



# Hawai'i Community Foundation Learning Example

This foundation learning example is part of the Approaches to Learning Amid Crises: Reflections from Philanthropy report, which showcases a series of learning examples aimed to support philanthropy in learning from doing while changes are still underway. In this report, we lift up examples of how foundations have reacted and, specifically, highlight what and how they are learning. We spoke with leaders from seven Canadian and American foundations to learn from their actions during the first several months of the 2020 crises related to COVID-19 and the widespread acknowledgement of systemic racism and racial inequity. We focused on what they did, how they did it, and what it means from the perspective of organizational learning and evaluation. This is one of those seven foundation learning examples.

At the heart of our inquiry, we were guided by these two questions:

- 1 How does a foundation's learning culture shape its capacity to act and adapt during a crisis?
- 2 How do relationships between funders and grantees shape their capacity to learn together?

We encourage you to reflect on these questions in your own context as you read through this case study.

Interviewees were asked to reflect on how their foundation responded during the first four months of the crises, beginning in March 2020 at the start of COVID-19 lockdowns in North America, and through the widespread protests in June 2020 after George Floyd's murder. Interviewees were asked to share what actions they took, and what informed their decision-making. Our conversation was semi-structured with the goal of telling instructive stories about how learning helped to shape action.

**This foundation learning example represents real-life experiences, but not necessarily best practices.**

It does not cover all aspects of the foundations' inner workings or thinking, but rather offers a point-in-time snapshot through the eyes of the interviewees. The issues explored here could be unpacked further and in much greater detail. As such, they may leave the reader with more questions than answers, which we consider a positive (albeit potentially frustrating) outcome.

# Hawai'i Community Foundation

## Interviewee:

Tom Kelly  
Vice President of  
Evaluation and Impact

## Date:

June 2020

## Background

The [Hawai'i Community Foundation \(HCF\)](#) is a public, statewide, charitable services and grantmaking organization supported by donor contributions for the benefit of Hawai'i's people. Community foundations serve a specific geographic area and are unique in that they are made up of a collection of charitable funds given by multiple donors. As a strategic grantmaker, HCF invests through initiatives and programs, has 70 staff across four islands and counties, and gives approximately US\$70 million annually from funds and assets of US\$770 million, about two-thirds donor-advised and one-third discretionary.

## Responding in times of crisis

The pandemic became the fourth crisis that HCF responded to in one year (lava, flooding, and wildfires are the others). The Foundation already had some mechanisms for rapid response and had done some reflective practice on ways to frame relief and recovery and improve grantmaking before the pandemic hit.

In mid-March 2020, HCF created the Hawai'i Resilience Fund, which organizes giving around a four-phased approach as illustrated below.



In Phase I of that framework, focused on Risk Reduction and Readiness and deployed within two weeks of the initial lockdown, HCF supported grantees that prioritized risk reduction, such as increasing screening and reducing the spread of COVID-19. HCF's question was: How can we help the people who are serving the most vulnerable on the front lines?

The Foundation chose to focus specifically on the systems outside health care where infection control experience and resources were absent and where the highest vulnerable populations (elderly, homeless, chronically ill) were served.

Although much attention was being paid among funders and the media to the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) in hospitals and clinics, HCF decided to fund the purchase of PPE for those serving vulnerable families in the state's behavioral health system (e.g., substance abuse programs, domestic violence and homeless shelters).



**We prioritized support for frontline behavioral health care workers over support to the hospitals that had access to other funding and resources, including already-established mechanisms for purchasing PPE.**

Frontline behavioral health workers tended to be social workers and paraprofessionals who were unfamiliar with accessing and using PPE and protective protocols. In addition, many of these workers and volunteers were at risk of infection themselves, with health challenges and vulnerabilities similar to the people they were serving (older volunteers, young pregnant women, those with chronic health conditions).

HCF also deployed Phase II (Rapid Relief and Response) funding simultaneously for emergency food and feeding programs and emergency financial assistance grants for rent and utilities. Phase III (Recovery and Stabilization) recently began with grants for data and planning economy recovery, addressing the education disruption of graduating seniors, and preserving childcare capacity for workers.

## Learning Insights

As a critical source of funding in Hawai'i, it was important for HCF to be able to make decisions and deploy resources quickly. This meant relying on what it had built already--its strategic focus, and its investments in networks as structures that have the potential to effect greater change than a single organization working on its own.

In recent years, HCF has developed a set of community goals that focus on equity and are shared across all grantmaking areas. HCF has been using the United Way's Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) framework to consider its equity focus. ALICE families and individuals are working but are unable to afford the basic necessities. In Hawai'i, nearly 48% of the population is considered ALICE or below. Because of the economic and unemployment impacts of COVID-19 and the dramatic reduction in tourism, HawaiiData.org now estimates that 59% of the state's population will be ALICE or below by the end of the year.

When the pandemic hit, many ideas were competing for limited funding (e.g., supporting entrepreneurs to make ventilators). But HCF chose to maintain its strategic focus on ALICE populations, those most likely to be at risk of COVID-19 infection, and, later, those most likely to be financially impacted by the economic shutdown.

“My normal evaluative frame would have been to come at the Foundation's COVID-19 response with a set of questions for the leadership and program teams to carefully consider. The Chief Impact and Strategy Officer felt there wasn't enough time for extensive deliberation and suggested making affirmative statements based on data being collected and what the Foundation already had been doing. For example, we said that HCF would keep to its equity goal and ALICE focus by ensuring that responses are targeted to these groups and communities.

HCF was then able to deploy resources widely and efficiently through a network of behavioral health providers with which the Foundation had an existing, authentic relationship.

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