



Philanthropic Recommendations

National Philanthropy

These recommendations apply to philanthropic organizations with a national scope. Examples: independent foundations (e.g., Robert Wood Johnson Foundation), family foundations (e.g., Blandin Foundation), corporate foundations (e.g., Walmart Foundation), and public charities/donor-advised funds (e.g., Fidelity Charitable).

Understand the landscape and your role in it

- Know the history behind the wealth that created your foundation; if wealth was extracted from rural, use it to support rural.
- Understand the foundation's mission and program oscillations and their impact on communities and grantees; avoid doing harm with changes.
- Clearly define your goal (e.g., place-based philanthropy vs. scaling solutions).
- Seek funding parity between rural and urban communities.

Play the long game

- Support long-term approaches and multi-generational strategies.
- Ask "how does this work affect the networks and infrastructure of the nation?".
- Seek to understand and align with grantees' long-term frameworks.

Take risks, be creative, and use all the tools available

- Engage in impact investing and other investments beyond grants.
- Private foundations: give more than the required 5% payout.
- Align leadership, governance, and funding.
- Reframe modern portfolio theory and fiduciary responsibilities.
- Consider a significant collaborative effort to fund Rural Development Hubs at scale.
- Study the impact of funding with fewer restrictions: are the outcomes more transformational?

Support and learn from rural communities

- Spend time in rural America.
- Engage deeply in places where you work.
- Hire folks from rural areas as program officers.
- Recognize that rural places do not want to become urban places.
- Recognize that communities contorting to fit funder perspectives is inefficient.
- Maintain strong communication loops around learning, trust, and accountability.
- Deepen understanding of Rural Development Hubs, how they work, and how they vary.

Use your voice

- Advocate for rural community priorities in national spaces.
- Engage in storytelling to lift up rural work and positive rural narratives.
- Measure the impact of investments and publicize that impact to draw investment from corporate and other funders.

Collaborate

- Collaborate across national philanthropy to reduce the burden on organizations serving on multiple overlapping "learning networks".
- Utilize existing rural gatherings, networks, and organizations for expertise.
- Understand power dynamics and try to shift from traditional grantor/grantee relationships to more equitable partnerships.
- Embrace partnerships with regional rural funders.

Invest in Rural Development Hubs

- Support intermediaries building community capacity.
- Invest in Hubs at regional levels, not just national intermediaries and technical assistance providers.
- Find ways to provide regional backbone or back office support.
- Use Hubs to re-grant funds closer to the ground.
- Support national rural development collaboration infrastructure, including regular large rural gatherings with unscheduled time for connection.
- Make multiyear unrestricted grants to Rural Development Hubs.

Recognize the need for conscious complementarity to federal funding

- Provide a match where useful.
- Support organizations transitioning from federal funding.



"I want national philanthropies to go deep. I want to see them step up. National philanthropy needs to remember why it was created in the first place and get creative—the usual approach is not going to get it."



Felecia Lucky

Black Belt Community Foundation,
Alabama

"We need fewer transactional funder relationships and more transformational partnerships, where rural practitioners and communities are true co-creators at the table. We need funders who will use their voice, influence, and relationships, including those of their trustees, to advance policy change for the greater good."



Brandy Bynum Dawson

MDC, North Carolina

"I believe that experts, the practitioners with direct experience are best positioned to determine how funding can be most effectively used to achieve the best outcomes."



Ernestor De La Rosa

ITC Great Plains, Kansas

"Philanthropy needs to understand the history behind why they were able to build up so much wealth. Continuing to push that under the table or not addressing that is not helpful—it does further harm. You're either going to lean into the root of the problem or you're not."



Jessica Stago

Change Labs,
Navajo Nation/Arizona

"Philanthropy needs to try an R&D lens on investment. Take risks and learn from failure like venture capital does."



Stacy Caldwell

Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation,
California

"Figure out who you want to impact and build the system from there."



Nancy Fasching

Southwest Initiative Foundation,
Minnesota





State Philanthropy

These recommendations apply to philanthropic organizations with a state or multi-state scope. Examples: independent foundations (e.g., Northwest Area Foundation), family foundations (e.g., Patterson Family Foundation), corporate foundations (e.g., Land O'Lakes Foundation), and public charities/donor-advised funds (e.g., state-focused community foundations).

Leverage your role

- Act as a convener for organizations across the state (e.g., convene rural and urban economic developers to share approaches and develop collaborations).
- Use your voice, power, and relationships to seed change in systems.
- Consider taking on a research and development role in your ecosystem.
- Organize rural philanthropy networks at the state and regional levels (e.g., Texas Rural Funders, Appalachia Funders Network, Delta Philanthropy Forum, Greater New Orleans Funders Network).

Take action

- Try new approaches and learn.
- Don't be afraid of funding something new and different.
- Be careful about too much introspection at the expense of action.
- Private foundations: disburse more than the required 5% payout.

Design equitable and accessible funding and reporting systems

- Provide ongoing support with minimal administrative burden.
- Be careful of forcing communities to compete against each other for funding.

- Consider partnering with regional organizations like Rural Development Hubs to distribute funds to communities.
- Invest in smaller communities.

Respect rural communities and people

- Offer compensation (e.g., honoraria) for time spent advising.
- Approach relationships with Hubs as a generational investment.
- Involve communities in planning and framework development.

Build the capacity of rural communities

- Support leadership networks.
- Support intermediaries that work with communities to build capacity.
- Co-create investment opportunities in rural communities.

Elevate grantee community voices

- Tell community stories (e.g., profiles, interviews, videos).
- Connect communities to donors (e.g., events, introductions).

"As a regional funder, it helps to have others across the country that are doing this work, so that I can tell our board it's not just us, it's others. And this is the way forward for rural philanthropy, so we need to build up the funding field alongside the nonprofit field."



Jerry Kenney

T.L.L. Temple Foundation, Texas

"Funders can help by embracing the role of being a connector and a dealmaker rather than a static gatekeeper."



Tito Llantada

Trust for Civic Life, Colorado

"I'd like to see philanthropy commit to ongoing partnerships—recognize that there are reliable players and fund them on an ongoing basis."



Peter Hille

Mountain Association, Kentucky

"We need to find the opportunities for rural and urban to have conversations and develop relationships."



Maria Urias

Sustainable Forestry and African-American Land Retention Network (SFLR), Tennessee



Local Philanthropy

These recommendations apply to philanthropic organizations with a local scope. Examples: independent foundations (e.g., Minnesota Initiative Foundations), family foundations (e.g., Richard King Mellon Foundation), corporate foundations (e.g., local bank foundations), and public charities/donor-advised funds (e.g., local community foundations).

Stay connected to your community

- Build relationships that are not only based on funding.
- Engage with rural areas—get out of your office and be in the community.
- Partner with Tribal governments.
- Hire young people for your staff and ask them to serve on your board.

Be bold and proactive

- Actively engage in co-creating projects to leverage.
- Consider other investments beyond grants, including supporting capacity building/leadership development for nonprofit staff.
- Private foundations: give more than the required 5% payout.
- Incorporate trust-based philanthropy principles.
- Take more risk.

Be a catalyst

- Make introductions and connections.
- Embrace your role as a bridge-builder for your rural region.
- Engage in catalytic grantmaking (e.g., leverage, matching funds).

- Don't fund the thing (e.g., broadband, water, housing)—fund the ecosystem that does the thing.
- Move from transactional to transformational.
- Tell the story of your community.

Create the philanthropic conditions for Rural Development Hubs to thrive

- Undertake regional funding ecosystem landscape analysis.
- Provide long-term support for Hub infrastructure.
- Invest in capacity building at the local level.

Help grantees focus on the work

- Provide unrestricted funding whenever possible.
- Provide technical expertise to grantees to improve systems and service delivery.
- Communicate clearly about what funding is available and in what form.
- Simplify application processes and share feedback with those who were declined for funding.

Keep learning

- Use a research and development model—learn from failure.
- Learn from peers with successful models and approaches.

"When funders ask for sustainability plans, I want to reframe the question. If we're engaged in generational work, and you know your grant lasts only a year, then the most powerful sustainability plan is connection. Trust your grantees—then commit to introducing them to ten other funders. If you believe in the work and understand that lasting change takes time, those introductions are how we sustain impact—together."



Janice Ikeda
Vibrant Hawai'i, Hawai'i

"Funders have to do internal community building, not just community building out in the community—internal community building within the foundation, the board, and the staff."



Roque Barros
Imperial Valley Wellness
Foundation, California

"I would ask local foundations to be risk takers with us—to practice trust-based philanthropic grant making and to be willing to respond with real help in real time."



Stephanie Swepson Twitty
Eagle Market Streets Development
Corporation, North Carolina