A Playbook for Responsive Philanthropy During Natural Disasters

Lessons learned from supporting recovery and rebuilding after the 2020 wildfires in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California

THE Ford Family FOUNDATION
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Introduction

In September 2020, the staff of The Ford Family Foundation, like many across the country, had been working remotely for almost six months. Rural communities in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California, were acutely feeling the social, health and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and resources were stretched thin across the board. Layered on top of this already stressful context was widespread social tension following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis as well as the 2020 presidential elections, just months away. Everyone was at their limit.

And then the wildfires ignited.

On a particularly hot and dry Labor Day weekend, the region was swept by unusually dangerous winds. The result was fast-moving wildfires that moved through communities with very little to no warning. Emergency responders and firefighters scrambled to do all they could to save people’s homes and business, but infrastructure in some communities was completely destroyed. Level 1, 2 and 3 evacuation orders were issued over wide swaths of the region — nearly all of The Ford Family Foundation’s staff were under evacuation orders themselves. The entire state of Oregon experienced hazardous air quality due to the smoke from the fires. More than a million acres burned and at least 11 lives were lost.

During this tragedy, we saw unmatched generosity and support for those who lost their homes. Volunteers organized meals and housing; ranchers showed up with trailers to evacuate their neighbors’ cattle or horses; signs thanking firefighters hung on homes and along roadways; and everyone was doing everything they could to help the thousands of people who were displaced.
Why this playbook?

The purpose of this playbook is to detail how the staff of The Ford Family Foundation responded and adapted to the wildfires of 2020, especially the strategies that emerged as a result of lessons learned in real time. From organizational infrastructure to staff time allocations, support from the Board of Directors and close side-by-side work with community organizations, significant time and resources were invested in an immediate, comprehensive response to major challenges in rural communities.

The timing of a natural disaster will never be convenient. Our hope is that when another natural disaster occurs, this playbook can serve as a guide. We feel that investing in organizational learning, reflection and thorough documentation can save time and resources in the future, when even minutes and hours count. This playbook is informed by interviews with grantees and Foundation staff, as well as collaborative discussion and reflection.

Who is this for?

This playbook was written first and foremost for the future staff of The Ford Family Foundation who may find themselves faced with the need to deploy resources in response to large-scale natural disasters. Yet the lessons contained here are broadly applicable to many organizations — private and community foundations, all levels of government agencies, and even NGOs such as the United Way. As you read, use these tips as guidelines and make adjustments to fit your organization’s context, situation and time.

To the future staff of The Ford Family Foundation: We believe in you! Know that we are doing our best now to set you up for success in responding to the communities we serve and live in.
A trauma-informed perspective:
Research in the last decade has shown the centrality of using a trauma-informed lens in work with survivors of major disasters. In the case of the 2020 wildfires, entire communities whose homes were destroyed faced extreme trauma. Direct service responders experienced second-hand trauma, absorbing the devastation of their neighbors. This was compounded by baseline struggles and inequities many individuals faced prior to 2020 and the social and economic context that had been unfolding throughout the year. A trauma-informed approach to engaging with residents and community leaders is essential.

The role of place-based funding:
The Ford Family Foundation is a strategic and responsive place-based funder. This means that staff actively seek ways to be a good neighbor to the geographic areas the Foundation serves. When a disaster of any kind occurs, relationships developed over years of community engagement provide a basis for response.

Rural is its own inequity:
As a place-based funder, understanding the layers of inequities that impact residents informs engagement strategies after a disaster, including how to respond with a trauma-informed lens. Communities may be unincorporated, lacking a local uniting government structure. They may be remote, more than an hour from social or medical services. Years of disinvestment in rural social and physical infrastructure compounds other inequities related to race, gender, income and other identities. When a natural disaster occurs in a rural area, remember: Rural is its own inequity.
As the French Creek fire burned in the night outside of Glide on Sept. 7, Abigail Malek posted to social media: “If you have friends out there, check with them to see if they need any help.” And while she helped evacuate her neighbors, offers of help flooded in.

“People started reaching out to me personally, saying ‘hey, we’ve got a truck and trailer,’ and ‘hey, we have an excavator,’” Malek said. When the Archie Creek fire, burning to the south of the French Creek fire, began to threaten the town itself, she remembered the offers for help. Through a Facebook group she created, Glide Strong, she started connecting people with resources to people with needs.

And people from all over, it turns out, had resources to assist. Offers to help evacuate and bring in equipment such as water trucks and bulldozers came in from Douglas County and beyond. Volunteers organized food and supply donations right away.

“If there was a need, we put it up on Facebook, and we had 10 people jump up and say, ‘we can help with that,’” Malek said. These grassroots efforts were crucial for filling the void left by overtaxed firefighting resources. In early September, over a million acres of wildfire were burning in the state, five other communities were facing similar disasters, and even more fires burned out of control in the American West.

During the days after Douglas Forest Protective Agency’s initial response and before taxed federal resources made it to Glide, community volunteers led the wildfire response on their neighbors’ properties. Local contractors and loggers used their equipment to construct fireline. People with hand tools drove around putting out spot fires, and volunteers with trucks and trailers evacuated livestock, people and possessions.

Community volunteer Celine Weber and Christina Hill, owner of Glide’s 138 Grill, set up a central food station during the Archie Creek Fire that offered three free meals a day to the community. Most of the food came through donations.

“Successful communities begin working on resilience before they need it, and leaders in the Glide area have been doing that,” said Roque Barros, director of the Ford Institute for Community Building. “When the fire came, they had community builders who could quickly pivot to disaster response through relationships they had already built. That’s the power of community building.”

After a summer of COVID-19 restrictions and a tense political environment, it was easy to forget the connection the community had, Malek said. “But after something like this happens, and people come together to help, I realized people are just awesome.”

By the time the Archie Creek fire was contained, most of the residents of Glide had experienced a loss of home, property or timber. For Malek, who was busy coordinating people through the Glide Strong page, it was time to get to work. She grabbed some volunteers and a few laptops and took over a corner table at the 138 Grill to begin the recovery efforts.

Covering immediate physical needs was the first order of business, and Glide Strong organizers set up a donation center in the middle school gymnasium. The space was quickly flooded with food, clothing and supplies from donations throughout the state. Their needs were covered so quickly that they were able to send overflow goods to other nonprofits in places like Jackson County, where wildfires also devastated small communities.

“Glide Strong was just a social media hashtag at first,” said Malek. “But now it’s an important tool to keep up momentum, and keep people involved in the process.”

Most of the official recovery work is done through an existing 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Glide Revitalization, for which Malek then served as assistant director. Alison Doty, the director, said that she founded the organization to encourage economic development in the community. Now, Glide Revitalization is the trusted liaison for community members and organizations involved in disaster response.

Initially, volunteers were busy helping residents register for aid through FEMA, find housing and get the household goods they needed from the donation center. Then volunteers were committed to rebuilding the community physically, financially and emotionally.

“Our goal is to get people back to Glide and find a place for them. We have a very generous community,” Doty said. “People have rallied to make sure that we help each and every one of our neighbors who were devastated by this fire. We can’t make them whole, but we can help get them to their new normal.”

— Community Vitality, Spring 2021
**TIP 1: Be prepared**

**Build a strong yet nimble organization.** When a disaster occurs, an organization’s ability to work collaboratively and respond effectively is tested. Investing in those aspects of organizational culture and operations that create inclusive and high-functioning processes will prove invaluable when they are put to the test under highly stressful situations with very fast timelines.

**Create an emergency protocol.** Save time and confusion by establishing clear guidelines and protocol that staff can follow. This protocol can include how funding can be spent and distributed, decision-making processes and communications procedures.

**Prepare pre-approved emergency response funding.** When serving a broad geographic area, it is likely that every year at least one natural disaster will occur that requires emergency response. Consider creating a designated fund within the organizational budget to accelerate response time for future disasters. For long-term recovery, as is the case with the 2020 wildfires, designate funding to support communities over time.

**Support disaster preparedness and resiliency in communities.** Investing in work that creates a community-building culture leads to more resilient communities and people. In places where residents know each other and organizational infrastructure exists — including communications, trained staff and volunteers, emergency plans and safe spaces for shelter — residents are better positioned to recover and rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

**Nurture connections with peer funders and state agencies.** Connections among philanthropic organizations and government agencies will strengthen a region’s resiliency. Everyone benefits from high-functioning partnerships. The Community Rebuilding Fund housed at the Oregon Community Foundation is an example of a highly collaborative partnership resulting from the need to respond. Collaboration on this fund has strengthened the ability of the organizations involved to work together in the future.

“The condition of a community before a tragic event is the single best predictor of their ability to recover.”

Josh Bruce, University of Oregon
TIP 2: Assess the landscape

Take a deep breath. Encourage staff to bring their human selves to the response. This will be a long road. Tend to the needs of those closest to you, including family and colleagues. Be a supportive member of your community if the disaster is nearby. Keep yourself safe and well, physically and mentally.

Support staff who are also affected by the emergency. Allow time away as necessary and create space for flexibility in daily work. During the 2020 wildfires, the Foundation’s entire home county was under a Level 1 evacuation order. Many of our staff also had family members or friends needing support to evacuate and stay safe. The entire state was experiencing dangerous air quality due to smoke.

Establish internal communications channels. Use available internal tools to establish clear spaces for updates and communication. During weekly all-staff meetings, the Foundation’s president and staff working directly with communities provided updates. Summaries were shared on the internal intranet. A chat channel was created for live updates. Emails were used for official guidance and updates regarding employee safety.

Provide bilingual communication. If residents affected by the natural disaster prefer a language other than English, provide materials in their language. During fast-paced emergency response, accessible communication can get overlooked. Be inclusive.

Use the lowest barrier tools to communicate. During the pandemic, emergency response meetings were held through videoconferencing (Zoom). This made broader connections with more individuals in many different communities possible. Even when in-person meetings are possible, using easy-lift tools is important.
TIP 3: Leverage relationships

Connect directly with community-based organizations. Communities are best positioned to know their needs. Staff members should use pre-existing relationships with local nonprofits and community leaders to learn about needs. In areas where relationships are lacking, invest the time — as appropriate given circumstances — to gently reach out and learn from those leading the local response.

Lead with clarity. Know that a successful response depends on trusting, honest relationships with affected communities. Resist jumping in with solutions immediately. Clearly communicate the intention to support emergency needs and recovery.

Connect organizations with each other. Stronger cross-organization relationships are important in current recovery as well as future resiliency. One way the Foundation connected organizations was by partnering with the Nonprofit Association of Oregon to convene weekly learning sessions with content area experts, county emergency response departments, community leaders and federal agencies. All benefited from hearing from each other.

Listen without a response in mind. Open listening builds trust and creates opportunities for stronger relationships and investments in the future. These relationships and the wisdom gained from listening will be crucial in the months ahead. Deep listening lessens the burden on people in the midst of trauma to identify their needs.

Look for gaps in other funding sources. Philanthropic funding is more flexible than county, state or federal resources. Listen for how public dollars are addressing the emergency and other potential sources of funding from peer funders. Support communities by identifying the gaps.

“I connected with people on a human level to say, ‘We’re thinking about you, and we’re here when you need us.’”

Max Gimbel, director, Ford Institute for Community Building
TIP 4: Create an internal team

Analyze internal capacity and invest in learning. What knowledge will your team need to be successful? What is reasonable for them to learn about this immediate situation, and where might you need to bring in content area experts for advice and guidance? The level of learning required to effectively respond in a complex landscape takes time. Document it in a shared drive to save time in the future.

Response Team

Core Team
Guide decision making, approve funding, work with Board of Directors; biweekly meetings

- Anne Kubisch
  President
- Roque Barros
  Director

“Seedling” Team
Implement strategies, discuss possibilities, problem solve and test out ideas; weekly coordination meetings

- Max Gimbel
  Associate Director
- Keavy Cook
  Director
- Mandy Elder
  Communications Specialist
- Rozalyn Mock
  Levi Williams
  Associate Program Officers

Entire Response Team
Connect with community members in geographic regions, inform strategies; quarterly meetings plus ongoing contact with communities and Core Team

- Denise Bacon, Crystal Aston, Laura Isioridia, Katie Jameson, Yvette Rhodes

External partners
Community members in each region, Nonprofit Association of Oregon, peer funders, Center for Disaster Philanthropy, design and communications, community listening
Designate a “core team.” Emergency response requires a variety of organizational functions, from grant processing to community engagement to communications. Pulling a cross-departmental team together early and designating leaders for areas of work makes sure everyone is able to lend their “super power” to the effort. See Appendix B for strategies developed by the Foundation’s core team.

Include the top people right away. The leader of an organization has the broad perspective necessary to see the skills and functions needed and the decision-making authority to redistribute or assign work. Their influence and wisdom are necessary from the beginning to remove roadblocks to a fast response.

Make time for the work. Designate a team who can come together for planning and operationalizing the strategies developed by the core team. This sub-team can meet more frequently, build agendas and raise questions to the level of the president or organizational leadership. Within the Foundation, these team members proudly named themselves the “seedlings” and worked to seed ideas and generate action behind the scenes.

Bring in consultants. When the content, skills or capacity required for response is outside of the scope of internal staff, consider what type of consultants may be needed. For example, early in the formation of the overall response strategy, a contract with the Center for Disaster Philanthropy provided feedback and guidance. Later, a contract with an evaluation consultant made further listening work possible with grantees.

“Very few strings were tied to the grant application and it let us decide what was best for us. That was helpful.”

Grant recipient, Siskiyou County
TIP 5: Remove money barriers

Send checks first. When immediate needs like safety, food and shelter arise, it is critical that responding organizations have the resources they need. Activate grants management and finance departments to quickly process and send checks. Reach out to the grantee so they know the money is on the way. Once a clear need is identified, this entire process can occur in under an hour.

Get funding approved quickly. The total funds needed for emergency response is likely outside the range of staff approval levels. Learning gained from previous natural disasters informed the quick decision by the Foundation’s Board of Directors during the fires to authorize a pool of funds for immediate emergency response with authority delegated to the president to approve specific grants.

Use all funding mechanisms. Grants will be needed over time. Initially, displaced residents may need gas and food. Make smaller grants for gas cards, emergency medical supplies or community meals.

Design a short, specific application. Applicants are experiencing extreme stress and first- or second-hand trauma during an emergency response. Show respect for their time and energy by including only questions necessary to processing funding, inform strategy or understand the recovery landscape. Open-ended questions with no wrong answers work best. (See sidebar at left).

Invest the necessary staff time to ensure that applicants are requesting support for activities that are likely to be approved. Avoid the unfortunate experience of grantees feeling like their time was wasted by ensuring that funding is likely to be approved before inviting an organization to apply. A drawback of this approach is that closed, invitation-only applications can sometimes miss organizations not in touch with foundation staff. This puts the onus on staff to do comprehensive, deep and wide-ranging listening in communities.

Track how funding is used. This will clarify future funding needs and make it possible to report back to partners. For an example of how this was done, see Appendix C.

Quick application

Below is the application developed by Foundation staff. In our experience, it was effective and served all of our internal needs without burdening applications.

These funds are designed to provide resources where there are gaps in available funds from state and federal sources. We are looking for work that supports the most vulnerable and assists in a more enduring and equitable long-term recovery. If your request falls outside of the funding areas below, please apply and explain how this work is critical to community recovery (see question 2 below).

These funds can be used to support operations, capital, technical assistance, programmatic and other efforts. Grants will vary in amount. Please apply for the amount you have discussed with Foundation staff.

Application questions

1. What role is your group playing in support of community recovery efforts?
2. How will these funds support your role in community recovery efforts?
3. How might this work contribute to the groundwork for long-term recovery?
4. What do you see as the 2-3 most critical challenges your group has encountered or expects to encounter in your recovery efforts?
5. What else would you like us to know at this time?
Allocate funding by region to avoid competition. The 2020 wildfires affected multiple regions. Allocating funding ahead of time to each region means that communities are not competing against each other for a limited funding pool.

Designate a specific staff member as the point of contact. One point of contact for applicants’ process and technical questions means channels of support are clear. This staff person should serve as a member of the core team detailed above, keeping others apprised of funding availability and application status.

Provide funding in phases. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, meeting basic needs is the priority. As time goes on, community capacity will grow and needs will evolve. Larger dollar amounts can be provided for specific functions and organizational infrastructure. A phased approach avoids overwhelming grantees or creating an “all or nothing” dynamic.

We’ve got more! See Appendix B for additional tips from one of the Foundation’s field coordinators active in the 2020 wildfire response.

**TIP 6: Stay connected**

Keep in touch in the months and years through recovery. Rebuilding and recovering after a natural disaster is a long-term process. Honor the relationship by staying connected. Relationships created through these shared experiences can also serve as valuable sources of learning. Likely you will call on these individuals again as responders or sources of support to others. These relationships also provide opportunity for greater investment in the future as community needs evolve.

Recognize and celebrate recovery leaders. Play the role of cheerleader and supporter by recognizing and lifting up communities and recovery leaders. Public recognition, small tokens of appreciation and acknowledgment on digital communication platforms can be small ways to show support for their hard work.
Conclusion

Philanthropic organizations like The Ford Family Foundation are ideally positioned to develop community-centered strategies that support long-term recovery and rebuilding after natural disasters like wildfires. Flexible budgets and funding are crucial for resident health and safety following an event. In addition, staff positionality, expertise and skills can be put to use advocating at state and county levels for people who have been displaced. This can support more informed decision making across agencies. Lean into the challenge.
Appendix A: Wildfire response strategies

**Community Engagement**
- Communicating with and supporting community building efforts
- Community Liaisons work directly with community organizations
- Looking out for the needs of the most vulnerable

**Learning and Coordination**
- Making connections vertically and horizontally at the local, state, and federal level between organizations doing wildfire recovery work

**Internal Wildfire Recovery Fund**
- $1 million allocated by the Board to address medium term needs
- Working with an evaluator to collect long-term learnings
- Developing strategies to meet those who are most likely to be excluded from traditional relief

**Community Rebuilding Fund**
- Partnering with OCF and MMT and together have hired a Coordinator for the fund
- Funds are focused on long-term planning and re-building

**Communications**
- Disseminating high-level information internally and externally to keep staff and partners informed
- Supporting communication opportunities in communities during rebuilding

**Advocacy, Systems and Policy**
- Anne sat on Governor’s Wildfire Economic Recovery Council
- Representing rural at key tables
- Advocating for the most isolated and vulnerable
People need money, not stuff:
More tips for rapid response to local emergencies

- Remember: in times of crisis, people do not need stuff — clothes, household supplies. They need cash. Cash and gift cards can purchase fuel, food and evacuation supplies at a variety of locations. Find an organization that can quickly receive a grant to purchase gift cards.
- Start with organizations where you have relationships. Keep in mind that if their staff are fleeing danger, they will not have the capacity or supplies they would need to process a grant.
- Identify umbrella organizations that can help. Organizations like the United Way or local community foundations already have emergency fund mechanisms in place. Organizations at an “arms length away” may have the bandwidth to distribute funding. Consider pre-vetting these organizations in your service area.
- Use social media to your advantage. Follow the local hashtags and do background research about the organizations making announcements to the community.
- When possible, communicate with closed-ended questions rather than open. Yes or no responses are clearer in emergencies.
- Use your business credit card as a tool. Buy snacks, coloring books and crayons for kids, and supplies to track information (pens, markers, flip charts). Take pictures of your receipts right away.
- Lean on the finance team who can provide guidance about use of funding and resources.
- Be realistic about what you can offer. If you are unsure of how you can help say, “We can do something. I don’t know what. I’ll get back to you.”

– From Crystal Aston, field coordinator for The Ford Family Foundation
Wildfire response grantmaking and community supports
Community building creates conditions for greater preparedness and resiliency

Multiple philanthropic tools and strategies have been used to support communities recovering from the September 2020 wildfires. The Foundation’s approach to grantmaking aims to unlock other funding opportunities by building capacity and filling gaps left by public sources.

Number of grants committed and paid to date: 50
Average grant size: $23,318
Smallest grant: $2,000, Largest grant: $100,000
Median grant size: $25,000

Support to statewide systems builds capacity across agencies and creates conditions for greater resiliency in future disasters

Grantmaking to each geographic region has been highly-customized, strategically supporting recovery and building capacity

- **Responsive** (food and medical supplies, translation)
- **Strategic Recovery** (TA, case managers, coordination and capacity, behavioral health supports)
- **Resiliency** (community knowledge; planning for safety and prevention; connected and aligned state, federal and local agencies)

As communities progress through the disaster response cycle*, requests for additional capacity funding grow. $24,391 of the $1.25 million in Board allocated wildfire recovery funding remains.

$1,225,609 committed funds

$0

$1.25M

Ongoing activities to support community resiliency

- Strategic funding to support organizational capacity, case management and community-level coordination
- Weekly learning and sharing sessions hosted in partnership with the Nonprofit Association of Oregon
- Collaborating with Oregon Community Foundation and Meyer Memorial Trust to operationalize the Community Rebuilding Fund (pooled statewide recovery fund)
- Ford Institute staff serving as community liaisons, providing highly-customized support for the unique circumstances in each affected community
- Continued learning and documentation that informs future emergency response strategies

*Model based on the Disaster Life Cycle from DisasterPhilanthropy.org, April 2021