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Sending Help Fast: Setting Up & Managing **Emergency Grants in Times of Crisis**
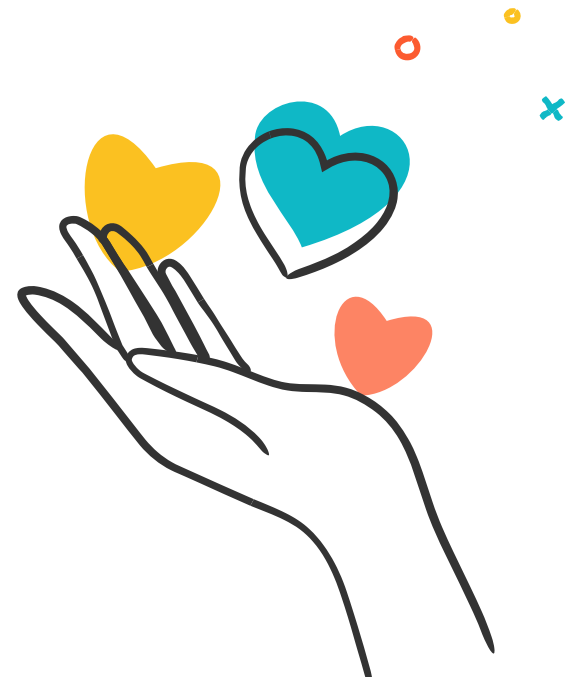
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SENDING HELP FAST: SETTING UP & MANAGING **EMERGENCY GRANTS IN TIMES OF CRISIS**

Grantmaking is close to an art. Honing the process of setting up a grant, collecting applications, selecting the right fits, and then reporting on your results is something that takes years of experience, lots of thought, and an ongoing, laser dedication to your mission.

Truly great grantmaking requires enormous amounts of consideration, labor, tweaking, and analysis—but what happens when you need to issue an emergency grant and don't have time for any of that?

The recent Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us that philanthropy can't always wait—even for a few weeks—and that while the grantmaking process is often long and thorough for a reason, sometimes we have to expedite the process in order to do what grants do best: help connect resources to the people who need them most.

At Submittable, we have the unique opportunity to watch thousands of grantmakers go about their business each day. In the past month, we've also watched as dozens of foundations and organizations have stepped up bravely, quickly, and with resolve to mainline assistance to the groups who can use it most during the COVID crisis. Their solutions for setting up emergency grants have been creative, nimble, unhesitating, and, above all, compassionate.

Emergency grants are vital in the wake of calamity, whether the world has been shaken by a public health concern, a natural disaster, an economic recession, or a pressing social issue. Here's what we've learned from our clients about how to set up and manage emergency grants with maximum efficiency, for maximum impact.

NINE EMERGING STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING AN EMERGENCY GRANT

Emergencies require that we leave our comfort zones. For grantmakers, this means that the rules change, even when it comes to the most tried and true methods, procedures, and technologies that you're relied and sworn upon in past years. As an example, PEAK Grantmaking reports that just in the wake of the COVID crisis, 97 percent of organizations are considering changes to their grantmaking processes, while 63 percent are considering changing their grant priorities—who and what they fund.

Emergency grantmaking requires sacrificing "perfect" for "done" and valuing efficiency and speed over almost all else. It also requires more trust: trust that your applicants need your funds and that they will use them with the urgency and weight that inspired your grant.

Grantmaking best practices and emergency grantmaking best practices are different. Here are the strategies that we've seen working.

1 Be ready for remote work

One of the biggest challenges of the COVID-19 crisis is that social distancing is required for everyone to stay healthy and safe, which means in-person collaboration is all but taken off the table. And it's important to add that many emergency situations, from national disasters to economic crashes, may also necessitate an increase in remote work. For these reasons, being able to work remotely and virtually are vital to your emergency grant planning.

How can you make the shift?

Utilize video conferencing solutions, like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Hangouts, to take many meetings and interviews remote. Specifically for the grants space, you may conduct site visits virtually through these tools, too.

Adopt application management software, like Submittable, to replace in-person review and selection processes. Review teams of any size can tackle applications and make decisions based on customized scoring systems, while communicating through in-platform messaging.

Go paperless. The majority of foundations now use electronic grant application processes, but if you are in

the minority, now is the time to update your procedure. This is also the time to examine any instances where you use paper—can you replace paper letters with email communication? Can you wire funds to your grantee accounts instead of sending checks via post?

Do less. Going fully remote in a crisis may simply mean letting some tasks slide. The [Helen J. Serini Foundation](), for example, cancelled all of their upcoming site visits, citing them as not vital to their current mission, which is helping their grantees during the crisis.

2 Reduce the burden on grantees

Place yourself in the grantee's shoes. Many of them are strained by the consequences of the crisis and many of them need funding for crisis-related work yesterday. Anything you can do to make their job easier helps them, the community, and everyone's efforts toward relief.

Just a few of many ideas:

- Consider expanding your funding or changing the scope of your funding.
- Ease requirements on existing grants, including requirements related to spending, reporting, timelines, outcomes, and allocations.

- Consider offering general operating support, such as technical support or infrastructure support, to grantees who are struggling with moving to remote work or adapting to the conditions of the emergency.
- Make grant modifications easy through extremely simplified processes.
- Consider making grant payments sooner and/or expediting the timeline of future payments.

3 Communicate transparently

The first best step toward easing the burden for your grantees is **asking them about their situation and listening to their needs.** This is the time to reach out individually to your grantees to both let them know what changes your organization is making to provide emergency relief as well as better understand what changes they are undergoing to adapt to the situation and continue making an impact.

This isn't an opportunity for only sending a general public statement about "the current situation" and leaving it at that. This is the time to make individual phone calls or video conference meetings. Connect with individuals who are leaders in your community and get the best handle on the situation before you start organizing a unified response.

Don't forget to communicate internally. If you're making sweeping changes to the process in which you create and award grants, make those changes crystal clear. Just because you're turning to a bare-bones system for issuing a grant doesn't mean you can skip vital steps like getting your team on the same page.

Also communicate to the public and to donors. If you're making drastic changes to your grant process, let people know. If you're offering a ten-day application window for a new series of emergency relief grants, get the word out as quickly as possible so that the organizations and individuals who would benefit know to apply. If you are doing something new and exciting that will really help fast, let your donors know.

You will need to cease a lot of your "normal" tasks as a foundation, but communication is not one of them. Information that's important to communicate especially in times of emergency includes:

- How operations have been affected, such as a move to remote operation.
- Any scheduled events that will be changed, cancelled, or postponed.
- How your employees are being supported during this time.
- How your grants processes and requirements are changing.

- Special grants, events, and strategies that you are launching to help.
- Other organizations that are offering assistance.
- How readers can help.

Communicate this information through multiple channels:

- Through email
- On your website
- On social media
- Through the media
- In a press release

Consider creating a simple survey to assess needs. Help everyone communicate their needs to you without a huge time commitment, especially if you don't have the bandwidth to reach out individually. Quickly understanding the scope of the problem as you form your emergency grants to ensure you'll be finding the right solutions.

Lilia Perez, Grants and Programs Manager at Arts Mid-Hudson, realized that much of what her non-profit was funding was going to be cancelled, postponed, rescheduled indefinitely, or made virtual. Before deciding on next steps, she set up a simple survey via Submittable to collect information and assess needs before picking up the phone.

> **We really needed to get a pulse in an easy way from a lot of people at once on what their plans were, to do an overall survey of information and then reach out one on one to follow up and figure things out...We want our plan of action to be based on what we're actually hearing from our grantees.**
>
> **- LILIA PEREZ**
>   Grants & Programs Manager, Arts Mid-Hudson

Be honest and open in your communications. This is even more important in times of uncertainty and fear. Remember that before they are grantees, donors, or employees, the people you are communicating with are human beings who are processing a crisis.

4 Consider collaborations and partnerships

This isn't the time for competition or even comparison. Collaborating with other foundations may simply be the best way to quickly get emergency grants out the door.

The Ausherman Family Foundation lept into action in response to COVID-19 by immediately partnering with five other local funders to maximize impact and establish a central application process for organizations to elicit help.

Their emergency relief page doesn't just contain their emergency grant information, it also lists support options from other nonprofits, assistance surveys, ways to donate and volunteer, and ways to support local businesses.

Artist Relief also came to the conclusion that there was strength in numbers. Leaders of Academy of American Poets, Artadia, Creative Capital, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, MAP Fund, National YoungArts Foundation, and United States Artists joined together, "realizing that a network of small to mid-sized grantmakers would be nimble enough to organize on a local, grassroots level and then scale up together to help artists across the country," according to the group.

Look for coalitions. For example, this group of over 600 philanthropic organizations have signed a pledge written by the Council on Foundations to follow emergency grantmaking and nonprofit guidelines during the COVID crisis. Coalitions like these can help you establish best practices quickly and find partners and collaborators without exhaustive effort.

Consider giving to local pooled funds. Examine your budget and weigh the benefits of sending money to local collaborations in addition to establishing your own emergency relief grants. Pooling money can increase impact and simplify the process from start to finish.

Start with who you know. In order to work fast, use relationships that you already have and organizations that you have partnered with or interacted with in the past.

Cheryl Thompson-Morton, Program Manager for The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, shared that tapping an old, well-established partnership between her organization and the Local Media Association, was key in launching their $100 million in emergency grants to assist local news outlets in just days after the COVID crisis began.

> **Having the partnership already in place made it easier to deploy resources to this emergency and act quickly. We were able to use the framework that we use for our other community grant programs as the basis for this and make changes that were appropriate for a high velocity grant. We built off what we already had in place.**
>
> **- CHERYL THOMSPON-MORTON**
>   Program Manager,
>   The Lenfest Institute for Journlasim

5 Simplify your guidelines and forms

Another major way to ease the burden on grantees, while also simplifying your own process is to greatly reduce the length and complexity of your grant application form. The stereotype of exhaustive, red tape covered grant applications with strict rules has no place here.

The Brooklyn Community Foundation, which set up and funded a first round of emergency grant within ten days of the pandemic hitting its borough, acted so swiftly in large part due to their simplified forms. The foundation created two brass tacks applications: one with just two questions for returning grantees and another with four questions for new applicants.

> **Even before our COVID-19 response, we've been working to minimize the burden on nonprofits because we understand that even the process of applying and responding to RFPs, that's labor. There are pieces of information that we would like to know about the organizations applying for grants but if they're not pieces of information that we will use to make the decision, we're not asking for them now.**
>
> **- MARCELLA J. TILLETT**
>   Vice President of Programs & Partnerships,
>   The Brooklyn Community Foundation

In just over a week, they had funded anti-hunger and anti-violence campaigns, advocacy for low-wage workers, and community care for Hatian Americans.

A few ways you can shorten your form:

- Eliminate all information that you would like to know, but don't need to know.
- Consider removing questions that capture information only used for analysis and reporting—you can capture that data at a later stage, after the crisis is over.
- Minimize financial due diligence.
- Consider making a second, shorter application for grantees that have applied for funding in the past.
- Partner with other local organizations to create a universal application process.
- Create extremely clear and thorough guidelines that help organizations self-qualify.

Some foundations are skipping the application process altogether in some instances. For example, The Heising-Simons Foundation only requires current grantees come to them with their needs to access emergency funding.

6 Quickly adapt your website

Your emergency response won't be as effective if people don't know about it. In addition to the communications you conduct over the phone and through email, update your website to reflect the changes you've made to your grant process, your priorities, and your current mission.

- Make sure your website can handle increased traffic.
- Create a landing page specifically for the emergency and your efforts.
- Add a banner or pop-up to your homepage that links to your new landing page.
- Make sure your emergency pages are accessible to all.
- Clearly link to your guidelines and application form.
- As the crisis evolves, keep your website current to any developments and changes.
- Use a variety of media, including text, video, and images.

In many cases, the news of your emergency relief grant will spread quickly. Still, having a clear home for your grant information is vital.

7 Streamline your review process

Just as your form will need to change in a time of emergency, so will your review process. This is not the time for long meetings that painstakingly consider the pros and cons of funding a grantee. Brown Media Institute, for example, was able to review and select five projects to fund from among 325 applicants over a weekend with

video conferences and grant management software because they knew moving rapidly was vital.

This is a time for quickly verifying the validity of an application, picking the right grantees for your mission, and getting one step closer to funding them.

Fasttrack your review process by:

- **Matching your form with a review process.** You may be able to set up a Google form quickly and for free, but doing so doesn't leave you with a remote and intuitive system of review—just a spreadsheet.
- **Developing a simple scoring rubric.** Use application software that allows your reviewers to quickly comment on, approve, or decline an application.
- **Making sure you can operate remotely.** Just as in the case of the COVID-19 emergency, the ability to meet in person may be hampered (and may waste time). Remote team review is imperative.
- **Add review team members.** During an emergency, when so many people have needs, you could be flooded with thousands of applications. Use a system where you can quickly add and train reviewers.

Yes, these review shortcuts could lead to mistakes that are preventable through a more thorough review process. But this downside is easily outweighed by the importance of getting your funding out the door as soon as possible.

8 Put aside exhaustive reporting

One of the major strategies that large numbers of philanthropic organizations are leaning into right now is easing their reporting requirements, both for grants that are currently being funded and for their new emergency relief grants.

Consider changing your reporting requirements by:

- Extending or suspending reporting deadlines.
- Converting reports to phone calls, video conferencing, or short memos.
- Streamlining reporting processes.
- Minimizing, eliminating, or changing the scope of project deliverables, including events and conferences.
- Cancelling or postponing site visits, or making site visits virtual.

The Association of Independents in Radio (AIR) created a Freelance Audio Fund to provide relief to professionals in the audio production industry. AIR CEO Ken Ikeda told Submittable that while reporting is extremely important, and while they're collecting some anecdotal data now, getting the applications set up quickly and getting the money out as soon as possible was the most important thing—so that there were sound producers around in the future.

> **This is not about applying a level of scrutiny that says, are you the world's most accomplished producer? Are you the best storyteller? We want everyone to get there, but that's not actually the purpose of this.**
>
> **- KEN IKEDA**,
> CEO, Association of Independents in Radio

You may also want to shift how you approach the idea of reporting altogether—like switching from a more qualitative approach from a quantitative approach, trading hard numbers (at least in some ways, or briefly) for storytelling. This is an opportunity to gain a lot of anecdotal stories that are emotional and good—and good for your brand. For example, you may set up "reporting" via social media to collect and share videos, images, and anecdotes, about what's happening on the ground. What you lose in data may be gained in stories of real impact.

One caveat: **keep legal compliance in mind.** While cutting corners on reporting and funding can help your emergency relief grants get out the door quickly, you still need to keep financial and legal records that are vital to operations.

9 Recognize that crisis work is not going to be organized or calm

Applying the above strategies to your emergency grant response will help you expedite your giving and assist the communities you care about. But they will not change the fact that you are operating in uncertain, and perhaps unprecedented, times.

It's normal to feel overwhelmed and stressed, but all you can do is focus on being a flexible, adaptable human being. Do your best and be forgiving of yourself, your team, and your grantees. Understand that you'll be making some things up as you go along, and that's okay. A crisis is a time for action, even if it's imperfect. It can also be a time for amazing innovation and radical acts of compassion.

KEEPING LONG-TERM ANALYSIS AND GOALS IN SIGHT EVEN IN EMERGENCY

Taking action during an emergency often means moving forward before you know all of the information you wish you had, or without knowing exactly what the final outcome will be—and that's okay. Sometimes we simply need to act to survive.

But while you do the amazing—like setting up a grant in a matter of days instead of a matter of months—insert placeholders to go back and analyze what you've done and the impact that it had. While reporting will take a back seat to doing, tracking things for later or collecting reports analysis down the road is still smart. So is never losing sight of what really matters: your core goals as an organization.

"Keep your eye on your mission," the CEO of The Samuels Group, Judith Samuels, told Big Duck. "This is where your impact and expertise matters. Be innovative but focused."

WHAT YOUR "NORMAL" GRANT PROCESS CAN LEARN FROM EMERGENCY GRANTS

Some of these strategies will fade as we emerge from the crisis. But it's likely that other strategies will remain—and that grantmaking will see permanent changes linked to our collective COVID response. The world will likely change permanently in the wake of the pandemic, and that goes for grantmaking, too.

As you build your emergency grant processes, or after your grants are safely deployed, take the time to look at the changes you've made and analyze if what

you've learned could improve your traditional grantmaking process. You might find that parts of your new remote workflow are more efficient than your old in-person meetings, or that requiring your grantees to go through less red tape eases their burden and makes the impact of your dollars go further. Keep an open mind, welcome innovation, and your new emergency grantmaking skills could improve processes for all your grants.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP

Unlike grantmakers, Submittable isn't on the frontlines of helping communities survive the coronavirus crisis. But our software is. We have been amazed at the myriad ways foundations and organizations have used our platform since the outbreak, from emergency relief grants, to virtual event planning, to the creation of COVID-19 related art.

Whether you are already a Submittable user, or you are exploring options to set up an emergency grant, our team is here to help you through the process. From creating a landing page and form, to using our review, reporting, and funding tools.

A grants management platform can help with almost all of the strategies above, from reducing the grantees' burden, to remote collaboration, to increased communication. Learn more.

Submittable

Submittable is a cloud-based submission management platform that makes it easy to accept, review, and select any kind of content, no matter where you are. Since 2010, Submittable has helped organizations collect more than 10 million submissions for thousands of customers all over the world.