TENTH EDITION

11 Trends in Philanthropy for 2026

Dorothy A. Johnson Center
FOR PHILANTHROPY

Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy

The Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University was established in 1992 with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Our mission is to be a global leader in helping individuals and organizations understand, strengthen, and advance philanthropy, resulting in a smart, adaptive sector that helps create strong, inclusive communities.

We put research to work with and for professionals across the country and the world. Through professional education offerings; research, evaluation, and strategic services; and bold thinking to advance the field, we support a philanthropic ecosystem defined by effective philanthropy, strong nonprofits, and informed community change.

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11 TRENDS IN PHILANTHROPY FOR **2026**

Looking Back to Look Ahead: A Decade of Trends in Philanthropy

This year marks a milestone for the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (Johnson Center) at Grand Valley State University: the tenth edition of our *11 Trends in Philanthropy* report. What began in 2017 as a modest supplement to our annual report has grown into a widely read and discussed publication, reaching more than 100,000 readers each year.

Each year's report is really a compilation of 11 separate articles, each individually researched, written, and reviewed by teams of authors from the Johnson Center. Typically, these articles explore new shifts or evolving movements across the field of philanthropy.

For this tenth edition, however, we have taken a different approach. Rather than identifying a wholly new set of emerging trends, we have turned our attention backward to reflect on the themes that have shaped our sector over the past ten years, and to name both enduring shifts and new developments.

This reflective lens is not just a nod to our anniversary. It is also an acknowledgment of the moment we find ourselves in — a moment of hyper disruption, that combines both great anxiety about where we are headed and great possibility for what could come next. Our future feels more uncertain than ever, but the opportunity to create and scale life-changing innovations for our communities feels present, as well.

One of the biggest challenges philanthropy faces as it seeks to plan for and build that future is that our day-to-day landscape is shifting so rapidly and in so many directions. As executive orders, legal contests, and legislative debates play out, we do not have a clear picture of how much federal funding has been rescinded or withheld from nonprofits and communities. We do not know how many nonprofits have closed or will close their doors, how many staff have lost their jobs, or how many communities have lost access to critical services. We do not know how many donors have paused or limited their giving out of economic anxiety, or how many foundations have shifted strategies in response to the moment. The data are incomplete, the timelines are unclear, and the reality on the ground keeps changing.

In this environment, our best path forward is not to predict or assert, but to reflect. To remember, as Shakespeare reminds us, that "what's past is prologue" — no matter how different the world may look today, we are still carrying with us everything that came before.

So, as a field, we encourage you to look back with us at what we have learned in order to carry those lessons forward. To ask better questions. To celebrate our strengths while acknowledging the complexity of the systems we are trying to impact. To weave together research, data, stories, and conversations in an effort to make sense of the world we are living in. And, as this *11 Trends* project has always aimed to do, to offer ideas — not answers — about what might come next.

Thank you for joining us.

Acknowledgments

As we reflect on the past ten years of *11 Trends in Philanthropy,* we are struck not only by how much the field has changed, but by how much this project has grown.

What began as a U.S.-focused publication has become a global conversation. To the colleagues in seven countries and the Caribbean who have written their own responses to our *Trends* reports, offering insights from their own philanthropic ecosystems and expanding the dialogue across borders, we are truly grateful. To see this project inspire cross-border conversations, collaborative research, and enduring professional connections has been one of its greatest gifts.

Stephanie Andrews Caropepe and Kyle Caldwell originated the *11 Trends in Philanthropy* concept at the Johnson Center in 2016. Since then, more than 50 Johnson Center staff and graduate assistants have taken part in this work — as writers, reviewers, readers, and critics.

To all of you: your engagement has made this project stronger, more relevant, and more impactful. You have helped countless practitioners around the world see the field more clearly, and you have challenged us all to think more deeply.

Special thanks go to Karen Hoekstra for consistently making this project beautiful and accessible online and in print, to Pat Robinson for her extraordinary attention to detail in our research and editorial style, to Kallie Bauer and Joe VanDoornik for transformative project management, and to Tory Martin for helming *Trends* every year since 2017.

As we mark this tenth edition, we do so with humility and hope. Humility in the face of uncertainty. Hope in the power of reflection, collaboration, and shared inquiry. And a renewed commitment to asking the questions that matter — even when the answers are still over the horizon.

Thank you for being part of this work.

Beyond Good Intentions, Nonprofits Must Show Good Work to Build Trust

By Emily Doebler, M.P.P., Jennifer Lawson, Ph.D., and Brenda Falk, M.H.R.

In *11 Trends in Philanthropy for 2021,* Martin (2021) highlighted that although nonprofits are trusted more than other institutions, their position is tenuous. She shared three ways to buoy public opinion: increase transparency, elevate constituent engagement, and maintain a commitment to equity. While these recommendations have typically been a surefire way to establish trust with communities, research suggests there is much more to the equation.

Nonprofits fulfill an essential role in society. Recognized as "society's safety net," they often provide vital social services when the government falls short (Lynch, 2025). Even so, public trust in nonprofits is showing signs of wear (Moore, 2025).

Trust in the Nonprofit Sector Is in Question

Independent Sector and Edelman Data Intelligence (2025) found that in the years 2024 and 2025, only "57% of Americans report[ed] high trust" in nonprofits. While 57% is a majority, it is hardly a landslide (p. 7).

In March 2025, the Johnson Center deployed a national survey to revisit public trust in institutions. The research is intentionally in conversation with data from both Indiana University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (2022) and the Council on Foundations (COF) (2023). From when those surveys were published to when the March survey was conducted, trust in nonprofits appears to have generally grown — from 39% in 2022, to 43% in 2023, to 42% in 2025.

However, when the survey was fielded again in September 2025, the results revealed that most nonprofits had experienced a decline in trust over the course of six months. By September, only 35% of respondents reported high trust in nonprofits (Doebler & Williams, 2025).

The Measurement Challenge: Why Demonstrating Competence Is So Hard

Notably, Edelman's Trust Barometer (2025, pg. 24), a study separate from but related to Edelman's work with Independent Sector, measures trust using two dimensions: trust in a sector to generally act ethically, and trust in a sector to generally act competently. Nonprofits are on par with businesses and outperform the government and media in the U.S. on ethical conduct. But when competence is the question, nonprofits' performance is middling and still in the red (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2025, pg. 17). Business is the only sector that U.S. respondents trust to act both ethically and competently.

Part of the problem is how competence is perceived; the nonprofit sector's impact is tough to measure and communicate in ways that matter to the public (Searle, 2025). How do you quantify the value of a child who does not end up in the juvenile justice system because of an after-school program? Or measure the ripple effects of a community health initiative that prevents chronic illness years down the road? These outcomes are real and valuable but resist simple measurement.

This creates a tension between storytelling and data. Whether for reporting purposes or internal tracking, many nonprofits report impact by "counting heads and dollars — sharing the number of events held, people served, volunteers engaged, dollars raised or other similar metrics" (Crowder & D'Avanza, n.d.). Although these numerical details are undoubtedly essential to track, they should not be decoupled from the many powerful individual stories behind them.

Many nonprofits feel stuck between these two approaches, unsure of which strategy will truly build trust: collecting the numbers or sharing the stories. The question is further complicated by the demands of funders. Some funders want rigorous evaluation and detailed metrics, while other donors respond more to compelling stories (fundsforNGOs, 2025). The result is that many organizations are simultaneously over-reporting to some audiences and under-communicating to others, exhausting themselves in the process without necessarily building public confidence in their competence.

Moreover, the social problems nonprofits tackle are often intergenerational, intersectional, and influenced by factors far beyond any single organization's control (fundsforNGOs, 2025). A program for unhoused folks can provide shelter and job training, for instance, but it cannot independently also address the lack of affordable housing policy in a region or decades-long wage stagnation. This complexity makes it difficult for nonprofits to demonstrate clear cause-and-effect relationships between their work and real-life change.

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The Trust Ecosystem: It's Not Just About Nonprofits

The reality is that trust in the sector exists within a broader ecosystem that either supports or diminishes confidence in the sector's work.

Consider the role of media coverage. Local news outlets, which historically cover nonprofit achievements and community events, have drastically decreased in recent years (Abernathy, 2022; Hastings, 2024). When nonprofits do make the headlines, it is often in the context of scandal or controversy rather than innovation or impact. The result is a skewed impression of the sector: failures make headlines, while the organizations serving their communities with care and competence rarely do.

Funders, too, play a complicated role in the trust equation. While they rightfully want accountability for their investments, some reporting requirements work against trust-building. When nonprofits spend significant staff time producing detailed reports for multiple funders, each with different formats, metrics, and timelines, those hours are not being spent on direct service delivery or community engagement. The public sees organizations stretched thin and wonders about efficiency and know-how, not realizing how the administrative burdens built into our sector can drain time and resources (Howard, 2025). Restricted funding that prohibits investment in infrastructure, technology, or communications capacity further hampers nonprofits' ability to demonstrate and share their impact effectively.

Efforts to Shift the Public Narrative

In 2025, many organizations worked to address the challenges of public storytelling. The National Council of Nonprofits (2025) and COF (2025a, 2025b) both launched public awareness campaigns — Nonprofits Get it Done and Giving is Here for Good campaigns, respectively — providing flexible messaging, graphics, and guidance for their networks to adopt and adapt. The Council on Foundations (2025) and the University of Florida's Center on Public Interest Communications launched the learning series Better Stories, Better Language over the summer to help communications staff leverage recent research on bridging language. And *The Chronicle of Philanthropy's* new monthly opinion column, *Watch Your Language,* is intended "to help nonprofit professionals reduce jargon and communicate in ways that build trust and understanding of the sector."

Funders are also seeing the need to help nonprofits invest in their storytelling. Vanguard Charitable's Philanthropic Impact Fund (2025) specifically offered grants under the "Shifting the Narrative around the Nonprofit Sector" (Watkins, 2025).

Questions Remain

The more organizations are equipped to take on the work of accessible storytelling around both ethics and competence, the more benefits the whole sector is likely to see. For nonprofits, success relies on having your community's trust — without it, organizations cannot serve effectively or influence social change (Purdy, 2024).

Still, fundamental questions remain that the sector must grapple with collectively:

- How do we define "competence" in ways that resonate with the public, without oversimplifying complex social change efforts?
- How can funders balance accountability with giving nonprofits needed flexibility?
- How might we better leverage local trust to build broader confidence in the nonprofit sector?

In a time of social and political turbulence, answering these questions is not optional, it is essential. The sector's ability to serve communities effectively depends on the public's belief that nonprofits are not just well-intentioned but genuinely capable of creating the change our society needs.

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Weighing the Power of AI Against Its Impact

By Kallie Bauer, M.B.A., and Emily Brenner, M.P.A.

In the three years since generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools became widely available to the public, we have seen an extraordinary rate of growth and change.

Alongside technological advancements, the market growth of AI has accelerated. In September 2024, Bain & Company estimated that the total market share for AI-related hardware and software would grow between 40% and 50% annually, reaching between $780 billion and $990 billion in 2027 (Crawford, Wang & Singh, 2024).

Gallup reported in 2025 that regular AI use is growing rapidly among U.S. workers. In the past two years, the percentage of U.S. employees who have used AI in their roles a few times a year or more has doubled from 21% to 40% (Pendell, 2025).

AI's upward surge is visible in the nonprofit sector, as well. A 2024 report on nonprofits' adoption of GenAI tools cited that 58% of global survey respondents indicated their organizations used GenAI in day-to-day operations. The top use cases included marketing and content creation, fundraising, and program management (Google.org, 2024).

The Johnson Center discussed the AI revolution and its potential implications for philanthropy in 2024, stating, "With cost no longer the primary barrier to entry, nonprofits and foundations who invest the necessary time and capacity into exploring these new tools and commit to using them responsibly will benefit the most from this emerging technology" (Bauer, 2024). This statement still rings true today. While it remains difficult to predict the future implications of AI, philanthropy can and should remain committed to its responsible use.

Limitations of AI

The responsible use of AI cannot be undertaken without first understanding its current limitations. In 2023, *Scientific American* released an article explaining how personal information is being used to train GenAI models. Author Lauren Leffer described how developers turn to publicly available information on the internet to build large, GenAI models. Data that are viewable in a search engine, such as personal blogs, LinkedIn profiles, images, videos, and personal data from social media sites are incorporated in training models for AI tools. AI companies, such as OpenAI, also fine-tune their models based on user interactions with their chatbots (Leffer, 2023).

Consequently, GenAI results are only as valuable or reliable as the data used to train them. Inaccurate data, personal and societal biases, and private information all play a role in contributing to the results GenAI produces. Here are two examples of related risks:

- In 2023, Liang et al. demonstrated in an article for *Patterns* that ChatGPT and similar generative language models based on GPT frequently misclassify non-native English writing as AI generated.

- In 2024, the American Bar Association (ABA) cited iTutorGroup as an example of AI hiring discrimination. iTutorGroup's AI program automatically rejected female applicants age 55 or older and male applicants age 60 or older, resulting in age and gender discrimination during the hiring process (Kempe, 2024).

Institutions are trying to provide guidance for AI users, in the hope that transparency and caution will become working norms when people interact with this technology.

- The American Psychological Association (APA) emphasizes the importance of being transparent about AI's use in writing and research, stating, "The recommended citation approach is to include the precise text of the prompt, and then provide a reference that incorporates the author of the AI tool, the date of the version used, and other details." The APA further cautions that AI detection software is available but is also unreliable (Huff, 2024).
- IBM released an article explaining the privacy risks of AI, including risks related to the collection of sensitive data, collection of data without consent, the use of data without permission, and biases (Gomstyn & Jonker, n.d.).

As GenAI tools are used more in philanthropy, organizations must exercise caution and acknowledge the potential pitfalls in day-to-day operations.

Environmental and Community Impacts

Alongside addressing issues with data accuracy, biases, and privacy, it is important for organizations to consider the environmental impacts of AI. *Harvard Business Review* authors Ren and Wierman (2024) write that

> the training process for a single AI model, such as a large language model, can consume thousands of megawatt hours of electricity and emit hundreds of tons of carbon. This is roughly equivalent to the annual carbon emissions of hundreds of households in America. (para. 3)

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AI energy demand is predicted to increase by a multiple of 10 from 2024 to 2026 and will cause an increase in air and water pollution, production of solid wastes, and a potential increase in higher levels of ozone and particulate matter (Ren & Wierman, 2024, para. 4). Especially for funders focused on addressing the impacts of climate change and sustaining overall healthy ecosystems, in-office AI use may be directly working against the organization's mission. And, as Ren and Wierman state, "In many cases, adverse environmental impacts of AI disproportionately burden communities and regions that are particularly vulnerable to the resulting environmental harms" (para. 11). As office cultures shift to adopting AI tools, funders with explicit community and human services ties will need to be cognizant of this paradox.

Funders will also need to be aware of the potential impacts that investments in AI will have on grantee partners and nonprofit ecosystems. Sara Herschander, writing in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy,* states that, "only a tiny sliver of philanthropy today goes to such investments in tech governance, even as many major foundations encourage their grantees to experiment — if not outright embrace — new corporate A.I. tools" (Herschander, 2025).

Many funders and nonprofits are already working to respond. Humanity AI was created by a coalition of 10 different philanthropic organizations to "[make] sure people and communities beyond Silicon Valley have a stake in the future of artificial intelligence (AI)" (Omidyar Network, 2025). The coalition's funders committed to a $500 million, five-year investment in five priority areas related to AI — labor and economy, humanities, security, democracy, and education (Omidyar Network, 2025).

The Importance of AI Usage Policies

Thoughtful AI use policies can go a long way towards sorting out these challenges. Relevant policy elements could include allowable and unallowable use cases, acceptable and unacceptable AI tools, how to cite AI usage, how to work with vendors and partners that may also have AI policies in place, and how to disclose AI usage in contracting documents.

The Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG) found in its 2024 *State of Philanthropic Tech* survey that only 30% of foundations report having an AI policy in place (TAG, 2024). TAG offers a helpful framework on responsible AI adoption that includes ethical considerations, organizational considerations, and technical considerations (2023).

The MacArthur Foundation also posted its AI use policy, stating, "The Foundation wishes to harness and responsibly use AI tools to improve creativity, efficiency, and productivity in furtherance of our mission while recognizing its limitations" (MacArthur Foundation, n.d.).

As we look into the future, philanthropic organizations that have policies in place will be in a better position to harness opportunities with AI and prevent irresponsible use. Further, as Rasheeda Childress writes in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy,* "it's crucial to start with organizational values; focus on key concerns like privacy, bias, and transparency; and remember that humans, not the technology, should be top of mind in all the work" (Childress, 2025).

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Public and Nonprofit Media are Facing Existential Threats

By Trish Abalo and Emily Doebler, M.P.P.

Threats to journalism in the U.S. are clear and present. The field is grappling with declining public trust, long-standing financial instability, and continued digital disruption, all while disinformation makes reliable news more important than ever.

Now, the public media system — the hundreds of radio and television broadcasting stations that were supported by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) along with institutional and individual giving — is working to stabilize. As challenges and competition for funding intensify in the wake of CPB's closure (Reuters, 2025), nonprofit news organizations (an ecosystem distinct from, though similar to, public media) are emerging as an anchor: average revenue has increased even as the number of new start-ups has declined, suggesting the field is maturing, according to the Institute for Nonprofit News (2025). Moving forward, philanthropic funding and nonprofit news models will be vital to journalism's survival, especially in the movement to sustain public media.

High Trust, High Turnover

The growth in the nonprofit news sector is particularly significant given nonprofit news' strong association with local journalism, which maintains considerably higher public trust than national outlets. A Pew Research Center survey polled Americans on their trust in news, with the results showing that local news maintains relatively high public trust: 70% of Americans trust local news organizations, compared to just 56% for national news (Eddy & Shearer, 2025).

However, this expansion is happening within a broader ecosystem in crisis — one that makes it difficult for news organizations to survive, as Martin (2019, 2023) tracked in prior *Trends* reports. Medill Local News Initiative calculated that more than 130 newspapers closed in 2025, while noting approximately 40% of all local U.S. newspapers have ceased publication over the past two decades (Metzger, 2025). Metzger (2025) also noted that while philanthropy has allocated $1.1 billion in journalistic grants over the past five years, this funding remains highly concentrated, reaching fewer than 1,000 out of 8,000 local news outlets nationwide, with most grants directed towards urban areas.

Public Media in Crisis

Especially endangered in this crisis is public media, which now faces an existential threat. In July 2025, Congress defunded CPB, narrowly voting to rescind $1.1 billion allocated for fiscal years 2026 and 2027. The decision ultimately forced CPB to close its doors entirely (Reuters, 2025).

To understand the impact of the rescinded funds, it helps to understand how federal funding flowed through the system. CPB served as an intermediary: it received federal appropriations and distributed them to the public media ecosystem. Seventy percent of CPB funding in FY25 went directly to local NPR and PBS member stations (Beroza, 2025). The remaining CPB funds supported national organizations: NPR received 1-2% of its budget from CPB, while PBS received 15% (Folkenflik & Langfitt, 2025).

Public media stations are fundamentally part of the broader nonprofit news field. Like other nonprofit news organizations, they operate under 501(c)(3) status and share the same mission: providing community-centered, mission-driven journalism. They are mandated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to provide non-commercial educational content. This moment is significant because defunding does not just affect public broadcasting but also threatens a major portion of the nonprofit news infrastructure that communities depend on.

The impacts are already visible. At the national level, NPR has announced $5 million in budget cuts, while PBS has cut 15% of its workforce. NPR is waiving programming fees for its network of member stations, an effort to provide relief that simultaneously eliminates a revenue stream representing a third of NPR's own budget (Folkenflik & Langfitt, 2025). Local stations face even steeper challenges. Many lost a third or more of their operating budgets overnight (Kim & Epps, 2025). Media Impact Funders has deemed the federal cuts a "critical moment" for funders to understand their role in supporting community news (Sachdev, 2025).

Meeting the Moment

Deepening Funder Collaborations and Commitments

Closing these funding gaps has become an urgent priority for philanthropy, especially for stations serving rural areas and tribal communities (Bell & Starks, 2025). The Alliance for Rural Public Media (2022) highlighted that community stations are often the only source of local news and emergency information for

> *[C]ommunity stations are often the only source of local news and emergency information for [rural and tribal] communities, underscoring the harm of cutting off access to these stations.*

these communities, underscoring the harm of cutting off access to these stations. Recent moves include:

- The Public Media Bridge Fund, the largest recent coordinated philanthropic response to public media attacks, aims to raise $100 million over two years, enough to support 115 of the most vulnerable stations (MacArthur Foundation, 2025).
- The Knight Foundation made $10 million available for direct support to public media organizations (Fuller, 2025).
- MacArthur Foundation awarded $1.25 million to the National Federation of Community Broadcasters, which supports 200 community radio stations serving two million people weekly (Fuller, 2025).

Emergency Local Fundraising

Individual stations have launched emergency fundraising campaigns, rallying their communities to fill the gaps left by federal cuts. GBH, the largest producer of content for PBS, announced a $225 million "Fund the Future" campaign for the greater Boston area, a major market response reflecting the station's scale and reach. Louisville Public Media experienced its largest 24-hour fundraising period to date, raising $400,000 in pledges, enough to cover the expected CPB losses for a single fiscal year (Falk, 2025).

Alaska represents a particularly urgent case. Over a quarter of all CPB funding went to the state's public media, which serves as a vital communication system for rural communities (Alaska Community Foundation, 2025). For example, KYUK in Bethel, Alaska, the oldest Indigenous-owned and operated bilingual radio station in the country, broadcasts three times a day in English and Yugtun, the Yup'ik language. One of their programs features community members calling in to report ice conditions on the Kuskokwim River, allowing locals to warn each other about unsafe travel conditions in real time (Rosenthal & Bradley, 2025). Public radio serves as a lifeline in these remote areas, providing not just news but emergency alerts (Kim & Epps, 2025).

Alaska stations and the Alaska Community Foundation coordinated a statewide response. The Voices Across Alaska Fund raised $3.5 million in its first two months from 80 donors, including individuals, corporations, and foundations. However, sustaining funding remains uncertain, especially given years of gubernatorial vetoes of state legislative funding for public radio (Samuels, 2025).

Advocacy and Legal Action

At the 2025 Grassroots Radio Conference, FCC Commissioner Anna Gomez criticized the Trump Administration for censorship, including threats of licensing revocation and costly investigations aimed at punishing critical news coverage (Loving, 2025). The nonprofit advocacy organization Free Press published an index analyzing how the 35 biggest American media conglomerates have responded to increasing pressure to curb reporting and commentary critical of the Trump Administration.

Additionally, dozens of college newspapers signed an amicus brief supporting a lawsuit against the Administration targeting international students for political speech in support of Palestine, with legal representation from the free speech advocacy nonprofit Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (Church & Srivasta, 2025). These efforts underscore the role nonprofit and scholastic media play alongside philanthropic funding in defending press freedom and free expression.

Investments in Long-Term Infrastructure

Convenings like the Lenfest Institute's News Philanthropy Summit and the Radically Rural summit are fostering collaboration and sustainability strategies (Jewell, 2025; Contant, 2025). Tracking tools like the Medill Local News Watch List (which identifies areas at risk of being news deserts) and Semipublic's job loss tracker are bringing needed light to the issues (Curley, 2025).

Looking to The Future

The coming year will test the mettle of both news outlets themselves and the communities, funders, and donors that support them. Many organizations face difficult decisions — staff layoffs, coverage and programming cuts, or closure (Brown, 2025; Johnson, 2025) — even as the field navigates long-standing tensions between financial sustainability, editorial independence, funding to scale, and making fair choices about how resources are distributed. The loss of federal funding does not just create a budget gap. It raises urgent questions about who controls and benefits from journalism, placing increasing pressure on philanthropy to help answer.

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Where the Government Steps Back, Business and Philanthropy Can Step Forward Together

By Emily Brenner, M.P.A., Tory Martin, M.A., and Anneliese Orr, with research contributions from Lesley Slavitt, Ph.D.

In the 2019 and 2021 *Trends* reports (Moody, 2019; Moody, 2021), the Johnson Center reflected on "blurring boundaries" between the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, examining the growth of hybrid organizations, crossover practices, and a social impact economy.

OpenAI's October 2025 transition from a nonprofit organization to a public benefit corporation, OpenAI Group PBC, is a notable example of how this trend continues today. The original nonprofit is now the OpenAI Foundation, with a 26% stake in OpenAI Group PBC. That stake is valued at $130 billion — a number that "eclipses the $86 billion held by the Gates Foundation, instantly making it one of the most well-funded charities in the world," as *Inside Philanthropy* notes (Scutari, 2025).

Yet, business and philanthropy remain distinct sectors. The middle path — running a profitable business and a social mission simultaneously — is not always smooth. In September 2025, Jerry Greenfield, the "Jerry" of Ben & Jerry's ice cream, resigned from the company he co-founded because, he said, the brand's social mission was being silenced by their parent company, Unilever. "It was always about more than just ice cream," Greenfield wrote in his public resignation letter (Greenfield, 2025); "it was a way to spread love and invite others into the fight for equity, justice and a better world."

Navigating the tension between business goals and social goals is a natural part of any partnership or crossover between these two spheres. However, with the federal government sweeping backwards from the role it has long played in funding the U.S. and global economies[1], both philanthropy and business have much at stake, and much to gain by working together.

New Partnerships for a New Economy

One of the biggest challenges the philanthropic sector now faces is the reality that many of our society's most urgent crises — homelessness, criminal justice reform, disaster response — do not have existing, proven market solutions.

[1] The U.S. federal government's expenditures in Fiscal Year 2025 amounted to $7.01 trillion (FiscalData.Treasury.gov, n.d.). Our nation's entire estimated gross domestic product) (GDP) in Fiscal Year 2025 was $30.62 trillion (International Monetary Fund, 2025).

Take journalism, for instance. The press has struggled for two decades to find a way to support itself through traditional capital mechanisms, and it has continuously come up short. With the 2025 erasure of $1.1 billion in Corporation for Public Broadcasting funding (Reuters, 2025), that is another $1.1 billion the industry is going to need to find somewhere in order to maintain operations. Philanthropy alone cannot fill that gap — not now, and not into the future. If this country wants a free press, it will need to come up with a new way to make it happen.

In the absence of government funding, and with need only rising, the business and philanthropy sectors will need to work together to find creative and innovative ways to sustain vital services. Those seeking solutions will need to think beyond funding alone to consider how other kinds of resources can be leveraged, resources such as the time and talents of students and retirees, the seeds from last year's garden, junk drawers full of usable school supplies, and the wealth of frameworks and guides that already exist.

Accomplishing something together is what brings us together, far more than dollars alone.

A Threat on the Horizon: Corporate Giving Under a New Tax Code

While there is reason for optimism, changes to the federal tax code signed into law in July 2025 could also make it much harder for philanthropy and business to move forward together as they are now.

Giving by corporations totaled $44.4 billion in 2024, up an inflation-adjusted 6% from 2023 (GivingUSA, 2025). According to GivingUSA, that number includes "cash and in-kind contributions made through corporate giving programs, as well as grants and gifts made by corporate foundations" (p.17) and accounts for 7% of charitable giving (p. 22).

However, that support could now be at risk. Prior to the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) in June 2025, for-profit companies were not allowed to take deductions for charitable

One of the biggest challenges the philanthropic sector now faces is the reality that many of our society's most urgent crises — homelessness, criminal justice reform, disaster response — do not have existing, proven market solutions.

contributions exceeding 10% of their taxable income. However, excess contributions could be carried forward over the following five years (Council on Foundations, 2025).

OBBBA introduced a new paradigm, including a 1% floor for corporate charitable deductions. This floor acts as a threshold that businesses must meet before receiving any tax benefits for their charitable giving. The impact of this change on nonprofits could be huge. The Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship estimates it may reduce corporate charitable giving by approximately $45 billion over the next 10 years, while simultaneously generating $16.6 billion in additional tax revenue for the federal government within the same window (Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, 2025).

Other estimates also paint a dire picture: the National Council of Nonprofits (NCN) estimates an $81 billion reduction in charitable giving over the next decade due to the 1% floor and other provisions in the new tax code. While NCN does estimate that OBBBA's universal charitable deduction will generate $74 billion in that time, that still leaves a gap of $7 billion in overall revenue loss for the sector (National Council of Nonprofits, 2025).

Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship states that, "The OBBBA's 1% floor represents a fundamental shift in how the United States approaches corporate charitable tax incentives

… The international evidence suggests this approach is unusual among developed nations and may further reduce social cohesion" (2025).

The bottom line is that funding for vital services that have traditionally come from both the government and business sectors is under threat, and in many cases already disappearing.

Sister Sectors

The potential for partnership is limitless, but how those partnerships will be formed and what they will look like is still unpredictable. Both nonprofits and corporations will likely have to cede some ground and perhaps reinvest in the art of compromise.

But necessity can be the mother of invention. Creativity and imagination are hallmarks of both the nonprofit and business sectors. Dedication to mission and purpose has always been core to our sector, and, in the past decade, we have seen an orientation towards public good adopted much more widely across the business sector as well (Business Roundtable, 2019). While the two sectors remain distinct, our mandate to build and sustain a society is shared. In the absence of a robust government partner, business and philanthropy will need each other more than ever.

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Innovation and Survival: The Charitable Sector is Looking for New Ways to Work

By Jeff Williams, Ed.D., M.B.A.

For many organizations, the inability to exist effectively in the current environment has forced a retreat to survival strategies for both financial and operational reasons. Government funding cuts have led to a third of U.S. nonprofit service providers losing funding in early 2025 (Tomasko et al., 2025). In response, organizations are not just merging for efficiency; they are questioning their very existence. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (Beasley, 2025, para.1) notes that 46% of more than 400 surveyed nonprofit leaders worry their organizations may have to merge or close as a result of these cuts.

While some contract, others reinvent themselves through experimentation, bifurcating into two distinct streams: how funding is organized, and how operations are structured.

From a Foundation or Donor Perspective

Donors are bypassing the traditional private foundation model in favor of vehicles that offer speed, privacy, and political flexibility. The rise of "philanthropy via LLCs" — championed by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI) and the Emerson Collective — allows funders to blend previously charitable giving with impact investing and political advocacy, untethered by the slow compliance and public disclosures required by a 501(c)(3).

Our previous *Trends* essays and reports have documented other shifts. There is a surge in collective giving and donor collaboratives (Loson-Ceballos & Layton, 2024) formalizing traditions of community generosity, while tech-enabled platforms like GoFundMe allow for hyper-local, direct-to-person giving that sidesteps traditional grantmaking institutions entirely. Within traditional grantmaking, the philosophy of "trust-based philanthropy" (Behrens & Martin, 2020) seeks to dismantle the rigid power dynamics between grantor and grantee. At the same time, new payment and processing vehicles, such as donor advised funds (Heist et al., 2025), continue to gain popularity. Other foundations are electing limited lifespans (Dale, 2025) instead of a traditional, perpetual horizon.

From an Operating Nonprofit Perspective

On the operational side, the 501(c)(3) is no longer the only option. Public Benefit Corporations (PBCs) (Hiller, 2013) and other low- or limited-profit structures allow entities to prioritize social mission alongside profit. We have also noted that fiscal sponsorship (Williams & Akaakar, 2024) is experiencing a renaissance, evolving from a temporary administrative stopgap into a permanent operational home. By housing projects within a larger entity that handles human resources, payroll, and compliance, social entrepreneurs can focus entirely on mission.

Other organizations are maintaining the same corporate structures but experimenting with new internal structures, such as our prior *Trends* essays on the co-CEO and other distributed leadership models (Sharp Eizinger & Martin, 2023; Sharp Eizinger, Peterson, & Martin, 2022), or dusting off the "linked" model of operating a charitable 501(c)(3) alongside a non-tax-deductible 501(c)(4). While operating multiple entities is not new, this structure is receiving fresh attention as a tool for defense. As noted by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (Gose, 2025), some leaders are exploring (c)(4)s not just for advocacy, but to shield assets and buy time if the federal government attempts to freeze assets or revoke tax-exempt status.

The Complex Case of OpenAI

Perhaps the most notable example of structural experimentation is OpenAI (n.d.). Initially founded in 2015 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the organization added a for-profit subsidiary in 2019 to raise the capital necessary for large-scale AI research. In late 2025, the organization recapitalized, converting its for-profit arm into a Public Benefit Corporation (OpenAI Group PBC) that remains under the ultimate control of the nonprofit OpenAI Foundation. However, this unique structure has faced significant governance challenges. The sudden firing and subsequent reinstatement of CEO Sam Altman in 2023 highlighted the tensions between a mission-focused nonprofit board and the interests of major investors. The resulting oversight agreements underscore the difficulty of maintaining independent governance in hybrid entities.

[T]hese experiments signal a departure from traditional, more hierarchical structures — and raise new questions.

Blurring Lines and New Questions

Collectively, these experiments signal a departure from traditional, more hierarchical structures — and raise new questions. There are growing concerns about mission drift, conflicts of fiduciary duty, and how to value charitable assets to ensure they remain dedicated to community needs. As the lines blur, so too does the concept of independent governance and of the boundary between charitable and business activities and entities we noted back in 2019 (Moody).

Resolving these tensions will require more than new legal structures. It will require robust public engagement, openness from the philanthropic sector, and a legal framework that accommodates creativity without sacrificing accountability. As trust in traditional institutions continues to erode, a fundamental question emerges: can philanthropy reinvent its structures without losing its soul?

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Community-Led Movements are Driving Climate Action

By Trish Abalo and Emily Doebler, M.P.P., with research contributions from Lesley Slavitt, Ph.D.

The Johnson Center first highlighted the issues of climate change and disaster philanthropy in our 2020 *Trends* report (Behrens & Martin). In 2023, Layton, Peterson, and Dietz examined how the sector was adjusting to the new reality of bigger, more frequent disasters by increasingly adopting community-rooted, community-first strategies and shifting focus toward resilience over mere response. Going into 2026, this momentum continues as nonprofits, grassroots movements, and the philanthropic funders that support them pursue sustained climate action.

Now, these organizations and partnerships are making changes and working to strengthen systems and activism amid enormous shifts in federal policy and funding.

Increasing Frequency and Intensity

According to the World Meteorological Organization (2025), 2024 was the warmest year on record and the first to exceed the 1.5°C threshold set by the Paris Agreement. This single-year breach underscores the escalating urgency of a global response, as the climate crisis intensifies and our population experiences its effects on community health, infrastructure, and ecosystems everywhere (Ripple et al., 2024).

Floods, hurricanes, and other natural disasters displaced 45.8 million people worldwide in 2024 — more than double the average of the past 15 years (International Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2025). And, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Centers for Environmental Information (2025), climate-related disasters in the U.S. alone that year accounted for $182.7 billion in damages.

At the same time, the most recent Giving USA report estimates that total charitable giving in 2024 amounted to $592.5 billion (p. 17). If philanthropy alone were tasked with disaster recovery, it would require nearly 31% of all U.S. giving.

Community Solutions are Leading the Way

The frequency of climate disasters is accelerating, and the loss of federal support is pressuring philanthropy to step up. Accordingly, grassroots groups are leading the way with community-led, systemic solutions (Gersigny, 2025; Greenberg et al., 2025). These groups adopt a holistic approach, weaving intersectionality and long-term thinking into their strategies. They consider every phase — preparation, prevention, and rebuilding — while addressing disparities across social and geographic lines and strive to balance immediate needs with the goal of building a just and thriving future.

For example, community members are developing local knowledge and solutions to drive systems change, working between local, state, and national mitigation strategies. The *Changing the Game* report highlights 15 cases of community-based strategies, including Acadia Center's advocacy work in Maine, which helped the state become the fastest adopter of heat pumps — a cleaner alternative to fossil fuel heating. These cases highlight measurable contributions to carbon mitigation and broader benefits for democracy, health, and equity.

The U.S. South and Appalachia

Community-led networks demonstrate how relationships enable equitable climate disaster response. CoThinkk, a North Carolina giving circle, quickly mobilized during Hurricane Helene thanks to decades of built trust with residents. CoThinkk's 2024 year-end newsletter highlighted the importance of understanding philanthropic investment across response, recovery, and rebuilding; elevating BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) leadership; and supporting deep relationships, such as cross-generational collaborations and collective decision-making.

Coordinating to ensure equitable response, funder networks and mutual aid efforts are using data for recovery and rebuilding. Hurricane Helene, which hit the U.S. South and Appalachian region in September 2024, resulted in $78.7 billion in economic losses (Ramirez, 2025). The Appalachia Funder Network launched the Appalachian Helene Impact Explorer tool in October 2025, a dashboard mapping gaps in equitable resource allocation across the region's many communities. Developed after promises from FEMA and other federal agencies fell through, the network has leveraged the tool to bolster its efforts to secure and release funds for long-term recovery (Ramirez, 2025).

Leveraging Indigenous Knowledge

Organizations are amplifying Indigenous knowledge, leadership, and sovereignty as climate solutions. Indigenous communities are not just holders of traditional knowledge — they are on the frontlines of climate advocacy, experiencing some of the most severe impacts and spearheading systemic responses (Chiblow et al., 2025).

> ***If philanthropy alone were tasked with disaster recovery, it would require nearly 31% of all U.S. giving.***

At the Boston Museum of Science's Indigenous Knowledge and Climate Change: The Keys to Our Future series, leaders from the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), Mashpee Wampanoag, Shinnecock Nation, Gabrielino-Tongva Indian Tribe, and Klamath Tribes shared how Traditional Ecological Knowledge informs wildfire mitigation strategies, including cultural burning practices that restore ecosystems and reduce catastrophic fire risk (Huntington, 2025).

Similarly, in the Arctic, the Alaska Arctic Observatory and Knowledge Hub collaborate with Iñupiat observers to track sea ice loss, erosion, and wildlife shifts (Glenn, 2023). This data is crucial for tribal planning and food security while challenging colonially-rooted research norms. These examples demonstrate how Indigenous knowledge is indispensable for building climate justice efforts and driving effective solutions.

Funders have honored their commitments in this space in big ways. A $1.7 billion pledge made in 2021 to support Indigenous land tenure reached its goal with one year to spare. At COP30 in November 2025, the Forest Tenure Funders Group renewed the pledge, committing $1.8 billion by 2030. "Not that this commitment has been without its challenges," writes Michael Kavate for *Inside Philanthropy* (2025b). "The funders have struggled to get money directly into the hands of Indigenous peoples and local communities…with just 7.6% of funding in 2024 going directly rather than via intermediaries. The renewed pledge signatories promise to continue trying to increase that share.

Learning from Hurricane Katrina

Movement-building organizations are centering historical lessons that drive structural and cross-movement approaches. Twenty years after Hurricane Katrina, recovery remains incomplete, and it has become evident that disasters compound existing inequities, leaving marginalized communities behind. Project South, a Georgia-based nonprofit that coordinates regionally across the South and nationally, hosted the Katrina 20 People's Movement Assembly in August 2025 to connect these lessons to current climate efforts and address structural barriers (Project South, 2025).

Youth-Led Action

Centering their futures and long-term stewardship, youth-led movements are establishing legal precedent for systemic climate protections. Young advocates, supported by Our Children's Trust — the only nonprofit public interest law firm of its kind — secured landmark rulings in *Held v. Montana* (2024a) and *Navahine v. Hawaii*. These rulings affirmed the constitutional right to a livable climate (2024b), setting precedent as federal protections erode.

The Funding Landscape is Heavily Concentrated

As mentioned above, philanthropy does not have the funds to step in whenever and wherever government retreats. This limited capacity is evident in disaster funding: although climate disasters have trended upward over the past decade, these efforts represented only 1.4% of all private and community foundation giving in 2022 (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2024).

This funding gap becomes even more acute at the grassroots level, where funders severely underfund grassroots groups working on climate and disaster action. The Just Returns Project found that among 50 key climate funders, only 3% of the total $2.7 billion reached grassroots organizations (Climate Justice Alliance, 2025).

In the first *Trends* article on philanthropy's relationship with climate change, published in 2020, Teri Behrens and Tory Martin identified four categories of work that broadly captured the field's activities:

1. Responding to disasters that are more frequent and more powerful as a result of climate change,
2. Incorporating the impacts of climate change into strategies for issues already being addressed,
3. Advancing innovative programs for mitigation and prevention, and
4. Continuing to lead on advocacy efforts for climate-focused policy change.

The 2026 analysis demonstrates that these categories are still accurate today. If anything, the work has become even more cross-cutting — as highlighted in the second category — and even more urgent as the federal infrastructure for supporting state, local, and network infrastructure has disappeared.

Giving is also highly concentrated. Just five funders (the Hewlett Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Freedom Together Foundation [formerly JPB Foundation], MacArthur Foundation, and Gates Foundation) provided 40% of funds, and a fifth of all funding went to just five organizations: the U.S. Energy Foundation, ClimateWorks Foundation, Sierra Club Foundation, Environmental Defense Fund, and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The majority of resources go to these larger mainstream organizations, market-based solutions, and technocratic fixes, leaving environmental and climate justice groups with a small fraction of the funding. Youth-led movements received less than 1% of grants from the largest climate funders from 2022 to

2024, despite their critical role in the legislative progress (Youth Climate Funding Study, 2025). Indigenous opposition to fossil fuel development has prevented emissions equivalent to one quarter of the annual U.S. and Canadian totals — yet Indigenous Peoples receive less than 1% of all U.S. philanthropic funding (Near, 2024).

Shifts on the Horizon

Pathways for change are increasingly available. In 2024, the Environmental Grantmakers Association awarded $805 million to advocacy, organizing, and movement building — its top-funded strategy (Toles O'Laughlin et al., 2024). Governed by grassroots leaders, the Fund for Frontline Power, Seventh Generation Fund, and the Environmental Justice Resourcing Collective offer models for sustaining momentum and investment (Near, 2024; Begaye & Battle, 2024; Kostishack & Seta, 2025).

Another example comes from the Swift Foundation, which is sunsetting by the end of 2028 to redistribute its endowment to Indigenous land and knowledge keepers, including seed-funding for the Indigenize Fund and tmixʷ Land Trust (Swift & Benally, 2025).

And even as billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates retreated from the climate advocacy space this year with the slashing of his Breakthrough Energy team (Gelles & Schleifer, 2025), others stepped forward at COP30 in Brazil — including a $300 million pledge from the collaborative Climate and Health Funders group and commitments from Bloomberg Philanthropies to address methane emissions (Kavate 2025b).

As the federal government eliminates its climate commitments, it is imperative that philanthropy does not overlook grassroots solutions. Whether philanthropy will correct its underinvestment in frontline organizations remains to be seen.

"We're talking about building something that would last," said Dr. Robert Bullard, considered by many to be the "father of environmental justice" (Funes, 2023). That is the heart of this work — lasting impact that is rooted in lived experience and led by those most affected.

Enormous Shifts in the Federal Landscape

U.S. federal policy is actively shifting on climate action, with an array of policy, funding, and regulatory changes. Noteworthy events from 2025 include:

On his first day in office, President Donald Trump ordered U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, hampering global efforts to mobilize $1.3 trillion in annual climate finance (Goldberg & McGlinchey, 2025).

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) froze or rescinded $29 billion in climate grants in 2025 (at the time of this writing), many of which were awarded to first-time grantee nonprofits. The cuts face ongoing legal battles, namely a class action lawsuit from a national coalition of nonprofits (Baddour, 2025). The withholding of funding, banning of words, and threat of loss of tax status are part of ongoing concerns about a "chilling effect" on philanthropy when doing climate work and addressing the disproportionate effects on vulnerable populations (Colman, 2025; Bryan et al., 2025; Kavate, 2025a).

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision on the Clean Water Act in March 2025 marked a significant rollback in regulatory oversight (U.S. EPA, 2025). Additionally, the EPA's 31-point plan to dismantle key regulations includes eliminating crucial data reporting on greenhouse gas emissions (Franklin, 2025).

Federal cuts to workforce, budgets, and research efforts, such as at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and NOAA, are expected to hinder climate and disaster preparedness and response (Ndugga et al., 2025).

These rollbacks emphasize the growing burden on philanthropy and the impacts to come on communities.

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Partners No More? Government and Philanthropy Navigate a Fractured Relationship

By Jill Roof, M.P.A., and Jeff Williams, Ed.D., M.B.A.

Over the years, the Johnson Center has chronicled the relationship between philanthropy and government and the enduring impact of politics and government funding on the independent sector. For years, we viewed government and philanthropy as partners: sometimes uneasy but aligned in purpose. Although the evolving nature of this relationship has been a recurring topic in our *Trends* reports, no one fully anticipated the level of disruption we saw in 2025, suggesting that these two longtime partners may be becoming adversaries.

The Future of the Johnson Amendment

In 2018, we explored how efforts to repeal the Johnson Amendment, which forbids 501(c)(3) nonprofits from endorsing or deriding any candidates for public office, could change the game for nonprofits (Caldwell & Downey). In that *Trends* essay, we assumed any change would come from legislative action. While that particular push failed, the voice of nonprofits in electoral politics remains unsettled. What the prior trend did not foresee was that, by 2024, the game would change again — this time via potential judicial action.

A lawsuit filed in federal court in Texas in August 2024 alleged that the nonpartisanship provision of the Johnson Amendment violates free speech. In the second half of 2025, the IRS and the two plaintiff churches agreed to a consent judgment that, if approved, would prevent enforcement of the Johnson Amendment against those two churches (Aprill, 2025). Regardless of the outcome, this ruling will not immediately change how the IRS has enforced the Johnson Amendment with other churches in the past (i.e., the IRS has not generally enforced the Amendment against political statements made from the pulpit in practice) (Hauser & Duniway, 2025). Still, an adverse ruling raises future uncertainty about the applicability of the neutrality envisioned by the Amendment to churches, nonprofits, and foundations toward politics.

Opinions about what comes next vary widely. According to the National Council of Nonprofits (2025) and many nonprofits themselves (including many houses of worship) (Leddy, 2025), repealing the Johnson Amendment for all nonprofits risks politicizing charitable nonprofits, houses of worship, and foundations, furthering national political divisions. A narrow carve-out exempting religious organizations from the amendment may be challenged as unconstitutional favoritism toward religious nonprofits over secular nonprofits, according to the Americans United for Separation of Church and State and other entities (Hauser & Duniway, 2025).

At the time of writing, the consent decree was still under consideration by the judge, and no final ruling has been issued. Therefore, nonprofits, foundations, and houses of worship alike — and their donors — are in a holding pattern, with major unanswered questions.

Government Funding in Philanthropy

Outside of electoral politics, tax policy and changes in government funding continue to impact nonprofit revenues in ways that are hard to predict and plan for, though we did try in *Trends* essays for both 2019 (Caldwell & Murray-Brown) and 2025 (Abalo & Williams).

But while those essays cautioned tax policy that could destabilize or harm nonprofits, the story in 2025 was how basic cash flow reliability, or lack thereof, could have similar effects. Via turbulent funding policies throughout the year and the October 2025 federal government shutdown (Wessel, 2025), nonprofits and communities across the nation learned that government funding instability due to funding delays and stop-work orders could be just as damaging as direct funding cuts.

An Urban Institute report (Tomasko et al., 2025) using data from the *National Survey of Nonprofit Trends and Impacts* found that one-third of nonprofits experienced disruptions of federal, state, or local government funding in 2025. Further, nonprofits that experienced a funding disruption were also more likely to report subsequent reductions to staff, programming, and hiring. Other nonprofits reported that these disruptions, even if they did not affect them directly, have altered the funding landscape, leading to increased fundraising challenges.

The Johnson Center further explored this trend of disrupted government funding in a blog post on the complex relationship between nonprofits and government revenue (Williams, 2025), finding that policy and funding changes reverberate throughout an economy dependent on the nonprofit sector for delivery of essential services. Recent funding cuts have directly eliminated funding for nonprofits, while government program cuts have increased the need for nonprofit services. The result has been not only significant workforce disruption for the sector, but new and urgent challenges for communities seeking food supplements, health care and housing supports, legal assistance, and more.

Johnson Center research (Williams, 2025) found that the nonprofit sector cannot replace the government's role in providing basic services or promoting the nation's general welfare. In 2024, federal expenditures totaled $6.75 trillion, while total assets held by private and community foundations amounted to only $1.466 trillion. As nonprofits are asked to do more with less, we need to be cognizant of the challenges, unclear boundaries, and unrealistic expectations that are created when philanthropy begins substituting for, or flat-out supplanting, the traditional roles of government, as noted by Caldwell (2018) and again by Martin (2021).

Due to the volatility of government programs, funding, and support of nonprofits, the nonprofit sector has learned that if "it is committed to systems change to improve outcomes for the most people, [it] will have to engage with the systems — and the systems makers —

> ***As nonprofits are asked to do more with less, we need to be cognizant of the challenges, unclear boundaries, and unrealistic expectations that are created when philanthropy begins substituting for, or flat-out supplanting, the traditional roles of government.***

themselves"(Martin, 2025) through advocacy and lobbying efforts.

A Glimmer of Hope

We are already seeing evidence of increasing engagement. In April 2025, the "Unite in Advance" campaign launched with a public sign-on statement to support philanthropy's freedom to give (Allen et al., 2025). Then, nearly six months later, leaders of more than 100 philanthropies banded together to issue an open letter defending their freedom of speech after the White House called out progressive foundations (Daniels, 2025b).

The relaunch of the Congressional Philanthropy Caucus by Rep. Danny Davis (D-IL) and Rep. Blake Moore (R-UT) in early December 2025 offers a bit of optimism. According to the group's announcement on Moore's website (2025), the group aims to help Members of Congress understand the sector's impact, and to promote

> policies that strengthen America's communities and the philanthropic and charitable sectors by supporting and expanding tax incentives for charitable giving, protecting the ability of foundations, individuals, and businesses to give back, and advancing public — private partnerships that empower and drive local impact.

According to reporting from *The Chronicle of Philanthropy,* Moore and Davis have already helped secure key wins for the sector this year, including advancing the universal charitable deduction that went into effect over the summer of 2025 and helping to kill proposed changes to foundation excise taxes (Daniels, 2025a). That report also notes the importance of direct advocacy from the United Philanthropy Forum in the reformation of the Caucus (para. 6), evidence that the sector is continuing to see the value of directly engaging with lawmakers.

Where We Are Now

Today, philanthropy continues to grapple with changes in government programs, services, funding, and even which words are deemed acceptable to use when describing the work. As Amir Pasic and Eugene R. Tempel wrote in a 2023 issue of Philanthropy Matters, we cannot ignore how vulnerable philanthropy is to changes in how the government behaves because "a vibrant independent sector and a just government that protects rights and liberties are like mirror images of each other" (para. 12).

Government and philanthropy remain intricately connected and dependent on each other. But the events of 2025 raise a fundamental question: "Are we entering an era where philanthropy must function despite government, rather than with it?"

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We Need Data and We Need Context. Both Are at Risk.

By Joe VanDoornik, M.S.A., PMP, and Kallie Bauer, M.B.A., with research contributions from Crisol Beliz and Jason Entingh

In 2021, the Johnson Center likened data to air — something that is everywhere, vital, and freely accessible (Williams, 2021). But just as air can be restricted or siphoned off, we are now learning that data can be, too.

Fewer federal datasets are publicly available to researchers today than even a year ago. Eroding trust in data and institutions has led to new obstacles in data collection and dissemination. In addition, artificial intelligence remains a source of both great power and great risk.

The future of the data landscape for philanthropy is now dependent upon the development of new avenues for data collection and community engagement, advocacy for maintaining public dataset availability, and an emphasis on responsibly generating data stories to inform decision-making.

The Disappearing National Data Ecosystem

Throughout 2025, U.S. federal government agencies have removed, attempted to remove, or discontinued publicly available datasets, including:

- **January:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) removed data on gender and sexuality, including the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) (Steenhuysen & Hesson, 2025). This information was restored on February 11 by court order (Stone, 2025).
- **February:** The American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics (COPAFS) announced that administration officials had canceled 169 contracts with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Those contracts had provided for the collection of data on topics such as post-secondary finances, teacher shortages, chronic absenteeism, and post-secondary education student outcome data (Levine, 2025).
- **May:** The National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI), a part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), retired the “Billion Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters” report (National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service, 2025).
- **September:** The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the termination of future Household Food Security Reports (USDA, 2025).

The importance of having access to federal datasets cannot be understated. These datasets allow foundations and nonprofits to identify needs, measure results, and make informed investments. As Leslie Boissiere, vice president of external affairs at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, stated, “When data is weakened, we’re all flying blind” (as cited in Stiffman, 2025, para. 9).

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In response, the philanthropic sector is organizing and funding data rescue efforts. For example, the Data Rescue Project (n.d.) launched in February 2025 as a network of data researchers, nonprofits, associations, and universities working to capture and preserve federal datasets before they potentially disappear. The David and Lucile Packard Foundation also proposed a framework for preserving and rebuilding public data systems (Sridharan Chibber, 2025). Additionally, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation committed $30 million to preserve public health and climate data and to support local, data-driven studies on health gaps. The foundation is partnering with city and regional dashboards to gather health data that federal reports will now miss (Plough, 2025).

Ongoing Efforts to Get Value From Data

Going into 2025, the sector’s main priorities related to data included increasing access and transparency; ensuring responsible practice in its collection, interpretation, and use; and supporting practitioners’ data fluency. These higher-order goals persist, even as strategies for achieving them naturally evolve and barriers arise.

Personal Data and Public Trust

There are many reasons why nonprofits and foundations might struggle to access data that could help them make more impactful decisions. Delays in data processing and publication at the Internal Revenue Service (Williams & Akaakar, 2024) and other government agencies, limited data capacity among practitioners, and resource constraints that limit nonprofits’ access to top-of-the-line technology all contribute to the challenge (Bauer, 2022).

The importance of having access to federal datasets cannot be understated. These datasets allow foundations and nonprofits to identify needs, measure results, and make informed investments.

However, a new factor is complicating nonprofits and foundations’ efforts to collect their own data — declining trust. A national survey fielded by the Johnson Center in 2025 (Doebler & Williams, 2026) found that many respondents did not feel confident about nonprofits’ ability to protect their personal data. More respondents (38%) reported that they were not very confident that local nonprofits, like food banks, could keep their information safe, compared to those who did feel confident (31%). Trust was even lower for grantmaking groups, like community foundations or United Ways.

Artificial Intelligence

This mistrust is compounded by the growing potential for biases within data analysis. Although artificial intelligence (AI) tools have revolutionized the way the sector can analyze and bring context to data, these tools should be used with caution. While analysis can be streamlined, biases and inaccuracies in AI-generated responses are possible and even endemic. Organizations must be responsible and transparent about AI usage to prevent further erosion of public trust in data. Now more than ever, organizations must work harder to build trust and ensure participants feel confident in how their input is used.

Equity Mapping and Community Context

In the 2020's *Trends* report, Bauer and Borashko noted the proliferation of equity mapping tools in communities across the country. These online resources aimed to help people better understand disparities and opportunities in their regions by converting mass quantities of data into navigable indicators and visualizations.

However, emphasizing context is crucial to building and maintaining trust in data. Dorman (2022) wrote:

> Exploring numbers in a vacuum can be enticing because statistics seem to provide tidy answers to understanding our complicated world. But we must acknowledge the context for this information and attempt to avoid the pitfalls of oversimplification (or worse). (para. 2)

While equity maps, inclusive of data dashboards, have been appealing to organizations, many fail to supplement data with community context. This allows the opportunity for data to be misinterpreted or even to be used maliciously. In response, many philanthropic organizations are now leaning into data storytelling. Data storytelling uses interactive data visualizations to support compelling narratives and add context to data.

For instance, PEAK Grantmaking released five data storytelling strategies to foster learning in 2024 (Marsack). The Nonprofit Leadership Center (Imbergamo, n.d.) also identified five essential elements to master data-driven storytelling. And DATA4Philanthropy is a growing peer-to-peer learning group that "promotes the responsible use of data and technology in new ways but also encourages the integration of lived experiences throughout the process" (DATA4Philanthropy, n.d.).

As the philanthropic sector looks to the future of data collection and analysis, it must not forget the importance of human connection. Organizations should continuously evaluate the ways data are collected, conveyed, and shared. In the current data landscape, engaging communities in data will be more powerful than before.

What's Next?

Although the philanthropic sector faces challenges navigating reduced access to data, it can also develop new frameworks for data strategies that ensure permanence, equity, and transparency.

Leaning into private partnerships and third-party data, for instance, can fill knowledge gaps and ensure continuation of services and allocation of resources for those in need (Axelrod et al., 2025). Matching qualitative data to quantitative information can support compelling narratives and add context to sometimes stark numbers (Kirvan et al., 2024). Setting guidelines and policies can safeguard communities from biases in analysis via AI. And of course, expanded and continued advocacy for keeping public data sources available will be critical. To thrive in this new data landscape, the sector must be adaptable, vigilant, and assume collective responsibility.

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Employee Well-Being at Risk During Times of Hyper Disruption

By Jill Roof, M.P.A., Anneliese Orr, and Mandy Sharp Eizinger, M.S.

Nonprofit organizations, which provide vital services to their communities, often face funding barriers and other challenges when attempting to invest in the well-being of their most valuable resource: their staff. Just last year, the Johnson Center identified the workforce crisis facing the nonprofit sector as a trend (Sharp Eizinger & Roof, 2025) because of the many threats to practitioners' mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Ultimately, these threats also put nonprofit programs and the people who rely on them at risk.

The nonprofit workforce provides critical services and programs to individuals and families in need; yet, in 2022, 22% of nonprofit employees lived in households unable to afford basic necessities, according to the 2024 report from Independent Sector and United for ALICE, *ALICE in the Nonprofit Workforce: A Study of Financial Hardship.* This crisis has been exacerbated by the current climate of policy changes and budget cuts that have limited the sector's ability to operate. As the Urban Institute reports (Tomasko, 2025), recent executive orders and federal funding cuts have created a state of perilous uncertainty for nonprofit practitioners.

Burnout Among Nonprofit Leaders and Staff

The Center for Effective Philanthropy's (CEP) *State of Nonprofits 2025* (Smith Arrillaga et al., 2025) report found that "Nonprofit leaders describe difficulty pursuing their missions effectively in an environment that presents multiple significant challenges to their ability to operate."

Not surprisingly, 86% of nonprofit leaders in CEP's study express some level of concern about their own burnout, and 89% say burnout is impacting their staff. Reporting for *The Chronicle of Philanthropy,* Stephanie Beasley (2025) highlights how the government shutdown in late 2025 added stress to an already overwhelmed sector and workforce, citing all the uncertainty as "a mental and emotional drag on people who just want to get out of bed in the morning and help their neighbors have a better life."

Survival: Programs and Lives Are at Stake

Nonprofit leaders know how vital employee well-being is. Since 2020, the Johnson Center has written four *Trends* essays noting the growing movement of funders and nonprofits working to embed wellness into the culture of organizations through co-leadership models, employee sabbaticals, and programs to set aside funds specifically for employee well-being improvements:

- Innovations in Talent Investment for Individuals, Organizations, and Communities (Sharp Eizinger et al., 2022)

- New Organizational Structure Models are Toppling the Staff Pyramid (Sharp Eizinger & Martin, 2023)
- With Crisis Comes Change: Black Women and the Glass Cliff (Laramore, 2024)
- The Nonprofit Workforce is in Crisis (Sharp Eizinger & Roof, 2025)

However, political divisions, policy changes that question the legitimacy of programs and language, and upheaval in funding sources during a time of increased service needs have created unpredictability for the sector and a new crisis for its people. In data shared by the Nonprofit Finance Fund (2025), 32% of respondents said that "providing for staff wellness" was a major or minor challenge for their organization.

Organizations are rapidly preparing for all possible situations. This year, the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits was one of many to share a list of "Resources to Navigate Uncertainty," including listing guides, courses, and other organizations that could support nonprofits with scenario planning, legal and HR compliance, financial modeling, board support, data and evaluation, and more (Dunford, 2025).

From January to June 2025, at least 23,000 nonprofit staff members were laid off (Straus et al., 2025), with no more recent numbers available. Sharing results from a survey conducted in late 2025, Aparna Rae (2025) also cited,

> systemic organizational instability driving widespread layoffs, an experience paradox where expertise becomes a barrier rather than an asset, accelerating brain drain as talented professionals exit the sector, broken hiring processes that dehumanize candidates, and devastating personal impacts that extend far beyond employment status (para. 4),

as some of the many dynamics driving the employment crisis inside the sector.

It is difficult to know what the full number is, and more difficult to know how many of those individuals may have found new employment, but the scale of the employment crisis is only likely to grow. Simultaneously, research from the Urban Institute released in October indicated that, among nationwide nonprofits this year,

It is difficult to know what the full number [of nonprofit staff experiencing layoffs] is, and more difficult to know how many of those individuals may have found new employment, but the scale of the employment crisis is only likely to grow.

- 21% reported losing at least some government funding,
- 27% reported experiencing a delay, pause, or freeze in government funding, and
- 6% reported receiving a stop-work order. (Tomasko et al., 2025)

Add in the fact that an estimated 211,000 federal employees left their jobs in 2025 — "through firings, forced relocations and a 'deferred resignation' program" (Partnership for Public Service) — and many of those are likely seeking roles within the social sector where they can continue to serve communities, and the picture of a workforce in turmoil gets even more overwhelming.

The impact of these cuts is not philosophical. Nonprofit organizations and philanthropic workplaces are focused on survival. Nonprofit jobs and livelihoods are at stake, and in many cases, where programs are closed or defunded, the lives of program participants are also at risk.

A study in the medical journal *The Lancet* (Medeiros Cavalcanti et al, 2025), for example, estimates that cuts to USAID this year could lead to 14 million deaths by 2030. As Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states, it is challenging for individuals to prioritize higher-level needs, such as psychological safety, belonging, and esteem — traits we associate with well-being — when they are struggling to meet the most basic needs of survival and security.

More Funders Understand the Importance of Employee Well-Being

The good news is that, going into 2025, an increasing number of funders were already beginning to understand and respond to this crisis. CEP's 2024 report, *How Foundations are Supporting Grantee Staff Well-Being,* found that one-half of foundation leaders say their foundation is engaging in practices to support the well-being of staff at the organizations they fund. The hard news is that recent political changes and decreases in government funding levels are impacting the overall funds available to nonprofits at a time when needs for services are growing, making prioritizing well-being more difficult. And for a sector grounded in "love for humanity" — the meaning of the word "philanthropy" itself — the crises playing out in communities everywhere take their own toll.

What Comes Next

The nonprofit sector is at a critical juncture, but the future, in many ways, feels far more uncertain than ever before. Organizations must not forget the lessons of previous crises: people and groups working on the frontlines of emergent situations need rest, care, and resources.

In the decade since we began writing *11 Trends in Philanthropy,* our sector has been through several globe-altering events. While it is unlikely we will ever return to a pre-pandemic operating mode, what comes next is still to be built. By centering workforce well-being, embracing structural innovation, and responding strategically to national trends, organizations can build a more resilient and effective future. The stakes are high, not just for staff, but for the communities and lives they exist to improve.

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Donors Face New Dangers Amid Increasing Political Violence and Attacks on Charitable Foundations

By Elizabeth J. Dale, Ph.D., and Brenda Falk, M.H.R.

There is a new kind of danger confronting the philanthropic sector.

Previous *Trends* essays have explored the dangers nonprofits and the public might face due to the potential influence of tainted money (Moody & Pratt, 2020) and anonymous donors (Martin & Layton, 2024) on philanthropic work. A separate but related article published by the Johnson Center (Moody, 2022), which continues to garner attention, cataloged the different kinds of harm philanthropy can unwittingly inflict.

Yet we could not have anticipated the rise of a new danger to donors themselves, and the chilling effect that recent acts of political violence and executive orders could have on a wary sector.

A National Tradition of Associational Life

A vibrant and independent civil society — the network of organizations, associations, and community groups that are adjacent to the public sphere — has been a hallmark of U.S. society dating back to the 18th century. Organizations such as congregations, local sports leagues, food pantries, immigrant aid groups, and hospitals, as well as civic and mutual aid clubs, formed the basis of what Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about in Democracy in America when he said, "Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations" (Tocqueville, 1838). Embedded in this idea is the value of plurality that undergirds the sector and our national credo.

While tactics to limit participation in civil society have been well documented and are increasing across the globe (Kleinfeld, 2024), donors continue to find and fund innovative ways to give. For example, donors are supporting public-private partnership efforts (Lam, 2023), a topic Martin explored in the 2021 *Trend,* "Philanthropy and Government Play Increasingly Overlapping Roles in the Public Sphere," and making transformational "big bet" donations (Buteau et al, 2023). Data from Giving USA's *2025 Annual Report* (Giving USA Foundation, 2025) show that giving actually grew by 3.3% (when adjusting for inflation) in 2024 and that individual giving increased, making up two-thirds of all giving.

As Pasic (2025) shared:

> We see the strength and resilience of charitable giving in a year like 2024, as growth in total giving returned. The role of the individual donor cannot be overstated. Individuals were responsible for the largest share of all donations made last year, and they continue to play a central role in our nation's philanthropic sector. (as cited in Giving USA Foundation, 2025, para. 5)

Is Giving Political?

Philanthropy, according to Robert Payton (1988), is "voluntary action for the public good." The IRS tax code differentiates between 501(c)(3)s, which are not allowed to engage directly in the politics of campaigns and elections, and 501(c)(4)s, which are. The public good supported by individuals' generosity is, arguably, meant to operate substantially outside the sphere of politics.

However, scholar Lucy Bernholz makes a different argument: "Giving is political in that it is a statement of values, something to build community around, and something that powers communities. Giving is also political because we write laws that privilege certain behaviors" (Bernholz, 2021, p. 25), such as charitable tax incentives that prioritize a small number of wealthy people who itemize their taxes. In this way, giving is neither wholly democratic nor completely independent of public systems and public policy.

Still, Bernholz defines a line between what ought to be politics and what ought to be protected First Amendment behavior. Issues of anonymity and transparency in philanthropy, she writes, stem from the same intention of fostering broad public trust. To summarize her argument, we want transparency in political donations so we know who influences the people making decisions on our behalf, but we allow charitable donors to maintain anonymity to protect associational life from interference.

[W]e want transparency in political donations so we know who influences the people making decisions on our behalf, but we allow charitable donors to maintain anonymity to protect associational life from interference.

The Chilling Effect on Civil Society

When the philanthropic coalition, Unite In Advance, comprised of nearly 200 foundations and funds, released a statement in September 2025, they were responding to an urgent shift in our public space:

> Organizations should not be attacked for carrying out their missions or expressing their values in support of the communities they serve. We reject attempts to exploit political violence to mischaracterize our good work or restrict our fundamental freedoms, like freedom of speech and the freedom to give. (para. 4)

A series of recent executive orders targeted many of philanthropy's most prominent issue areas, including racial and gender equity, climate change, and immigration, and organizations such as the Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations (National Council of Nonprofits, 2025). Additionally, we have seen a rise in political violence, including the assassination and attempted assassination of two state legislators in Minnesota (Sullivan et al., 2025) and that of activist Charlie Kirk (Schoenbaum et al., 2025). Taken together, these realities have led individual, family, and institutional donors to examine the political nature of giving, and whether it is even safe to give. As *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* reports, some organizations and executives are taking new measures to keep staff safe, including hiring online privacy experts, changing event logistics, and retaining security details (Gose, 2025).

Many of the wealthiest donors spent 2025 in a state of paralysis, overwhelmed by uncertainty and unsure where their giving could be most effective. Some donors may be looking for increased anonymity and privacy in giving (DiMento, 2025), so as not to draw attention to themselves. This can be especially true when donors are supporting issues that are under public scrutiny and attack. As a result, nonprofits are beseeching donors to reaffirm their commitments and support organizations on the front lines. Continuing to give, paying multi-year pledges early, giving unrestricted support, and offering other forms of giving — like technical assistance and mobilizing support from others — will all help nonprofits weather this current crisis and continue to deliver on their missions.

While we do not expect this giving context to change quickly, donors and nonprofits alike must continue to weigh risk, evaluate ethical considerations, and pursue values-based work. For donors and foundations, this level of scrutiny and political meddling may feel new, but giving has always been political. The question now is: will donors continue to give and resource the organizations that are responding to the urgent and real needs of our communities when it matters most?

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The Evolving Landscape of Philanthropy: Collective Practices, Digital Tools, and the Search for Connection

By Michael D. Layton, Ph.D., with research contributions from Crisol Beliz

In 2020, Moody and Martin observed: "Go to any philanthropy conference today and one of the keynote speakers is likely to be the author of a book about 'the elite charade of changing the world' (Giridharadas, 2019), 'why philanthropy is failing democracy' (Reich, 2018), or the need to 'decolonize' and 'heal' (Villanueva, 2018) a philanthropic sector gone awry." This still feels true today.

Conversely, and more hopefully, leaders like Dimple Abichandani are calling for a "new era of philanthropy" (2025) that reimagines how wealth can be mobilized for justice — an era grounded in shared power, transparency, and participation. This year, we trace how successive trends have captured the evolution of that vision, mapping an emerging landscape defined by collective practices, digital tools, and a search for connection that is reshaping philanthropy.

Collective Practices: Strength in Numbers

Early *Trends* reports from the Johnson Center captured the stirrings of this transformation. In the first edition, Jason Franklin described a worldwide movement in which small contributions could be aggregated into significant collective impact (2017a, 2017b). The following year, he explored how giving circles build both community and capacity by pooling resources and decision-making (Franklin, 2018).

By 2025, two essays confirmed that what began as a niche practice had become a durable feature of the philanthropic landscape (Layton; Couturier & Martin). In the wider field of philanthropy, this story is beautifully rendered by two untiring advocates for giving circles, Sara Lomelin's 2022 TED Talk, "Your Invitation to Disrupt Philanthropy," and Hali Lee's 2025 book, *The Big We: How Giving Circles Unlock Generosity, Strengthen Community, and Make Change.*

Research shows that collective giving challenges traditional hierarchies by dispersing decision-making power (Loson-Ceballos & Layton, 2024). It builds social capital as people deliberate and act together. As Layton argued in 2021, these spaces deepen belonging and civic engagement.

These dynamics are especially visible across communities of color, where collective traditions long predate current models. Two *Trends* essays in particular have sought to highlight this work — “Donors of Color Are Mobilizing for Their Communities” (Spicer, 2022) and “AAPI Communities Are Leading an Upswell in Philanthropy” (Abalo & Sharp Eizinger, 2024) — illustrating how culturally rooted philanthropy is expanding who participates and what gets resourced. Taken together, these developments suggest that collective philanthropy is now a mainstream force in the evolving landscape of generosity.

Digital Tools: Promise and Peril

Technology has fueled how new practices of generosity emerge. As The Generosity Commission (2024) noted, “the proliferation of different modes of giving” will likely be a permanent feature of the U.S. landscape.

Early optimism surrounded crowdfunding as a democratizing force. Yet, as nonprofits became increasingly dependent on corporate platforms, vulnerability followed. In the 2022 *Trends* report, Emily Brenner and Karen Hoekstra revealed how sudden algorithmic changes could disrupt outreach and fundraising.

Further, in 2024, Kallie Bauer explored how emerging AI tools are reshaping donor engagement and decision-making, potentially amplifying both reach and inequity. That same year, Brenner and Martin showed how social media personalities mobilize followers around causes at the intersection of authenticity and visibility. The related blog post, “TikTok: A New Frontier for Philanthropy?” (Hoekstra, 2024) examined short-form video’s potential to engage younger donors while raising questions about sustainability.

But digital participation can come at a cost: the infrastructure that enables it is often privately owned, driven by algorithms that prioritize engagement — and profit — over all else. This creates tension between philanthropy’s aspiration to create public good and social media’s tendency to amplify polarization and misinformation. As the Center for Humane Technology warned on its podcast (2023), such systems are designed to capture attention, not to cultivate connection. The paradox is that the very tools with the potential to foster generosity are too often powered by forces that provoke division and isolation.

> ***[C]ollective giving challenges traditional hierarchies by dispersing decision-making power. It builds social capital as people deliberate and act together.***

The Search for Connection: Reweaving the Social Fabric

A critical challenge of our time is the rise of social isolation, identified by the U.S. Surgeon General as a public-health crisis with profound consequences for individual and community well-being (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). At the same time, the Pew Research Center reports that only about one-third of Americans now say most people can be trusted — a steep decline from previous decades (Silver et al., 2025). This erosion of trust weakens both civic life and the everyday generosity that depends on strong social bonds.

Dietz (2024) demonstrates that social connectedness and associational life enhance volunteering and giving, indicating that rebuilding community ties is central to revitalizing philanthropy. However, younger generations are forming connections differently. Chatterjee and Ochieng (2025) find that many now build community digitally — through TikTok, YouTube, and GoFundMe — rather than through traditional civic associations. These digital spaces enable new forms of participation and mutual support, even as they raise questions about whether online networks can cultivate the depth of connections that Dietz identifies as essential for sustaining generosity.

The Generosity Commission (2024) documents a long-term decline in everyday giving but also identifies promising pathways for renewal. These include youth engagement and collective giving, where community foundations, as place-based philanthropic institutions, can serve as catalysts by embracing these practices. Together, these findings point to a common imperative: rebuilding connection and trust is both a social and a civic project.

The 2021 *Trend,* "The Nonprofit Sector Has a Unique Opportunity to Build Public Trust" (Martin), and the 2025 *Trend,* "The Movement to Fund Democracy Is Learning Important Lessons" (Dale), extend this insight, showing that restoring faith in democratic institutions requires reweaving the same connective tissue that binds communities to one another. Philanthropy's role, therefore, is not only to fund programs but to support the practices and infrastructure that make democracy itself more resilient.

The Open Question

These interconnected trends and more recent research document that philanthropy is shifting from institutional to participatory, from elite to networked. Digital tools can expand access; collective practices can redistribute power; and in our search for connection, we seek to reweave our social fabric.

The future of philanthropy will be shaped by Gen Z's evolving relationship to institutions — and by how they practice generosity across the five Ts: time, talent, treasure, testimony, and ties (Laramore, 2024). Even amid financial strain, Gen Z engages in philanthropy through digital platforms and peer networks while seeking community.

The question is not whether philanthropy is changing, but whether our institutions can evolve to embrace these new forms of generosity and to lift up the next generation as philanthropists. Much is riding on the answer.

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