

Lessons for foundations on rapid-response support at the front lines of democracy

By Shireen Zaman and Melissa Spatz

What makes rapid-response support effective? Zaman and Spatz share 5 tips from their work at Proteus Fund.

Even before the results of the 2016 election, it was clear to us, along with the organizations, communities and movements that we support, that we were operating under a new playbook.

In these tumultuous times, it's especially critical that grantmakers use rapid response effectively and strategically.

Over the last 2 years, the Piper Fund and the RISE Together Fund (formerly known as Security & Rights Collaborative) have experimented, stepped out of our comfort zones and found success in deploying rapid response funds. We learned 5 critical lessons along the way.

A HISTORY OF SUPPORTING THE FRONT LINES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

For 10 years, RISE Together has provided strategic support to America's Muslim, Arab and South Asian (MASA) communities to protect rights, advance policy reform and enhance coordination of the field.

Over the last 3 years in particular, we saw a dramatic rise in hate violence and toxic political rhetoric targeting MASA communities, which was quickly translated into regressive policies and executive orders under the new administration.

Our work to support policy advocacy, public education and community organizing on issues related to profiling, discrimination and hate crimes became ever more salient.

The Piper Fund, which supports advocacy, coalition-building and public education to protect and strengthen democratic institutions and norms, prioritizes grantmaking to communities that are under-represented in our democracy, particularly communities of color.

Piper saw new attacks in its primary areas of work – confronting the influence of money in politics and defending judicial independence – and also identified a disturbing new trend of unprecedented attacks on freedom of assembly, an issue central to democracy.

Since early 2017, legislatures in 31 states have introduced bills to criminalize and disincentivize protest, with laws passing in multiple states.

As programs of the Proteus Fund, a full-service philanthropy organization that brings funders and movement leaders together to create the collaborative systems and strategies needed to create and protect enduring social change, we had a strong and flexible infrastructure from which to navigate these challenging times.

And as 2 funder collaboratives with decades' long experience working on



In December, with rapid-response support from the RISE Together Fund, representatives from the Council on American-Relations and prominent American-Islamic Muslim civil rights activists and religious leaders joined a procession of more than 400 individuals and interfaith leaders to protest the inhuman treatment of asylum seekers and migrants. Photo by Naaz Modan.

critical issues in our democracy, we felt compelled to expand our boundaries, rise to the challenges of the time and deploy resources quickly and strategically to our fields.

5 LESSONS FOR FUNDERS

Rapid response has long been in the philanthropic toolkit, and, indeed, a core part of our collaboratives.

Below are 5 lessons we have learned from collectively deploying \$900,000 over 2 years through rapid response support:

1. Rapid-response must be truly “rapid.”

During a time when we saw virulent attacks against marginalized communities and the basic pillars of democracy occur almost weekly, many funders have risen to the occasion. They issued special calls for proposals to support frontline work to counter these assaults. It was inspiring to see many in philanthropy step up in this way.

However, many funders took months to approve rapid-response grants.

In contrast, Piper and RISE Together have been able to deploy rapid-response funding within 1-2 weeks. Together with Proteus’ grants management, finance and senior leadership teams, we amended our sound internal program processes to get the grants out the door even more quickly.

We streamlined our proposals, asking 3-5 questions for most grants, took phone applications if the situation required it and proactively reached out to organizations in hot spots.

In Piper’s case, the spate of anti-protest bills took communities by surprise, and our staff were often the first to inform state advocates of this new threat to freedom of assembly. At the same time, state legislatures were rushing to approve these laws, with no meaningful engagement.

This meant that, in multiple states, we had to move from outreach, to inviting a proposal, to approval of a grant

for public education about these antidemocratic initiatives and policies, within a very short time frame.

For both funds, this ability to move grants quickly was critical for our grantees.

2. Rapid-response vehicles work best when they are known to the field.

We were able to move grants quickly because field leaders know us and we know them. Our collaboratives’ program staff hold personal and professional ties to the advocates that we fund, and this has helped to facilitate the grantmaking process at many levels.

In a time when activists are rightfully wary of who is collecting information on their work, our funds have a longstanding track record of hands-on and transparent support to the field. We built this trust by being responsive to grantees’ requests, supporting them beyond the grant (more on that below) and advocating for the field with other funders.

It has also meant that we knew how to quickly identify potential grantees to do the critical, urgent work at hand.

Piper, for example, funds in 21 states and has relationships with advocates in many more. As we launched a rapid-response fund to provide grants at the state level, these relationships allowed us to identify potential grantees quickly, with a clear assessment of their reach and the likely impact of their public engagement work.

RISE Together benefited from our participation in key MASA listservs, conferences and networks, which allowed us to maximize our reach to the field. We were able to get our RFPs directly into the hands of key community leaders and personally connect with organizations based on our long track record in the field.

3. There needs to be flexibility on how funds are used.

Prevailing “grantmaking best practice” is that rapid-response funds should not be

used for staff time or to carry ongoing costs. The reality for our rapid-response grantees, many of whom are small organizations with budgets under \$300K, however, is that a small grant can sometimes close a salary gap or allow for the immediate hire of staff for an issue campaign poised to have a critical impact.

We also learned to use multiple tools in our toolbox beyond grantmaking. For example, RISE Together was supporting rapid-response work around the Muslim ban, only to discover that there were no materials available in Somali, thus compromising outreach to those from one of the banned countries.

Rather than make a grant to an organization and slow down the process, we paid a professional directly to translate the needed materials.

Similarly, Piper has used rapid-response funds to contract directly for messaging research that was critical for groups looking for the best ways to engage their communities, the media and others.

4. Funds are not enough.

Very quickly, we learned that just providing funding to put out fires was not enough. We needed to support our fields to be able to see and strategically analyze the full picture.

For RISE Together, this meant hiring a team of well-established field leaders as consultants to support a space called MASA Organizing.

This included the creation of a listserv for information sharing, which now has more than 400 subscribers from almost 200 organizations, regular calls and webinars to share policy analysis and field updates, along with the creation of shared resources such as a MASA civic engagement platform¹ in the lead up to the midterm elections.

We have also supported multiple convenings – around the Muslim ban and other issues – to allow advocates to build relationships, improve their skills and plan proactive campaigns.

We realized that this investment would make our grantmaking and the MASA field's response to critical policy more effective, efficient and, in the end, build more community and solidarity at a time of distress for MASA communities around the country.

This network has helped us to identify new areas of need and helped make our small grants more impactful because the field is sharing what they are doing and learning in real time.

Similarly, as the Piper Fund began to make rapid-response grants to protect freedom of assembly, we quickly recognized that state organizations needed more than just financial resources. As groups began to grapple with this new threat to democracy, they had questions about the constitutionality of the proposed laws, best practices for messaging to inform and engage their communities and lessons learned from other states. We also saw that national organizations were beginning to address the issue as best they could, but that the field was not coordinated.

In response, we hired a consultant and worked with a set of national groups to form Protect Dissent, a network we cofacilitate with Piper Action Fund that provides coordinated and strategic support to state groups seeking to protect freedom of assembly.

Bringing together organizations addressing democracy, education, environmental justice, racial justice, human rights and more, this network has made our grantmaking approach more holistic and impactful.

5. Rapid-response is no substitute for long-term funding.

While we are in the midst of a moment of ever-increasing acute crises, we did not arrive here overnight. We have witnessed a steady erosion of democratic norms and institutions, and philanthropy has failed to invest over many years as robustly as it should have to defend our democracy and ensure that it is inclusive and participatory.

For too long, philanthropy has prioritized white-led Beltway groups to an-

chor field work on issues of democracy and civil rights. As a result, communities of color and other frontline communities at the crosshairs of each crisis since the election have been forced to operate from a position of significant scarcity.

Without the long-term funding required to build the viability, visibility and tactical skills needed to articulate and advance their agendas, these communities will be unable to build the inclusive and participatory democracy they envision and will forever be playing defense in the face of emerging crises.

Now is the moment not only for critical rapid-response grantmaking but also for refocusing our collective vision on this long-term response.

While rapid-response grantmaking will continue to be part of our strategy, both Piper and RISE Together prioritize long-term grantmaking to communities of color that have had limited access to resources.

We will also continue to advocate in philanthropy for the transformative, long-term funding these community-led organizations need and deserve as they lead the fight for our democracy.

We invite you to join us. ■

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Notes

1. Visit <https://voteandbeheard.tumblr.com/>.



1,000 opponents of the Line 3 pipeline project gather in St. Paul, Minnesota, to rally, march and testify against the proposed tar sands pipeline. MN350, a Piper Fund grantee, engaged their community in 2018 to defend the rights of pipeline protestors. Photo by Andy Pearson, MN350.