



Fund for Shared Insight Listen for Good Co-Funders: One Year In

November 2017

Introduction

To engage more funders in supporting beneficiary feedback efforts and using client feedback data to inform their work, Fund for Shared Insight (Shared Insight) structured its Listen for Good (L4G) initiative as a co-funding opportunity. In 2016, 46 nonprofit grantees were supported by 28 new co-funders that contributed a \$20,000 matching grant to each \$60,000 L4G grant.

Beyond providing the matching grant, co-funders do not have other obligations, but they do have opportunities to engage. Opportunities for this set of co-funders included an optional webinar in the spring of 2016 to talk about lessons learned, invitations to convenings and related events, and periodic emails with updates and notification of additional funding opportunities. Two co-funders with larger cohorts of grantees received additional support from and engagement with Shared Insight in convening each of their grantees to dialogue more about what grantees are learning.



Methodology

In September 2017, ORS Impact interviewed individual co-funders who had supported at least one L4G grantee beginning in 2016, weren't a Core Funder, and were part of a staffed foundation.¹ Of the 21 we reached out to, we spoke with 16 (76%) about their experience with L4G and their foundation's practices around listening to end beneficiaries and feedback.

This memo provides a high-level overview of findings as an interim product. Ultimately, findings from these interviews will be included in a final report looking at Shared Insight's work over its first three years.

Co-Funders in Our Sample

The 16 co-funders who were interviewed fund 33 of the 46 L4G grantees (72%). Ten co-funders had one grantee, four had two grantees, and two supported larger cohorts of grantees (Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and Episcopal Health Foundation).²

Our sample is comprised of different types of foundations, ranging from nationally focused private foundations to community foundations and corporate giving. Of the nine private organizations, six were independent foundations and three were family, corporate, or operating foundations. The seven public organizations included six community foundations and one public charity. Half of the interviewees held programmatic roles within their organization. Others held executive positions (15%), evaluation/research roles (15%), and other more specific positions (20%).³

The organizations also represented a variety of regions across the US, including five organizations along the west coast, three in southern states, four in northeastern states, three in midwestern states, and one in Hawaii. See Figure 1 for geographic representation of co-funder organizations.

¹ We did not include seven co-funders in our sample: two individual donors and the five foundations who are also Core Funders. One foundation we spoke to is unstaffed and was not able to reply to many organizationally-focused questions. Core funders were not included since our primary interest was in learning about the impact through the co-funding mechanism; core funders are more deeply engaged and committed given their overall role in the funding collaborative. A full list of co-funders and supported nonprofits is included for reference in Appendix A.

² See appendix A for full list of L4G grantees and their co-funder.

³ Of the 16 co-funder interviews, four organizations had two representatives participate.



Figure 1 | Geographic Representation of Interviewed Co-Funders (n=16)



Motivations and Engagement in Listen for Good

For co-funders, L4G aims to:

- **Engage more funders in supporting, using, and valuing beneficiary feedback** by structuring L4G as a co-funding/matching grant opportunity.
- **Capture and share lessons learned from co-funders** (among others) to positively catalyze the feedback movement and inform the work going forward.

Co-funders more frequently drove involvement in the 2016 cohort.

Co-funders could become connected to L4G by either hearing about the opportunity directly and approaching a nonprofit, or by being asked by a nonprofit they already work with to co-fund their application. **Among our sample, most (11 of 16) approached nonprofits with the opportunity.** One co-funder was initially approached by a nonprofit and then invited a second organization to participate.

Motivations for participation varied.

Most co-funders (11) cited that they participated in L4G because they believed in the **positive benefit nonprofits would derive** from collecting and using feedback to enhance their organization or their work.



“The theory of organizational effectiveness has to do with connection to communities and involvement of communities. This is a way to support and partner with our grantees to facilitate that.”

“Organizational effectiveness is a key part of what our Foundation cares about... We think client/customer feedback is such an important piece of organizational effectiveness.”

Co-funders also spoke of the benefit of being able to **leverage their investment** (8) or **live out existing values** (7). For some, these values were around the belief that if nonprofits listen to those they serve, they will improve their programs and impact; for others, it reflected a belief in the value of community engagement or authentic relationships. Four specifically spoke about the benefit they saw to **learn more themselves** by being part of L4G. Some co-funders also spoke to what motivated them to select specific grantees. Several mentioned picking higher capacity grantees, for whom building in feedback loops would “up their game.” Three co-funders specifically linked involvement in L4G as augmenting or building skills for the nonprofit to do more self-evaluation in the future.

Almost all have heard from their grantees about what they are learning.

Of the 14 who had heard from their grantees, 10 spoke to changes their grantee(s) were making based on the data they were collecting. Five spoke to how they had seen benefits to the grantee’s capacity, either from going through the feedback process or from the technical assistance they received as part of L4G.

“It’s one thing to hear from your grantees that things are going well and programs are working, but it’s always better to hear the real stories and validation of the impact directly from people participating in the grantee’s programs and services.”

Two co-funders with multiple grantees experienced a lack of consistency in the frequency and content of grantee sharing.

“I think the information is being shared, but it is not being shared in a systematic way... I’m not sure that’s something being shared all the time. I think if it’s something relevant [...] the grantee is probably proactive in sharing that.”

Most co-funders don’t share much with their foundation colleagues.

Ten of the 16 co-funders said they had either only shared information with their colleagues about nomination opportunities for other rounds of L4G or had shared little to nothing at all. Five talked about higher levels of engagement, generally including updates and information about L4G as regular parts of program or staff meetings. Typically, this occurred among foundations with fewer staff members.



Current Foundation Practices Related to Using Beneficiary Feedback

Shared Insight hopes that involvement as a co-funder leads to greater support for, use of, and value for beneficiary feedback among funders. We asked co-funders about the current practices of their foundations.

Most foundations try to access data from constituents to inform their work, but it's typically indirect and often not systematic.

Nine co-funders gave examples of how they sometimes build in information that comes directly from those they ultimately seek to support, including:

- **Directly funding research or using community-level indicators** (3).
- **Asking grantees about information from constituents** (3), such as specific grant report questions or direct conversations with grantees.
- **Using episodic planning activities when their foundations listened** (2) in order to create a new initiative. For one co-funder, this occurred on a regular three-year cycle, but mostly the foundation sought out people to speak on behalf of end beneficiaries (e.g., teachers, not students). The other co-funder described an isolated case of creating a new initiative with more constituent engagement, but it did not seem to be a standard process for the foundation.

Three co-funders have ways they deeply engage their ultimate beneficiaries; three don't have ways to hear directly from end beneficiaries.

The three foundations with deep engagement vary in how they gather and use constituent voice in their work. One does deep, place-based work and uses ethnographic approaches to inform their efforts. Another has a deep engagement grantmaking approach that includes sitting on nonprofit boards and supporting rigorous evaluations, which brings data directly from constituents to the table. A third co-funder had aspects of working as an operating foundation, implementing programs such as a 211 line, which also gave them direct access to the needs of their community members. Three co-funders had no ways they directly hear from end beneficiaries and did not speak to future plans to do so.



Different types of foundations varied in the degree to which they use constituent data.

While this was a small sample, we wanted to see if there were any discernable patterns in the use of constituent data in foundation work by the type of foundation. Using data from Foundation Center, we categorized our sample of co-funders and found that all community foundations, operating foundations, and public charities had at least some ways they listened to end beneficiaries. Independent foundations varied across no use, some use, and high use.

As we've heard in the past, a number of co-funders fundamentally see their grantees as their direct constituents; about half have ways to get feedback from their grantees.

When asked, *"Is there a way your organization gets information about the issues, concerns, or preferences of the people you seek to help?"*, seven co-funders spoke to their relationship with their grantees.

"Our role is to promote effective practice among the grantees that we work with and that's where we place our emphasis, and we think that's the correct level."

Four of these co-funders have ways to collect feedback from their grantees on their relationship, such as regular surveys, forums, and interviews.



Realized and Potential Changes to Foundation Practices Related to Using Beneficiary Feedback

In addition to asking about relevant current practices, we also asked co-funders about the degree to which being a part of L4G had changed either their knowledge of feedback processes or the way they think about how their foundation could benefit from having grantees gather and use feedback.

L4G has mostly re-affirmed interviewees' thoughts or values related to how they think about feedback processes and nonprofits.

When asked about any changes in thinking, co-funders typically replied along the lines of *"It's sort of an extension of what we've done in the past," "It reconfirms and validates some things I've been thinking all along,"* or *"I think [L4G] affirms how valuable it could be if nonprofits of all kinds would include intentional practices for capturing feedback and acting on it."* Four co-funders did speak to changes in knowledge or thinking, including: a change in their view of the value of different kinds of data beyond rigorous research-type approaches; the value of walking the walk and collecting feedback from their grantees; a focus on the use of feedback by the nonprofit; and more knowledge of specific aspects of the Net Promotor System (NPS) and ways nonprofits could use mobile technology more effectively.

"I had a linear view about what evaluation is. At a program level, it was kind of testing long-term to see if there were statistically significant changes and that sort of thing—a best practice. But this has opened my eyes to the process of getting feedback from grantees, not just during program implementation, but during program design as well. In interviews with potential grantees here at our foundation, I ask questions like, 'You are designing this home for LGBTQ homeless adults. Did you ask them during the design to get feedback?'"

A few co-funders have made some changes in their foundations based on their L4G participation.

Four gave specific examples of changes they have made. Several involve more specific ways they are encouraging grantees to listen to their constituents, such as two co-funders who are asking new grant application questions (e.g., *"How did you get feedback during your design work from your target audience?"*), and one who incorporated it into how they think about their foundation's community engagement program and supports to grantees. Another co-funder has surveyed grantees to have their own feedback practice among the foundation's constituents—something that had never occurred to them before, and which they now hope to do on an annual basis.

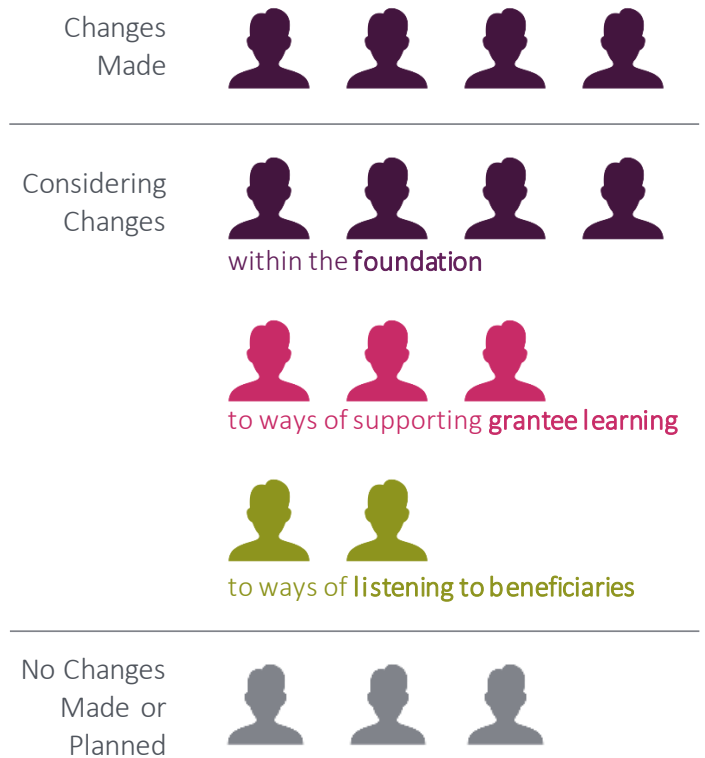


L4G seems to have mostly raised up some new ideas for foundations to consider, but these rarely seem to be on a clear timeline or path to implementation.

Seven co-funders described things that they consider as possible changes, including:

- **Potential changes they could make in their foundations** (4), such as how to include feedback as a specific role within their evaluation staff, changing internal expectations about being informed by the community in addition to nonprofits, more systematically including questions about what nonprofits are learning into grant reports, or potentially integrating feedback into ongoing capacity building programs.
- **Ways they could change their work with grantees** (3), such as supporting greater incorporation of learning into their nonprofit work, supporting grantee thinking about how to sustain a continuous feedback loop as a priority, and more systematically checking in with their L4G grantees to see what they are learning.
- **Ways to get closer to beneficiary voices directly** (2), including working more directly with clients to get information and finding ways to engage more families directly in their grant selection process and decision making.

Figure 2 | Changes to Foundation Feedback Practices



While many of these potential changes seem well aligned to L4G goals, the co-funders’ statements did not make clear if or when they might occur. Some were couched as early stage conversations or in vague terms, which didn’t inspire confidence that these changes are likely during the timeframe of their engagement with L4G.

“... I think there’s a question of, given a broader concept, how are we going to incorporate this? But it’s not clear if we are going to take on something new. Are we going to make a big push? Are we going to change the milestones of each grantee? ... It’s still in an open conversation.”



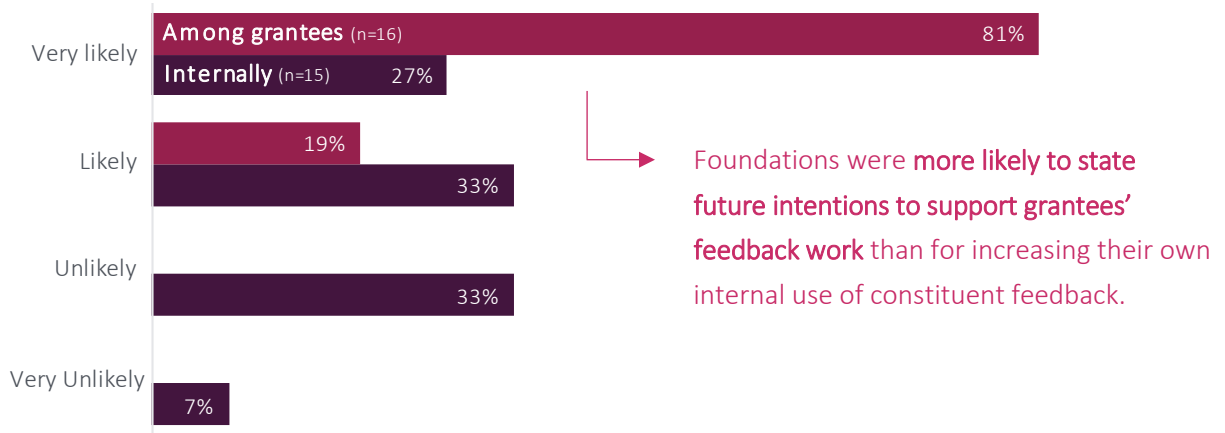
Three co-funders don't anticipate any changes.

One shared they had been thinking about more direct constituent engagement for years and wouldn't attribute their changes to L4G, while two others had no examples or thoughts on specific changes they were intending to make.

There is greater intentionality around foundations continuing to support grantees' use of constituent feedback in the next few years than for increasing the foundations' own use of the feedback.

When asked to rate their likeliness of continuing to support grantees on a scale from "1" (very unlikely) to "4" (very likely), all co-funders rated a "3" or "4", with an average of 3.8. Reasons for their support were aligned with their motivations for engaging in L4G in the first place: the belief that this is a good way to support grantees, that supporting grantees in doing this work specifically helps to strengthen the grantees' work, and/or that it is well aligned with foundation values. On the other hand, when asked to rate the likelihood of increasing their foundation's own use of information from constituents, co-funders' answers ranged across the full scale, with six co-funders choosing the "1" or "2" range and nine choosing "3" or "4."⁴

Figure 3 | Foundation Likelihood of Continuing Feedback Work



⁴ A number of funders gave ratings that included decimals (e.g., "2.5"). For analysis purposes, we rounded these answers down (e.g., "2.5" was converted to "2").



Co-funders raised a number of potential issues related to making changes in their foundations.

While there were similar benefits cited (e.g., foundation values, benefits to grantee relationships or the nonprofit organization), there were more concerns about the **role of the co-funder** (4); concerns about **data quality or utility** for the foundation (4), such as representativeness of data and how feedback for the grantee can inform foundation strategy; lack of **foundation capacity** (3) such as time, funding, or infrastructure; or need for **organizational buy-in** (2). When asked about the variability in current practices, co-funders shared other potential issues, including the degree to which collecting grantee feedback data is **relevant or a good fit** for them given their work and strategy. Some co-funders did not see the relevance of the feedback to their work and/or strategy, while others did not see the opportunity to build feedback process with grantees that are **more system-focused and long-term in nature**. One final concern mentioned by co-funders was occasional limited **interest and engagement from staff**. Among those who didn't see much interest from staff, a few individuals talked about the work being personality driven due to their own interests or values, rather than something baked into the foundation's culture.

Co-funders mentioned several trends in philanthropy that could positively or negatively affect the advancement of feedback practice.

The nature of traditional philanthropy (i.e. top-down power dynamics and a reluctance to listen to the community) was cited as a potential barrier to expansion of feedback loops (6). Several talked about how these power dynamics were playing out in their own organizations, with philosophical differences among generations. Others (4) mentioned the uncertainty and volatility of the current political environment and the worry that marginalized constituent members may feel unsafe providing feedback. Three co-funders lifted up the emerging sector focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion as a potential facilitator, with one noting, *"DEI forces people to talk about constituent input."*

"I think what is happening here is likely happening in the entire sector, which is really a shift in the way that philanthropy and social change-making happen. They'll have a bunch of staff that is from the old model/old school/top down that think, 'We have the data; we know this is what is best for communities; we are going to fund it and force it to happen.' We are shifting from that to this more bottom-up approach where not only is it a value and a moral imperative, but it's actually more effective to partner with and listen to communities and people they are living with every day on the ground. We are doing both and we are evolving as I think many organizations are."



Feedback for Listen for Good

Beyond asking about their engagement with L4G and internal practices, we also wanted to gather co-funders' feedback on L4G and learn what they thought could be useful for future co-funders.

Almost all are very satisfied with their experience as a L4G co-funder.

Positive comments related to good communication and regular updates from the L4G staff (6), and having an efficient and streamlined process for making the grant (3). Two co-funders also felt their L4G involvement was an incredible learning experience and exposed grantees to work on the national scale. Two outliers were less than "very satisfied" with their L4G experience, and both spoke to some lack of clarity around expectations or what the opportunities have been for greater involvement.

A few co-funders had one-off suggestions for L4G improvements.

A few interviewees had constructive criticism, some of which was in direct contradiction to what others appreciated. While there were few themes in the suggestions, we thought it would be helpful to share where co-funders are having variable experiences. Specific suggestions and comments included:

- **Changes to communications** (4). Co-funders requested more lessons from grantee experiences, clarity of co-funder expectations, more opportunities for engagements and updates, and more responsiveness from L4G staff.
- **Changes to logistics** (3). Suggested improvements to logistics included: using a direct funding mechanism rather than a funding intermediary such as Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, targeting human service funders with direct constituents to source feedback from, and providing more flexibility with fiscal years as it was difficult to get funds outside of funding cycle.

Co-funders also shared suggestions for future co-funders.

During the selection process, co-funders mentioned the need to be mindful of the capacity of the grantee organization (3) and the existing grantee-funder relationship (2). Co-funders saw the amount of work it takes to effectively implement feedback loops, and felt that there needs to be organizational capacity and desire to undertake feedback processes for it to be meaningful. Furthermore, the existing grantee-funder relationship should be strong, with plans to continue in the future, to best facilitate successful implementation of feedback loops and the sharing of lessons. Other suggestions including getting early buy-in from other foundation staff (1), attending a convening with grantees (1), and if funding more than one grantee, trying to connect them to share lessons (1).



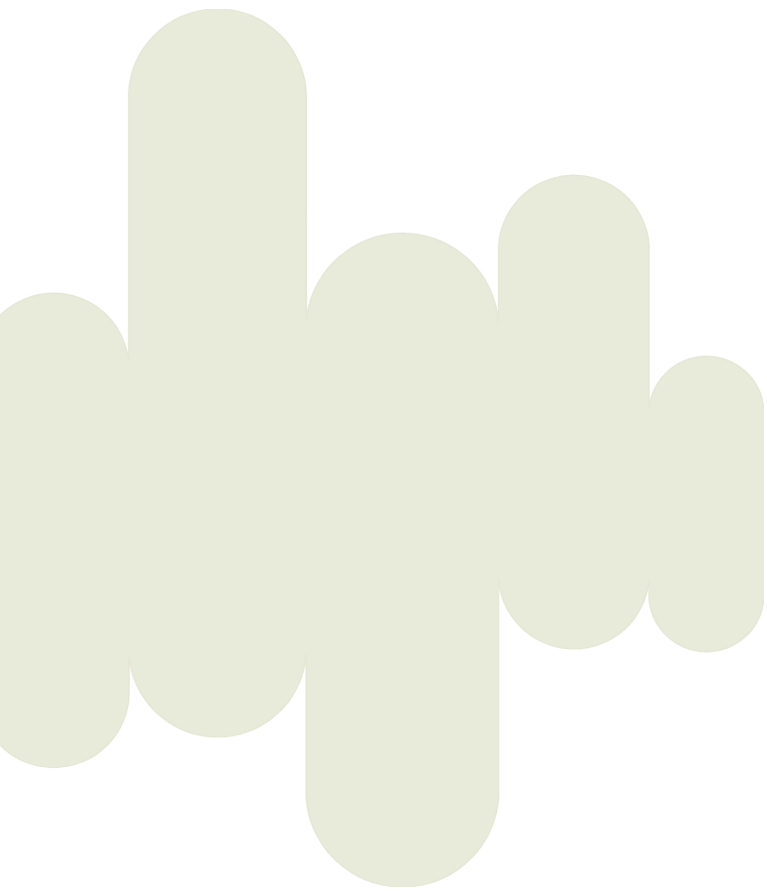
Evaluator Observations

- 1. The 2016 L4G cohort attracted like-minded co-funders but is not necessarily leading to a lot of action, yet.** It was heartening to see the degree of alignment around the idea of feedback from constituents for grantees among this group. However, there was less strong data around the degree to which foundations are changing practices, and it is not clear that much will change in the next few months. There is a small thread around how and to what degree feedback data for grantees can inform foundation strategy. And it's not necessarily clear what the desired changes look like for co-funders.
- 2. Seeing grantees as the primary constituent of the foundation does not negate interest in feedback from end beneficiaries.** As noted earlier, seven of the interviewed co-funders shared that they primarily see their grantees as their constituents, versus thinking of the ultimate beneficiaries they seek to help. We hypothesized that would suggest less interest or future intentionality to hearing more directly from beneficiaries. In fact, three of those seven did think it would be desirable to hear more directly from constituents as a future action. These three were among the co-funders who collect feedback from their grantees. This suggests there may be an opportunity to build upon other kinds of feedback processes, even when foundations' primary orientation is toward their grantees.
- 3. Early L4G results may reflect the experience of higher capacity organizations.** When co-funders spoke to why they co-funded particular organizations, a number shared that they selected from those they thought were already strong. Many of their comments reflect the ways in which adding feedback processes into an organization could help a nonprofit enhance strengths. In one case, a co-funder had sought to fund another organization in 2017, but by connecting them with the current grantee, did not go ahead when the new potential grantee realized the amount of time and staff capacity required to do it well. It may be helpful to keep this in mind as we learn more from new groups of L4G grantees (e.g., for repeat co-funders, are organizations a better fit? Or do we see the group expand to include lower capacity groups?). It also may warrant consideration of implications for opening up the survey and benchmarks more broadly.
- 4. There are some differences about a focus on feedback being "smart" or "right."** When we looked at aspects of co-funders' motivations for involvement and their future intentions around supporting nonprofit feedback practices, there was some divergence between those who talk about the importance of relationships and community engagement and those who talk about the value of feedback as a way to strengthen organizational effectiveness—in other words, better outcomes and more effective programs. And within the organizational effectiveness piece, there was a small set of co-funders linking feedback work to building overall evaluation capacity. Rarely did anyone speak to both aspects. This lines up with some of the messaging around feedback being the "right thing" and the "smart thing," but—at least for this group—there seemed to be a bifurcation between which of these messages resonates most strongly.



Closing Thought

As new cohorts of L4G are launching, it's a good time to take stock of what the co-funding strategy as previously implemented has achieved and whether or how that could change going forward. Data from this first year and first cohort of L4G grantees show some strong conceptual alignment and may also lift up ways to communicate to and engage with these and other co-funders going forward. It seems there may be opportunity even within this cohort to solidify and strengthen some of the potential outcomes before their co-funding engagement ends.



Appendices



Appendix A: Full List of Co-Funders and L4G Grantees

Co-funder	Grantee
Cisco Systems Inc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good World Solutions
Edna McConnell Clark Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Door Ventures • PACE Center for Girls, Inc. • Talent Development Secondary • The Nurse-Family Partnership-National Service Office • United Teen Equality Center • Blue Engine
Episcopal Health Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Advocates of Fort Bend • Lone Star Circle of Care • Phoenix Center Texas • ProUnitas • Samaritan Center • El Buen Samaritano Episcopal Mission • Epiphany Community Health Outreach Services • Family Service Center of Galveston County • Memorial Assistance Ministries
Greenlight Fund Bay Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesys Works
Hartford Foundation for Public Giving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Village for Families & Children
Hawaii Community Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malama Pono Health Services
Inasmuch Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma • ReMerge Oklahoma
Oregon Community Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oregon Museum of Science and Industry
Saint Luke Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East End Neighborhood House
The Boston Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater Boston Legal Services, Inc. • Union Capital Boston
The Plough Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Step Ahead Foundation • Shelby Residential and Vocational Services, Inc.
The Whitman Institute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the Move
United Way for Southeastern Michigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan
United Way of the Cape Fear Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue Ribbon Commission on the Prevention of Youth Violence • Boys & Girls Club of the Peninsula
Weingart Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ArtworxLA
Wishcamper Family Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Springboard to Opportunities