

May 19, 2020 Webinar Summary

# How Listening & Feedback Can Inform Foundation Grantmaking and Strategy Development

Nearly 750 foundations have signed philanthropy's COVID-19 pledge, committing them, among other important practices, to lift up the voices of those least heard in the public discourse and decision-making around crisis response. Fund for Shared Insight joined with Grantmakers for Effective Organizations to host a webinar exploring how funders might live out that commitment and related goals and values around connecting with, listening to, being informed by, and acting on what we hear from the people and communities we seek to help.

The webinar, hosted by Melinda Tuan, managing director of Fund for Shared Insight, and moderated by Marcus Walton, CEO of GEO, featured a discussion with Kelley Gulley of The James Irvine Foundation, LaTida Smith of the Moses Taylor Foundation, and Melissa Luna of GreenLight Fund Boston. #FundersListening

---

Melinda kicked off the webinar by introducing the goal of the one-hour event: “to learn from our featured speakers about how they’re listening to the people and communities they seek to help; how their listening efforts are changing and adapting during this COVID-19 crisis; how feedback and listening connects with efforts around equity; and how listening and feedback is informing their foundation’s day-to-day and strategic thinking.”

A two-minute video, “Why Does Listening Matter?” followed, featuring clients who access nonprofit programs and services and have had the opportunity to share their opinions with the organizations. In this first of what will be a three-part video series, “Perspectives from People Who Give Feedback,” Kate, in Massachusetts, says: “I think it’s important for everybody to elevate their voice because everybody counts, everybody matters.”

After the video, Marcus began the panel discussion. Noting that feedback and listening are “so fundamental to our interaction and clear communication with others,” he asked

Kelley, LaTida, and Melissa how listening is taking place in the work that they do. Kelley talked about community listening sessions that Irvine started throughout California in 2016 that uncovered themes, such as that people want to be treated with dignity and connected to community networks, very much relevant today.

*“It’s really important for us to be reminded that we cannot just get our news from newspapers and periodicals and television, but the people have their own stories and we should hear their unique and distinct voices.” – Kelley Gulley*

Melissa described GreenLight’s “family-partner model,” in which GreenLight convenes family partners from the Greater Boston community to vet and vote on potential grantees that want to bring their work to Boston. The family partners, along with GreenLight Fund’s advisory council, ultimately decide on the one organization that will be funded.

LaTida said that early listening tours, embarking on a Center for Effective Philanthropy grantee perception survey as soon as possible, and participating in Shared Insight’s feedback grant program, Listen4Good, helped get listening “baked into our strategy and into our thinking about what kind of impact” the seven-year-old Moses Taylor Foundation can have in its region.

Turning to Marcus’s question about the connection between listening and equity, Kelley recounted how Irvine’s 2018 California Workers Survey, which grouped all Asian American and Pacific Islander responses into a single category, led to another survey in 2019 that disaggregated data for AAPI groups. The second survey, she said, “was in direct response to ‘hey y’all missed something.’”

At GreenLight, the family-partner model acknowledges that the people in the communities, especially those often marginalized, are the “experts in all of this,” Melissa said. And it’s important, she added, to recognize “their power in order for us to be truly invested in equity and change the systems and the way our society works.”

*“When we talk about family partners owning the decisions, owning what’s coming into their community, that’s when we start to really shift the narrative around power and really think about how we can give voice but also agency for families and for our family partners to make a real difference in their community.” – Melissa Luna*

In response to a question about how the foundations were responding to COVID-19, LaTida described new efforts to regularly reach out directly to grantees by email or telephone to ask specific questions about their needs. At the same time, she said,

to respect how busy grantees are, **Moses Taylor** is sharing information with other foundations and co-funding based on their due diligence. The foundation has experience in such collaboration as it organized local funders to join together to support nonprofits participating in Listen4Good and share their learnings around the feedback process.

Melissa said **GreenLight** is hearing from grantees not only about their immediate needs, but about their concerns for what things will be like in the coming months and next year. Doing the listening and getting the feedback, she said, slows response time some, but gives the foundation confidence it will land “in the right place.”

**Irvine’s** response to the crisis, Kelley said, has been informed by the listening the foundation has done with individuals and organizations before and during this time.

LaTida wrapped up the webinar’s discussion time with a reminder about closing the feedback loop. She said that especially during these busy and trying times, it shows respect and builds trust to let people know they were heard.

*“Funders can be guilty of asking a bazillion questions and then just going on our merry way, and people never know like, ‘Did you hear what I said?’ and ‘What did you do as a result of what I said?’” – LaTida Smith*

During the open Q&A, Melinda shared a quick description of Listen4Good and then asked LaTida how her foundation has changed based on what it has learned participating in the program. LaTida said **Moses Taylor** has added to its grant proposal and reporting processes questions about how potential grantees listen to their clients. And, she said, it has also added listening and learning practices into its strategic planning for programs, including those that support school nurses and older adults experiencing isolation.

Kelley was asked how to get a representative sample of voices when trying to listen to a whole state. She responded that some is data-driven — the science of sampling in surveys — and some is keeping a finger on the pulse of communities and having good relationships with policymakers. The important thing, she said, is that **Irvine** is “not just a foundation over there doing this thing” on its own.

In addressing a final question, Melissa reflected on how listening and engagement are a spectrum with embedded layers of issues of power, and that it’s not an all or nothing game. It’s “about how do we support each member, each stakeholder, each partner to move along the spectrum and take those steps, because together, when we start to move that, then you start to see . . . systems change.”

A video recording of the webinar is posted [here](#).

For more information, go to [Fund for Shared Insight's website](#).

Also, please check out these related resources:

- Fund for Shared Insight video: "[Perspectives from People Who Give Feedback, Part 1: Why Does Listening Matter?](#)"
- Center for Effective Philanthropy blog post by LaTida Smith, president and CEO, Moses Taylor Foundation: "[How Learning to Listen Prepared One Funder for Its Crisis Response](#)"
- Center for Effective Philanthropy blog post by Valerie Threlfall, Listen4Good; Fay Twersky, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; and Melinda Tuan, Fund for Shared Insight: "[Fulfilling Philanthropy's COVID-19 Pledge: Listening in a Time of Crisis](#)"
- GEO cross-post by Carolyn Wang Kong, Blue Shield of California Foundation: "[Two Years Into Our Journey – Lessons in Listening and Humility](#)"
- The James Irvine Foundation [listening sessions](#) and [findings report](#) on the AAPI California Workers Survey
- Fund for Shared Insight's upcoming [Listen4Good](#) co-funding and grant opportunity:
  - For funders: [https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/listen4good/for-funders/Register for June 18 webinar](https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/listen4good/for-funders/Register-for-June-18-webinar).
  - For nonprofits: <https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/listen4good/for-nonprofits/>
- Fund for Shared Insight's [#Feedback4Equity](#) campaign
- Ekouté landscape scan on foundation listening: "[Bridging the Gap: A Review of Foundation Listening Practices](#)"
- [Listen4Good Tips for Listening During COVID-19](#)
- Feedback Labs resource page: "[Listening During COVID-19: A Framework for Funders](#)" and blog post: "[Listening: A Key Element of Crisis Preparedness](#)"