Adopting Community-Centric Fundraising: Findings from a National Study

FEBRUARY 2025

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Because this work started in the community of BIPOC fundraisers, we wanted to undertake this research with their knowledge, support, and input. We are grateful to members of the Community-Centric Fundraising Global Council who provided input on our survey, helped with distribution, and offered their feedback on the results. Similarly, our thanks go to the AFP Foundation for Philanthropy, AFP Global, and more than a dozen individual AFP chapters who helped amplify the survey opportunity.

Finally, we thank our participants, predominantly over-taxed fundraisers, who took time away from their work, individually, and sometimes with their teams, to answer our questions and write hundreds of open-ended responses. Special gratitude goes to the 14 fundraisers we interviewed to understand their successes and challenges in greater detail.

To all fundraisers and nonprofit leaders, we hope this report not only bolsters your confidence but also inspires you to continue transforming fundraising practices for a more inclusive and equitable future.

The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect official positions or policies of AFP Foundation for Philanthropy, Community-Centric Fundraising Global Council, Grand Valley State University, or the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy. All errors are owned by the authors.

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Executive Summary

This national study examines the adoption of Community-Centric Fundraising (CCF) practices across U.S. nonprofit organizations. Proposed in 2019, CCF is a set of principles developed by people of color to align fundraising with movements for race, equity, and social justice (CCF, 2024). Based on survey responses from 283 organizations and in-depth interviews with 14 fundraising professionals, the research revealed both promising developments and persistent challenges in transforming established fundraising approaches.

There was widespread awareness of CCF principles. More than 90% of survey respondents reported being familiar with the movement, and 76% reported that their organization had changed fundraising practices in response to CCF or broader equity initiatives. **Organizations implementing CCF typically took a comprehensive approach,** with 81% making changes across seven or more categories of CCF-aligned actions. The most commonly adopted practices included:

- supporting other nonprofits' fundraising efforts (92%);
- grounding fundraising in race, equity, and social justice (87%);
- modifying storytelling practices to avoid harmful stereotypes (87%);
- increasing accessibility in events and communications (86%); and
- changing internal operations to increase inclusion and equity (83%).

The impact of these changes was largely positive or neutral. Most organizations reported either increases or stability in contributed revenue, donor numbers, and volunteer engagement. While 26% of organizations lost some donors due to CCF-aligned changes, many found new funding sources to replace them. Of those organizations that had adopted CCF changes, almost 45% reported that fundraisers' morale had increased while just under 5% said morale had decreased.

Despite these positive outcomes, many organizations faced significant challenges in implementing CCF practices. The research identified five major barriers to adoption:

- resistance from boards and leadership unfamiliar with CCF principles;
- resource constraints and concerns about financial impact;
- limited staff capacity to implement changes;
- geographic and political considerations; and
- structural challenges within the professional fundraising industry.

Still, the research suggests that CCF adoption is steady and ongoing, with more organizations implementing changes each year. We also found that organizations with three or more BIPOC fundraisers were significantly more likely to adopt CCF practices, highlighting the importance of a diverse staff in driving change.

These findings indicate that CCF represents a viable alternative to traditional donor-centered fundraising, one capable of maintaining financial sustainability while building more equitable and inclusive philanthropic practices. The authors recommend increasing awareness and educational programming on CCF principles by both CCF and professional fundraising associations as well as sharing case studies and results; maintaining commitments to inclusive practices despite external pressures and DEI backlash; implementing more equitable donor recognition practices and donor education; supporting collaborative fundraising efforts, such as joint fundraising campaigns; and maintaining a long-term commitment to address structural barriers to change.

Introduction

In 2023, giving to nonprofit organizations in the U.S. surpassed $557 billion, with at least 75% of that giving coming from individual donors (Giving USA, 2024). Much of that giving was facilitated by fundraisers, both paid and volunteer, who met with prospective contributors, either individuals or organizations, to share information about a nonprofit's work, and build the strategy to acquire dollars needed to support the activities and services that their nonprofits provide.

Charity work, historically run by religious organizations and supported by tithing, has diversified in numbers and approaches over the last 150 years and professionalized as the nonprofit sector has grown. The fundraising profession has grown alongside these organizations to ensure they have the funds necessary to deliver on their missions. That growth has brought with it a new formalization, including best practices, courses, and certifications. Since the early 2000s, the predominant fundraising approach — commonly known as donor-centered fundraising (Burk, 2003) — has elevated donors' roles in nonprofits' work. This was a change from the transactional approach of decades earlier, where relationship development was secondary. But much of this giving, and the wealth that undergirds the largest gifts, reflects systems of unearned privilege, generational wealth, and racial and economic inequality. Moreover, the dominant donor-centered approach encourages fundraisers to lift up those large contributors as "heroes" and "saviors" who are then often given outsized influence in organizational decisions. This may look like sitting on the board of directors, influencing programmatic approaches, or threatening to withdraw support if an organization makes decisions they disagree with or falls short of their intended outcomes.

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The power dynamics between funders and nonprofits can lead organizations to over-promise the impact of their services and focus on short-term success while minimizing the systemic root causes of the conditions their nonprofits seek to address. At the same time, the interests of donors can be prioritized over the needs of beneficiaries. This dynamic is important to note as few of these large supporters reflect the people many nonprofits serve: immigrants, single parents in poverty, people who are unhoused, and children and youth, and few have lived experience dealing with the issues nonprofit clients face.

In 2018, a group of Seattle-area fundraisers of color started meeting monthly to raise questions about the dissonance they felt in fundraising work and envision a different path. In May 2019, the Community-Centric Fundraising movement officially formed to evolve fundraising and present a set of principles to align it with movements for equity and justice. Rooted in years of unrecognized work by various organizations and nonprofit leaders of color, CCF aims to transform fundraising philosophy and practice away from donor-centrism towards approaches that challenge structural oppressions and center community needs and perspectives (CCF, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice protests in 2020 accelerated a shift in the way fundraising is conceptualized and implemented. Although the donor-centered fundraising model remains the dominant ideology — both in training and practice — there is a growing conversation among scholars and practitioners regarding the ethical implications of these practices (Bergeron & Tempel, 2022). At the same time, CCF started gaining momentum among fundraisers seeking — and developing — new strategies more aligned with their values. Rather than harmful and extractive fundraising practices, CCF prioritizes the entire community over individual organizations, fosters a sense of belonging and interdependence, presents work not as individual transactions but holistically, and encourages mutual support between nonprofits (CCF, 2023).

Five years after the CCF movement's official launch, as researchers and practitioners, we wanted to understand if fundraisers and organizations have implemented CCF-aligned practices and how they have challenged traditional fundraising philosophy and centered the community in their work. We also wanted to understand the challenges, frustrations, and barriers to this work. While we believe in the inherent value of the CCF movement, we also know that rigorous data and capturing the breadth of experience can help a movement grow.

Review of Literature

Donor-centered fundraising, a term coined in 2003 by Penelope Burk, prioritizes personalized relationships and experiences for individual donors to build loyalty to nonprofits and increase donations over time. While most organizations have found a donor-centered approach effective to raise contributed income, a core critique of this approach is that it concentrates power and influence among major donors and pits nonprofit organizations against one another (Le, 2017). In contrast, CCF (2020) emphasizes social justice principles of inclusive decision-making, diversity of contributions, and accounting for the needs of various stakeholder groups. While donor-centered fundraising treats donors as key partners and often elevates them as "heroes," CCF sees donors as only one part of a broader community, which also includes the beneficiaries of nonprofits' work.

As the CCF movement has grown, fundraisers, especially fundraisers of color, have increasingly examined donor-centered fundraising's ethics and the relationship between donors and beneficiaries (Clohesy, 2003; MacQuillin, 2016; Ostrander, 2007), and turned to CCF as an alternative model (Bergeron & Tempel, 2022). While donor-centrism has proven effective for raising money, CCF practitioners argued that it often takes the practice to harmful extremes that undermine social justice aims (Breeze & Dean, 2012; Le, 2015, 2019; Novovic, 2022). Examples of how CCF practitioners have embraced these evolving practices include:

- an organization centering love and moving away from metrics that emphasize transactional fundraising (Trinh, 2021),
- a fundraiser implementing creative practices to increase access and divest from harmful systems (Talbot-Heindl, 2021), and
- a leader sharing vulnerable stories of missteps on the path toward progress (D'Souza, 2021).

Despite the growing literature exploring CCF's principles and fundraising ethics (Burton & Barnes, 2017; Keegan, 2021; MacQuillin, 2023), as well as insights from practitioners themselves, this is the first larger-scale research to understand how organizations have begun to integrate these principles, what challenges they have encountered, and what results they have seen. Beyond the anecdotal examples of new approaches and practices, there has been no broader scale examination of how individual practitioners have applied community-centric principles in their fundraising roles and organizational strategies. While CCF leaders themselves have noted that a movement that centers justice and equity should not need to "prove" its efficacy (Le, 2021), the lack of research into the impact of CCF principles on organizations' revenue, culture of philanthropy, and other measures has been raised as a barrier to broader implementation of this approach by boards and leadership groups wary of displacing proven methods of raising revenue (Le, 2021).

As researchers and fundraising practitioners, we set out to investigate the following questions:

- What CCF practices have nonprofit fundraisers introduced to their organizations?
- What have been the organizational challenges in adopting CCF practices?
- How have donors responded to those practices?
- What, if anything, has changed in the organization as a result (i.e., revenue, the culture of philanthropy, etc.)?

We believe that studying CCF is necessary to understand the way fundraising practices are changing in response to a growing awareness around privilege and inequality in our country and how fundraisers can champion greater equity and inclusion in their organizations and communities.

Methodology

Our research design included both quantitative and qualitative data collection, building on the strengths of each approach. We fielded a 40-question, online survey using Qualtrics in April and May 2024. We asked that the lead fundraiser of the organization complete the survey, either alone or in consultation with their fundraising team. The questions asked about participants' organizations, the fundraising staff, fundraising practices, equity and inclusion efforts, and changes in fundraising results organizations have experienced in the past few years. All questions were voluntary.

The survey was primarily distributed via dedicated emails to the Association of Fundraising Professionals' members and the Community-Centric Fundraising's listserv inviting participation. Additional promotion took place through each of the above organizations' newsletters and social media channels. The survey continued to be publicized through local AFP chapters, on social media, and to at least one fundraising consulting firm's mailing list to ensure the broadest response possible.

While over 662 participants started the survey, the results are based on 283 usable responses from participants who completed more than 90% of the questions and reached the end of the survey. These responses also included several open-ended survey questions. Survey data were analyzed using both quantitative (SPSS) and qualitative (Dedoose) software. Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation analysis of several key variables, which were tested for statistical significance using Pearson chi-square measures. Open-ended survey responses were coded to identify patterns and themes and to help identify quotations to illustrate the survey and thematic findings.

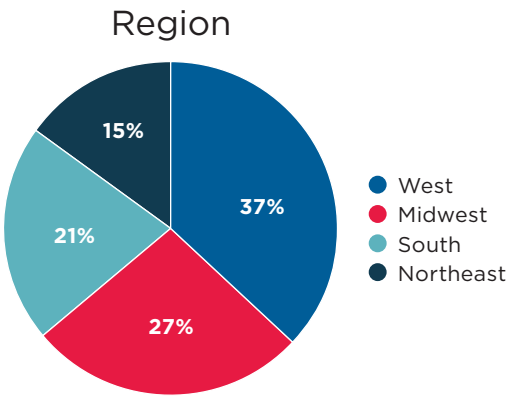
Survey participants were also asked if they would be willing to participate in a one-hour follow-up interview. We randomly selected 30 of the 109 volunteers for an interview, and ultimately spoke with 14 nonprofit and fundraising staff. All interviews took place via Zoom, were transcribed via Otter AI, and checked by a member of the research team. Interviews were then inductively coded, and the codes were sorted into themes.

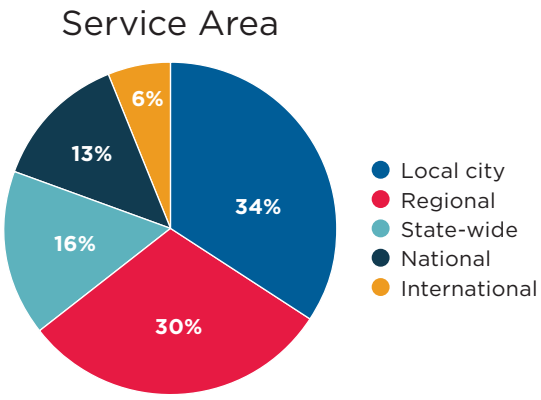
Organizational Demographics

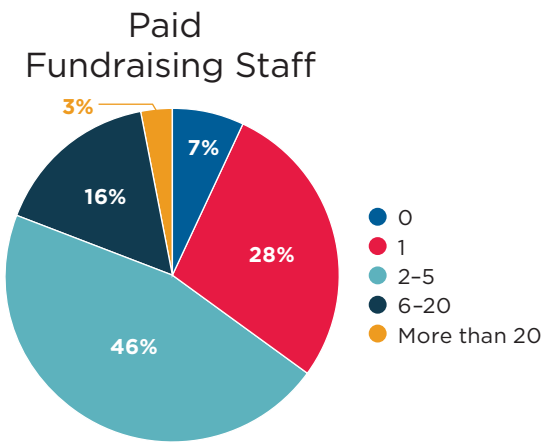
While the survey was answered by individual fundraisers, we asked them to report on the demographics of their organizations. (See Appendix for full results.) The vast majority of respondents represented independent 501(c)(3) organizations (94%), just 3% represented fiscally-sponsored organizations, and the remaining 3% was spread across 501(c)(4) organizations, unregistered groups seeking nonprofit status, and unregistered groups not seeking nonprofit status. Organizations were generally well established; just over a third of organizations (36%) were founded prior to 1980, with another 31% established between 1980–1999. The remaining third were established in the 2000s — 17% were founded between 2000 and 2009 and 15% were established from 2010 to the present. Organizations represented 43 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, but were overrepresented in the West (37%) — where the CCF movement began — and Midwest (27%) regions.

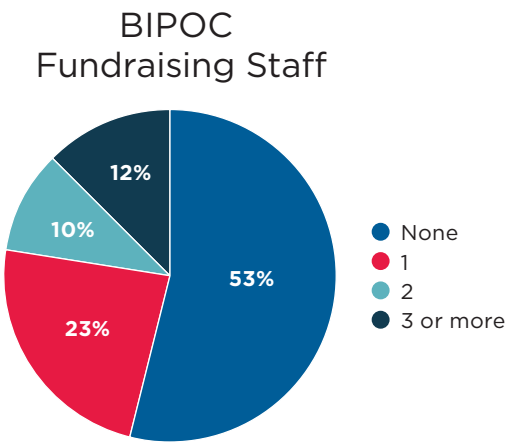
A majority of organizations (60%) were headquartered in large cities (over 300,000 people), with 17% in mid-sized cities (100,000–300,000 people), 15% in small cities (under 100,000 people), and 7% in rural communities. Over a third of organizations (34%) defined their service area as their local city, while 30% were regional (either multi-city or multi-state), 16% worked state-wide, 13% were national, and 6% were international.

Organizations represented all nonprofit subsectors, with human services organizations as the most (37%); 13% identified as arts and culture organizations, and 11% each were identified as civic and public affairs, K-12 education, and health care organizations. Organizations ranged in size, which we defined by organizational revenue: 24% had a total revenue of under $1 million, 32% had revenues of $1 million to $5 million, and 35% had revenues of over $5 million. Contributed (philanthropic) revenue was generally only a portion of the organizations' total revenue: 38% raised under $1 million, 46% raised $1 million to $5 million, and 17% raised more than $5 million. Finally, we asked about each organization's paid fundraising staff. Almost half of organizations (46%) had between two and five full-time staff, 28% had one staff member, and 16% had a fundraising team of between six and 20 people. More than half of organizations (53%) had no fundraisers who identified as members of the BIPOC community, while 23% had one fundraiser of color, 10% had two, and 12% had three or more.









Interview Participants

We collected additional demographic information from the 14 interview participants. These fundraisers and executive directors represented 12 women and two men from nine different states. Eleven participants identified as white while three identified as mixed race. They ranged in age from 28 to 58 years old with an average age of 45. Finally, they averaged over 15 years of experience in the fundraising field.

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Overall Findings

Overwhelmingly, more than 90% of survey respondents reported being familiar with Community-Centric Fundraising, and 76% reported that their organization had changed fundraising policies or practices in response to CCF or to general calls for increasing equity and inclusion. Participants learned about CCF from Vu Le's Nonprofit AF blog, the CCF website, mailing lists, and Slack channel, as well as from conversations with other fundraisers, and, to a lesser extent, through local AFP chapters, or by stumbling across it online. While the organizational demographics indicate that respondents represented a broad range of nonprofits — from size to age, to mission category and location — these results, and the ones that follow, indicate that survey respondents were largely fundraisers from organizations who were aware of CCF, felt aligned with CCF's overall goals, and were taking steps toward implementing CCF-aligned practices.

We conducted several statistical tests to determine if there were any patterns among the organizations that had adopted CCF practices.[1] When holding other factors constant, organizations that served a state,* regional,* or local constituency* or were headquartered in the Northeast or West regions of the U.S.* were statistically more likely to have implemented changes in their fundraising programs. Organizations located in mid-sized* and small cities^ were less likely to have made changes. Organizations with at least three fundraisers who identified as part of the BIPOC community were significantly more likely to have adopted CCF practices.*

The Role of BIPOC Fundraisers

Because CCF was founded by a group of BIPOC fundraisers, we also wanted to understand the unique experiences of this group. BIPOC fundraisers are vastly underrepresented in the fundraising profession. According to surveys of U.S. fundraisers conducted by AFP IDEA (2021) and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (Childress, 2022), an estimated 13% to 25% of fundraisers identify as people of color, compared to 2020 U.S. Census data that showed more than 40% of the U.S. population identified as people of color (Frey, 2021). In this study, 53% of organizations reported having no fundraisers of color in their organizations. Our results showed that BIPOC fundraisers were more likely to work in organizations headquartered in large cities, defined as having over 300,000 people, and work in larger organizations, defined as having more than $5 million in total revenue (both $p \leq 0.05$). We note this as fundraising continues to be a white-dominated space, which can impact the adoption and success of CCF-aligned approaches.

> *"We have to be able to talk about money [in our roles]. A majority of our team, 99% of us, are BIPOC, low-income folks, or from low-income backgrounds. It's hard to talk about money, money is really traumatic and so [CCF] felt like a good way for us to be able to ease into some of these conversations and it's still not perfect, it's still a learning journey, but it made it so much more tangible." – Interview participant*

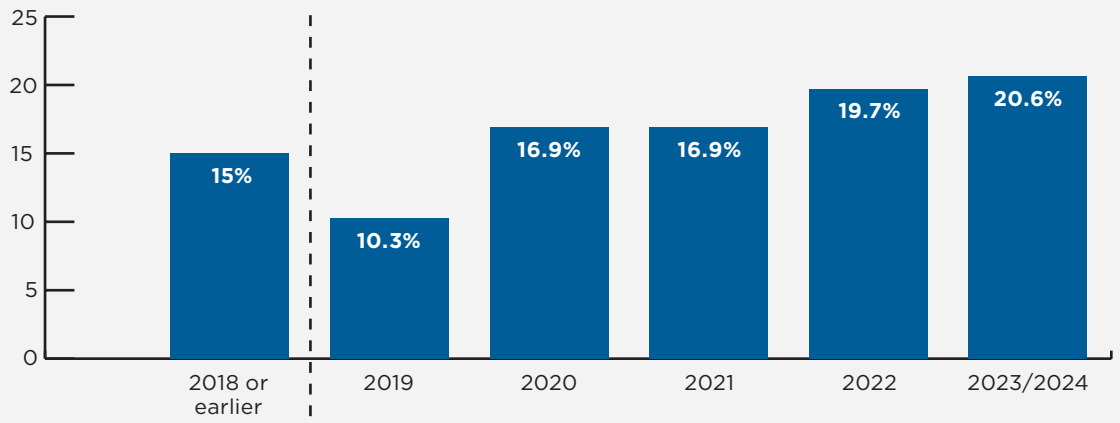
> *"The most important lesson I have learned, [...] as a white woman, [...] is that you must listen to people of color. That for me was the proving grounds that when you are talking about work in community and for community, you have to listen to people of color in these spaces." – Interview participant*

Timeline of Changes

Of the organizations that had made changes, 85% said they had done so since 2019, the year the CCF movement launched. Further, survey results showed that the pace of CCF adoption has been relatively consistent since 2019, indicating that organizations are steadily changing fundraising practices and capturing the movement's continued relevance. After 2019, roughly 17% to 20% of organizations in our survey changed their fundraising practices and policies each year through the start of 2024. (See Figure 1, pg. 12.)

[1] For statistical tests, we report results where $p \leq 0.05$ (*) and $p \leq 0.10$ (^), which represent a greater than 95% confidence interval and 90% confidence interval, respectively.

Figure 1. When did organizations begin making changes to their fundraising practices or policies in response to CCF? (n=213)



CCF Adoption

Participants then answered a series of questions about specific steps they had taken with respect to nine different domains of CCF-aligned actions. These questions were developed from the CCF Aligned Actions List (CCF, 2020) and expanded upon by the researchers and through conversations with fundraisers. The domains were:

1. Grounding fundraising in race, equity, and social justice.
2. Supporting other nonprofits in their fundraising efforts.
3. Recognizing donors of time and talent in addition to money.
4. Changing donor recognition practices to recognize gifts of all sizes.
5. Increasing accessibility in events and communications.
6. Changing storytelling practices.
7. Including donors in conversations about systems of oppression.
8. Supporting social justice, movement-based work to facilitate systemic change.
9. Changing international operations/practices to increase inclusion/equity.

Each domain included between three and 12 actions and participants were asked to select all that applied to their organization. In addition to reporting the individual actions and changes organizations have made, we created a measure of CCF adoption across all nine domains, whereby organizations were given a point if they had engaged in one or more activities within the domain. We found that 81% of organizations were making changes in seven or more domains and nearly 40% were active in all nine. (See Figure 2.) These results indicate that once organizations were aware of CCF and started to implement changes, they took a holistic approach to revising fundraising practices and exhibited high fidelity in implementation. In other words, among organizations adopting CCF, they don't just "dabble in it" or try one or two things, but they integrate it across their fundraising program.

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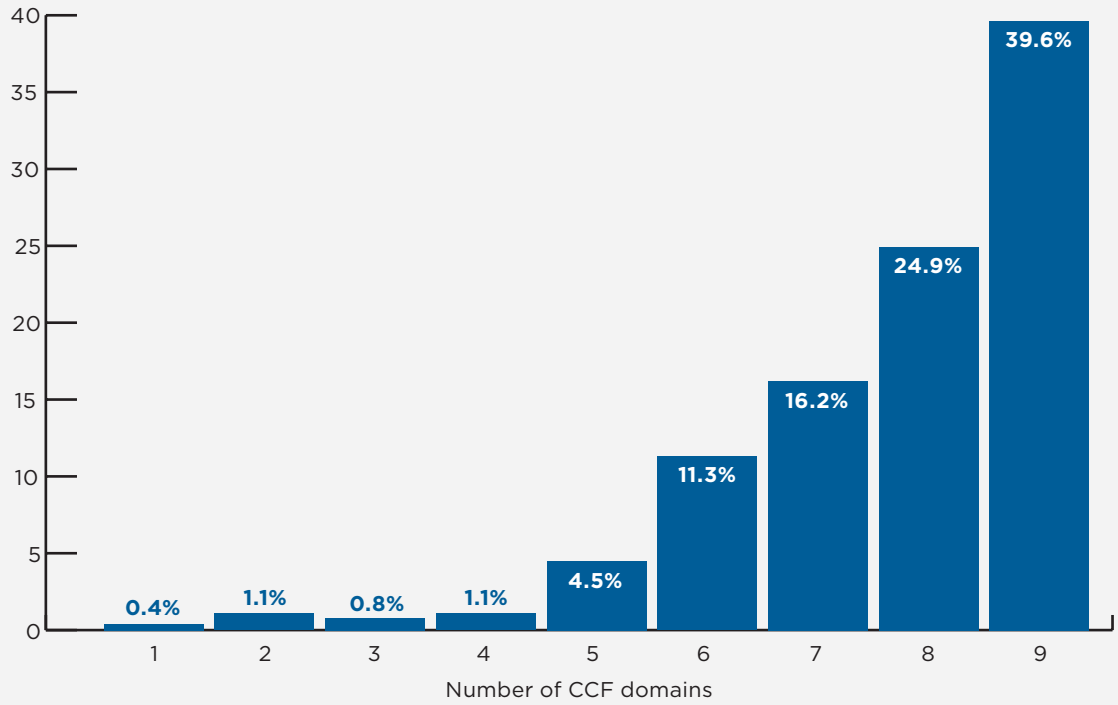
Figure 2. Percentage of organizations that made changes in one or more CCF domains
(n=265)



What changes did organizations make?

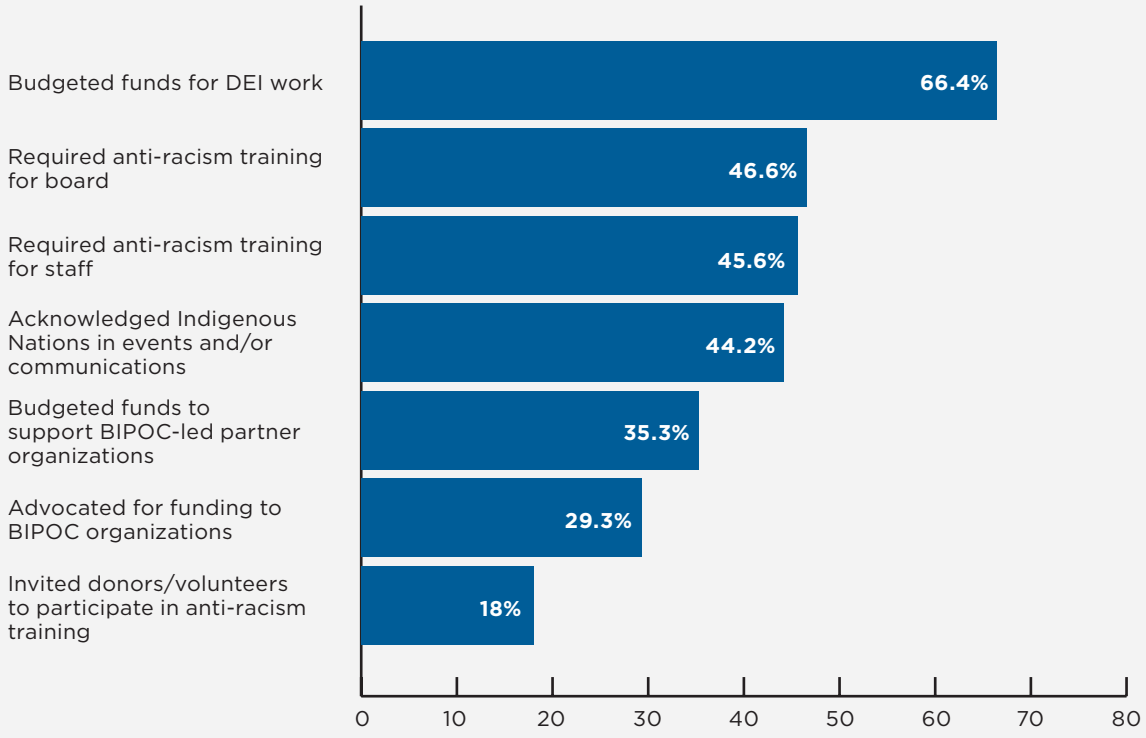
This next section reports results from each of the nine domains of CCF-aligned actions. Organizations were asked to identify specific activities that they had actively undertaken and could also write in additional activities.

1. How have organizations grounded fundraising in race, equity, and social justice?

Nearly 87% of organizations reported taking at least one of the following actions to ground their fundraising work in a broader understanding of race, equity, and social justice. The greatest number (66%) had budgeted funds for DEI work, followed by requiring board members and staff to take part in anti-racism training (47% and 46% respectively). Donors and volunteers were much less likely to have been invited to such trainings, with only 18% of organizations reporting they had made this effort. (See Figure 3.)

> *"I will say that this whole idea [CCF] has created a place for me in philanthropy, and allowed me to stay in it because I was very close to leaving." – Interview participant*

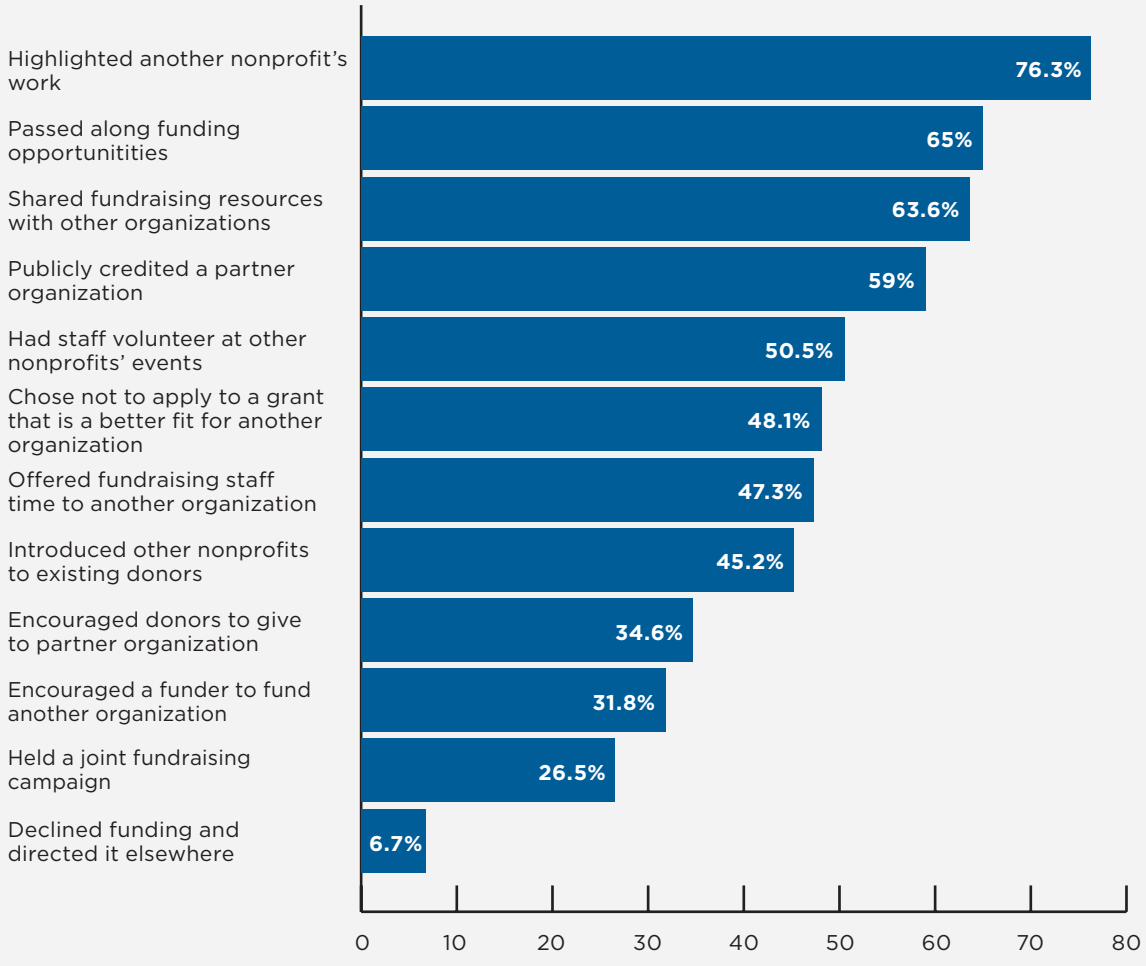
Figure 3. How organizations grounded fundraising in race, equity, and social justice (n=283)



2. How have organizations supported other nonprofits in their fundraising efforts?

A second area of CCF's focus is recognizing that nonprofits are in a broader ecosystem and should be mutually supportive of one another. Here, 92% of organizations reported engaging in one or more activities. The most common practices were highlighting another nonprofit's work, passing along funding opportunities, sharing fundraising resources, and publicly crediting another nonprofit organization. Between 45% to 50% of organizations had fundraising staff volunteer at other organizations, opted not to pursue a grant, or introduced donors to other nonprofits. Outright encouragement for donors to give to partner organizations, direct a funder elsewhere, hold a joint fundraising campaign, or decline funding were the least common. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4. How organizations supported other nonprofits in their fundraising efforts (n=283)



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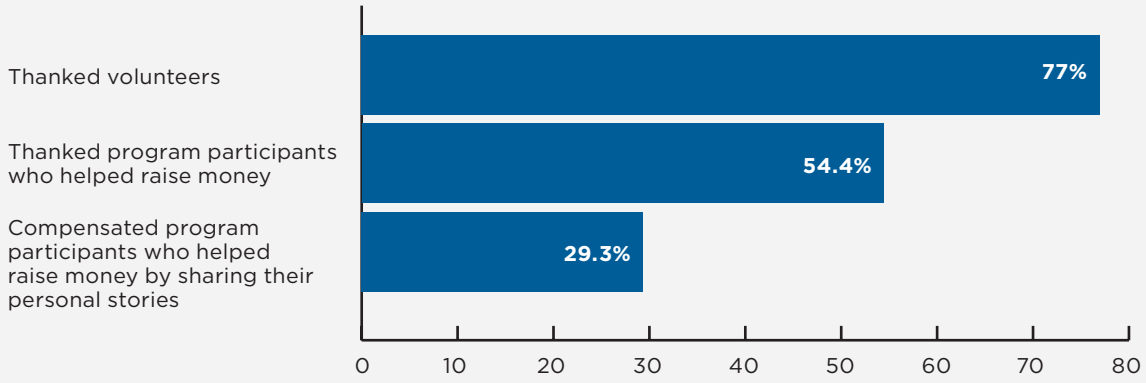
> *"Occasionally I have said to my boss [the CEO], 'I don't think we should apply for this. I don't think it's a good fit for us. I think we could probably get it because we have a professional fundraiser and some of our partners do not. But I don't think we should. I think we should just let that go.' We do not have to scoop up every penny, every dime, every dollar if it's not going to affect our bottom line." – Interview participant*

3. How have organizations recognized donors of time and talent in addition to monetary support?

A similar number of overall respondents (87%) reported recognizing volunteers, program participants, or both, who were involved in fundraising. While just over three-quarters (77%) reported thanking volunteers with notes or other forms of recognition, just over half (54%) thanked program participants who helped to raise money. Only 29% reported providing compensation to participants and/or people from marginalized communities who shared personal stories to help raise money. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5. How organizations recognized volunteers and program participants (n=283)

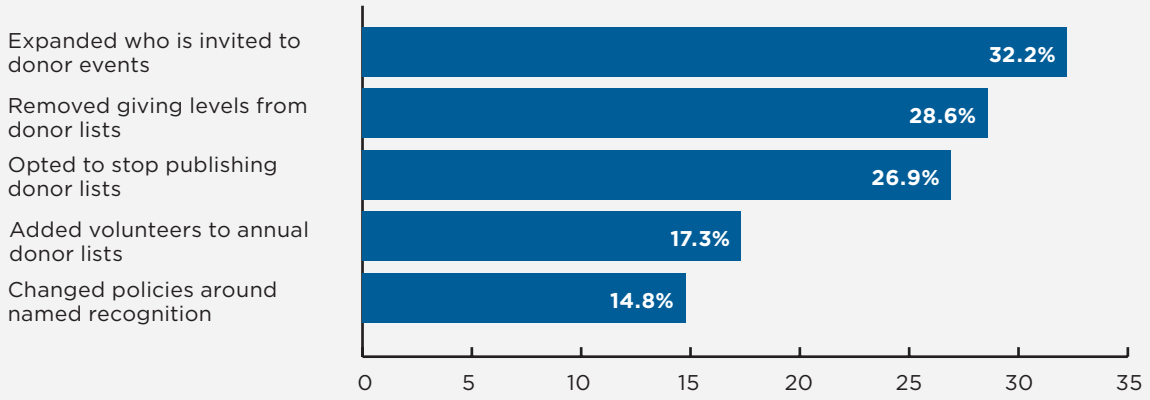


4. How have organizations changed donor recognition practices to be more inclusive and recognize contributions at all levels?

Another tenet of CCF is that all donors are celebrated, regardless of the size of the gift they make. Seventy-one percent of respondents indicated they had taken one or more actions to be inclusive beyond just large donors. While no action was overly favored, the most common actions were expanding who is invited to donor events (32%), removing giving levels from donor lists (29%), or choosing to stop publishing donor lists altogether (27%). Far fewer organizations had added volunteers to donor lists or changed policies about other forms of named donor recognition. (See Figure 6.)

> *"It's not that we are being exclusive, it's that we are not being intentionally inclusive. A lot of what we've been learning from these different sources, and from CCF is, how are we shaping our message so that we're not accidentally excluding people, and instead, we are creating a message that's more inclusive that speaks to the values of diverse communities." – Interview participant*

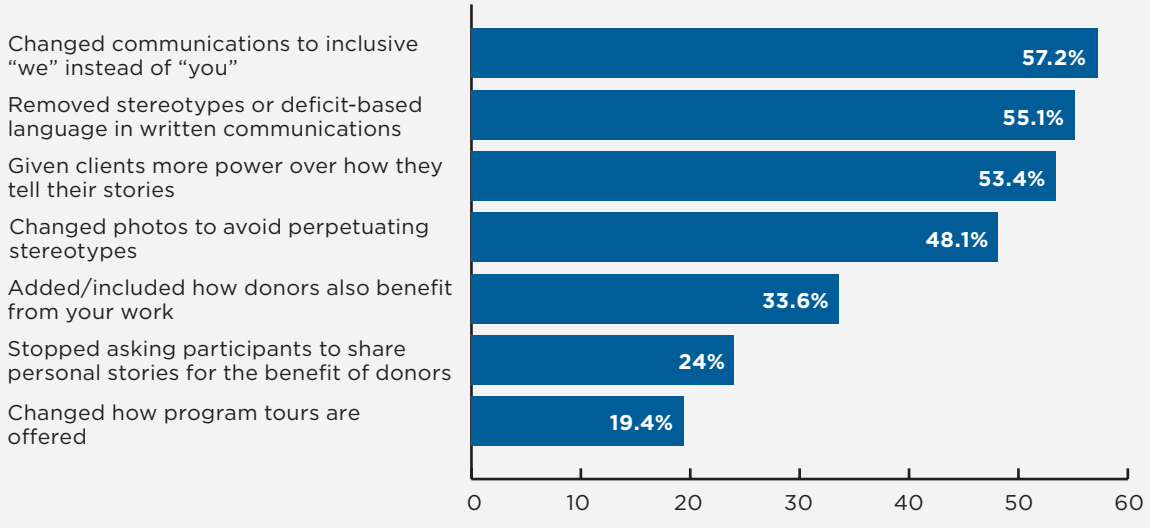
Figure 6. How organizations changed donor recognition practices (n=283)



5. How have organizations changed storytelling practices to avoid othering the people they serve and perpetuating harmful stereotypes?

Most organizations (87%) had taken steps to change communications and storytelling practices to be more inclusive, client and participant-centered, and avoid both image and language-based stereotypes. The most common change was to switch from the donor-centered "you" to a more inclusive "we" (57%), followed by removing stereotypical or deficit-based language about beneficiaries from the organization's publications and communications (55%). Far fewer organizations had stopped asking program participants to share personal stories for the benefit of donors (24%), or changed how program tours were offered to increase dignity for the people using the organization's services (19%). (See Figure 7.)

Figure 7. How organizations changed storytelling practices (n=283)



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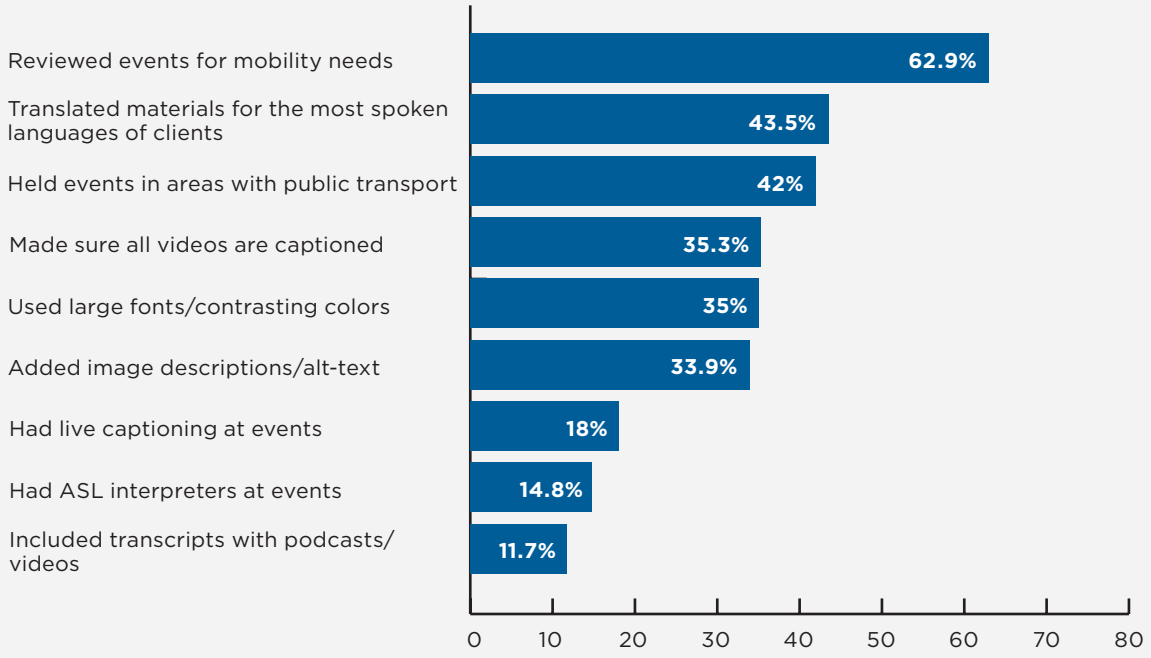
6. How have organizations increased accessibility in events and communications?

A similar number of organizations (86%) reported taking at least one step to increase accessibility in their events and communications. The most common was reviewing events and locations for physical mobility needs (63%); next was translating materials for the most spoken languages of clients (44%), and holding events in areas served by public transportation (42%). The fewest number of organizations reported having live captioning at events (18%), ASL interpretation at events (15%), or including transcripts with podcasts/videos online (12%). (See Figure 8.) Several of these latter steps are more costly, which could be one reason more organizations had not adopted these practices.

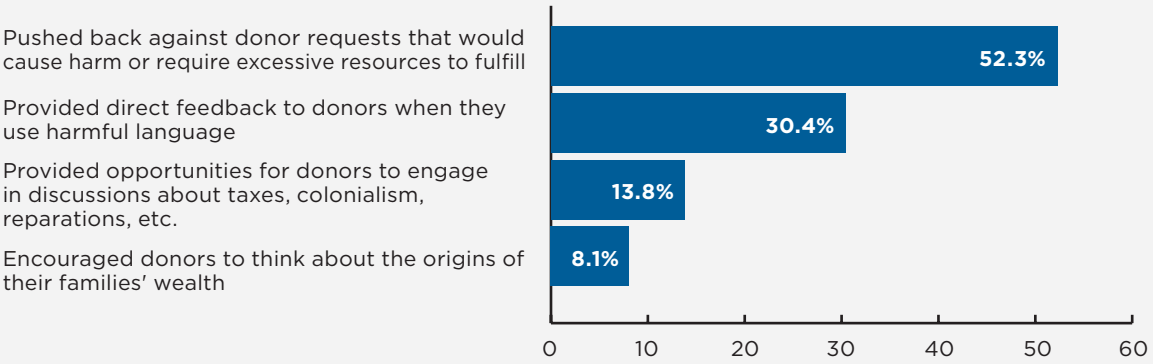
Figure 8. How organizations increased accessibility in events and communications (n=283)



7. How have organizations included donors in difficult and transparent conversations to understand the complexity of your work and larger systems of oppression?

Compared to the prior questions, fewer organizations said they had taken one or more actions related to difficult conversations with donors (62%). More than 52% reported pushing back against a donor request that would cause harm, either to clients or the community, or that would require excessive organizational resources to fulfill. Just over 30% said they had provided direct feedback to donors when they used harmful language with staff, clients, or in public. Very few organizations were involved in proactive conversations with donors around structural inequality. Less than 14% provided opportunities for donors to engage in discussions about taxes, colonialism, slavery, reparations, etc. and the impact on the communities' organizations served, and even fewer (8%) encouraged donors to think about the origins of their families' wealth. (See Figure 9.)

Figure 9. How organizations included donors in conversations about systems of oppression (n=283)

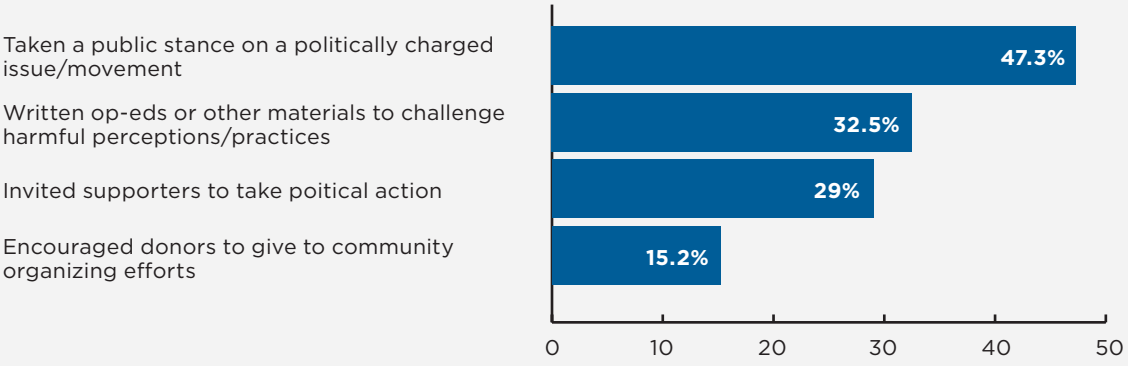


"It's hard to say no to a donor." – Interview participant

8. How have organizations supported social justice movement-based work to facilitate systemic change?

Fewer organizations also reported engaging in efforts to facilitate systemic change, which are often considered as advocacy. Just under 67% had engaged in one or more activities and no activity was engaged in by a majority of organizations. The most common action, at 47%, was taking a public stance on Black Lives Matter, gun violence, or other politically charged issues/movements. Nearly a third of respondents had written op-eds or other published materials to challenge perceptions and practices that harm people from marginalized communities. Fewer organizations had engaged their supporters in this work: 29% had revised or implemented an advocacy plan to invite supporters to take political action, while just over 15% encouraged donors to give money to community organizing efforts. (See Figure 10.)

Figure 10. How organizations supported movement-based work to facilitate systemic change (n=283)



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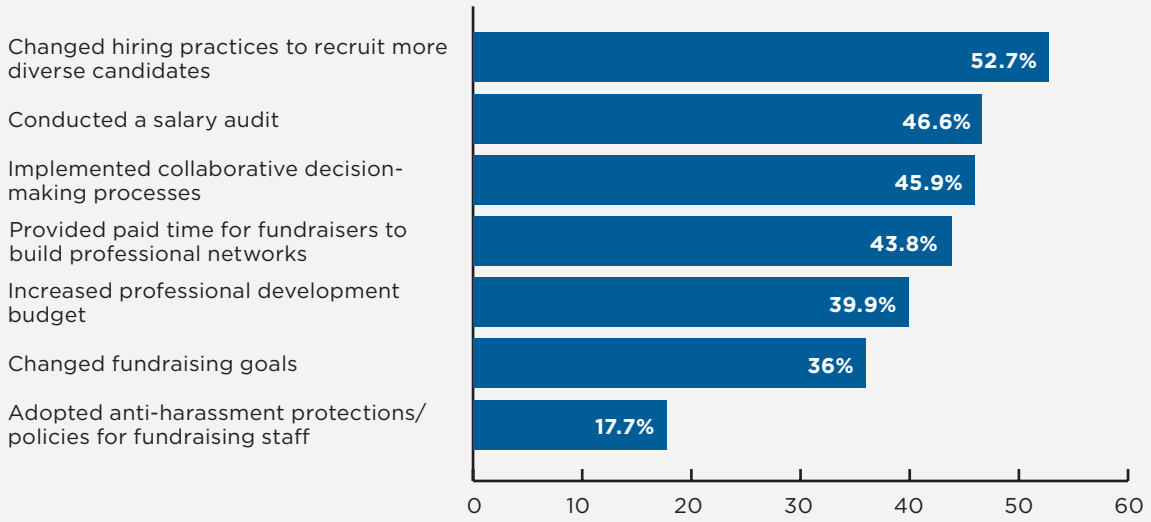
9. How have organizations changed internal fundraising operations/practices to increase inclusion and equity?

While many of the CCF-aligned actions are externally focused on donors, communications, and nonprofit partners, we also asked about aligning internal fundraising operations to CCF principles. Eighty-three percent of organizations had taken at least one action, though the individual steps organizations had taken were quite mixed. The most common was to change hiring practices to recruit a more diverse candidate pool (53%), followed by conducting a salary audit (47%). Implementing a collaborative decision-making process that included frontline fundraisers was third (46%). Surprisingly, less than 18% of respondents reported that their organization had adopted protections/policies for fundraising staff when dealing with harassment or bias from external parties such as donors, volunteers, and/or board members, even though there has been extensive media coverage about the harassment that fundraisers can experience. (See Figure 11.)

> *"I'm really grateful to CCF for removing the veil. But I'm less in the 'fundraising is bad' camp and more in the 'fundraising can be better,' camp and I want to be part of making it better." – Interview participant*

Figure 11. How organizations changed internal operations/practices to increase inclusion and equity (n=283)



As we reflect on these results, we had two overall impressions — first, we were heartened to know that organizations of all types were involved in this work and were generally wholesale engaged in it. Organizations were not just picking and choosing a few CCF practices but were working on multiple changes simultaneously. At the same time, we also noticed that practices that involved money (either those requiring organizations to spend additional funds or potentially putting donations at risk), practices that rethought how program participants were involved in fundraising and sharing their stories, and direct work with donors were the ones the fewest organizations engaged in.

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What effects did CCF-aligned changes have?

We asked a series of questions to understand what, if anything, had changed in organizations as a result of adopting more CCF-aligned actions. Here, only respondents from organizations that were actively making changes to their fundraising programs were included. As many factors can influence fundraising metrics, we focused on whether overall trends increased, decreased, or stayed the same rather than any specific percentages.

While many organizations were unsure of the impact of their efforts, the majority of respondents reported either increases in revenue, number of donors, and number of volunteers or that those metrics had stayed the same. (See Table 1.) While the trends were generally positive or neutral, more than a quarter of respondents (29%) said they were aware of their organizations losing or parting ways with one or more donors based on making CCF-aligned changes. Of the organizations aware of losing or parting ways with one or more donors, over 90% had made changes in seven or more CCF-aligned areas.[2] Though it is notable that these organizations knew they had lost one or multiple donors, for most organizations, the loss of funding was replaced from other sources.

Table 1. Changes experienced since adopting CCF principles

Criteria	Increased	Stayed the Same	Decreased	Don't Know/ Not Sure
Contributed revenue (n=250)	37.2%	14%	8%	40.8%
Number of donors (n=247)	29.1%	20.6%	16.6%	33.6%
Number of new donors (n=243)	23%	30.9%	8.6%	37.4%
Number of volunteers (n=180)	27.8%	36.1%	7.2%	28.9%

> *"We've lost some donors because they thought it (CCF) was a little too real, but those [donors] who were on the fence or didn't understand it, understand the work better, they're more engaged. We have definitely had an increase in our volunteerism. So, it's made a big difference." – Interview participant*

We also asked fundraisers to categorize how much these fundraising results were due to their organization's adoption of CCF principles. Nearly 58% said that adoption of CCF practices were a minor factor, while 17% said it was a major factor; 24% said they did not think adopting CCF principles was a factor at all. In a different question, nearly 80% of fundraisers said that other factors such as a campaign, leadership change, or something else also influenced these results.

Beyond fundraising-related metrics, we also wanted to understand what impact changing fundraising practices had on fundraisers themselves. Of those organizations that had adopted CCF changes, almost 45% reported that fundraisers' morale had increased while just 5% said morale had decreased. Several interviewees said that CCF has encouraged them to stay in the sector and given them hope that the fundraising profession can move away from the donor-centric model, going as far as to say that CCF and Nonprofit AF "sustains me" and is crucial to them continuing their position. This is often because participants felt that their own values are reflected in the principles of CCF.

[2] $p \leq 0.05$, which represents a 95% confidence interval.

Given that fundraiser retention has been an ongoing issue for the field, we also asked survey participants from organizations with at least three fundraisers what effect changes had on their staffing: 40% said fundraising staff have expressed a greater commitment as a result of making changes, while less than 4% report losing fundraising staff as a result of these changes. The remaining 56% said that retention was unchanged after adopting CCF practices.

What are the barriers to adopting CCF practices?

The barriers and challenges to adopting CCF practices showed up in several open-ended survey questions; they were also a key aspect of the interviews we conducted. We inductively coded these barriers and challenges to develop themes and present the most frequently mentioned ones below.

1. Resistance to change and lack of understanding

Among survey respondents who said they had not made any CCF-aligned changes in their organizations, the most common reason was an overall lack of awareness or understanding of CCF.

Among survey respondents who said they had not made any CCF-aligned changes in their organizations, the most common reason was an overall lack of awareness or understanding of CCF. As one respondent said, "My organization doesn't know much about the CCF model, and while they are working to increase diversity in staff and board memberships, they have yet to move into other departments with an IDEA perspective. They haven't prioritized it." Other fundraisers shared that while they were aware of CCF, the rest of their organization or team was not, or that their organization was early in its equity, diversity, and inclusion work, and had not yet extended that work into fundraising approaches. Several respondents shared that they "struggled to understand what actions are needed for larger shifts toward increasing race equity and implementing CCF principles within the organization," "how peers have implemented practices," or that they did not understand the impact of CCF or felt there was a lack of research to back up CCF and were uncertain if it worked. A few respondents shared outright hostility to CCF practices saying, "I resent that CCF assumes we have not been equitable." Lastly, several respondents felt that CCF was focused on "social service and client-based organizations" compared to a policy/advocacy organization without direct service or that it didn't apply to their organization, in this case, an international nonprofit.

2. Pushback and lack of understanding from board members, leaders

Respondents — both those who have implemented CCF practices as well as those who have not — also felt that CCF presented a steep learning curve for board members who often favored "traditional, transactional fundraising." Over 40 survey responses related to board challenges. Some respondents linked this to a lack of board diversity or board members who held conservative political views. These respondents anticipated pushback from the board if CCF principles were introduced or said it was difficult to even make diversity, equity and inclusion work a priority within the organization. Another common belief fundraisers shared was that board members felt "donors want to know 'where their money was going'" and thus, supported using phrases like "$X funds X number of widgets." As one participant said:

> Board members are unaware of CCF practices and are only familiar with the previous way of doing things. Educating them and getting them to come along with these new ideas isn't always easy. Since we're a new organization, I've been able to stop us from starting practices like a printed donor list, breakdown of funds [that] highlights admin/overhead, etc. but the board is constantly asking for it, because they don't know any other way.

Board members also were concerned with adopting practices that could impact major donors' giving, particularly around recognition (for themselves and other donors), or didn't understand the importance of recognizing loyal and first-time donors who might make smaller gifts. This familiarity with more traditional models of fundraising was also reinforced with fundraising "experts" and for-profit direct marketing agencies who "insist on tried and true strategies" and often present to boards and executive staff.

A somewhat smaller group of respondents also called out similar lack of knowledge and hesitations from executive directors and staff leaders who expressed resistance or felt that adopting such changes could put off some major donors and lead to a loss in fundraising revenue. As one participant wrote, "[T]he narrative of 'donor as hero' seems to be a prevailing refrain. [...] If I turned down someone's contribution of [$25,000], even if the donor truly is an abhorrence, I could see myself getting formally reprimanded or even fired."

3. Resource constraints: Funding challenges and financial realities

Organizations experiencing funding challenges also presented another barrier to adopting CCF-aligned actions, particularly in small organizations needing to grow or where there was a limited donor base and fewer opportunities to seek new funding. Respondents expressed the concern that "changing traditional [fundraising] practices will impact revenue metrics" and "jeopardize our ability to serve our clients." Some organizations shared that they were still trying to rebound financially after COVID-19, were experiencing operational deficits or "budget restraints," or trying to ensure staff salaries were at a living wage. As another respondent said, "There is still a 'we need to raise as much money as possible however we can' mentality because of the financial reality of our org[anization]." Several respondents also made references to their performance goals, which were financially based, or said that with significant organizational growth, it was difficult to take on more "collaborative and collective fundraising strategies" with other organizations while simultaneously trying to raise more funding.

4. Implementation challenges: The need for time and staff capacity to facilitate change

The time and effort required to rethink fundraising approaches showed up in several coded barriers and challenges: in how to reimagine fundraising, the time involved in developing new strategies, and staff capacity, all of which highlight the pressures fundraisers face and the difficulty of venturing into unchartered waters. Comments ranged from "Reimagining sponsorships is difficult"; to "moving away from transactional language is hard; it requires a high level of trust from donors." One respondent said, "Shifting the hero of our story from individual to community has simply taken time to become habit." Reimagining fundraising was also challenging depending on where else fundraisers had worked. As one fundraiser said, "Staff members who had previous fundraising experience in other organizations had to take time to unlearn previous practices or understand alternative methods," a comment echoed by others. Even when an organization's leaders were supportive of CCF, one participant said, "[I]t has taken a lot of my time and energy to teach them why we are adopting CCF practices and why this is important to our fundraising efforts and our organization overall."

Almost 30 responses mentioned that limited staff time or capacity affected their adoption of CCF, especially if there was only one fundraiser, part-time staff, or if the executive director also was the primary fundraiser. As one solo fundraiser said, "So much of my time is spent just getting everything done that has to be done and very little time is available for big picture thinking." Staff capacity also was an issue if an organization experienced frequent staff turnover. Building internal understanding among other staff also took time, and for some, they said the demands on program leadership has meant they can't move forward with CCF ideas.

Almost 30 responses mentioned that limited staff time or capacity affected their adoption of CCF, especially if there was only one fundraiser, part-time staff, or if the executive director also was the primary fundraiser.

On the positive side, one respondent said that thoughtful, steady change presents a path forward:

> We did not adopt these practices as CCF practices, we did them through decades of work, dialogue and execution of our mission. That's why it has worked for us. We are not perfect, and we continue to learn all the time. If an organization, regardless of its mission, tried to implement these practices quickly with no thought to its mission, it would be transactional at best and likely wouldn't stick. Change takes time and has to be related to mission.

5. External Factors and community engagement

The adoption of CCF principles is inherently connected to organizations' commitment to — and investment in — diversity, equity, and inclusion, efforts that have been increasingly polarized and under attack. Several comments mentioned barriers related to where organizations were located, including the racial composition and dominant political ideas in their communities. For example, a respondent from a Texas-based organization said we "don't want to lose funding [...] due to controversy around diversity and equity," referencing backlash and legislative restrictions regarding diversity, equity and inclusion, especially for those organizations connected to public higher education. Several comments also mentioned that "leaders don't feel it [CCF] would apply to our donor base since we're so rural and conservative" or that there was a prevailing feeling that "it doesn't matter to us since we live in a mostly white community and our staff has no BIPOC individuals."

One of our interviewees, whose organization represented ranchers, talked about moving her board along in the DEI process, an important aspect of adopting CCF principles.

> A consultant came in to guide us through getting our DEI statement because everyone there had misconceptions about what the DEI statement was or why we needed it or what it meant. [...] [T]he board has a lot of trust in the staff. So, when we come forward and say, "Hey, this is something we understand that we need to do, and this is what we need to do as an organization." They say, "Okay, we trust you." They've really put it on the staff which is great for us to have that space to do what we know we need to do. But then we make sure to drag them along in our committees, and talk them through what we're doing so we ensure they understand it and don't just couch it as liberal. We know the parameters we've got to work in. But that's part of why it's going to take time.

6. Cultural and structural barriers: Cultivating a new mindset amid a professionalized industry

Organizational culture change is always difficult, even when staff and leadership are on board. A final theme we highlight is about the structural impediments to implementing new ways of fundraising. As one respondent said, "So much of conversation in fundraising perpetuates old ways of thinking/approaches that contradict CCF practices. There is a lot of resistance from those who advocate 'what has always worked.'" This includes the broader fundraising industry of direct mail vendors, professional education and training, and consultants. As one interviewee said,

"There is a lot of resistance from those who advocate 'what has always worked.'" This includes the broader fundraising industry of direct mail vendors, professional education and training, and consultants.

> I have been to many webinars where I or someone else has asked questions about how you would apply CCF principles. And either they have no idea what we're talking about, which is sad, [...] or they'll say, "Well, this is what works." [...] The point is not that it works, the point is that it is not fair to the people that we're talking about, and it does not align with the principles of CCF, and it doesn't align with our own values as an organization. So, it's really hard to go from something that is proven to work to something that is kind of out in the jungle, the "fundraising jungle."

Another structural reality is economic inequality and wealth concentration, which can make it difficult for individuals and organizations to adopt an abundance mindset. Participants noted that existing fundraising practices can "uplift savorism" or are based in "historically white/wealth-centered events and practices." One respondent commented,

> The vast amounts of wealth that are concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer people has to make its way into the ecosystem. There are more than enough resources in the US to solve these problems but maybe not currently in circulation.

Its corollary, a "scarcity mindset about funding" also permeates the sector, whether that shows up in the prioritization of major gifts fundraising or reticence to partner with other organizations when each organization is trying to survive. As one respondent said:

> There is a lot of fear that if we do something to affect fundraising negatively, there are real people who depend on our services to meet their basic needs who will be affected. We know this is a false binary, but we've had to be intentional in addressing that in ourselves. We have not had pushback about CCF from our Board and Executive Director, or even our donors/volunteers/participants, but I think it's been hard to challenge our own thinking about the "right" way to fundraise and what will be effective. We've also had to practice challenging ourselves when it comes to "we've always done it this way" and accept that we'll try a bunch of things, and some might not work and that's ok because we'll learn from it.

Another participant said,

> It can be challenging to break old habits, and I find that we sometimes are falling back into them without realizing it. Adopting CCF practices requires reminders and reflections, and sometimes we are moving so fast we don't realize it until it's too late.

However, the challenge of change can also be invigorating, which one interviewee shared,

> I think that it's really exciting to be part of encouraging other people to question those norms, because I just don't know if everybody understands that they are working in a system that's built to not make any of this work. The old system was built to make nonprofit organizations live forever and all the community problems will still be there.

Adopting CCF: Taking the Next Step

While the survey provided an overall picture of how organizations were adopting CCF practices and which practices were most common, our interviews and the open-ended survey responses provided more detail on how fundraisers integrated CCF principles into their work and the creative ways they were experimenting with fundraising changes. The interviews stressed the importance of conversations about *why* these changes are necessary and *what* they mean to not just the organization but to their community. These conversations often included staff and other stakeholders to ensure that everyone in the organization understands the CCF principles and are on board with the change. When fundraisers didn't have internal support for making changes, some still moved forward with what they could change within their work independent of others in the organization.

When fundraisers didn't have internal support for making changes, some still moved forward with what they could change within their work independent of others in the organization.

Unsurprisingly, each organization has varied in how they have integrated CCF principles into their work. For example, several interviewees focused on how they present their community to donors and have updated the language and imagery they use to refer to their clients or beneficiaries. Other participants discussed how they have altered their events by including sliding scales for payment, choosing venues accessible to public transport, having captioning and/or ASL interpretation at events, or introducing a range of ways for people to give (e.g., having both an auction and $10 games). One interviewee said, "Our events are supposed to make people feel comfortable. Our audience and guests are diverse and have varying levels of ability to participate financially in the event and that's okay, we appreciate everyone that comes," while another respondent said, "We no longer do fundraising events but rather community events" and did away with a hierarchy of sponsorship levels.

Several participants discussed that their modified way of interacting with donors encourages people to give in whatever way is meaningful to them in hopes of creating deeper connections, having important conversations, and inviting donors deeper into the organizations' work. These conversations often happen at the same time as fundraisers engage donors in discussions about harmful mindsets/behaviors. As one interviewee said,

> We make sure that donors understand that this work is not about them, that this is about [the] community and we are going to bring them along in the process and help them learn and understand those things, and we're also going to have difficult conversations with them when we need to.

While we cannot list every action that participants shared, we highlight a few unique changes that respondents indicated their organizations were making:

> "Providing a wider variety of culturally diverse foods at our events."
>
> "Shifting our board composition to fulfill a range of roles, and not requiring a give/get minimum for board members."
>
> "Our development team meets monthly to discuss CCF principles and understand how we can better apply them to our work."
>
> "Allotting all unrestricted funds to direct provision of services for underserved populations."
>
> "We removed tiered benefits for our donors. We used to have a membership program, where members who gave more funds received more benefits, including free tickets to events and private parties. Now all donors have access to the same short list of benefits that do not have any dollar value attached to them."

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> "One specific thing we have adopted is donating a portion of all netted fundraised income to three Black or Indigenous-led partner non-profit organizations in our service area."

Additionally, newer organizations still forming their culture, values, and policies can introduce and integrate CCF principles from the outset, compared to older/more established organizations with existing donor bases and fundraising structures.

Recommendations for Fundraising and Philanthropy

Based on our findings, we conclude with recommendations for fundraising and philanthropy as well as implications for the field at large.

1. Increase awareness and education on CCF principles

While education about CCF principles is ongoing, participants noted that trainings and workshops dedicated to CCF tend to be offered outside of association-led professional development (e.g., AFP, Association for Healthcare Philanthropy), and often do not address how to bridge current fundraising practices to new practices rooted in CCF. While this gap is partly structural, and partly by design, as CCF is a both a counter-movement and one without significant infrastructure, the reality is that fundraisers cannot rebuild their programs overnight and will need to make iterative changes. Part of facilitating that change is to increase educational programming about CCF at local, regional, and national levels that discusses how to incorporate CCF principles into existing programs and practices. As one interviewee said:

> There's so much noise in the nonprofit world with so many webinars, I could attend webinars full time. But most of them are not even aware of or just ignore CCF, never mind doing a webinar through that lens. And I think that would be really helpful. That's the thing that I'm hungry for, is to take any area of fundraising and talk about it through the lens of CCF and talk about what it looks like. I'm always having to take the learnings and then try to apply the CCF principles myself.

In addition to training, education, and dedicated learning, there is also a need to develop and share case studies and practical examples of how organizations have successfully implemented CCF principles. This addresses the need for more concrete guidance on applying CCF principles, as highlighted by an interviewee who expressed a desire for more examples and data on how to do it better.

> I would love to hear from other organizations that are really implementing this. I love reading all the articles [...], but I would love to hear from other folks who are doing this and their own kind of experiences and challenges.

In addition to training, education, and dedicated learning, there is also a need to develop and share case studies and practical examples of how organizations have successfully implemented CCF principles.

2. Maintain commitments to inclusive and equitable practices

Second, fundraising teams and their organizations need to redouble their commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, even as the public and private sectors move into a period of retrenchment. Organizations should prioritize hiring practices that increase the diversity of fundraising teams, ensuring representation from BIPOC communities and taking steps to avoid tokenization. And larger teams should be cognizant of the importance of having multiple BIPOC fundraisers. One interviewee mentioned changing job posting language and being transparent about salary budgets to attract diverse candidates. Nonprofits also need to require anti-racism training for all staff, board members, and volunteers to create more inclusive organizational cultures where fundraisers from diverse backgrounds can thrive.

3. Align donor engagement and recognition with CCF practices

One of the easiest steps organizations can take is to implement inclusive donor recognition practices that celebrate contributions of all sizes and types, including time and talent. This can help shift the focus from large donors to a more community-centric approach.

> We removed tiered benefits for our donors. We used to have a membership program, where members who gave more funds received more benefits, including free tickets to events and private parties. Now all donors have access to the same short list of benefits that do not have any dollar value attached to them.

These findings also underscore the need to engage donors in transparent conversations about the complexities of nonprofits' work and larger systems of oppression. One interviewee suggested creating spaces for donors to have uncomfortable conversations and learn from them in a moderated environment.

> We make sure that donors understand that this work is not about them, that this is about community, and we are going to bring them along in the process and help them learn and understand those things, and we're also going to have difficult conversations with them when we need to.

4. Support collaborative efforts and mutual aid

One area of the CCF-aligned actions — lifting up, sharing, and supporting the broader ecosystem of nonprofits — was often mentioned as something fundraisers struggled to operationalize. While highlighting a partnership in communications seemed easy to accomplish, directing funding to another organization or engaging in joint fundraising campaigns seemed much more difficult. We encourage fundraisers to talk about ways to work together in the spirit of community and mutual support, perhaps starting with a Giving Day or community event, and call on donors and especially institutional funders to make sustaining commitments that enable fundraisers to try new approaches.

5. Address structural and cultural barriers

Finally, we recognize that adopting CCF practices requires a long-term commitment and ongoing effort. Changes should be thoughtful and aligned with the organization's mission, as noted by an interviewee who emphasized the importance of steady, long-term change: "We did not adopt these practices as CCF practices, we did them through decades of work, dialogue and execution of our mission. That's why it has worked for us." It's also important that fundraisers have the support needed to make these changes and the ability to make mistakes and learn from them. As one astute interviewee noted, since fundraising is white-dominated, it's important for white fundraisers to discuss and learn about CCF without placing the burden on BIPOC colleagues to serve as "educators" saying, "There might be room for a white-people-adjacent community to have some of these conversations so that the people who are people of color within CCF don't have to."

As this report shows, adopting Community-Centric Fundraising approaches is not only possible, but offers significant potential for shifting the power dynamics in philanthropy, ensuring that the needs and perspectives of the community are prioritized over those of wealthy donors. Increasing equity and inclusion in fundraising not only serves as a better reflection of the diversity of supporters and beneficiaries, but also leads to deeper, more authentic relationships and a greater sense of shared purpose. The findings also show promise that adopting CCF practices can impact fundraiser morale and organizational tenure, building a more sustainable and ethical fundraising model. While the CCF movement is still young, the steady pace of change and overall positive to neutral effects on fundraising results by early adopters should be shared widely to encourage more organizations to adopt these practices as nonprofit organizations work toward long-term impact and systemic change.

Adopting Community-Centric Fundraising approaches is not only possible, but offers significant potential for shifting the power dynamics in philanthropy, ensuring that the needs and perspectives of the community are prioritized over those of wealthy donors.

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Appendix

Table 2. Nonprofit organization demographics (n=283)

Demographic		Number	Percent of Sample
Structure	501(c)(3)	266	94%
	501(c)(4)	3	1%
	Fiscally sponsored organization	8	3%
	Unregistered groups	5	2%
Year Established	Pre-1980	101	36%
	1980-1999	88	31%
	2000-2009	48	17%
	2010-present	43	15%
U.S. Region	West	105	37%
	Midwest	77	27%
	South	58	21%
	Northeast	42	15%
Urban/Rural	Large city (over 300,000 people)	170	60%
	Mid-sized city (100,000 – 300,000 people)	49	17%
	Small city (under 100,000 people)	42	15%
	Rural community	19	7%
Organization Service Area	City/local	97	34%
	Regional (multi-city or multi-state)	86	30%
	State-wide	45	16%
	National	36	13%
	International	18	6%
Organization Subsector	Arts, Culture, Humanities	36	13%
	Association/Membership Organization	3	1%
	Civic or Public Affairs	31	11%
	Community/Economic Development	9	3%
	Higher Education	13	5%
	Education – K-12 & other	31	11%
	Environment	16	6%
	Health	32	11%
	Human Services	105	37%
	International	2	1%
	Religion	4	1%
Total Revenue	Under $1 million	67	24%
	$1 million - $5 million	91	32%
	Greater than $5 million	98	35%
Contributed Revenue	Under $1 million	96	34%
	$1 million - $5 million	117	41%
	Greater than $5 million	43	15%
Paid Fundraising Staff	0 staff	19	7%
	1 staff	79	28%
	2 to 5 staff	131	46%
	6 to 20 staff	45	16%
	More than 20 staff	7	3%
BIPOC Fundraising Staff	0 staff	150	53%
	1 staff	66	23%
	2 staff	28	10%
	3 or more staff	33	12%