroots organizations. These multi-level partnerships can provide bigger reach into communities facilitating new relationships and building direct trust.

› Honoring long-term commitments

Building equity and trust, and effectively engaging communities for long-term change requires long-term commitments from foundations. Foundations can address an issue long-term by strategically using their resources and leveraging lasting partnerships with a range of collaborators.

“With one-year funding you can’t expect a lot to happen. Foundations can’t expect a one-year grant to change the world or to noticeably change the trajectory of an organization’s capacity. That is unrealistic.” – Brenda Sharpe, President and CEO, REACH Healthcare Foundation

› Providing unrestricted funding

Effectively engaging communities requires flexibility in funding. Burdensome restrictions and eligibility requirements can limit the types of organizations and initiatives that get funded. More flexibility in funding allows for more [trust-building](#), and opens the door for innovation. It allows grantees to think about the sustainability of their entire organization.



Case Study: Strategically Addressing Underfunding in Budget Priorities

A mandate of the REACH Foundation is to improve the health insurance coverage rates in their service area. They focus on how they can reduce the rate of the people without access to affordable health coverage. One of their goals is to build capacity and leadership within organizations that have historically been underfunded and under-resourced. They do this by directly expressing each of their strategies, projects, and initiatives in their budget. There was mismatch between what REACH was aiming to do and what they were achieving. A series of interviews with Black leaders of non-profits in their community illuminated that they were underfunded due to a narrow perspective on health and healthcare. Based on the community feedback, the Foundation launched an initiative to center Black voices and looked inward at their role in advancing [philanthropic redlining](#), and perpetuating racism through underinvestment in the back community and other communities of color. Now, nearly half of REACH's funding is awarded as unrestricted, two-year, renewable, core operating grants to safety net health care, thereby connecting people to what's available to them in the community.

Conclusion

Combining the elements of trust-based philanthropy, power sharing, and meaningful community engagement creates a powerful approach to achieving health equity. When foundations adopt these principles, they foster genuine collaboration, ensuring that community voices are at the forefront of decision-making processes. By integrating these strategies, funders can better address the needs of underserved populations and work toward dismantling structural inequities, leading to more equitable and healthier communities.