



SUSTAINING YOUR FUNDRAISING DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19

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Sustaining Your Fundraising During the Time of COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a plethora of challenges for consumer health advocacy organizations and the communities they support. Listening to our partners, we understand that fundraising and organizational financial sustainability remain near the top of these challenges. As the pandemic continues to cause almost inconceivable harm, and advocates continue to work to counter COVID-19's destruction, we hope this toolkit, *Sustaining Your Fundraising During the Time of COVID-19*, can serve as practical guide to support some of these financial challenges.

There has never been a more important time to support grassroots organizing and advance health justice at the local, state, and federal level. However, with in-person fundraising events cancelled and a nationwide economic crisis, cultivating and sustaining funders and donors currently, and for the foreseeable future, will remain a difficult task. We also recognize that funding is a finite resource and that there are significant competing demands in a time where many justice-oriented movements are uniting.

In this vein, we encourage predominantly white and white-led organizations to think critically about the space they are occupying, as it is essential that those impacted by racism lead efforts to dismantle it. With the converging pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism, how can white-led organizations follow the lead of organizations led by people impacted by racism and other forms of discrimination? How can they responsibly fundraise to further their racial equity work while also making space for funds to go directly to those organizations?

In this toolkit, we outline digital fundraising strategies where partners have found success – from hosting a virtual awards event to state-specific “Giving Days!” We also explore lessons learned from communicating and working with individual donors and local, state and national foundations during this time. Lastly, we share some additional resources and tools to build health advocates’ abilities to fundraise now and into the future. In the coming months, we will continue to collect and share best practices, recognizing that as the pandemic continues, new strategies will emerge as well as anecdotal data on what works. If you have examples to share with our learning community, please [email Amanda Ptashkin](#).

PIVOTING TO VIRTUAL

In a time of physical distancing, advocates are rethinking how they raise resources without the one-on-one and face-to-face engagement they have relied on in the past, be it through in-person fundraisers or individual meetings with donors. What used to be yearly events, galas, breakfasts, races, and other key fundraising events must be restructured to comply with physical distancing protocols. Partners are leading the way in showing us what is possible in these new and trying times. Here are some notable examples:

GIVING DAYS

Advocates in Idaho participated in Idaho Gives – what normally is a yearly one-day push for donations for non-profits turned into a two-week long effort to garner support for more organizations and raise additional funds.

The [Boise Bicycle Project](#) (BBP) was one of thirteen non-profits that decided to band together to support each other through the week of action. This collective effort made the week a success, cross promoting other organizations, highlighting the areas of intersection in their work and making clear why supporting these organizations was critical to their overall mission.

In 2019, the one-day total for Idaho Gives was \$1.7 million. This year, that total jumped to \$3.9 million. Check out the [timeline](#) for this year that includes the daily themed messages that helped to drum up support. You can also listen to an NPR [interview](#) on “How Idaho Nonprofits are Doing with Virtual Idaho Gives Fundraiser.”



1. Giving Days are 24-hour online fundraising challenges that aim to rally groups of people around a particular region, cause, event, or university.

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Here are some takeaways from Jimmy Hallyburton, The Boise Bicycle Project's executive director:

- “ In this moment of COVID, I truly believe the nonprofits that emerge most intact will be the ones who've figured out new ways to work collaboratively and collectively to serve the community.
- We have to purposefully show our audience how intertwined each of our nonprofits are: “BBP can only succeed if Big Brother Big Sisters, IRC, Jannus... succeed, because BBP is only addressing one of the barriers our participants face. That means a donation to one of BBP's partners, still supports BBP.”
- I've spent a lot of time building trust for BBP in the community, and I've also had the unique opportunity to work intimately with countless other organizations. And that means I also have a unique opportunity to share this experience with others: “Here are some of the incredible organizations I believe in and here's why...”
- Not everybody has the ability to give financially right now, and that's ok, but most people do have the ability to amplify the mission of the organizations they love and cherish to a broader audience. Commenting on social media posts and sharing your own personal experience/story about an organization with others can make a big difference.
”

In many other states, the organizers of Giving Tuesday (the Tuesday after Thanksgiving), bumped up the day to earlier in the year to recognize the difficult financial situation many non-profits were experiencing and to find ways to activate communities in support of the important work ahead. Giving days in [Georgia](#), Missouri, and a special [Give STL Day](#) helped drive donations.

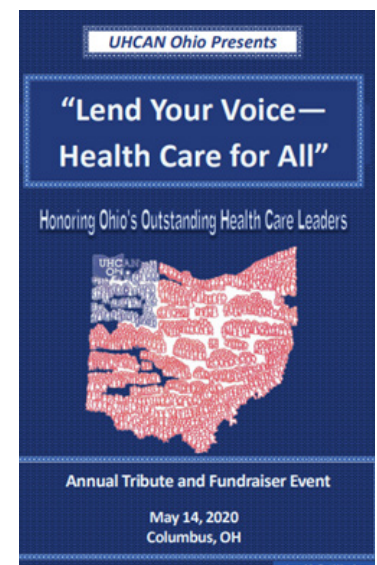
EVENTS REIMAGINED

In addition to traditional online fundraising, many organizations are rethinking their signature in-person fundraising events and have proactively pivoted to socially distanced events.

In Ohio, partners at [UHCAN Ohio](#) hold [Lend Your Voice - Health Care for All](#), an annual tribute and significant fundraising event that provides their biggest source of unrestricted dollars. This year, forced to take a different approach, UHCAN Ohio held the event via Zoom, but still made individual asks to more donors, securing \$31,500 - the most raised in the last five years.

Speaking with UHCAN Ohio's executive director, Steven Wagner, we gained some additional insights into the process and some suggestions for others making this pivot.

- Their first step was to determine whether they would move forward with their annual event. Recognizing that the pandemic was unlikely to resolve itself in the immediate future and unwilling to wait until next year, Wagner decided to push forward. Their main concern was how to hold a socially-distanced event while still highlighting the voices of awardees.
- Next, they made sure to mail out the actual awards ahead of time to the recipients so that they could film their portions in advance. In addition to then having several video clips to use and promote on social media, they were able to play the videos and connect live with the recipients during the event. The video clips enabled UHCAN Ohio to create social media posts, widely spreading the news of the honoree with good pick up and shares for additional fundraising revenue.
- Since they muted lines and there was no audible applause, organizers taught attendees the American Sign Language (ASL) sign for clapping and reported it was great to see a screen full of people waving their hands in honor of the awardees.
- They also recommend that organizations identify a dedicated event emcee and a stage manager to handle tech issues that might arise, keep the flow going and keep everything running smoothly.



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The Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy Coalition ([MIRA](#)) held their annual gala, [Give Liberty a Hand 2020](#), virtually for the first time in June 2020. Replete with keynote speakers, awardees and even live music, the event was a great opportunity to bring the community together and celebrate each other, despite the challenges of the pandemic. Some of the highlights included:

- A segment of the program featuring the co-founders of the Boston String Project who delighted attendees with a [live musical performance](#) – straight from their living rooms. 263 unique viewers, with 430 total participants (including people who dropped off and came back).
- Replicating the sense of community of a real-life MIRA gala by converting dozens of guests to on-camera “panelists” (Zoom allows up to 100 panelist slots), able to visibly applaud, raise their glasses, pump their fists, and otherwise express support and appreciation for speakers. They also actively encouraged comments in the chat box, resulting in hundreds of chat messages over the course of the event.
- Easily [shared edited segments](#) of the event were later posted on social media, extending the shelf-life of the event and fundraising momentum.



MIRA believes that the benefit of the shareable video segments was more about community-building, branding and sponsor recognition than about fundraising.

For advocates at Georgians for a Healthy Future ([GHF](#)), they took on an entirely new approach to fundraising this year with their, Give 'Em Health Virtual Trivia Night. A teams-driven, interactive trivia competition, hosted over Zoom the event included categories such as Health Care Current Events, Health on Film/TV and Health Care Quotes. GHF thought it was critical to include fun pop culture references, that way everyone from the average consumer to the biggest policy wonk could feel included. In addition to clever categories and questions, the GHF team featured special guests via video questions. GHF was able to reach out to some state legislators to record short messages of support for the organization and to read the question and reveal the answer. The highlight was their [question](#) and [answer](#) from former Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher. GHF's advice: guest speakers are happy to help if you make it easy and give them clear instructions.

With solicitation of sponsors as well as individual ticket sales, the event grossed \$8000, surpassing their initial goals. They found that specific asks of individuals to sponsor or support (or to at least purchase a ticket) were more successful and that they had more success with corporate asks than in previous years. The night was hosted by an event company that GHF contracted with; the additional support helped the event run smoothly and allowed GHF staff to enjoy themselves.



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MUTUAL AID

As illustrated earlier, collaboration across sectors and non-profits is crucial right now, as is direct support for those most impacted by the pandemic and its economic fallout. Many groups that have traditionally not worked in the direct service space are now fundraising for mutual aid² to deliver vital services. These groups collect and redistribute donations to those in need, helping build authentic new relationships between supporters and nonprofits and their clients.

Our partners at [TakeAction Minnesota](#) created a [#ShareMyCheck](#) campaign to encourage individuals to use some or all of their stimulus relief checks to help local communities. They provided a robust list of on-the-ground supports available to individuals and a direct link for donors wishing to contribute to those efforts. One of the funds the group promoted, [MN Immigrant Families COVID-19 Fund](#), has raised approximately \$275,000 dollars to support immigrant communities. In addition, another partner in the #ShareMyCheck campaign, [COVID-19 Mutual Aid Fund for LGBTQI+ BIPOC Folks](#), raised \$250,000.

Similar efforts in Maine are also helping people to donate, volunteer or access resources from groups across the state. The [Maine People's Alliance](#) created a page, [Mainers Together](#), which allows people to give, get assistance, volunteer or connect to health services if they are feeling sick. The website helped Maine People's Alliance to increase their grassroots base by over 1,000 – people with the potential to engage in future advocacy campaigns. Check out [Beacon](#), a project of the Maine People's Alliance for more information on their mutual aid work and other efforts to support Mainers during the pandemic.



Though fundraising is important, another critical piece of mutual aid work is engaging grassroots supports. Sometimes people are not in a position to make a donation, but are able to volunteer their time, delivering groceries or supplies, or providing childcare. It is also an opportunity to deepen relationships and build a robust community that will thrive beyond the pandemic. As your organization grows these networks, we recommend building in well-thought out ways to track engagement and follow-up opportunities. Check out Community Catalyst's recent toolkit, [Let's Talk About Tech: Databases and Platforms to Manage and Engage Your Network](#).

INDIVIDUAL DONOR CULTIVATION

Perhaps paradoxically, the pandemic and resulting economic distress have provided an opportunity to develop and/or grow an individual donor program. Right now, people are continuing to clamor for all types of information – information on the virus, what to do if they are sick or suspect they might be, how to connect to resources like unemployment insurance, housing supports, food pantries etc. During this time, many groups are holding webinars about these very issues, promoted through social media, and bringing folks together virtually. This is an opportunity to plan for how to move new social media followers up the [pyramid of engagement](#), for both advocacy and as potential donors. For example, people who may not have previously heard of the organization may now engage because the organization is providing information, webinars and other content concerning COVID. We encourage organizations to think about which of those new members might be in a position to become a long-term financial supporter through careful stewardship, while still being mindful that many people are struggling in the current environment and asks for financial support should be measured and well-timed. Now is also a good time to make sure you are following [best practices for digital fundraising](#), and adjusting as needed to fit in our new reality.

² "In systems of mutual aid, communities take on the responsibility for caring for one another, rather than forcing individuals to fend for themselves... mutual aid creates a symbiotic relationship, where all people offer material goods or assistance to one another. Mutual aid organizing is volunteer-run, transparent, and driven by the needs articulated by community members." [Source](#).

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Partners at the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services ([ACCESS](#)) had this to share, as they engage with donors and potential donors during the pandemic.

- **One-on-one calls, emails to donors/prospects:** These calls/emails should not have an “ask” to them but should be more about checking in with them and asking about them and their families. Donors, more than anything, and now more than ever, appreciate these messages.
- **Emergency e-appeals/campaigns:** ACCESS has found success sending out an e-appeal or hosting an online fundraising campaign telling donors what the organization is doing in this unexpected emergency situation, how it has been affected, and why they urgently need their help. After the e-appeal/campaign, staff consistently updated donors through emails on the status of the campaign until they reached their fundraising goal, at which point they pivoted their message to share how donations had provided vital assistance to those in acute need.

ACCESS did a special social media campaign called [People of ACCESS](#), highlighting donors, staff, partners, and volunteers who have dedicated themselves to helping the community during the pandemic by sharing their stories across its social media platforms, similar to [Humans of New York](#).

Partners at the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty ([NMCLP](#)) are using the emergency e-appeal approach as well, currently developing an appeal for support of their work on the affordable housing and eviction crisis. NMCLP is also increasing their emphasis on monthly giving, which can be a more manageable approach for some donors as well as becoming a consistently reliable gift for the organization. Statistics show that monthly donors have very high levels of retention, resulting in increased giving over time.

COMMUNICATING TO FUNDERS

We recognize that local, state or national foundations fund many organizations and are reevaluating their current and future grant-making in the context of COVID-19. A number of foundations have offered flexibility to grantees that have helped ease the strain COVID-related pressure – from lessening proposal and reporting requirements to allowing reallocation of funds to COVID response activities or general operating needs.

Open and ongoing communication with funders is critical to ensure their awareness of the unique challenges organizations are currently facing. Presenting funders with a clear picture of your organization’s current and future needs will allow funders an opportunity to provide flexibilities which otherwise would not be available. In many cases, funders have shown an openness toward innovation to meet the needs of their communities.

TIPS FOR ASKING A FUNDER FOR FLEXIBILITY

- Present the challenge and potential solutions
- Don’t be afraid to be creative with your proposed solutions – you never know unless you ask!
- Consider several possible areas where a funder’s flexibility and support could help (i.e., grants management, deliverables, technology)

Stacey Leaman, Development Director at NMCLP, shared their experience in seeking and securing flexibilities and opening up potential new opportunities.

“ In the wake of COVID-19, we have been heavily focused on information-distribution (preparing and disseminating information and resources), tracking philanthropy’s response and pursuing new grant opportunities—including submitting a couple of joint grant proposals in collaboration with our partners—and updating funders on how our organization is responding to the pandemic. We have been heartened by the foundations that are relaxing expectations for grant deliverables and reporting requirements and allowing for more flexibility with how grant funds are spent, such as by converting project grant funds into general operating support. ”

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BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

There have been multiple instances of funders allowing reallocation of funds or introduction of new funds to ensure internet access for organizations and community members. This has come in the form of Wi-Fi hotspots, software (Zoom business account), and technology (Chromebooks). Consider your organizations' and partners' needs regarding remote work and if this is an area of potential flexibility with any of your funders.



KEEP FUNDERS IN THE LOOP WITH VIRTUAL FUNDER BRIEFINGS

Some partners have also found it useful to initiate more regular contact with their funders to keep them informed of progress, pivots and, of course, successful outcomes of their work. In addition to communicating directly with your existing funders, a funder briefing is a strategy for developing new funder relationships.

Bring funders together and describe your portfolio of work, being sure to provide tangible outcomes that illustrate your success. For example, describe how many phone calls you generated during your last campaign and explain how these phone calls shifted votes in favor of your cause. If you can, invite a close funder to partner with you in hosting the virtual briefing and ask them to invite peer foundations to attend.

Partners at the North Carolina Justice Center ([NCJC](#)) have been modeling this behavior with bimonthly funder briefings. Their first briefing registered over 170 attendees and was an opportunity to build relationships with current funders, loyal volunteers and others who have attended past NCJC events while updating them on their work and its outcomes.

Be sure to check out Community Catalyst's resource on how to conduct a [funder briefing](#) if you are interested in learning more. While this tool does focus on in-person funder briefings, many of the best practices can translate to virtual ones, such as identifying a funder to host, conducting outreach to ensure strong attendance, and thoughtful follow-up.

PLANNING AHEAD

Partners at NMCLP have started strategic organizational scenario planning as they look ahead to a new fundraising landscape, particularly since they anticipate some reductions in current funding sources. So far, they have participated in webinars on scenario planning to help them outline strategies, deferred a planned office move, and crafted a very cautious FY21 budget.

Particularly with no end to the pandemic in sight, now is a good time to start thinking about how to approach funders ahead of 2021. Organizations may have to grapple with shifting priorities for funders and recognize that funding they relied on pre-pandemic may now be directed to support COVID-related work. Additionally, with a major election on the horizon and various potential outcomes, the need for planning takes on new urgency.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Even in the best of times, fundraising is one of the most difficult tasks for a non-profit. In the time of COVID-19, it is all the more critical given the broad sweeping implications of the pandemic on health, housing, food security, etc. Community Catalyst is always looking to connect funders with the local work in states and to pass along opportunities for your organization to apply for new grants and programs. Here are a few recommended resources to follow as you broaden your fundraising approach:

- Community Catalyst: [Best Practices for White-led Organizations to Promote Health Equity and Racial Justice in Health Advocacy](#) (2020)
- Community Catalyst: [Effective Strategies for Diversifying Funding](#) (2018)
- [Philanthropy News Digest](#) – a monthly digest of current RFPs across various issue areas, including health.
- Candid is compiling a list of [COVID-19 funding](#), searchable by location, with over 600 entries so far.
- NonProfitPro has this searchable site for [COVID funding](#).
- Philanthropy Roundtable: [Philanthropy and COVID-19](#)

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- Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services
- Boise Bicycle Project
- Georgians for a Healthy Future
- Maine People's Alliance
- Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy Coalition
- New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty
- North Carolina Justice Center
- TakeAction Minnesota
- UHCAN Ohio