



CENTER FOR
PUBLIC INTEREST
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Council on
Foundations

Insights From Interviews With Congressional Staffers on Philanthropy and Foundations

Created by The Center for Public Interest Communications

Introduction

In our landscape analysis of conversations about philanthropy — [“Better Stories, Better Language”](#) — we noted that many of the critiques about philanthropic giving were rooted in a lack of understanding about how foundations operate and what they do for communities, states, and our country. This misunderstanding is concerning when it comes to policymakers, especially at the federal level, because skepticism about foundations’ practices can lead to increased regulation of philanthropy, restricting the ability of foundations and nonprofits to support services and opportunities across the country. Statements from policymakers like [Senator Sheldon Whitehouse \(D-RI\)](#) or lawsuits like that against the Atlanta-based [Fearless Fund](#) tell stories that portray philanthropy in an extremely negative light. Without our own sector-wide stories to fill the narrative vacuum, these harmful stories will continue to solidify harmful narratives about the philanthropic sector.

To better understand how policymakers perceive philanthropy and foundations, we reached out to dozens of U.S. congressional offices and some state offices to request interviews. We contacted staffers from both parties between September and November 2023. However, due to the prolonged U.S. House Speaker search and other developing crises, we were only able to interview four congressional staffers — two who worked for Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives and two who worked for Democrats in the U.S. Senate. Because of this, we added two additional research methods to provide supplemental data for these interviews: [an analysis of Congressional Research Reports](#) and [an analysis of members of Congress’ social media posts about foundations](#).

This report distills the topline findings from these conversations and recommendations on how to tell stories that accurately portray the role of foundations in the United States. *Some quotes have minor edits for clarity that are noted with ellipses and brackets.*

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Overview of Methods

From September to December 2023, the Center team interviewed four federal-level Congressional staff members on their views of the philanthropic sector and stories and communication approaches within it. Staff members interviewed included two from the Senate and two from the House, four being Democrats and zero being Republicans. The staffers worked for representatives from the following states: Florida, Hawaii, Michigan, and Minnesota. Staffers from both parties at the state and federal levels were asked to be interviewed.

We used two methods to arrive at the following insights: the first is consensus or frequency among the interviewees, which meant multiple participants agreed on some area of inquiry. The second is through identifying bright spots or areas of positive deviance. Bright spots are specific interventions or viewpoints that the interviewees found particularly compelling.

Both methods can also unearth negative findings. There might be consensus about what does NOT work, or bright spots may be focused on areas of failure. Negative insights are included in this analysis and can be helpful as they will help us develop guidance about what not to do—and this often helps solidify what action should be taken. The interview protocol for this method can be found on [the Center for Public Interest Communications' website](#).

Top Line Insights

To better understand how individuals in the policy sphere perceive philanthropy and foundations, we asked interviewees about what role foundations play in the United States, how they have interacted with them, how they get their information about philanthropy, and what they want to know about philanthropic giving for their Member of Congress and constituents. The following insights stood out:

Staffers had overall positive sentiments towards foundations, saying they saw them as more creative, flexible, and having longer-term horizons than the federal government. Ensure your storytelling captures these strengths in your work with communities.

Congressional staffers highlighted various strengths that foundations have that allow them to effectively partner with policymakers and communities, including the ability to take quick action in funding to prove the viability of programs and solutions that the government could support in the future. We recommend leaning into these strengths when telling stories—identify the steps you take internally and tell stories about how that fits into the more extensive changemaking process.

Selected quote:

“[I look] at the foundation sector or philanthropic sector as a proving ground for what's possible ... [I look] at foundations as institutional partners in communities to help see work come to fruition ... Some of the policy ideas you may not necessarily be able to get through Congress or any legislative makeup at the time because there isn't enough evidence, foundations can serve that purpose. [I look] at the foundation sector or philanthropic sector as a proving ground for what is possible.”

“I would probably imagine that foundations can be a little bit more creative and flexible in their funding and can do more of the cutting-edge things that aren't. You know, solid enough for there to be a federal program to fund under.”

“I see foundations as less self-serving. They are mission-based in a way that you can't be when you're trying to meet a bottom line or cut costs or things like that. I know there are internal funding constraints in each foundation, but it just doesn't seem heartless, like some private businesses can be.”

While they had these positive sentiments, many see the sector as “vast” yet also “vague” and “mysterious” at the same time.

The staffers we spoke to said they had various levels of experience with foundations. While each of them provided stories about interacting with various philanthropic entities, they said that the

sector as a whole is still mysterious to most Americans. They mentioned the budgets and size of some foundations as things that may draw confusion or skepticism from the everyday person.

Selected quotes:

"I think that it's such a vast sector that it's anything, like you're talking about a small foundation that might be three people working there or you're talking about a huge foundation that might be larger than a lot of private companies, so they have very different needs ... when you say foundation it might bring a certain institution to mind, or organization to mind, and that's maybe not what you're actually talking about, or what the other person is talking about... So it's very different in size and their budgets also would be very different funding streams and things like that."

"I think the philanthropic sector is still a mystery to most people. They're like, oh, they hear foundations, they hear some of the keywords, words like big money, and mysterious. They're using their dollars to fund political organizations that's incredibly illegal, actually [perception of the public, not reality]."

"wealthy benefactors who have—or families who have—a certain mission or cause that they want to support and fund those efforts."

Staffers said that they want to know more about what foundations do and how they make decisions. Incorporate details about your processes and how your team makes decisions with grantee partners in your storytelling.

Many of the interviewees said they wanted more transparency from foundations. They reported that they do not know or need help understanding how foundations make decisions. They also noted that the public does not understand much about foundations and sees the whole sector as mysterious and in the realm of the wealthy.

Illustrative quotes:

"I don't really know a lot about how they work, or it's based on guesswork. I haven't been on the nonprofit side applying for foundation grants, so I haven't really gotten much exposure to it, and so I just don't know exactly how foundations establish what their mission is. How do they? How do they change that over time? How do they set their grants? I mean, I know that they're kind of annual. They're usually some sort of annual review or reporting process, but I'm not sure what is required by any tax exemptions they may get like I just, I don't have a lot of information or know a lot about that."

To be more transparent, staffers said they wanted foundations to tell the public directly what they are doing.

Illustrative quotes:

“I think there isn't really an idea of what the general public knows of how they do their work unless you work in them or understand them better in that way or interact with them often. So I think it would be better to be able to let the entire general public know that they are not just a good, non-self-serving entity that's trying to forward a goal, but kind of telling more about it.”

“I want to know how often they partner with congressional staff members ... I would love to see that information. How many entities actually partner, not thought leadership, but a partnership? No, the hard work of the entity, OK, you're funding this nationwide, these are the available fellow federal dollars not going to tell you what type of entities to go look at or tell you the type of entities look at which entities based on the federal requirements because sometimes they need help with drawing down federal funds. That's a major gap.”

When we asked them what they would like specifically, staffers said they wanted foundations to have a shareable one-pager with **the foundation's goals** and **examples of projects funded in the past**. One staffer noted that a one-pager like this would be very helpful for him to share with his constituents so they can be more competitive when they apply for funding from the foundations. Another staffer noted that a **local “hub” of information** about local foundations and funding sources would benefit them and their constituents.

Illustrative quote:

“[Put] your grant-making goals on the one-pager. And then give us some examples of organizations you funded in the past? That would be incredible...What are your goals? What are you seeking to accomplish? Give me your not your performance, but give me the logic model. How are you thinking about this, you know?” – (on what information they would like from fellow COP policymakers).

“If there's a foundation hub that all work together, would put it together so that communities are able to say these are resources available to my community.”

Staffers said they use a foundation's history, age, and IRS compliance as proof of legitimacy. Lean into the length of your grantmaking – along with process transparency – when communicating with policymakers.

Congressional staffers were cautious about funding and supporting new foundations with less of a track record. Instead, they trust older foundations with a track record. This trust makes sense,

considering they are politically risk-averse (funding or championing a failure or a foundation with a scandal is risky for them).

Risk averseness and preference for foundations with a track record were also the case when they talked about their work with community foundations.

Selected Quotes:

“The United Way, I would look at their Alice report. So large reports that are utilized on an annual basis so I can identify them and reread them and see the past versions, but I just use them to verify the legitimacy because I have to verify that if I'm doing a community park congressional earmark for them to verify that they are nonprofit, it's because there's limitations on who we can help.”

Stemming from a question on how to determine trustworthiness of an entity: *“The age of the entity. Because it would show that somebody has been utilizing this for a while, the 90s to make sure that they've recovered and turned in the IRS forms needed. If I was personally donating the fund utilization scores to make sure that it's not just going to administrative and staff cost is going to the research or the service being provided. From my space it's mainly just the age of the entity and the capacity of the individuals leading it to accomplish the federal goal provided with the money being provided to them.”*

Congressional staffers preferred community foundations in their geographic areas compared to large national foundations. If you are partnering with communities in their constituencies, make that clear.

Perhaps due to creating more goodwill among their constituents or staying out of national political issues surrounding foundations like the Gates Foundation, Congressional staffers heaped praise on their local community foundations and avoided talking about national foundations—with the exception of one staffer who mentioned a national foundation working on significant projects in their state.

Selected quote:

“Members of Congress, regardless of where they're from, they can identify with a Community Foundation they looked at from a bureaucratic perspective, you know, beyond the debates, once it gets to the department, they receive the director to give funding you trust from a fiscal responsibility perspective. You trust the Community Foundation to be a good steward. Those funds they have the due diligence processes in place because they already got to submit 990 forms and what have you to the IRS and and treasury and the whole 9 yards.”

For their information on foundations, Congressional staffers trusted government sources, local media, *The New York Times*, *The Council on Foundations*, and local entities focused on foundations, such as *The Council of Michigan Foundations*.

Selected quotes:

“I think the news, our local news. Local papers, I should say, is usually where I would go, or public radio. Newspapers, news stations, our websites. Other than that, I think I trust a lot of what different agencies, government agencies would tell me. And they might not, like I said earlier, have the most accurate data. So I think I'm also at a little bit of a loss of where to look.”

“Council of Michigan foundations. Council on Foundations... Association for Black Foundation executives... Digest, the philanthropic magazine, if you will. Quite often I go review candid which I forget it's old name now....Anyway, that's old now. It's called Candid. Just to name a few and of course, just general network of you know talking to folks.”