



# Funding LGBTQ+ Projects

Navigating the U.S.  
Philanthropic Landscape





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## ABOUT THE DOROTHY A. JOHNSON CENTER FOR PHILANTHROPY

The Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University was established in 1992 with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Our mission is to be a global leader in helping individuals and organizations understand, strengthen, and advance philanthropy, resulting in a smart, adaptive sector that helps create strong, inclusive communities.

We put research to work with and for professionals across the country and the world. Through professional education offerings; research, evaluation, and consulting services; and bold thinking to advance the field, we support a philanthropic ecosystem defined by effective philanthropy, strong nonprofits, and informed community change.

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We also acknowledge the sobering context in which this report is published. The United States is currently experiencing an authoritarian shift that will likely extend far beyond a single presidential term, creating sustained challenges for LGBTQ+ organizations and the broader social justice sector. We anticipate that available funding from private donors in general and from government sources in particular will decrease significantly during this period. This guide is designed to complement other survival strategies that organizational leaders may need to employ, including reducing operational costs, exploring mergers with other organizations, and fundamentally restructuring operations.

We must be honest about the reality facing the LGBTQ+ rights movement: not all organizations will survive the years to come. Despite the strength of their missions, the quality of their work, and the dedication of their staff and volunteers, some organizations will be forced to close due to circumstances beyond their control.

This acknowledgment extends to the systemic barriers embedded within philanthropy itself. Organizations and leaders can follow every piece of advice in this guide, implement best practices flawlessly, and still struggle to secure adequate funding. This is particularly true for organizations led by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and/or transgender leaders and groups specifically serving Indigenous, Black, poor, migrant, transgender, or non-English speaking communities. These organizations often face additional barriers to being seen as “credible” within the philanthropic landscape — barriers that reflect the sector’s own limitations rather than any shortcoming in their work or approach.

While this guide offers practical strategies drawn from successful organizations and the advice of experienced philanthropic funders and donor advisors, we recognize that our sector itself requires significant transformation. The fundraising challenges faced by many organizations are not simply matters of technique or strategy; they are symptoms of more profound systemic inequities that demand collective attention and action.

## Advisory Committee

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- Allison Scott, Campaign for Southern Equality
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# Introduction: The Current Funding Reality

LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations across the U.S. currently face a harsh funding reality that demands honest acknowledgment and strategic response. While existing funding data reveals concerning patterns — with resources concentrated among a few large institutions rather than flowing to community-based organizations, transgender-focused groups, and grassroots efforts — the challenges are deepening amid an increasingly hostile political climate. Even while public support for LGBTQ+ rights has generally increased over time, a [national study by PRRI](#) (2024) found that while support for non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people remains high (76%), that support has dropped from a high of 80% in 2022. In response to these realities and recognizing the urgent need to help organizations diversify funding streams and transition from small grants to larger funding pools, two stalwart LGBTQ+ funders — the Arcus Foundation and Tikkun Olam Foundation, Inc. — commissioned the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (Johnson Center) at Grand Valley State University to study the current LGBTQ+ funding landscape and develop this fundraising guide to support movement leaders navigating these complex challenges.

## The Numbers Don't Lie

In 2023, LGBTQ+ organizations received **\$209.4 million** from 826 funders — just **20 cents for every \$100** awarded by all U.S. foundations, according to the Funders for LGBTQ Issues [2023 Resource Tracking Report: LGBTQ Grantmaking by U.S. Foundations](#) (2025). This represents a **19% decrease (\$48.7 million)** from 2022 levels, with the 10 largest funders reducing their support by **\$38.9 million**.

Rising inflation compounds this decrease in funding, while escalating legislative attacks on trans rights and federal funding cuts to LGBTQ+ services over the past three years have created an unprecedented need to protect existing rights and provide services and resources in states where rights have been diminished. **In short, communities face a widening gap between resources and need, especially as private donors likely cannot fill the gulf created by 2025's federal funding cuts.**

## A Complex Landscape: Opportunities and Challenges

Despite these sobering numbers, this research shows that strong donor interest in LGBTQ+ projects remains. However, organizations must navigate polarizing political divides, regional resource gaps, shifting donor priorities, and economic pressures alongside emerging opportunities in fundraising. While these challenges exist for any nonprofit leader, they are especially acute for LGBTQ+ leaders whose very identities may be simultaneously under attack as they carry out this work.

### EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

On the positive side, philanthropic funding trends indicate that trust-based and intersectional grantmaking approaches are gaining momentum, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and centering community voices in the grantmaking process. Rapid-response funding for counter-discriminatory work, like Pride Foundation's Fortitude Fund, Borealis Philanthropy's Fund

for Trans Generations, and the Action for Transformation Fund (a partnership between the Transgender Law Center and Emergent Fund) have also emerged in response to executive orders and federal funding cuts.

### PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Political backlash and executive orders targeting LGBTQ+ rights have created a restrictive funding environment, with organizations experiencing funding cuts in response to advocacy work and public policy positions. Simultaneous attacks on and the sunsetting of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across corporate and governmental sectors have made many funders increasingly risk-averse, leading to a reduced willingness to make visible commitments to LGBTQ+ causes or to fund organizations engaged in advocacy and policy work. Regional resource gaps persist — especially in the U.S. South and Southeast — while barriers remain high for smaller and newer organizations as they establish themselves. The COVID-19 funding aftermath has left many organizations struggling to maintain programs launched with one-time emergency support, as new funders have not stepped in.

### THE NEW DONOR REALITY

Perhaps most significantly, even wealthy individual donors might now face, or at least feel, personal risk for their philanthropic giving in this climate, creating a chilling effect. During one of over a dozen interviews with foundation leaders, philanthropic advisors, and intermediaries, one interviewee explained: *“There’s the polycrisis, there’s economic uncertainty, and there’s the potential personal risk of being targeted as a donor because you’re funding progressive work. People with wealth are not used to feeling at personal risk like frontline movement leaders.”*

### THE WORK AHEAD

LGBTQ+ organizations have survived hostile periods before, but today’s scale of challenges is unprecedented. The current authoritarian shift, backed by coordinated government and billionaire-funded attacks that scapegoat LGBTQ+ communities, has created a climate where many funders are reluctant to be publicly associated with supporting LGBTQ+ movement work. This reality means that many organizations will not survive the next five years, regardless of the quality of their work or leadership.

For organizations navigating this landscape, success cannot be measured solely by traditional growth metrics. Strategic downsizing, controlled mergers, and even mindful organizational closure can represent responsible leadership rather than failure. These transitions deserve the same thoughtful planning and funding support as organizational startups. Organizations must clearly understand these dynamics and develop the skills to navigate unprecedented complexity while remaining focused on their mission.

This guide is written in support of those efforts as well as with the desire to fundraise and grow impact, recognizing that individual fundraising success or failure often reflects systemic barriers rather than organizational shortcomings. Leaders should approach this work with self-compassion, understanding that external forces beyond their control significantly impact outcomes.

## Methodology

This guide draws on comprehensive research to provide practical, evidence-based strategies that will help organizations understand the LGBTQ+ funding landscape and make a compelling case for donor support. Specifically, the Johnson Center engaged in the following activities:

- 1. Funding analysis:** Researchers analyzed 518 funding entities that had awarded two or more LGBTQ+-focused grants in 2022, including public and private foundations, nonprofit re-granters, intermediary organizations, community foundations, and donor advised fund account entities, to understand funding contours and provide perspective beyond just the largest grantmakers and most well-known names.<sup>1</sup> Notably, not all these funders explicitly identify as “LGBTQ+ donors” or name LGBTQ+ issues and communities in their stated focus areas, reflecting the broader landscape of organizations that provide support to LGBTQ+ causes through general equity, health, or social justice funding. Because our data includes public, 501(3) nonprofit funders in addition to foundations, our data diverges from the Funders for LGBTQ Issues resource tracking report. We also did not assess how grants were distributed to specific communities within a broad LGBTQ+ community designation.
- 2. Expert interviews:** Researchers conducted over a dozen interviews with foundation leaders, philanthropic advisors, and intermediaries to understand current funding dynamics and decision-making processes.
- 3. Case studies:** Researchers interviewed leaders and wrote two organizational case studies about organizations that experienced successful growth to identify replicable strategies and common success factors.

The interviews are the primary source for much of what follows, providing insider perspectives on what funders are looking for and how organizations can position themselves for success, even amid a challenging funding environment.

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis is based on a list of 277 funders identified by Funders for LGBTQ Issues that made two or more LGBTQ+ grants and had total LGBTQ+ giving of at least \$1,000. An additional 233 funders were identified via the Candid database, all of which made at least three grants to LGBTQ+ rights.





# Understanding the LGBTQ+ Funder Landscape: What the Data Tells Us

To develop effective fundraising strategies, LGBTQ+ organizations need to understand which funders are supporting movement work and how resources flow across different types of funders and regions. The analysis below is based on a pooled sample of 518 organizations that made two or more grants to LGBTQ+ causes, revealing important patterns that can inform future fundraising approaches.<sup>2</sup> This analysis discusses several characteristics of these funders overall, as well as their specific LGBTQ+ grantmaking. Please note that this data is based on publicly-available information from 2022, the most recent year available, and the analysis involved making informed assumptions and using approximate matching techniques to connect data from different sources. As with any data analysis of this scope, there are inherent limitations in accuracy and completeness that readers should consider when interpreting the findings.

## The Funding Ecosystem: A Balanced Mix

The data reveal a surprisingly balanced funding ecosystem. **Fifty-four percent of LGBTQ+ funders are private organizations, namely corporate and private grantmaking foundations, while 46% are public nonprofits**, such as community foundations, LGBTQ+ foundations, charitable nonprofits that operate donor advised funds, intermediaries, and nonprofits that make grants to others. This indicates that LGBTQ+ organizations have access to diverse funding sources rather than relying on a single type of funder.

Breaking this down further:

- **Private grantmaking foundations** constitute the largest funder category at 43% (224 funders)
- An assortment of **public charities, such as donor advised fund institutions and nonprofits that regrant funds**, follows at 25% (130 funders)
- **Community foundations and LGBTQ+-specific foundations** comprise 14% (74 funders)
- **Corporate foundations** represent 11% (57 funders)
- **Intermediaries** make up 6% (33 funders)

While private grantmaking foundations represent nearly twice the share of funders as the next-highest category, combining public charities, community foundations, and LGBTQ+-specific foundations yields almost the same number of funders, indicating that a variety of funding streams and funder types are available.

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<sup>2</sup> The following analysis comes from the IRS form 990 and 990-PF for the 518 funders identified.

## Grantmaking to LGBTQ+ Organizations

Our grants-level analysis based on 2022 data suggests that **LGBTQ+ organizations are competitive for most grant opportunities** from community foundations and public charities. The funding gap between LGBTQ+ organizations and other grantees only appears above grants in the \$100,000 range and above, indicating that mega-grants may be less accessible to LGBTQ+ organizations. Our data suggests that **private foundations may prioritize LGBTQ+ organizations** for mid-to-large grants, potentially reflecting a strategic focus on supporting marginalized communities.

Analysis of individual grants shows:

- **Among public charities and community foundations:** LGBTQ+ organizations receive virtually identical grant amounts to other nonprofits through the 90th percentile, or grants at about \$100,000
- **Private foundations:** LGBTQ+ organizations receive higher grant amounts in the 75th-95th percentiles than other nonprofits (grants ranging from \$5,000 through \$112,500), with LGBTQ+ organizations receiving double the funding at the 90th percentile as non-LGBTQ+ organizations (\$50,000 vs. \$25,000)

Although organizational leaders or fundraisers may assume that LGBTQ+ organizations are disadvantaged in grant competitions, this data contradicts that assumption. In fact, in recent years, these organizations have performed well, particularly with private foundations. However, it is worth noting that we are in a rapidly changing funding environment in 2025, with anecdotal reports indicating that funders and donors are pulling back from LGBTQ+ organizations.

## Regional Patterns and Grant Competition Reality

### GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION BY FUNDER TYPE

Based on the funder's location headquarters, private foundations are the most prevalent type of funder across all four U.S. Census Regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West). As shown in Table 1, private foundations are overrepresented in the Northeast (55% of funders) and Midwest (43% of funders). Community and LGBTQ+ foundations comprise a larger share of funders in both the Midwest and West (at 19% each) and the South (18%), suggesting opportunities to develop community foundation relationships in these regions. Comparatively, the South

**Table 1. Geographic Distribution by Funder Type**

Census Region	Public Charities	Community and LGBTQ+ Foundations	Corporate Foundations	Intermediary Funders and Grantmakers	Private Foundations	Total
Midwest	15 (17%)	17 (19%)	15 (17%)	4 (5%)	38 (43%)	89
Northeast	41 (23%)	15 (9%)	16 (9%)	8 (5%)	97 (55%)	177
South	34 (33%)	18 (18%)	6 (6%)	8 (8%)	37 (36%)	103
West	35 (29%)	23 (19%)	9 (7%)	12 (10%)	44 (36%)	123
Unknown	5 (19%)	1 (4%)	11 (42%)	1 (4%)	8 (31%)	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>518</b>

and West have fewer corporate foundations, and the Midwest has the fewest public charities supporting LGBTQ+ organizations.

### THE COMPETITION LANDSCAPE

Understanding grant competition is crucial for realistic planning:

- **75% of all grants are \$25,385 or smaller** (the 75th percentile), with 338 of 378 funders (89%) making grants at this level
- Fewer than 120 funders make grants of \$100,000 or more
- Only 34 funders (9%) made grants of \$500,000 or more
- Just 14 funders made grants of \$1 million or more

### REGIONAL GRANT-SIZE ADVANTAGES

Despite having fewer funders, the Midwest consistently provides higher average grant amounts for LGBTQ+ organizations (average of \$81,045), while the Northeast's strength lies in volume (number of grants) rather than individual grant size. LGBTQ+ funders in the South have the lowest average grant size, at \$44,108 (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Regional Variations of LGBTQ+ Grantees From 2022**

Region	Number of Grants	Average Dollar Amount Per Grant
Midwest	171	\$81,045
Northeast	701	\$59,018
South	555	\$44,108
West	628	\$55,792

## Strategic Implications: Match Your Strategy to the Data

### TARGETED ADVICE

- **For emerging organizations:** Focus on community foundations and the 338 funders making grants under \$25,000. These represent your most accessible funding pool with reasonable competition levels.
- **For established organizations:** Target the 120 funders making grants between \$25,000-\$100,000, which are substantial enough to create impact but not so large that only a handful of organizations can compete.
- **For major organizations:** Competition for grants over \$500,000 is intense, with only 34 potential funders nationwide. Success requires exceptional alignment, established relationships, and demonstrated impact.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ALL ORGANIZATIONS

### Diversify Your Approach

With the relatively balanced mix between private and public funders, organizations should develop the capacity to work with multiple funders rather than focusing exclusively on one category. This might include building relationships with local community foundations, regional corporate funders, and national private foundations simultaneously, while also developing expertise in both government contracting and private donor cultivation. Organizations should also consider diversifying revenue streams beyond traditional grantmaking, such as exploring social enterprise models, fee-for-service programs, or mission-aligned business ventures that can provide more stable income sources while advancing organizational goals.

### Build on Your Strengths

The data show that LGBTQ+ organizations are successfully competing for grants with non-LGBTQ+ organizations, particularly with respect to private foundations. When approaching funders, lead with your organization's unique value proposition, demonstrated impact, and strategic vision rather than emphasizing your limitations or resource constraints. Frame your funding request around the opportunities your support creates, not just the problems you're trying to solve.

### Consider Geographic Strategy

Organizations based in the Northeast and West may have access to more diverse funding options, while those in the Midwest and South should prioritize building private foundation relationships and consider approaching national funders.

Success requires strategically positioning your organization to access the mix of funding sources that best match your size, location, and programmatic focus.

### Think Cumulatively

Rather than seeking one large grant, building relationships with multiple smaller funders often provides more sustainable support. Consistent, smaller funding from multiple sources can be more reliable than competing for the few mega-grants available. However, managing multiple smaller grants requires significantly more staff time for reporting and relationship management, so organizations should weigh this administrative burden against the benefits of diversified funding when developing their strategy.

### Planning for Success

This landscape analysis confirms that LGBTQ+ organizations operate in a diverse funding environment with opportunities across multiple funder types and regions. Success requires understanding these patterns and strategically positioning your organization to access the mix of funding sources that best match your size, location, and programmatic focus.

# Five Essential Fundraising Principles

Before diving into specific types of funders, successful LGBTQ+ organizations should master five universal principles that create a strong foundation for all fundraising efforts.

## 1. Use Data and Tell Your Story

**Use credible data sources** like the [Williams Institute](#) and [U.S. Trans Survey](#) to ground your work in evidence. Combine this data with authentic, compelling community stories that illustrate your impact on people's lives. Provide measurable outcomes, whenever possible, that show how your work leads to concrete results. The [Movement-Defined Learning Project](#) from Borealis Philanthropy offers a range of additional metrics and evaluation approaches that can be utilized by organizations focused on organizing and power-building in a less-extractive manner.

As one funder explained, *“Trying to really articulate what the ‘value add’ of your group is and what you’re really good at is important.”* Demonstrate what makes your organization uniquely valuable and how your work aligns with multiple ecosystems, such as the broader LGBTQ+ movement or the funder’s priority areas (e.g., health, youth development, community safety, economic mobility, or other focus areas).

For non-LGBTQ+-focused funders, emphasize the intersections between your mission and their interests — such as addressing youth homelessness, improving public health outcomes, or strengthening community resilience — while maintaining your LGBTQ+-specific expertise and impact.

## 2. Communicate Effectively

### PREPARE A SUCCINCT OVERVIEW

**Master your elevator pitch.** Many funders welcome informational meetings with prospective grantees, but you may only have 30-45 minutes to describe your work and get input: *“You cannot give me your whole organization’s life cycle, your whole vision, in that 30 minutes. Give me the top-level points where I am going to be left wanting more,”* says one grantmaker.

**Be ready to list key accomplishments quickly.** Be able to explain your budget size and funding use clearly and translate your day-to-day work into accessible language that anyone can understand. Have a story ready to share that showcases your work. Make a strong case for organizing and movement work; while foundations may understand a systems approach, individual donors may need education about why this approach creates lasting change.

### TRANS AND BIPOC REPRESENTATION MATTERS

#### Demonstrate authentic transgender and BIPOC leadership and accountability.

Organizations must move beyond surface-level representation to genuine power-sharing with trans and BIPOC communities. If you claim to be community-led, **break down** what that actually means, says another funder: *“Explain the actual feedback loops you’ve got and partnerships you’ve got, and who’s really working with you.”* Demonstrate how transgender and BIPOC individuals within your organization hold decision-making power, influence strategic direction, and have mechanisms in place to hold leadership accountable. This means highlighting board

composition, staff leadership roles, community advisory structures, and how community input directly shapes programming and organizational priorities.

### 3. Build Strategic Alliances and Leverage Relationships

#### PROGRAMMATIC COLLABORATION

Partner with movement leaders and regional networks for mission-driven work. Funders want to see organizations working together rather than in isolation. As one advisor emphasized, *“We need collaboration amongst the movement more than ever.”* Join coalitions for policy advocacy and community impact, but avoid “parachuting in” to communities; become a genuine partner with shared accountability.

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#### DONOR RELATIONSHIP STRATEGY

Rather than seeking entry to exclusive donor events, leverage your current funders as bridges to new opportunities. Ask existing supporters how they can help showcase your work: Could they invite you to present at a philanthropy conference? Host a funder meet-and-greet? Co-sponsor a webinar highlighting your expertise? Become a thought partner to both movement allies and funders by anticipating trends, sharing insights, and positioning your organization as a strategic voice in the field.

#### STAY AGILE

Funders value *“groups that are agile and willing to change over time and don’t run away from change, but embrace it,”* while maintaining a solid track record and being aligned to the mission.

### 4. Work With Intermediaries

For fundraisers and staff at smaller and emerging organizations, do not overlook intermediary organizations that can provide:

- Access to funding opportunities and technical support
- Coaching and leadership development
- Essential operational and security tools
- Connections to other funders
- Opportunities to collaborate and learn from similar organizations

These partnerships can significantly expand your capacity and reach.

## 5. Do Your Research

### KNOW YOUR FUNDERS

You can research funder prospects by reviewing their Form 990s from sources like ProPublica to see who they have funded previously. Check annual reports of organizations like yours to identify new potential funders. This homework shows professionalism and helps you tailor your approach.

Understanding a funder's priorities, giving patterns, and recent grants helps you determine fit and craft compelling proposals that align with their interests.

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### NAVIGATE INCREASED SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

Be aware that the current political climate has led some organizations and funders to remove contact information from websites or reduce public visibility for safety reasons. This may make traditional outreach more challenging. Focus on leveraging warm introductions through existing networks, working through intermediary organizations, and building relationships with funders who are publicly supportive of LGBTQ+ causes. When direct contact information isn't available, consider reaching out through social media channels or professional networks where organizations maintain a presence.

These principles serve as building blocks for the approaches outlined below. Organizations that invest in developing these fundamental skills tend to be more successful in their relationships with diverse funders, from individuals to major foundations.



# I. Fundraising From Community Foundations: Local Partnerships, Local Impact

Community foundations occupy a unique position in the funding landscape. They are local institutions with deep community connections, serving as both grantmakers and intermediaries between donors and nonprofits. For LGBTQ+ organizations, they can be invaluable partners, particularly for smaller and emerging groups seeking their first institutional funding.

Although they exist nationwide, community foundations are especially significant in regions with strong philanthropic infrastructure, including the Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast. LGBTQ-giving practices of community foundations across the country were significantly shaped by a strategic initiative led by [Funders for LGBTQ Issues](#) over a decade ago, which aimed to organize community foundations to establish LGBTQ-specific funds. Examples of community foundations that have long supported LGBTQ+ initiatives include the [Boston Foundation](#), [The Miami Foundation](#), and [The Chicago Community Trust](#), among others.

Organizations should research their local community foundations' giving priorities and application processes, as many have specific funds dedicated to social justice or marginalized communities.

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## Understanding Community Foundations

Community foundations usually serve specific geographic regions, from single cities to entire states. Unlike private foundations that operate based on a family's or corporation's interests, community foundations respond to local needs and donor interests within their communities. They manage multiple funding streams and often serve as neutral conveners for community issues.

Importantly, many community foundations are actively working to be more accessible to nonprofits and grantees. As one program officer explained, *"We want nonprofits to know we're here. We don't want to be a gateway. We want to be a bridge."* This philosophy makes them particularly valuable for LGBTQ+ organizations seeking to build relationships and credibility.

## How Community Foundations Operate

### MULTIPLE FUNDING MECHANISMS

Community foundations offer various pathways to funding, often with different decision-making processes:

- **Giving circles and field-of-interest funds, like an LGBTQ+ or women's fund**, often involve a wide network of donors and use participatory or advisory structures to guide grantmaking and center community voices.
- **Competitive community grants** present opportunities where LGBTQ+ organizations can be competitive based on community needs and community-led approaches.
- **Donor-advised fund custodians** are foundation staff who actively connect organizations aligned with donor interests to individual donors who establish specified philanthropic funds.
- **Responsive grantmaking** is distinguished by an ability to address emergencies quickly due to local proximity and flexible funding.

### RANGE OF SUPPORT

Community foundations can fund everything from small grants (\$1,000-\$10,000) for emerging organizations or volunteer efforts — such as Pride events or school speakers — to larger strategic initiatives. They can also commission research and needs assessments and serve as conveners and coalition builders within their geographic areas.

### BRIDGE-BUILDING ROLE

Staff who advise donor fund-holders often actively work to “*communicate a nonprofit's needs and successes to donors*,” and can share LGBTQ+ community organizations with colleagues and board members who may not be as familiar with these issues.



## Strategies for Success



### 1. ESTABLISH YOUR PRESENCE

**Maintain updated profiles** in nonprofit databases, including local databases established by community foundations. This is your opportunity to tell your story in your own voice and ensure you are visible when opportunities arise.



### 2. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS EARLY

**Schedule one-on-one calls** with program officers and advisors, even when you are not seeking immediate funding. These relationships take time to develop, and internal staff can become valuable advocates for your work.



### 3. DEMONSTRATE LOCAL ROOTS

**Align with local priorities** and demonstrate your regional impact. Community foundations are accountable to their place-based communities, so show how your work addresses specific local needs and involves local stakeholders.



### 4. LEVERAGE CREDIBILITY

Leverage community foundation grants as institutional validation when approaching other funders. These grants demonstrate that a respected local institution has already vetted your organization, reviewed your financials, and endorsed your work. This third-party validation carries significant weight with other potential funders who may be unfamiliar with your organization, as it signals credibility and community support.



### 5. THINK SMALL TO START

Do not overlook small grants. For emerging organizations, a \$2,000 grant can provide crucial seed funding and help you establish a track record that opens doors to larger opportunities.



### 6. EMBRACE A FOUNDATION'S CONNECTOR ROLE

Take advantage of community foundations' willingness to connect you with donor-advised fund holders and individuals in the community. As one program officer noted: *"We are being really active with donor advised funds ... community foundations are trying hard to make sure they're connecting donors; it's one of the first places I tell a small group to go."*

## Why Community Foundations Matter

Community foundations can be particularly valuable for LGBTQ+ organizations because they:

- Understand local context and can advocate for LGBTQ+ needs within their communities
- Offer multiple entry points for funding relationships
- Provide credibility that helps with other funders
- Can respond quickly to emerging needs and opportunities
- Serve organizations of all sizes, from grassroots to established nonprofits

For many LGBTQ+ organizations, especially those just starting out or operating in conservative regions, community foundations may be the most accessible path to institutional funding and community legitimacy.





## II. Intermediary Partnerships: Bridging Resources and Communities

Intermediary organizations represent one of the most accessible and supportive funding pathways for LGBTQ+ organizations, particularly small and emerging organizations and those led by and serving communities of color, transgender people, and grassroots movements. These public nonprofits serve as crucial bridges between large institutional funders and community-based organizations and can offer high-touch and immediate support to existing and new grantees.

### Understanding Intermediary Organizations

#### WHAT THEY ARE

Intermediaries are nonprofits that actively fundraise from larger foundations, individuals, and corporate donors and redistribute those funds, often with a more regional or local focus. Key intermediaries for LGBTQ+ funding include [Borealis Philanthropy](#), [Contigo Fund](#), [Emergent Fund](#), [CenterLink](#), [Third Wave Fund](#), and [Movement Voter Project](#), among others.

#### AN INTERMEDIARY'S MISSION

These organizations exist to democratize philanthropy by moving resources closer to communities and centering the voices of those most impacted by systemic oppression. They often prioritize funding organizations that larger foundations might overlook due to size, location, or approach. They also frequently work at the intersection of multiple issues, such as reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, or towards building democracy among disenfranchised communities.

### How Intermediaries Operate

#### FUNDING PHILOSOPHY

Intermediaries typically provide flexible, single, or multi-year general operating support rather than restricting grants to specific programs. This approach recognizes that grassroots organizations need unrestricted funds to respond to community needs and build organizational capacity.

#### ACCESSIBLE PROCESSES

Unlike many large foundations, intermediaries often prioritize having accessible grant application processes. As one program officer explained, *“We try to have a more accessible grant application, which means you can reach out to our program officers to have a conversation about whether my work fits? What does that look like? We like to be accessible to our folks, not inaccessible, which is what we hear that folks experience in philanthropy — they don’t know who to get in contact with. They don’t know if their work is a good fit. They don’t know what is required.”*

## RAPID RESPONSE CAPABILITY

Many intermediaries can also respond quickly to emerging needs and set up rapid funding streams, whether responding to legislative attacks, natural disasters, or community crises.

## BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

Some intermediaries focus on organizations under a certain budget threshold (ranging from annual budgets anywhere from \$250,000 up to \$1 million), to ensure that resources reach grassroots groups.

# What Intermediaries Provide Beyond Funding

## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Intermediaries recognize that sustainable organizations need more than money — they need skills and systems. Therefore, many intermediaries offer comprehensive leadership development programs, organizational development support, and strategic planning assistance in addition to funding. They can also help with board development and leadership training, which are particularly valuable for grassroots organizations transitioning from informal volunteer efforts to incorporated nonprofits.

Beyond traditional grants, many intermediaries provide essential resources that organizations desperately need but often cannot afford. This includes safety and security resources for organizations facing legal threats, digital tools and technology support to build organizational infrastructure, and legal and compliance assistance to navigate complex regulatory requirements. They also create valuable convening and networking opportunities that help organizations build relationships and learn from peers. In short, intermediaries are high-touch and low-effort (on the part of grantees), making them particularly valuable as funding partners.

## NETWORKING AND CONNECTIONS

Intermediaries also help larger funders connect with local and regional partner organizations, serving as trusted scouts for institutional philanthropy. So, they can often be a pathway for organizations to gain wider recognition.

As one program officer noted, *“One thing that I would always encourage grantees to consider is, how can the program officer that you’re connected to, or that initial grant that you receive, how can they play a major role in connecting you to further resources and even helping to support grassroots fundraising campaigns?”*

## RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING AND ADVISING

Intermediary program staff often provide informal guidance about funding strategies, pitch development, and organizational growth. Their staff often have organizing backgrounds in and understand movement work intimately.

## Strategies for Working With Intermediaries



### START WITH A CONVERSATION

Reach out to program staff for exploratory conversations, even before you are ready to apply for funding. Program officers want to help you determine if your organization is a fit and can guide your application strategy.



### THINK LONG TERM

View intermediaries as long-term partners, not just funders. They can become advocates who help connect you to other opportunities and provide ongoing support as you grow.



### BE OPEN ABOUT NEEDS

Do not just ask for money, discuss your broader organizational needs. Intermediaries often provide or connect organizations to technical assistance, leadership development, and other capacity-building resources.



### LEVERAGE THEIR MOVEMENT CONNECTIONS

Take advantage of intermediaries' deep movement connections. They can introduce you to peer organizations, coalition opportunities, and other funders who share your values and work in the broader ecosystem, giving you opportunities to find new partners and strengthen your collaboration.



### CONSIDER THEM AS “MOVEMENT PARTNERS”

Many intermediary staff *“view themselves as movement fundraising”* partners rather than traditional grantmakers. Engage with them as allies who understand the challenges you face and want to support your success.



### ASK FOR INTRODUCTIONS

Do not hesitate to ask program officers to make introductions to other funders or provide references when you are applying elsewhere. They often welcome these opportunities to advocate for strong grantees.

## Why Intermediaries Matter

Intermediaries fill a crucial gap in the funding ecosystem by:

- Making institutional philanthropy more accessible to grassroots organizations
- Providing flexible, trust-based funding models
- Offering wraparound support beyond grant dollars
- Centering community voices in funding decisions
- Serving as bridges to additional resources and opportunities

For LGBTQ+ organizations, particularly those led by people of color or working in conservative regions, intermediaries often provide not just funding but legitimacy, connections, and capacity-building support that can transform organizational trajectory.





## III. Building Your Private Foundation Approach: From Family Foundations to Institutional Grantmakers

Private foundations represent some of the most significant funding opportunities in LGBTQ+ philanthropy, but they can require different strategies depending on their size, structure, and decision-making processes. Understanding whether you are approaching an institutional grantmaker or a family foundation is crucial for crafting an effective approach.

### Understanding the Private Foundation Landscape

Private foundations generally fall into two main categories, each with distinct characteristics that shape how they operate and make funding decisions: institutional grantmakers and family foundations.

#### INSTITUTIONAL GRANTMAKERS

Large institutional foundations like [Arcus Foundation](#), [Ford Foundation](#), and [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) set their own strategic priorities and programmatic issue areas through formal strategic processes involving boards, staff, and sometimes external consultants. These foundations often have formal structures, policies, and procedures along with clear programmatic focus areas and structured grantmaking processes.

#### How They Operate

These foundations may work through intermediaries to reach grassroots organizations, or may have an open and/or invitation-only submission process. Therefore, grant success requires having clear alignment with the stated foundation goals. However, even if your programming does not fit a current funding call, program officers can still be a resource, serving as way-finders and internal advocates for organizations navigating the funding process.

#### Decision-making

Institutional foundations typically have formal grant review processes, committee structures, and board approval requirements, which can often take months to navigate from submission to final decision. However, once you are in their funding portfolio, grantee relationships tend to be more stable and potentially larger in scale.

## Family Foundations

Family foundations usually reflect the personal interests and values of individuals or families, with staff supporting and representing these priorities rather than setting independent agendas. These foundations often have more flexibility in their grantmaking decisions but can also be more unpredictable.

### GEOGRAPHIC AND FOCUS PARAMETERS

Many family foundations have specific geographic parameters around where the family lives, such as funding only in certain states or focusing funding on specific areas like rural communities, to maximize impact. They may also concentrate funding on issue areas that reflect family interests and experiences.

### INVITATION-BASED PROCESS

Unlike institutional foundations that may have open application processes, family foundations often work through proposals by invitation only. Therefore, building relationships with a family foundation's program staff and getting on their radar requires different strategies and is more akin to working with individual donors.

### RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED

Family foundations typically seek long-term relationships with organizational leadership and place significant emphasis on building trust in individuals and their vision. They are investing in people as much as programs.

### GRANT CHARACTERISTICS

Family foundation grants may be unrestricted or program-based depending on the funder, though there is notable growth in foundations adopting trust-based philanthropy approaches even among smaller foundations. Many foundations also seek out smaller organizations where a modest grant (e.g., \$25,000-\$50,000) will have a larger impact, and they often provide consistent support year-to-year once relationships are established.

## Strategies for Success



### DO YOUR RESEARCH THOROUGHLY

Before approaching any private foundation, understand their funding history, strategic priorities, and eligibility requirements. For institutional foundations, review their strategic plans and recent grant announcements. For family foundations, research the family's interests and philanthropic funding history, which is available via IRS 990 forms or on websites or annual reports.



### ENSURE CLEAR ALIGNMENT

#### For Institutional Foundations

Demonstrate how your work directly advances their stated strategic priorities. Use their language and framework when describing your programs.

#### For Family Foundations

Show how your organization's mission and approach align with their values and interests. Even if they have not explicitly funded LGBTQ+ work before, you might be able to show how an issue like homelessness is disproportionately experienced by LGBTQ+ youth, making the case for grant support.



### PRESENT STORIES AND SUCCESSES

Both types of foundations want to see evidence of impact. Prepare proposals with clear metrics, success stories, and data that demonstrate your effectiveness and potential for greater impact with additional resources.



### UNDERSTAND THEIR PROCESS

Do not assume you know how a foundation operates. Ask direct questions of staff, like, *“If you were to consider us for funding, what’s the process like?”* or, *“how do I get into your lane to be considered?”* This helps you navigate their specific requirements with clear understanding.



### BUILD RELATIONSHIPS STRATEGICALLY

#### For Institutional Foundations

Focus on building relationships with program officers who can become internal champions for your work.

#### For Family Foundations

Invest time in building trust with key decision-makers, be they staff or the individuals within a family, as these relationships often determine funding success more than proposal quality alone.



#### CONSIDER THE INTERMEDIARY ROUTE

For institutional foundations, consider working with intermediaries who already have established relationships with larger funders. They can provide introductions and context that may be difficult to achieve through cold outreach.



#### THINK LONG-TERM

Both types of foundations prefer sustained relationships over one-time grants. Position your initial request as the beginning of a partnership rather than a stand-alone transaction.

### Key Considerations

Private foundations represent significant opportunities for LGBTQ+ organizations, but success requires patience, research, and strategic relationship-building. The investment of time in understanding their processes and building authentic relationships often pays dividends in both funding amounts and ongoing support.

- **Timing:** Private foundations often have long decision-making cycles. Plan your approach accordingly and do not expect quick turnarounds.
- **Capacity:** Private foundations may require more extensive reporting and relationship management than other funders. Ensure you have the capacity to maintain these relationships effectively and invest in the systems needed to support reporting and evaluation.
- **Leverage:** Grants from established private foundations can provide credibility that opens doors with other funders.





## IV. Individual Donor Engagement: Building Personal Connections

Individual donors represent both the most significant potential for growth and the most relationship-intensive funding source for LGBTQ+ organizations. Success requires understanding different donors' motivations, meeting people where they are, and building authentic personal connections that translate into sustained support.

### Understanding Your Donor Landscape

One way to make individual fundraising more manageable is to consider different donor segments, each of which might require different approaches and messaging.

#### PARENTS OF TRANSGENDER YOUTH

These donors are often highly motivated and are driven by personal experience and urgency. They understand the stakes and may be willing to give significantly to protect their children and other families, but they are often new to the LGBTQ+ funding space and may want to understand your work personally.

#### STRAIGHT ALLIES

Allies may need education about the connections between LGBTQ+ issues and their existing interests. In the example shared earlier, make the case for how someone concerned with homelessness should support LGBTQ+ youth because they experience disproportionate homelessness rates. Connect the dots for people by showing how LGBTQ+ movement work advances the causes they already care about and ultimately helps to expand protections broadly.

#### AGING LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY MEMBERS

These potential donors represent significant opportunities for legacy or planned giving, as detailed in Evelyn & Walter Hass, Jr. Fund's [LGBT Giving Project, 2011-2020 report](#). Many who lived through decades of struggle for LGBTQ+ rights may want to ensure that future generations do not face the same challenges. They are also less likely than younger LGBTQ+ community members to have children, who would typically inherit their wealth.

#### HIGH-NET-WORTH DONORS

When considering high-net-worth donors, understand that they often give through donor-advised funds and may require different cultivation strategies, including working through philanthropic advisors. We discuss key considerations for working with advisors below.

## Individual Donor Engagement Strategies



### LEVERAGE SPEAKING OPPORTUNITIES

Your “best calling card is speaking at events and gatherings,” says one advisor. Success requires “networking your way into the right networks with the right funder circles,” but this networking needs to be intentional and relationship-driven. Rather than trying to access exclusive donor spaces directly, ask current funders to recommend you as a speaker at conferences they attend, invite you to present at their board meetings, or host panels featuring your work.

Funding collaboratives and local community foundations can provide access to potential supporters and donor education opportunities. The key is becoming visible in spaces where donors gather and learn by leveraging existing relationships as bridges into these networks, since movement leaders are rarely invited into funder spaces independently.



### HOST INTIMATE GATHERINGS

House parties, dinners, and small donor gatherings create opportunities for peer influence, which can encourage people to explore new funding areas. These settings allow for deeper conversations and relationship-building that larger events cannot provide. Often, they are hosted by existing supporters, building awareness among like-minded people. These presentations can be highly effective when you can demonstrate clear impact and alignment with donor interests.



### EDUCATE, DON'T ALIENATE

Understand that you may need to engage with donors who may not align on all elements of your organization’s work. Use fundraising conversations as opportunities to educate wealthy donors about systemic issues, building understanding rather than assuming shared analysis. Meet individuals where they are at and focus on how your work creates positive change and addresses community needs. Frame your approach in terms of solutions and impact, demonstrating how supporting your organization aligns with their values while advancing broader social progress. This approach builds bridges and creates space for donors to develop deeper understanding of the issues your work addresses.



### EXPLAIN YOUR ECOSYSTEM ROLE

Help donors understand how you relate to other organizations in your orbit. Donors want to see collaboration and strategic thinking about how their investment fits into broader change efforts.

## Working With Philanthropic Advisors

Philanthropic advisors can serve as crucial intermediaries between individual donors and families and organizations, particularly for high-net-worth giving. While proactively meeting with philanthropic advisors is not necessarily practical because they are driven by their clients' giving priorities, it's important to understand how they work, as they may inquire about your organization when your mission aligns with their client's interests. Understanding their role and how you can build relationships with them can significantly expand your access to individual donors.

Identifying advisors in your area can be difficult since many work discreetly with private clients. Consider researching wealth management firms, estate planning attorneys who work with high-net-worth clients, and consultant networks in your region. Some may be listed through professional associations like the [Advisors in Philanthropy](#) or local nonprofit networks. Ask current major donors if they work with philanthropic advisors who might be interested in learning about your work.

If a philanthropic advisor reaches out, be prepared to articulate your organization's impact clearly and provide documentation for their client's due diligence process. These professionals appreciate organizations that respond quickly and thoroughly to information requests. Building a positive relationship with one advisor can lead to introductions to multiple donors within their client base, making these connections particularly valuable.

### THE ADVISOR'S ROLE

#### Strategic Guidance

Advisors help donors navigate giving strategies and clarify their desire to impact particular issues, communities, or geographies. As one advisor explained, they work to *"get to the core of the thing that [donors] are trying to solve, or the impact they're trying to have."*

#### Education and Due Diligence

Advisors provide high-touch, personalized services to help donors make informed decisions. They can educate donors about issues, answer questions, and provide *"strategy in a gentle way that hopefully leads donors to something greater than they could do on their own."*

#### Network Access

Advisors can facilitate introductions to aligned organizations, intermediaries, and pooled funds. The advising community is small, and advisors often use their networks to identify prospective organizations for clients. They can also set context, manage expectations, and serve as bridges between donors and organizations, bringing understanding and insight to your work.

#### Process Management

Advisors are careful to match due diligence requirements to grant size and help families navigate collective decision-making processes. They understand that families are not usually the first funders in and often rely on the track records and awareness from other funders who specialize in discovering new and emerging organizations.

## Success Factors With Philanthropic Advisors

Success comes from:

- Consistent, authentic communication about your work and community impact
- Recognition that donors want to feel connected to the cause and see their impact in tangible ways
- Understanding that individual donors often become advocates who introduce you to others
- Recognizing that these relationships can provide not just funding but also expertise, connections, and long-term organizational support

Individual donors and their advisors represent significant untapped potential for LGBTQ+ organizations willing to invest in relationship-building and strategic cultivation efforts.

To realize success with philanthropic advisors:

- **Build trust and credibility:** Demonstrate leadership strength and organizational credibility. Some donors want to get to know organizational leadership personally, while others prefer the distance an advisor provides.
- **Be transparent:** Display strong communication and governance practices. Relationships often begin with pilot investments that build trust and confidence over time.
- **Provide education:** Help advisors and donors understand trans-specific and BIPOC community needs. Many wealthy donors are white, cisgender, and have limited exposure to these communities, and need context to understand the urgency and impact of support.
- **Make broader connections:** Connect your LGBTQ+ work to democracy, health equity, reproductive justice, and other issues donors care about. Help them see how supporting LGBTQ+ organizations advances multiple causes simultaneously.
- **Building sustainable relationships:** Individual donor relationships require patience and genuine connection. Unlike institutional funders with formal processes, individual donors make emotional as well as rational decisions.



# Strategic Recommendations for Fundraising: Your Action Plan

The current funding landscape demands strategic action from LGBTQ+ organizations to navigate for long-term sustainability. Based on this research and interviews with funders, advisors, and organizations that have successfully grown and scaled, the following four recommendations provide a roadmap for building sustainable fundraising capacity in challenging times.

## 1. Build Authentic and Strategic Relationships

**Start with intermediaries and community foundations.** These more-accessible funding entry points can provide both funding and connections to other opportunities. They often have more flexible processes and can serve as champions for your work with larger funders.

**Engage donor networks actively.** Remember that one of your “*best calling card[s] is speaking at events and gatherings.*” Prioritize opportunities to present at donor events, conferences, and networking gatherings where you can showcase your leadership and build your organization’s visibility.

**Be politely persistent.** Maintain consistent, respectful follow-up with all potential funders. As one movement funder noted, “*There is a mathematically-proven benefit from being in someone’s ear as a fundraiser, and that leads to funding.*” Stay in communication by building relationships and sending regular updates about your impact and progress.

**Be specific in your asks.** “*Put a point on what you are asking for,*” says another funder, rather than trying to appeal to every funder with generic requests. Tailor your approach to each funder’s interests and capacity.

**Seek peer advice.** Do not struggle alone. As one experienced funder advised, “*Reach out directly to queer rights, queer liberation fundraisers — every one of them that I can think of, we are always willing to give advice.*”

## 2. Tell a Story That Moves Donors

**Focus on impact, not organizational survival.** Avoid the “*organizational survival pitch that can be compelling in the very short term to get money, but isn’t compelling to build a long-term supportive donor base.*” Instead, as one advisor explained: “*I don’t care about your organization. I am funding you because your organization is going to create a certain impact in the world. You have to sell me on the impact, and why you are well-positioned to have that impact.*”

**Match problem scale to intervention scale.** Be honest about your programmatic scope and realistic about your impact. One funder noted: “*It’s really important for groups to talk about the real, honest scale of their work versus the scale of the problem in the world. If we’re giving you money to do this work in this community, what’s going to happen in this community as a result?*”

**Use credible data and compelling examples.** Showcase your work in LGBTQ+ communities. Share authentic community stories that highlight your work and support them with credible data about the need from sources like the Williams Institute and U.S. Trans Survey.

**Connect to broader, intersectional movements.** Show how your programs advance equity and resilience and connect to wider political and social challenges. For example, demonstrate how trans organizing can help expand the definition of family, or how bodily autonomy connects to reproductive justice and healthcare access. As the political landscape continues to shift, be ready to adapt your messaging to meet the moment.

**Make the case for gifts of all sizes.** Help donors understand how contributions at different funding amounts can create a meaningful impact.

### 3. Build Organizational Strength

**Invest in infrastructure.** Use expert help and free resources to upgrade technology, train leaders, and improve systems and operational capacity. Build solid business practices that inspire donor confidence.

**Prepare donor-friendly materials.** Have your one-pager ready with relevant giving and contact information, including details if you accept stock gifts. Consider third-party platforms that can accept stock if you do not have your own brokerage account. Make sure annual reports and 990s are available on your website.

**Maintain community connection.** Do not lose sight of what it means to be community-supported. Institutional funding cannot necessarily be counted on right now, so maintain grassroots fundraising efforts and get creative with community engagement.

**Demonstrate good governance.** Strong boards, transparent finances, and clear communication systems signal organizational health to potential funders.

### 4. Navigate Challenges and Successes Strategically

**Frame messaging around current socio-political moments.** Philanthropy often responds to socio-political momentum — migrant justice giving surged following the 2017 Muslim bans, racial justice funding peaked after George Floyd's murder in 2020, and reproductive access funding increased after Roe's overturning in 2022. Connect your LGBTQ+ work to the current moment's urgency. For example, frame trans organizing as essential to criminal justice reform, or position LGBTQ+ youth work as critical to strengthening democracy and next-generation leadership. Philanthropy often struggles with intersectionality, so make these connections explicit and timely rather than abstract. If those connections are difficult to make, focus on what a future world could look like if you achieved your mission, which helps prospective donors see your vision.

**Manage windfalls strategically.** When experiencing fundraising success, plan carefully for sustainability. Consider investing in revenue-generating assets, building endowment funds, or strengthening operational infrastructure rather than immediately expanding programs or staff. History shows that funding surges often recede; reproductive organizations faced this reality after initial post-Dobbs funding waves, and racial justice organizations experienced similar patterns after 2020. If expanding your team during good fundraising moments, carefully consider the long-term implications of potential contraction on staff positions and

organizational morale. The Haas, Jr. Fund's report, *[Lightning in a Bottle](#)*, provides guidance on managing windfall periods effectively.

**Be transparent about growth edges.** Do not be afraid to name your challenges so that funders who believe in you can help. Transparency builds trust and allows supporters to provide targeted assistance.

**Acknowledge difficulties while showing leadership.** As one advisor observed, *“The pitches I’ve seen that have been most effective recently are the ones that honestly acknowledge how hard things are and provide some level of clarity and plan for how we’re going to handle those.”* Even when you do not have all the answers, donors want to hear that you are thinking strategically about challenges and have a plan to address them.

**Have a plan for having a plan.** When facing uncertainty, *“if you don’t know the plan, you must give the plan that you’re going to have the plan.”* Show your process for navigating challenges, even when outcomes are uncertain.

## **Moving Forward**

The current funding environment for LGBTQ+ organizations is harsh and uncertain. The organizations that may navigate this landscape successfully are those that combine authentic relationship-building with strategic thinking, and clear impact-demonstration with an honest acknowledgment of challenges. These recommendations provide a framework that may help maximize your chances of success; however, there are no guarantees, and adapting to your unique context, community, and mission remains essential.

The funding landscape presents significant obstacles, but opportunities do exist for organizations willing to do the patient work of building relationships, demonstrating impact, and strengthening their operations. As the following case studies show, while success can emerge from various strategies and approaches, there is no single path forward. We acknowledge that not all organizations will come through this period unscathed, despite their best efforts and vital community work.

Your community needs your work. While we cannot guarantee that these strategies will solve every funding challenge, they represent practical steps that may help you secure the resources needed to sustain and expand your impact in an increasingly complex environment.

# Case Study: Ali Forney Center

## At a Glance

**Location:** New York, NY

**Established:** 2002

**Executive Director:** Alex Roque

**Number of Employees:** 343

**2023 Revenue:** \$25,563,928

**2023 Expenses:** \$24,977,049

**Total Assets:** \$21,740,660

**Net Assets:** \$7,794,177

**Website:** [www.aliforneycenter.org](http://www.aliforneycenter.org)

**The Ali Forney Center (AFC)** is New York City's largest and most visible organization dedicated to serving homeless LGBTQ+ youth. Founded in 2002 by Carl Siciliano, a former monk who left his religious order after coming out as gay, AFC began as a small shelter in a church basement and has since grown into a \$25 million nonprofit with a staff of hundreds. The center is named in honor of Ali Forney, a gender-nonconforming youth who was murdered while living on the streets, and whose story became a catalyst for Siciliano's vision of safe, affirming housing for LGBTQ+ young people.

Siciliano's journey began with humble service — living among the homeless, working in soup kitchens, and running youth drop-in centers. It was during this time that he met Ali Forney, a courageous and resourceful queer teen who had been rejected by his family at age 13, endured eight foster placements, and ultimately found the streets safer than the systems meant to protect him. Forney's murder was a catalyst for Siciliano, who founded the center in Ali's memory, opening with just six cots in the basement of a church. The need was overwhelming: on the first night, 20 young people lined up for shelter; within a week, 100 sought entry, and within six months, 1,000 youths tried to access those six cots.

The organization's growth has been organic, driven by the needs of the community and the dedication of its staff. In an interview, Alex Roque — who became executive director in 2020 — explained that the center's expansion was not the result of rigid strategic planning, but rather a response to the urgent realities faced by LGBTQ+ youth. Roque recounted, *"There hasn't been a widespread strategic process ... The founding and the leadership of the organization have been very organic. Carl's sole mission is to keep these kids safe."*

When Roque first joined AFC in 2011 as the organization's first dedicated development director, AFC had about 60 employees, a \$3.5 million budget, and operated five housing sites from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., along with a 1,000-square-foot drop-in center open only on weekdays. At that time, roughly 90% of AFC's funding came from government sources, with private support — including corporate, individual, and event-based giving — totaling well under \$1 million. Events and corporate contributions were each below \$100,000, and there was no in-house development team, only consultants.

A major turning point came in 2010, when AFC received a capacity-building grant from the Paul Rapoport Foundation, which allowed the organization to hire its first

## Key Takeaways

### 1. Invest in development infrastructure.

AFC's 2010 capacity-building grant to hire their first development director transformed them from a \$3.5M organization with 90% government funding to a \$25M operation with diversified revenue streams.

### 2. Think creatively about untapped donor networks.

AFC bypassed traditional corporate giving channels by building relationships with LGBTQ+ employee affinity groups — discovering new donors who were more personally invested in the mission than conventional approaches and who still offered inroads to corporate support.

### 3. Balance mission urgency with organizational values.

AFC understands firsthand the urgency of youth homelessness, the scarcity of resources for this issue, and the limits of available funding. The organization carefully weighs these realities when considering support from donors with conflicting values. While prioritizing the mission above all else, AFC makes difficult decisions to ensure that resources are maximized for serving vulnerable youth without losing sight of its core values.

in-house development staff and build the infrastructure needed for sustained growth. This investment enabled AFC to expand its services, eventually growing to 18 sites at its peak before consolidating these to 13 more efficient locations. Bed capacity increased from 44 to over 225, but the need continues to outstrip resources, with more than 200 youth on a waiting list for shelter at any given time.

AFC's services have also evolved over that time. Today, the organization offers both six-month and two-year transitional housing programs and operates two 24-hour drop-in centers. However, city policy restricts overnight sleeping at one site, a mandate that Roque publicly challenged, resulting in the opening of a second drop-in location where the most vulnerable youth can sleep for one night. The drop-in centers provide not only shelter, but also meals, medical care, and HIV testing and care — an essential service given the heightened risk of HIV among homeless LGBTQ+ youth.

AFC's influence now reaches far beyond New York City through an extensive network of partnerships providing no-cost technical assistance to organizations across the U.S. and in 22 countries around the world. Since 2012, AFC has shared its expertise and model with local organizations, helping them develop LGBTQ+-affirming services tailored to their communities. Roque explained that these efforts range from supporting church-based shelters in Texas to working discreetly with grassroots groups in countries where LGBTQ+ rights are under threat. This international engagement shows AFC's commitment to advancing the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth globally, positioning the organization as a resource and leader in the fight against LGBTQ+ youth homelessness worldwide, even as LGBTQ+ rights are facing state and federal challenges in the U.S.

Financially, AFC's growth has been remarkable. By 2020, the organization had become a \$15 million operation, with corporate giving, especially through LGBTQ+ employee resource groups, serving as a primary source of support. Roque emphasized the importance of establishing relationships with these corporate affinity groups, which resulted in substantial increases in both corporate and individual giving. Over the past five years, AFC's annual budget has reached \$25 million, with government contracts now accounting for \$10 million (\$6 million from New York City, \$2 million from the state of New York, and \$2 million from the federal government). The remainder comes from private, corporate, and foundation support, with recent years seeing a surge in major gifts and foundation grants.

AFC's approach to funding is pragmatic and unapologetic. As Roque explained, "*We are a direct services organization. We need every penny,*" emphasizing that the mission to keep kids safe outweighs concerns about donor alignment. The organization has never turned down funding based on a donor's

reputation; instead, it chooses to invest those dollars directly into services for the youth who need them most.

Despite its success, AFC faces ongoing challenges, including a recent small deficit and a planned deficit for the current year, reflecting the volatility of funding streams and the ever-growing demand for services. The organization's leadership has also been instrumental in encouraging other nonprofits to recognize and support LGBTQ+ homeless youth, thereby helping to create broader awareness and support for this vulnerable population. However, Roque shared that in the first six months of the second Trump administration, he's seen a 30% increase in clients month-over-month.

Reflecting on the organization's journey, Roque highlighted both the urgency and the impact of AFC's work: "*We are, sadly, at capacity and we have over 200 young people on a waiting list.*" Yet, the center's steadfast commitment to keep LGBTQ+ youth safe, healthy, and affirmed remains at the heart of everything it does.



# Case Study: Campaign for Southern Equality

## At a Glance

**Location:** Asheville, North Carolina

**Established:** 2011

**Executive Director:** Jasmine Beach Ferrara

**Number of Employees:** 15

**2023 Revenue:** \$2,673,914

**2023 Expenses:** \$2,113,981

**Total Assets:** \$3,145,330

**Net Assets:** \$3,069,291

**Website:** <https://southernequality.org/>

For over a decade, the **Campaign for Southern Equality (CSE)** has served as a catalyst for LGBTQ+ rights and community empowerment throughout the Southern U.S. Founded in 2011 in Asheville, North Carolina, by Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, an ordained minister, CSE emerged from a vision of direct action, empathy, and grassroots mobilization. CSE's mission is to build a South where all LGBTQ+ people can thrive, free from discrimination and with full access to opportunity, health, and community. The organization's first major initiative, the "We Do" campaign, sent same-sex couples to county clerks across the South to request marriage licenses, and then publicized their denial. This campaign not only highlighted the human impact of discriminatory laws but also established CSE's reputation for compassionate, action-oriented advocacy that even humanizes those who oppose LGBTQ+ rights.

CSE began with a \$500 grant and a handful of volunteers meeting in a church basement. From the outset, the organization was shaped by Executive Director Beach-Ferrara's commitment to empathy and moral clarity, values that became CSE's enduring guideposts. As Director of Impact and Innovation Allison Scott explained, "*We don't ever devalue people. We can directly call things out. It doesn't mean we shy away [...] but we always*

*have empathy.*" These values attracted like-minded volunteers and staff, fueling CSE's early growth and shaping its distinctive approach to LGBTQ+ advocacy in the South.

Scott, who joined as a staff member in 2018 and was one of the organization's first planned hires, described how her role evolved to meet the changing needs of the organization. While she initially started as director of programs and policy, she is now the director of impact and innovation and is involved in every aspect of CSE's work, from program design and leadership development to operations and donor relations.

For its first several years, CSE operated with minimal staff and a modest budget. However, the organization's budget grew rapidly from \$354,000 to \$700,000 in 2017. This significant increase was attributed to CSE's innovative grassroots grantmaking platform and its ability to fill critical gaps in the Southern LGBTQ+ movement. Scott explained that CSE's early grantmaking efforts were similar to those of other organizations, processing a few hundred grants annually through labor-intensive paperwork.

In 2016, CSE "*threw out the playbook*" and redesigned its grantmaking process to be more scalable and efficient. This innovation positioned CSE as a leader during the COVID-19

## Key Takeaways

### 1. Establish leadership through future-oriented analysis.

CSE's success with funders stems from their forward-thinking approach: *"We're not just talking about what's happening today — we're looking at what could happen tomorrow, and we come prepared with solutions."* Their ability to forecast challenges and present ready solutions demonstrates strategic thinking that attracts institutional support and positions them as essential partners in movement building.

### 2. Innovate operations to scale impact.

CSE "threw out the playbook" in 2016, redesigning their grantmaking process to be more efficient and scalable. This operational innovation enabled them to respond rapidly during COVID-19 and distribute over \$1 million through their Trans Youth Emergency Program, demonstrating how process improvements can multiply impact.

### 3. Shared leadership can replace specialized roles.

Rather than hiring a dedicated fundraising director, CSE's leadership team shares fundraising responsibilities supported by contracted grant writers and engagement staff. This model can work effectively for organizations with strong leadership partnerships and allows for more integrated mission-driven fundraising approaches.

pandemic, when the need for rapid, direct support skyrocketed. According to a May 2020 report from *BPR News*, the organization made more than \$200,000 available through its [COVID-19 Rapid Response Grant Program](#) to support LGBTQ+ Southerners in urgent need. These grants, typically in increments of \$500, reached thousands of individuals and were administered by a small, dedicated staff. Funders took notice of CSE's proactive approach and ability to anticipate the challenges ahead, further strengthening the organization's financial base and reputation. As Scott put it, *"We're not just talking about what's happening today — we're looking at what could happen tomorrow, and we come prepared with solutions. If the government shuts down gender-affirming care, we already have a plan."*

CSE has consistently focused on addressing the unique needs of LGBTQ+ people in the South, particularly trans and BIPOC individuals who have often been underserved by national movements. Today, their largest grantmaking program is the [Trans Youth Emergency Program](#), which assists families of young people in 27 states who need to travel out of state for gender-affirming care, and has distributed over \$1 million between 2023 and 2025. The organization's deep, on-the-ground connections — built through years of direct engagement, from organizing the first Pride events in small towns to conducting the largest LGBTQ+ health survey of Southerners — have enabled it to fill critical gaps in research, healthcare access, and community support. Scott noted that national organizations often struggled to reach Southern communities; however, CSE's regional roots and relationships made it a trusted and effective partner.

CSE's funding model is a blend of grassroots and institutional support. The organization

has always maintained a strong base of individual donors, many of whom have been giving \$5 or \$10 at a time since the organization's first years. But today, most of the funding comes from large foundations, institutional donors, and donor advised funds. This financial diversity has allowed CSE to remain responsive to emerging needs while building long-term sustainability. Scott emphasized that CSE's track record of filling gaps and building trust with Southern communities has been key to attracting major funders. However, unlike many nonprofits, Scott and Beach-Ferrara share the fundraising work, opting not to have a dedicated fundraising director and instead utilizing contracted grant writers and a team of engagement staff to support their efforts.

With a staff of 15 across five Southern states and a 2024 budget of nearly \$2.7 million, CSE remains committed to advancing LGBTQ+ equality in the South through a combination of direct service, advocacy, and community building. As legislative attacks on LGBTQ+ rights continue and intensify across many Southern states, and funding for Southern LGBTQ+ organizations remains disproportionately low, CSE's work is more vital than ever. CSE's work, rooted in empathy, equity, and community resilience, stands as both a safety net and a beacon of hope for LGBTQ+ people throughout the region. As Scott put it: *"We're not just naming problems; we're offering real answers. That matters to funders and our community."*

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# Appendix: LGBTQ Intermediate Funders

**Table 3. LGBTQ Intermediate Funders**

Fund Name	Goal	Geographic Reach	Website
Contigo Fund	Community-led grantmaking supporting LGBTQ+ and Latinx individuals, immigrants, and people of color across Central Florida, with origins rooted in the response to the Pulse tragedy.	Central Florida	<a href="https://contigofund.org/">https://contigofund.org/</a>
Emergent Fund	Support emergent organizing and power-building through rapid response grants.	United States	<a href="https://www.emergentfund.net/">https://www.emergentfund.net/</a>
Fund for Trans Generations	Provide grants to trans-led groups focused on justice and feminism.	United States	<a href="https://borealisphilanthropy.org/fund-for-trans-generations/">https://borealisphilanthropy.org/fund-for-trans-generations/</a>
Out in the South Fund	Increase philanthropic resources for LGBTQ communities in the U.S. South.	Southern U.S.	<a href="https://lgbtfunders.org/programs/ots/out-in-the-south-fund/">https://lgbtfunders.org/programs/ots/out-in-the-south-fund/</a>
Queer Mobilization Fund	Support community mobilizations and projects advancing queer/trans liberation.	Southeastern U.S.	<a href="https://queermobilization.fund/">https://queermobilization.fund/</a>
Texas Pride Community Foundation	Support LGBTQ+ nonprofits in Texas.	Texas	<a href="https://texaspridecf.org/">https://texaspridecf.org/</a>
Third Wave Fund	Through six grantmaking programs, we resource grassroots BIPOC gender justice movements that are multi-issue, community-led, and unapologetically queer, trans, intersex, and sex worker-led.	United States	<a href="https://www.thirdwavefund.org/">https://www.thirdwavefund.org/</a>
Trans Justice Funding Project	Support grassroots trans-led justice groups organizing for trans justice.	U.S. and U.S. territories	<a href="https://www.transjusticefundingproject.org/">https://www.transjusticefundingproject.org/</a>

**Note:** This is a non-exhaustive list, but is included with permission from the funders and as a resource for grant seekers.