



California Grantmakers Join Forces through a New Initiative

Launched in January 2017, Philanthropy California is a culmination of collaborative work by three regional associations: Northern California Grantmakers (NCG), San Diego Grantmakers (SDG) and Southern California Grantmakers (SCG).

Across the country there are 34 regional associations of grantmakers. Their mission is to strengthen philanthropic work on the giving side. Staff at foundations, corporate giving programs, and government funders have the option of becoming members of their regional grantmaker association to connect with other funders and educational resources. The associations provide workshops, trainings and facilitate funder collaborations.

Although the three California associations (based in San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego) occasionally collaborated and shared information with each other, they didn't do so strategically.

“Over the years, I would occasionally remember to think to myself, ‘I'm bringing this great speaker in on corporate philanthropy to San Diego — maybe I should call up my colleagues in San Francisco and Los Angeles and see if they want to have that speaker too,’” says Nancy Jamison, CEO of SDG. “We informally tried to share opportunities with each other, which were sort of last minute because we are so busy running our own organizations.”

In 2014, board members and the CEOs of each organization held a retreat and discussed applying for the Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative (NSI) grant. The NSI is a funding collaborative that provides grants to help organizations form strategic partnerships to be more sustainable. Once the grantmakers received funding, they hired the consulting firm, The Giving Practice, and formed a steering committee with representatives from each organization.

Karen Freeman, vice president of operations and government relations at SCG and CAO of Philanthropy California, says this opportunity, “was for us to be able to do an assessment of how the three regional associations in California could possibly work better together and create better services for all of our members.”

The result of the process was an initiative — Philanthropy California. Each organization still functions autonomously in their geographic region. But representatives from each organization meet regularly to collaborate in teams of communication, public policy, programs and operations.

They collaborate on a number of projects, but the organizations also have a large geographic distance between them. So, they have continued to hold retreats to meet in person and to understand one another's work cultures. They have also gone to forums and conferences, like Foundations on the Hill, in Washington D.C., and presented themselves as a unified front.

“If there is a bill coming up in Sacramento that is important to our philanthropic members, it's a much stronger advocacy stance to have joined arms with colleagues statewide through Philanthropy California and our 600 collective members,” says Jamison. “It really is a powerful platform. We can better support our members' appetites for systems change through Philanthropy California.”

Even though they have had some staff turnover, each regional association has grown to bring in a new mix of people to accommodate an increase in their membership. They also share staff to work across all three organizations. In addition to responsibilities at SCG, Freeman manages human resources and finance for the three regions. The SCG director of public policy and government relations manages statewide public policy and advocacy. The NCG director of public policy and communications handles Philanthropy California's and the three organization's communication work. The SCG manager of statewide technology works on all websites and databases. One dedicated staff person works with Philanthropy California, including coordination between the teams at each regional association.

“NSI money was really valuable to us, just to be able to hire the right consulting firm that then helped us answer the questions we needed to be where we are. We wouldn't have gotten as far as where we are without that seed money,” says Freeman.