



**Direct Support Strategies:
A Roundtable on the Current Nonprofit Landscape**
Follow-Up Report

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Executive Summary

This session focused on how nonprofits can **strengthen resilience and funding strategies** amid climate events, displacement, and economic uncertainty. Nonprofits and banking partners shared lessons on balancing immediate response with long-term stability. Panelists included **Rocio Flores (USC Credit Union)**, **Marci Palos (Restore LA CDC)**, and **Josh Rincon (Advance Latino)**.

Key Insights

- **Crisis vs. Sustainability:** Emergency response often undermines long-term service budgets.
- **Funding Challenges:** Nonprofits face “philanthropy drift,” while banks require CRA-aligned impact.
- **Relationships Matter:** Lasting partnerships drive funding decisions.
- **Data & Technology:** Strong infrastructure and CRMs improve grant competitiveness.
- **Structural Inequities:** Nonprofits of color, especially Black women-led organizations, face systemic underfunding.

Recommendations

1. Advocate for unrestricted/general operating funds.
2. Leverage CRA relationships and programs (e.g., FHLB AHEAD grants).
3. Invest early in technology and data systems.
4. Diversify revenue streams (donor-advised funds, social enterprise).
5. Collaborate across nonprofits to share data and resources.

Closing Note

The discussion reinforced that nonprofits must prepare not only for **emergencies** but for ongoing resilience. Building stronger relationships, infrastructure, and equity-centered funding models is essential.

Live Notes

Immediate Needs and First Response

- **Employment Loss:** One of the earliest concerns following the wildfires was the large-scale loss of employment, which deepened the economic crisis for many families.
- **Rapid Fundraising:** Within one week, Josh raised over \$25,000 to support affected residents. His efforts were inspired by his church community, who had shared stories of job loss and heightened despair.
- **Key Challenges Identified:** Josh noted three critical questions in the immediate aftermath:
 1. How do we raise funds quickly?
 2. How do we identify those most in need?
 3. How do we distribute funds effectively while complying with federal restrictions?

Barriers and Gaps in Access

- **Language Barriers:** Marci highlighted that Spanish-speaking communities were disproportionately affected, often receiving translated materials only after grant deadlines had passed.
- **Fear of Enforcement:** Some immigrant communities were hesitant to apply for assistance due to fears tied to immigration enforcement.
- **Technological Barriers:** Rocio shared that her team bridged digital access gaps by sitting down with clients to complete online applications, ensuring that families could access relief funds.

Collaboration and Networks

- **Collective Response:** Restore coordinated with other CBOs, nonprofits, and housing agencies to form a referral network that expanded support across communities.
- **Value of Pre-Existing Partnerships:** Josh emphasized the importance of having networks in place before a crisis strikes to allow for faster and more equitable relief distribution.
- **Learning from Past Crises:** CCNP noted that lessons from COVID-19 relief were applied to wildfire response, while Triple R Services reflected that earlier programs (food cards, vouchers, clothing) were limited by word-of-mouth outreach and could benefit from stronger organizational partnerships.

Equity and Trust

- **Assessing Blind Spots:** Rocio posed the question: “How do you assess equity blind spots within your organization, and how do you address them?”

- **Building Trust:** Trust was identified as a cornerstone of relief efforts. Rocio emphasized that trust must be built before crises, so communities are more willing to accept assistance.
- **Client Relationships:** Josh's team collected personal stories while administering aid. Though time-consuming, this built rapport and reassured families during a vulnerable time.

Relief Program Administration

- **Application Overload:** Josh's organization created a Google Form for \$500 microgrants and received thousands of applications within days, though they could only serve 50 families. Federal compliance slowed down the process, creating frustration.
- **Miscommunication:** At one point, a pastor mistakenly told his congregation that funds were guaranteed, leading to families arriving without having applied. Over 250 families were already on the waitlist, and some were turned away.
- **Client Support:** Rocio's organization sat with clients to complete forms, making the process less intimidating and more accessible.

Long-Term Stability and Sustainability

- **Beyond Immediate Relief:** Marci's organization, though not a traditional relief nonprofit, helped wildfire survivors connect with resources for long-term stability, including workforce development.
- **Children's Institute:** Provided flexible funds to help families cover rent arrears. Staff noted sustainability challenges when families struggled to engage in long-term solutions, emphasizing the need for multiple organizations working together.

Lessons Learned and Future Planning

- **Program Redesign Reflections:**
 - *Josh:* Would pre-define partner organizations and use more secure platforms for sensitive data collection.
 - *Marci:* Would streamline applications to get funds out faster, simplify verification to reduce client fear, and create a dedicated private fund for fire relief.
- **Collaboration as a Standard:** Rocio urged organizations to return to their teams and create standing crisis response plans, including a list of trusted partner organizations.
- **Voice and Visibility:** Marci challenged nonprofits to not remain hidden, but to stand visibly for their communities and use their collective voice in times of crisis.

Formal Analysis

A diverse network of private professionals, community-based organizations, funders, and local leaders came together for a roundtable discussion focused on direct-to-consumer financial relief following the LA wildfires and other disasters. The session created a collaborative space to reflect on lessons learned, share challenges, and identify practical strategies for improving future disaster response efforts.

Facilitated through candid conversations, participants explored the logistical, emotional, and ethical complexities of delivering timely relief to impacted communities. The goal: to develop better-informed practices that ensure future disaster relief is equitable, efficient, and sustainable.

Key Themes and Insights

Equity and Access Gaps

Several participants highlighted persistent barriers to equitable relief:

- **Language Barriers:** Many emphasized that Spanish-speaking communities were often left behind due to delays in providing translated materials. By the time resources were made available, many grant application windows had already closed.
- **Immigration Concerns:** Some community members feared applying for financial assistance due to heightened immigration enforcement, creating an additional barrier to accessing available resources.

Takeaway: Preparedness plans must include multilingual outreach strategies and community education campaigns designed to overcome trust and access issues.

Balancing Speed with Accountability

A recurring tension was the need to distribute funds quickly while maintaining compliance with federal and local regulations:

- An individual shared that his organization raised over \$25,000 within a week but struggled to distribute funds rapidly due to federal restrictions and verification requirements.
- Using Google Forms to collect sensitive data created challenges, including managing thousands of applications for limited relief dollars.
- Participants agreed that streamlined application processes paired with clear verification protocols would reduce delays while protecting client privacy.

Takeaway: Future relief strategies should prioritize secure, user-friendly systems that balance speed, accuracy, and compliance.

The Power — and Challenge — of Collaboration

The roundtable underscored the importance of inter-organizational coordination:

- Restore partnered with local nonprofits, housing agencies, and community-based organizations to create a referral network that expanded their collective reach.
- Many stressed the need to establish partnerships during times of stability, not just crisis, so organizations can mobilize quickly when emergencies occur - and before they occur.
- Participants acknowledged that collaboration isn't always simple; challenges include differing priorities, funding constraints, and lack of shared infrastructure.

Takeaway: Building pre-established networks and maintaining regular communication between organizations are essential to effective crisis response.

Building Trust With the Community

Trust emerged as a central theme:

- Many shared that having staff sit down with clients to complete applications bridged technological and emotional barriers, making relief efforts more accessible.
- Some found that asking clients about their personal stories helped establish rapport and credibility, especially for organizations new to direct financial relief.
- Participants noted that trust-building cannot start during a disaster; relationships with community members must be nurtured well before a crisis.

Takeaway: Developing consistent, long-term engagement strategies ensures that organizations can respond more effectively when emergencies arise.

Lessons Learned and Opportunities for Improvement

In reflecting on what they would do differently, participants shared several recommendations:

- **Predefine Partner Networks:** Establish clear collaboration agreements and referral pathways before crises occur.
- **Streamline Relief Applications:** Simplify processes and minimize the need for sensitive personal information whenever possible.
- **Dedicated Private Relief Funds:** Create flexible funding pools to bypass restrictive federal compliance hurdles.
- **Invest in Awareness & Outreach:** Move beyond word-of-mouth communication to ensure broader access to available support.
- **Leverage Past Experience:** Apply lessons from COVID-19 relief efforts to strengthen wildfire and other disaster response systems.

Actionable Next Steps

The moderator challenged participants to take their insights back to their organizations:

1. Develop formal crisis response protocols that address equity, speed, and compliance.
2. Create and maintain a shared partner list to coordinate community support during future emergencies.
3. Establish multilingual outreach strategies to ensure no community is left behind.
4. Invest in proactive trust-building efforts with both community members and partner organizations.

Closing Reflection

This roundtable highlighted the critical importance of collaboration, trust, and preparedness in disaster response. While delivering financial relief in times of crisis is complex, the insights shared during this discussion point toward more coordinated, equitable, and effective approaches for future emergencies.

By sharing lived experiences and lessons learned, participants reinforced the value of working together — before, during, and after crises — to ensure resources reach those who need them most.