

Doing Philanthropy Differently

Here are some of the things we think about when we make grants.

1. We give unrestricted funds.

That means we don't tell our grantees what to do with the money or put any conditions on it. So when we read about a group's plans for their grant money, we keep in mind that we're here to help them not only with exciting program expenses but also with boring stuff like the cost of meeting space, electricity bills, buying a new computer, paying staff, helping a group that feels isolated go to a conference. In fact, we are especially excited about funding the boring stuff!

2. We know that trans justice work can take many forms. So the way people organize may look very different from community to community.

For those of us who live in a big city with lots of services, a support group might not seem like a radical or interesting thing to fund. But, as one of our applicants reminded us our first year, if you are in a small town in Iowa, the fact that a support group even exists may already be a radical success. What matters to us is that communities are organizing themselves and setting priorities based on what feels most urgent to them.

3. The way people talk about their work can also look very different.

Not everyone uses the same political language to describe their work—or to describe themselves. A lot of things factor into the way a grant application reads, including: where the writer is from, their communities, their class and education background, and their experiences with intersecting oppressions.



The Sisterhood/Missouri GSA Network, St Louis, MO.

It's easy to get excited about applications that are super well-written or use familiar language. But we don't want our decisions to be based on who is the best writer or who has access to the most current political thinking. We try to look past writing and vocabulary to make decisions based on what the group is actually doing.

4. We aim to keep our grant process as simple, easy, and quick as possible.

Our grant application is only a few pages. We don't have site visits. We don't require reports. People just fill out our form online and that's it. Why? Because we know these groups have more important work to do than spending all their time trying to romance us. We believe that a short application—plus a community panel of wise and experienced trans justice activists!—is all it takes to make informed funding decisions.

5. We want to be sure to support groups across the country, not just in the big cities on the coasts.

We especially want to have a balance between rural and urban, small town and big city, and to keep in mind that groups in more isolated areas often have less access to funding.

6. Providing services can be an important part of organizing.

Some grantmakers, especially more social-justice oriented funds, see organizing as separate from providing services. But we've seen how providing services can sometimes be an important step in bringing communities together. Providing services can also make it possible for people to participate who might otherwise be unable to because they are busy meeting their survival needs.

7. There is more than one way to define success.

A lot of funders see grantmaking as an investment. And the return on their investment is their grantees' success. They want tangible results from their grantees (like big numbers or big policy changes) so that they can prove they made a good investment.

But we know that grassroots social justice movements are messy. Endless. Complicated. Tangible results may be the flower at the end of a long process, but you don't expect to see a flower when you are looking at the roots. Movements need sustainable groups that will be there for the long run, and they also need short-term, kitchen-table groups that may only be around for a year or two. A group that may look like a failure to some funders may have in fact trained a crucial future leader, provided important resources in the moment, or done inspiring work that others will build on. So we try to take the long view of the movement and remember

that there is more than one way to define success in grassroots organizing.

8. We fund groups that aren't incorporated.

This means that even if a group is not a 501c3 non-profit and does not have a fiscal sponsor, we can still fund them. Sometimes it makes sense for a group to be incorporated, sometimes it doesn't. It depends on what their goals are. All that matters to us is: are they doing good work?

9. We reject the idea that grantees should be accountable to funders. We think funders need to be accountable to grantees.

Above all, we believe that grantees must be accountable to the communities they serve, especially to those who are most affected by oppression.

10. We are here to provide resources, not to pit everyone against each other in the thunderdome.

Funding in the non-profit world usually turns us all into competing activist-gladiators, fighting each other for scarce resources. Instead, we ask our panelists to read the applications as a friend. As someone who is shepherding resources to nurture a growing movement and to support the people and the communities that are making that movement happen. This is grassroots funding—we want to try and support the whole field of grass, not just a few blades!

"I support TJFP because on all levels they are practicing social justice and liberation: the power of funding being in the hands of trans and gender non-conforming communities themselves; the way that TJFP makes the grant application process simple and accessible in a world where philanthropy is usually unduly complex and vague; and the way that TJFP is a project of solidarity—in its founding, its fundraising, and its community-building—that cuts across seeming barriers of race, gender, class, and more."

—Jessie Spector, Donor