

We're Built For This

**NIMBLE NETWORK
RESPONDS TO 2020**



The first reported COVID-19 case in the U.S. appeared in Washington state in January 2020. Soon after, millions of people across the country faced unemployment, food shortages and eviction in addition to the dire health risks posed by the pandemic itself.

As the country reeled, federal, state, and local governments struggled to keep up with the growing and wide-ranging needs of their communities. Assistance requests overwhelmed existing services like unemployment offices and exposed deep gaps in the ability of government agencies to distribute massive amounts of relief funding. Government help would be delayed – and, unfortunately, likely not come at all for individuals and families who were undocumented, unbanked or otherwise invisible to official systems.

At the same time, generosity abounded. Individual donors – both regular and those contributing for the first time – gave at historic levels to support their neighbors, essential and healthcare workers and others struggling to stay healthy and make ends meet. But with so many in need, donors were looking for credible guidance for their giving options. Community foundations* had the answers.

The Regional Community Foundation Network

The Regional CF Network is a program of [Philanthropy Northwest](#) that addresses and advances issues of particular concern to community foundations within Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming and Hawai'i. Network members focus on information exchange, shared action and learning together.

This report spotlights the critical role [Regional CF Network](#) members played during the initial COVID-19 pandemic response from March to November 2020. While each of the community foundations* in the network acts as an independent entity, this is the story of their shared impact.

*Community foundations are a category of place-based philanthropic organizations that share similarities in charitable works, operations, financial sources and grantmaking practices. The data and information in this report do not refer to all community foundations regionally or nationally, only to those foundations that are members of the Regional Community Foundation Network included in this dataset.

Up to the Challenge

As place-based foundations, Regional CF Network members immediately stepped up to lead pandemic response efforts throughout Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming and Hawai'i. They quickly became the “go-to” relief organizations within their communities, serving as conduits for vital aid and bringing together local leaders, nonprofit organizations, private funders and government agencies to get aid into the hands of the people who needed it most.

The foundations faced an unprecedented challenge, but it was one they were uniquely positioned to take on as trusted wealth advisors, equitable grantmakers and community advocates. Across the Northwest — from farming communities to suburban neighborhoods to city centers — community foundations answered the call for help, filling infrastructure gaps, making human-to-human connections, offering stability and bringing voices in from the margins. They also provided something less tangible but no less important: a sense of hope and inclusion that helped so many people make it through the pandemic.

At a Glance: Regional CF Network COVID-19 Activities

As Regional CF Network members began to assess the impacts of COVID-19 in their communities, they were heartened to hear from thousands of donors and nonprofit partners compelled to help. Community foundations also recognized that the sudden and massive influx of dollars, coupled with such urgent need, would require coordination on a scale not previously seen in the Northwest.

Working closely with boards and private foundations, network members quickly raised over \$100 million for COVID-19 relief from a record number of new donors.¹ Community foundations headed up distribution of almost \$290 million, including nearly \$90 million in **Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES)** dollars, to thousands of local organizations providing assistance on the ground.

The \$290 million distributed reflected a staggering increase in grantmaking dollars — at least double for many foundations in the network when compared to previous years. Many members boosted grant award amounts, typically in the \$5,000 range, to many



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times that amount and, in the case of those who administered pass-through federal CARES relief, grants upwards of \$1 million. Additionally, the number of grants awarded skyrocketed. Thirty members of the Regional CF Network funded nearly 8,000 COVID-19-specific grants in the March–November 2020 timeframe alone.

Foundations in the network leveraged their proven expertise and extensive community connections to deploy this relief with record speed and nimbleness. They distributed millions of dollars within weeks, and many foundations shortened typical months-long grant cycles to mere hours or days.

Innovative, Community-Informed Leadership

New and Flexible Funding Practices

As COVID-19 spread everywhere at lightning speed, Regional CF Network members had to move just as quickly to help alleviate the crisis in their communities — resulting in innovation across many fronts. The community foundations and their partners helped pilot new ways to distribute funding; they offered nonprofits without large cash reserves no-interest bridge loans to front-fund relief and start distributing CARES dollars before the funds hit their bank accounts. When supply chains couldn't keep up with demand, several community foundations funded local small businesses to develop COVID-19 testing products and manufacture personal protective equipment (PPE) for essential workers. With waiting rooms

and schools shut down, funds from network members enabled grantees to bring mobile medical care and food banks into neighborhoods and partner with educators to deliver curriculum in non-traditional settings.

Additionally, some community foundations used alternative methods to move resources, such as fiscal sponsorship and grantmaking to non-501(c)(3) organizations like mutual aid and neighborhood- or identity-based volunteer groups. This flexibility enabled these smaller organizations to put money directly into the hands of residents often overlooked by — or afraid to access — traditional safety net programs. Affected individuals could ask the grassroots organizations they trusted for help and were able to apply the cash to their most pressing needs, with no strings attached.

Regional CF Network members also provided unrestricted and less restrictive grants, in much larger amounts, compared to traditional philanthropic giving. This enabled nonprofit partners to provide critical services to stay afloat and continue their vital work, using unrestricted funds for salaries, rent and other overhead costs even as revenue streams like fundraising events all but disappeared.

Relationship-Centered Grantmaking

Community foundations saw first-hand the momentous need and fear people in their regions were experiencing, and they knew there wasn't time for business as usual. They pivoted to using streamlined grant applications, often just email requests, or simply

picked up the phone to have one-on-one conversations to find out what their grantees needed. This approach reflected the immense trust between Regional CF Network members and their nonprofit partners based on years of place-based partnerships. The community foundations knew their partners had the first-hand knowledge needed to distribute COVID-19 relief effectively across their communities, and nonprofit partners felt comfortable reaching out to community foundation staff for assistance as needs continued to mount. This trust also resulted in an unexpected benefit: nonprofit partners alerted network members to the work of their alliances, leading the community foundations to extend the reach of COVID-19 relief to hundreds of organizations they hadn't previously funded.

Leading Through Connection and Collaboration

With deep community roots and widespread partner collaborations already in place, Regional CF Network members were able to empower local organizations to tailor resources to specific needs on the ground. For instance, network members' knowledge of local organizations' capabilities — which food banks distributed food versus grocery gift cards or which schools were lacking in technology resources — helped deliver the right type of support to the right places.

The community foundations also convened organizations with intersecting missions, like food banks, homeless shelters and health clinics to collaborate on strategies to best serve a rapidly growing client base while observing new

"Community foundations saw first-hand the momentous need and fear people in their regions were experiencing, and they knew there wasn't time for business as usual."



Photo provided courtesy of Innovia Foundation

pandemic restrictions. The foundations led regular meetings — often daily or weekly — with nonprofit leaders, government agencies and other groups to assess and facilitate urgent need requests. This coordinated, community-informed approach allowed participants to quickly adjust their approach as needs for PPE, COVID-19 testing and relief changed.

Heightened Focus on Racial Equity

COVID-19 amplified racial inequities across the country, including within the network's multi-state region. The virus proved especially deadly to Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) residents because of disparities caused by structural racism, inequitable access to healthcare and underlying health conditions.

Regional CF Network members moved to address these trends as well as the historical underfunding of BIPOC-led organizations by the philanthropic sector. Members prioritized giving to BIPOC organizations and communities and collaborated with partners serving refugee and immigrant populations to gain insight into and allocate funding for their most critical needs.

The foundations used their myriad local connections to reach deep into communities, proactively seeking new grantees working on the front lines in neighborhoods, churches and schools. Over 2,100 grants — more than a quarter of all COVID-relief grants — went to new grantees, including BIPOC community-based and grassroots organizations.



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Photo provided courtesy of Oregon Community Foundation

Many of the foundations in the network created new funds to support basic services, small business relief, scholarships, improved learning outcomes and long-term investments in BIPOC communities. Network members and partners funded translation and distribution of COVID-19-related communications to Latinx, tribal and Hawai'i's Micronesian residents, and helped people facing language or cultural barriers navigate complex government and health relief systems.

The pandemic shutdown emphasized how critical internet connections are to remote learning, employment and healthcare. It also revealed major deficiencies in digital infrastructure, especially in rural, immigrant and communities of color that have experienced resource divestment. In many rural and tribal areas, Regional CF Network members worked with local partners to advocate for and fund high-speed broadband to deliver access to school and employment opportunities on par with more highly resourced regions. Several of these projects are ongoing and will be receiving continued investments to make lasting policy and infrastructure changes.

Strategic Partnerships with Government

Government grants are typically bound by regulations that make grantmaking slower and more cumbersome for nonprofits, and grants are often tied to specific, pre-approved programs with detailed reporting rules. These requirements made it nearly impossible for government agencies to distribute unrestricted pandemic relief as fast as

it was needed. Government agencies quickly realized that community foundations in this network possessed the infrastructure and connections necessary to rapidly distribute CARES dollars allocated to their jurisdictions and relied on them to disburse the aid more effectively than they could themselves.

Community foundations were able to satisfy the complex reporting and evaluation requirements necessary for managing millions of dollars of public funds. Their donor tracking and grant distribution systems, plus staff expertise in sophisticated data analysis, enabled quick-turn analyses of grantmaking levels, reach, demographics, equity and trends.

Moving Forward

For Regional CF Network members, the initial COVID-19 response confirmed the value of focusing on trust and relationships with heightened collaboration and flexibility. We are committed to creating lasting change with community-driven philanthropy that is more flexible, respects the expertise of local nonprofit organizations, and values diversity, equity and inclusion principles. We invite our communities, especially BIPOC-led organizations, to help shape and inform our priorities as we move forward together to navigate COVID-19 recovery efforts and address the pandemic's long-term impacts.



Photo provided courtesy of
Idaho Community Foundation

We're Your Best Investment

We know our communities. We have the relationships. We have the infrastructure. We're built for this.

As you plan long-term COVID-19 recovery efforts, prepare for the next crisis or develop new collaborative projects, consider contacting the community foundation in your area to discuss how you can maximize your impact.

Visit the [Regional CF Network](#) online to start the conversation today.

Endnotes

1. The data presented in this report were collected as part of a Philanthropy Northwest initiative to understand COVID-19-related philanthropic activities from March 1 to November 30, 2020 in Alaska, Hawai'i, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming. Data was gathered in partnership with the community foundations' accounting software provider, Foundant Technologies. The anonymous grantee data included grantee zip code and fund type; donation data was categorized by destination fund type. The number of organizations receiving first-time grants was also recorded. The following 30* Regional CF Network members submitted their data: [Bainbridge Community Foundation](#), [Bethel Community Services Foundation](#), [Blue Mountain Community Foundation](#), [Community Foundation for Southwest Washington](#), [Community Foundation of North Central Washington](#), [Community Foundation of Snohomish County](#), [Community](#)

[Foundation of South Puget Sound](#), [Grays Harbor Community Foundation](#), [Greater Tacoma Community Foundation](#), [Hawai'i Community Foundation](#), [Homer Foundation](#), [Idaho Community Foundation](#), [Innovia Foundation](#), [Jefferson Community Foundation](#), [Kent Community Foundation](#), [Kitsap Community Foundation](#), [Montana Community Foundation](#), [One Valley Community Foundation](#), [Oregon Community Foundation](#), [Pike Place Market Foundation](#), [Pride Foundation](#), [Renton Regional Community Foundation](#), [San Juan Island Community Foundation](#), [Seattle Foundation](#), [Skagit Community Foundation](#), [Three Rivers Community Foundation](#), [Whatcom Community Foundation](#), [Whidbey Community Foundation](#), [Wyoming Community Foundation](#) and [Yakima Valley Community Foundation](#). *The Regional CF Network included 32 member organizations in 2020, but two member organizations were not able to share their data for this report.

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