

Leveraging Funds: An Interview Series with Advocates and Funders

INTRODUCTION

As part of our work, Community Catalyst aims to connect state and local partners to funding opportunities as well as to current trends in fundraising and best practices relating to resource development and organizational sustainability. At the end of 2020, we released a toolkit, [Sustaining Your Fundraising in the Time of COVID-19](#). We are now pleased to share a new resource – one focused on the difficult task of not only raising funds to support your work, but leveraging them for long(er)-term sustainability. This collection of Leveraging Funds tools offers insights and suggestions from both advocates who successfully used Health Justice Fund¹ (HJF) grants to secure matching funds for their work as well as an interview with a Georgia funder on how she works to leverage the capital of her foundation to the maximum benefit of her grantees.

Community Catalyst would like to thank [Dr. Laura Guerra-Cardus](#), [Scott Darius](#) and [Christine Reeves Strigaro](#) for having these conversations with us and sharing their perspectives with our community.

INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT DARIUS AND DR. LAURA GUERRA-CARDUS

What follows is a conversation with Dr. Laura Guerra-Cardus of the [Children's Defense Fund - TX](#) (CDF) and Scott Darius of [Florida Voices for Health](#) (FVH), whose organizations' fundraising efforts to support each state's Medicaid expansion battle have resulted in deeper investments in the work. While their experiences speak to that specific policy goal, the information they share is broadly applicable, especially as their campaigns focus on grassroots organizing and lifting up the voices of the people- and communities- most impacted.

What is your overall approach to fundraising for your work? How did you approach funders to talk about the work and explain your larger vision and campaign?

Scott Darius, Florida Voices for Health:

For us, it is about selling the vision; it is less about the policy outcome/ specific campaign and more about selling the infrastructure, the machine that will be around in the next crisis. We find fundraising most difficult when you don't have a foot in the door. We've found that our existing funders were helpful in making introductions to other funders and allowing a point of entry. Some of our current funders have even invited us to speak at funder meetings to share our vision for the work. Even if you only have one or two seeds, having those introductions and building those relationships is key.

¹Community Catalyst's Health Justice Fund is a key grantmaking initiative of Community Catalyst. The Health Justice Fund, formerly the ACA Implementation Fund, is a collaborative funding effort between Community Catalyst and a network of national and state foundations and individual donors.



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Dr. Laura Guerra-Cardus, Children's Defense Fund- TX:

I really started thinking about my organization and coalition partners – what would it really take to move the needle on coverage in Texas? When you figure out the strategies for what you really believe will make a difference, you become the best 'salesperson' possible. You come from an authentic place and this allows you to talk to foundations as thought partners. When our national funds to support the work landed, it validated our thinking and made us more confident on the road we're on. It also created validation for other foundations as well. We were able to approach them on much stronger footing, showing buy-in from the broader community and partners.



How has national funding positioned you for securing other funds?

Scott Darius:

Having national funding has been really helpful because no one wants to feel like it's just their money—but they also recognize that their [grant of] \$25,000 won't win the issue. By pointing to the national funding, we're able to show something that has support, partners working together and building a long-term infrastructure. It has been an easier sell to talk about infrastructure building so they can see how their money helps support those efforts. Being able to describe our [system of advocacy](#) (shout out CC), describing the six core capacities and how each partner plays a role has been quite helpful.

Dr. Laura Guerra-Cardus:

HJF funding was critical for helping us raise additional funds. Being able to approach foundation partners with a matching grant opportunity - where they can double or triple their impact by contributing to a bigger project - is extremely helpful. In our experience, state and local foundations really appreciate funding partnerships with national funders. In the case of HJF it was particularly useful to be able to tell state-level funders that national partners were committed for the long haul, with an expected multi-year investment. Not only do local foundations want to encourage and reward multi-year investments from national funders in their state, but they want to be part of maximizing the effort as well. Texas partners have been able to raise matching funds by leveraging our national grant opportunity to secure additional support. These funds have allowed us to:

- 1 . Hire a consulting firm to do power mapping, message testing, and strategic development to help identify the best messengers and messages in target districts and developing a coordinated communications plan that brings needed partners on board.
- 2 . Fund grant activities such as vigil projections, social media ads, and billboards.
- 3 . Hire a communications director.
- 4 . Provide sub-grants to organizations in up to four local communities.

How (if at all) did your funding approach differ from past fundraising for campaigns or projects?

Scott Darius:

We've seen that the landscape may lend itself to increased investment if you frame it the right way. Seemingly suddenly, funders want some impacts on racial justice. That piece blew up this year with funders wanting to be responsive to that moment, similar with the pandemic and public health crisis. So, we've been able to make the connections between health justice, racial justice and Medicaid expansion. I'd suggest framing in that landscape piece and making it relevant to what the big funders are looking out for while still meeting your organization's goals and outcomes. We've been able to show how we're working with other groups and partners, elevating voices of those impacted but also how new dollars will help get those stories out, help mobilize people, etc.

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Dr. Laura Guerra-Cardus:

These efforts didn't really differ from previous ones – we always go to the heart of what authentically makes a difference and we validate this with partners. This time around, we were super committed to the work so we started building this grassroots campaign without full funding. This has pros and cons associated it – con on work load level, pros on giving you a head start.

Were the additional dollars secured from in-state, national or regional funders?

Scott Darius:

We've been able to work with existing funders and supporters of health advocacy. For example, Allegheny Franciscan Ministries have been a consistent supporter of health advocacy. They are the ones leading the push, driving the bus – it's part of their ethos. They're responding to the moment.

Dr. Laura Guerra-Cardus:

Two in-state funders were already funding CDF but one funder was new to us. You have to keep your ear to the ground to learn about new opportunities. We've found particular success with grant opportunities with a quick turnaround. Reading request for proposals (RFPs) and seeing what they are really looking for and then measuring it to the work you lead – and you are a part of. We ask ourselves: are we an authentic fit for this? If so, let's go for it. If not, let's not waste our time.

How did you gain organizational partner/coalition support?

Scott Darius:

We have good working relationships to start. We've been very fortunate to work with good people we've known for years. A lot of it is recognizing everyone's strength but also knowing your own weaknesses. Knowing you can't do everything and not having an ego about pieces you can't do. For projects in the past, we've just divided the dollars evenly and went from there, but over time and as the work evolves, that's where it gets tricky. When the emphasis moved to grassroots or communications [for example], you should shift with it. Sometimes you need to have hard conversations when you don't want to fail the project. For example, we realized early on that we wouldn't be able to provide the right support for policy pieces so we were able to recognize that we have two partner organizations that excel in that area and we made sure they were part of the grant.

Dr. Laura Guerra-Cardus:

Working with partners for the first time – writing grants together, setting up communications structures – these things don't happen overnight. It's good to have a grace period as partners learn to work together. Partners do learn to work together really well. You end up creating a more finely tuned machine for how organizations collaborate. That's pretty valuable.

Foundations like joint proposals. I like them too. [From our perspective,] it almost always helps advance the work and creates strong structures for us to work together on the state level. It's a more intentional partnership that almost always benefits the work. Sustainability needs to be built with long-term funding. Funders who commit to partners for a long period of time are really able to get to the benefits of that work. We are able to identify what works best and invest in that more and more.

CONCLUSION

Advocates routinely demonstrate the strength of their coalitions, their range of organizational capacities, and their nimbleness to adapt to the times. In both Florida and Texas, where advocates continue to pursue Medicaid expansion, these efforts take both time and money. With national funding laying the foundation, other national, state and local funders can glean a better sense of what their investments could support as well as where they could fill gaps and provide other needed resources to accomplish the work. Community Catalyst is eager to continue thinking with you all about how to leverage existing resources and broker relationships with new funding streams. [Please click here](#) to read a funder's perspective.

Interviews conducted by Amanda Ptashkin, JD and Paul Gels