



# Lyle S. Hallman 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.

# Lyle S. Hallman Foundation

## Interviewees:

Laura Manning  
Executive Director

Abbie Graftstein  
Manager of Grants and  
Community Investment

## Date:

July 2020

## Background

The [Lyle S. Hallman Foundation](#) is a Canadian public foundation based in Kitchener, Ontario, with over 17 years of philanthropic giving and a current staff of four. In 2019, it granted approximately CA\$8 million, mainly in the Waterloo Region, in support of several causes related to children's initiatives, children and youth capital, higher education, and health care.

## Responding in times of crisis

The Foundation felt that its ways of working were conducive to responding to the COVID-19 crisis and, in many respects, much of the groundwork for the types of actions it took had been laid in recent years.

Like many foundations, its response began by prioritizing the relationships it had with its existing grant recipients, offering reassurance, and loosening restrictions.

In addition, the Foundation made some smaller proactive grants on its own to organizations it knew were being most affected. These grants focused on things like food security, homelessness, and addiction treatment. The ability to offer unrestricted grants and be proactive was made easier in part because some of its funding pre-pandemic was already allocated as unrestricted.

Next, using its connections with other local funders, the Foundation worked with some of its peers to establish an emergency response fund.

“ We collaborated with six other local funders and pooled money for an emergency response fund administered through the United Way. We created one application form to save applicants time. We also had a collective decision-making process.

“ We focused on being as supportive as possible to the organizations with which we have existing strong relationships. It was about helping them get through this. The first thing we did was lift all restrictions. We said we would be flexible on reporting deadlines and that reports would not be tied to the flow of money.

As a funder that doesn't need to fundraise or have a lot of restrictions on who they can grant to, it was easier for them to help fill the gaps when good proposals came forward but where other funders had more specific parameters to respect.

Functionally, the process of working collaboratively with other funders also benefited from the place-based nature of the funders. Not only were there existing professional relationships, but in a community the size of Waterloo Region, there was the reality that people would bump into each other in the community and would know many of their grantees well.

“ We had three days to go through dozens of applications. After reviewing them individually, this meant meeting, ranking, and deciding on who was getting what. Before even getting to this point, we decided we needed to have some shared principles around ways of working together. It was difficult on an emotional level reading these applications, learning about the challenges happening on the ground, and then having to make decisions. The process itself went rather smoothly, and part of what helped is the relationships we have. We are place-based, we see each other, we get together for coffee, we call each other. Cross-pollination happens anyway.

Finally, as the weeks passed, the Foundation began to think about how it would approach the rest of the year.

“ Our Board asked us to figure out what we should do for the rest of 2020. In our normal cycle, this fall would have been our largest funding envelope, focused on children's programs. Given that we didn't know much about what would happen with schools or camps, we realized restricted program granting didn't make sense. Our Board decided to approve a framework that involved proactively offering a range of unrestricted grants in amounts that were roughly equivalent to the last payment they had received. No application would be required. The only thing we will ask for from this group is a low-burden report in about a year, and we'll figure out what that looks like down the road. This was a way for us to scale our investment with aligned organizations. There is no requirement to continue the previously funded program; this new money could be used for whatever they needed. The idea was to provide a bit of 'breathing room' in an unclear environment.

Altogether, the Foundation's emergency response added up to approximately CA\$6 million. Yet staff knew early on that this was going to be a long-term challenge and wanted to be thoughtful about how they moved forward while also being sensitive to the immediate needs.

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Personally, I had a lot of anxiety. Were we going to be challenged for doing things this way? Some are calling for foundations to dip into our endowments, recognizing that this is the rainy day. We haven't really done that yet. We are anticipating that the really ugly part is going to be next year. We wanted to be meaningfully supportive of organizations but recognize that we needed room to do more. We second-guessed that decision. There's so much pressure to move fast and big. In week two or three of COVID, I was already thinking about this issue of what does a year from now look like. As soon as there was a sense of the scope of the shutdown, it was clear that there will be more uncertainty when government support programs end. We know there will be a lag until the government supports run out, and that is when it will really hit the nonprofit sector.

To help inform their decision-making, they relied on a number of different data sources. Staff had one-on-one conversations with 33 organizations the Foundation had a history with to check in and learn about how they were faring and what they were dealing with.

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We thought the calls would last 30 minutes, but people wanted to talk. They [grantees] hadn't had anyone to talk to. The act of reaching out and caring and asking questions like 'How are you personally?' and 'How is your team doing?' was important. We were working based on trust. In a crisis, you sail the boat you built. The way we work normally positioned us really well.

As a staff team, the Foundation has also benefited from the support of trusted consultants, with whom they have had long relationships, to help them process and reflect.





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We've been meeting biweekly with consultants that we're close with. They let us step back and think about process, and they helped us to move forward incrementally. They've been our sounding board. This wasn't what we contracted them to do originally. They've been supporting us for several years on strategy. Part of their role has always involved coaching sessions with the team to allow us time to step away and reflect. We reallocated hours for COVID. They've helped us to make sense of information in different ways. Because we're not all together, we're not having those incidental conversations in the hallway, so we have to structure time for that. We've also moved to staff meetings twice a week. That is our way of keeping our intel up to speed and being able to build up for the next thing.

They also relied on other sources to help inform their thinking.

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We checked in with other local funders too. We also made use of information from sector intermediaries, such as the Ontario Nonprofit Network and Imagine Canada, which did surveys and research on the sector. We spoke with other funders from other parts of the province or country that either operate in the same space that we do or are peers in terms of a comparable size. We spoke with cities and the regional pandemic response group. And we attended a lot of webinars.



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## Learning Insights

One of the things that enabled the Foundation to move quickly and pursue the actions it took was that it already had established a culture and way of working that valued trust and communication. Things like unrestricted granting and trust-based philanthropy were not new concepts for them, and there was already a degree of comfort at both the staff and Board level toward sharing power and taking more risks with its granting and reporting requirements. They have always designed Board meetings and staff meetings to create space for learning.

Indeed, building relationships with grantees and other funders that are trust-based and focused on learning has always been a key point of emphasis. This meant that staff were comfortable picking up the phone and speaking with colleagues, whether to check in, share news, or plan for the next step. The place-based nature of the Foundation's work meant that the issues they were hearing about and talking about were very real to them because it was their community too.

The Foundation built in time to listen and to understand and respect the learning cultures of its partner organizations. This included hearing from a variety of different stakeholders, including grantees, intermediaries, and other funders. In addition, they made sure to build in time to reflect, ask bold questions, and make their thinking visible. They took a step back by using the skills and support of consultants with whom, once again, they had long-standing relationships.

Altogether, the Foundation was able to leverage its ability to be flexible and move quickly, whether that meant reaching out to other funders or removing grant restrictions and doing some proactive granting to support its grantees. It meant they could be thinking not only about how to respond in the immediate but also have the resources to begin to plan ahead. Throughout their work, both staff and Board have been on the same page, and there has been a shared understanding of the needs of the community and how the Foundation should respond.

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