How Funders Can Build the Most Effective Programming: the Grantee's Perspective

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Introduction

Throughout the Voices for Health Justice 2.0 evaluation design period (August 2023 - February 2024) and implementation period (February 2024 - Present), the Institute for Community Health (ICH) team convened and engaged with an Evaluation Advisory Committee (EAC), whose members represent a range of grantee and subgrantee perspectives, primarily from southern and midwestern states. The purpose of the EAC is not only to gather ideas and input from people that are closest to the work of the program, but also to create a space that promotes reflection and evaluative thinking, to build relationships and community, and to promote networking among the grantees.

ICH led conversations with the Voices EAC from September 2025 through February 2026 to discuss the grantees' perspectives on how funders can build the most effective programming. Across these conversations, EAC members contributed feedback based on both their experiences as grantees and their experiences with co-designing and advising the evaluation.

EAC members were first asked to share their feedback on how funders can build the most effective programming, and this was explored in a series of conversations. They were then asked to react to and provide feedback on the recommendations ICH provided to RWJF in the 2025 Evaluation Report. The ICH recommendations that EAC members provided feedback on were:

- Recommendation #1: Acknowledge and honor the long-term nature of the work
- Recommendation #3: Offer grounded, relational, and right-sized TA
- Recommendation #4: Separate the work of TA provision from grant administration
- Recommendation #5: Increase funding to targeted grantees

The ICH recommendation #2 of "set clear, consistent, and specific goals at the Foundation" was not discussed, due to time constraints and the reduced likelihood of grantees having relevant perspectives on this topic.

Actions Funders Can Take to Establish Effective Programming

In our initial open-ended conversations with the EAC, the following themes emerged:

- Establish trust and relationship building: EAC members emphasized the importance of funders understanding that it takes time for grantees to build trust with the community. It is important to honor the time that is required to see change by defining success in a way that allows for long term relationship building. This may entail longer grant periods. It may also entail funding different stages of organizing work, acknowledging that early stages of trust building work are just as important as later ones.

- Offer flexible and responsive funding:
    - It would be helpful for funders to understand that grassroots organizations need to follow the lead of the community, with priorities and goals potentially changing over time. Grantees are frequently accountable to the relationship they're building with the community, which means that the vision of their work may change, based on what the community sees as the most important needs.
    - EAC members also appreciate the flexibility to change goals and outcomes in response to the rapidly changing policy environment. This flexibility supports effective, responsive programming at the state level. The grantees discussed how the rapid response funding, offered by the Voices grant, was helpful in dealing with unexpected and pressing needs.[1]

- Support grantees with their reputation: Grantees believe that it is important that funders use their political power to support the grantees, even when the grantees are taking actions that may be seen as "controversial," such as work in the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) field and supporting immigrant health. Funders should ***"stand up for the work they're funding."***

- Initiate direct contact with grantees:
    - EAC members spoke about their desire to build stronger direct relationships with funders, and for funders to increase their understanding of the populations that grantees work with and seeing the work on the ground. They suggest that funders should visit their grantees and the communities to whom they are providing funding.
    - Grantees also discussed that grantees would appreciate funders reaching out to them directly with support and knowledge, instead of grantees having to request the assistance.

Grantee Feedback on ICH's Recommendations

Voices EAC members largely agree with ICH's recommendations that were provided in the 2025 Evaluation Report. The grantees were able to provide feedback on the recommendations and shared real-world examples, which allows us to provide a more nuanced discussion.

[1] In Voices 1.0, the Steering Committee chose certain organizations – some current Voices grantees, some not grantees – to receive Rapid Response Grants in places where, from the perspective of the Steering Committee, there was an opportunity to positively impact health equity under a fast timeline. There was an application required from grantees, but it was by invitation only. In 2.0, supplemental funds were distributed as Special Opportunity Funds according to a competitive application process among grantees. There were different pros and cons with both approaches, and EAC members were likely referring to a combination of both programs.

Recommendation #1: Acknowledge and honor the long-term nature of the work

EAC members agree with ICH's recommendation of offering longer-term grants. Especially in today's political climate, the work being done by grantees may be considered controversial, which negatively impacts overall funding. Having funders that support the work of the grantees by offering long-term funding and relationships would allow for grantees to focus on the important work that they do with the community. Grantees believe that a three to five year grant is an appropriate length, as it would allow them stable funding and security for a decent length of time, while also not forcing grantees to commit to plans in the distant future.

When short-term funding for long-term work is unavoidable, grantees agree with ICH's recommendation to commit to funding partners for multiple grant cycles and to clearly state conditions for future funding. This security supports trust and relationship-building between funders and grantees. Grantees also appreciate "bridge grants," which cover funding between two grant periods, if staff would otherwise have to be laid off. This "bridge grant" was helpful between Voices 1.0 and Voices 2.0. When funding will not be continued, exit grants are helpful for organizations, as they have to figure out additional funding or staff transitions.

Recommendation #3: Offer grounded, relational, and right-sized TA

EAC members agree with ICH's recommendation and discussed the importance of offering appropriate TA. Ensuring that either TA provider skill sets are well-matched to grantee needs, or providers know how to bring in needed expertise, is an important aspect of TA. Grantees shared that the relationships with their TA providers are pivotal to the work that they do. They see the TA providers as the intermediary between the grantees and potential supports, and if the TA provider knowledge is not aligned with the methods or strategies used by the grantees, it can be detrimental to the work.

It is beneficial when TA providers are well informed about the topic and the specific context of the area where a project is taking place. Grantees also shared that it is helpful when TA providers are from the same state or region as the projects they are providing TA for. However, even when a TA provider is educated on different project-related components, it is helpful when they ***"lead from a place of exploration and curiosity, as opposed to coming in thinking they have all of the information."*** This could look like TA providers being open to learning and understanding what the grantees know.

Recommendation #4: Separate the work of TA provision from grant administration

EAC members had mixed feedback on ICH's recommendation. Some members spoke about ways to better integrate TA provision with fund administration. They shared that it is helpful when TA providers have knowledge about supplemental funding so that they can help answer questions that arise during the application process. When TA providers have knowledge of the supplemental granting process, they can support the grantees in writing proposals that are competitive and have a greater likelihood of being accepted. One grantee compared TA knowledge of supplemental funding

to a college teaching assistant knowing the test material and tutoring students on how to get a good grade on a test.

However, the grantees agreed that it would have been more beneficial to their project if they were to have received all supplemental funding upfront, instead of having to reapply for it at a later date. Distributing all of the grant funding, without requiring the work and the uncertainty of additional applications, is a demonstration of trust between the TA organizations and the grantees.[2]

Recommendation #5: Increase funding to targeted grantees

EAC members shared that increased funding to the grantees would make an impact in the work they are able to do and agreed overall with ICH's recommendation to increase funding to targeted grantees. Funders should focus on making thoughtful funding decisions, like funding organizations in geographical and topical areas of work that would make the most impact. Grantees discussed funding organizations in climates that are severely oppressive and where funding is often scarce. Grantees gave the example of the importance of funding a maternal health organization in Mississippi, where there are few maternal health services, as opposed to a maternal health organization in a state where more comprehensive maternal health care is already established.[3]

Grantees discussed the implications of fewer organizations receiving funding and came to the conclusion that organizations would need to be supportive of other organizations working on the same issues, and competing for limited funding. By requiring lead grantees to subgrant funding to other organizations doing similar work, collaboration between organizations could increase. This would allow smaller organizations who do not have the capacity to apply for large grants to receive funding towards the common goal, as well. One grantee shared that they would like to see a ***"lift as we climb"*** approach towards supporting other organizations in a competitive funding environment.

[2] We recognize that this contradicts the recommendations above about the rapid response funds being helpful to respond to rapidly shifting policy environments. We think this points to there being both pros and cons to offering additional funds in the middle of the grant – and we suspect that communication around these opportunities, plus the burden placed on grantees, is key to how much these additional funds build versus break down trust.

[3] None of the EAC members were from Mississippi, they just used this state as an example.