

## Dollars for Disability

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There were nearly 60,000 grantmaking foundations in the U.S. in 2001. In that year, those foundations granted \$29 billion to non-profits, but only 4 percent of the total foundation and corporate funding went to disability. And of that, the majority went to health-related projects. Far less addressed poverty, unemployment, transportation, housing and other issues of independent living.

Demographics are changing, and people with disabilities now comprise one-fifth of the population. So why does this largest minority group get so little funding? And why does most of it go to health when people with disabilities are not just waiting around for a cure, but want to lead independent and productive lives?

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## Knowledge Gap

Good questions. In 2001, 108 grantmakers were surveyed by the Disability Funders Network (DFN), and 20 disability grantseekers participated in in-depth interviews to document how California grantmakers understand and address disability issues. Both parts of the study explored possible communications and knowledge gaps between grantmakers and applicants.

The research found that there is, indeed, room for better understanding on both sides. Foundations are behind the curve in recognizing disability as a civil rights issue. Philanthropic organizations also need more contact with and representation from the disability community. Disability grantseekers, on the other hand, must demonstrate the impact of programs across lines of age, ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status, and they need to understand foundations and the grantmaking process better.

## Foundation Fundamentals

Foundations come in a number of shapes and sizes. Some have large permanent professional staffs, while others are “staffed” by members of the donor’s family, who meet once a year to distribute grants. Some raise money to give away, while others give no grants but run programs of their own. To be a successful grantseeker, it is essential to know the type of foundations you approach, the issues they support, and their typical grant size.

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## Types of Foundations

■ **Family & Independent:** Nearly 88% of all foundations are of these two types, set up by individual donors or a family of donors from their personal wealth. In family foundations, family members usually control the board of directors, and topics funded often reflect the personal interests of the family. Independent foundations tend to be larger, more well-established institutions with their own endowments, often originating from a single donor. However, relatives of the original donor rarely serve on the boards of independent foundations. Both foundation types use the interest from their endowments to fund programs. Examples: The David and Lucile Packard Foundation (family); The Ford Foundation (independent).

■ **Community & Public:** Both community and public foundations raise money from the public. Community foundations have grown significantly in the last twenty years. They serve a specific geographic area, usually a city or county, although they may occasionally fund outside of that area. Community foundations actively seek new donors and often create “donor advised funds” that allow donors to designate the types of programs they want funded with their donation. Public foundations are distinguished from community foundations in that they are not restricted by geographic focus. Examples: The San Francisco Foundation (community); Tides Foundation (public).

■ **Corporate:** Foundations and corporate giving programs are vehicles through which businesses give back to their communities. Some corporations have established a foundation as a formal separate legal entity; others maintain a giving program that is run by the corporation directly. Many corporations have both. Corporate giving programs are usually funded with a percentage of the profits of the company. This means that in bad years, the available funding is smaller. Foundations usually have more stable programs and interests. Examples: American Express Philanthropic Program; Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation.

■ **Operating Foundations:** These are private foundations that use their resources to fund charitable programs of their own. Very few make grants to outside organizations. Example: Benton Foundation.

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## Recommendations for Grantseekers

The more effectively disability organizations can argue, with concrete examples, the possibility and importance of incorporating disability into already existing program areas, the better the chance of getting programs funded.

■ **Target Your Request.** Learn more about foundation program areas and how disability can fit within them. Research foundations online or at The Foundation Center, and use that information to show how your work advances the funder’s program goals. There is no one-size-fits-all proposal.

■ **Follow Guidelines.** Follow the foundation’s instructions for initiating contact and writing proposals. Many proposals and letters of intent that may be eligible programmatically are rejected because they do not follow application guidelines. Take care to explain terminology that may not be known outside the disability community.

■ **Explain Disability.** Take the initiative to educate funders about disability issues. Acknowledge the progress founda-

tions have made in learning about disability while encouraging them to go further. Take particular care to explain the importance of requests focused on cross-disability projects, which are not as well understood by funders as are disability-specific programs.

- **Use Statistics.** Be prepared to provide demographic and other data about your local disability community to support the need for your proposed program. Funders look for statistics and other documentation to demonstrate need.
- **Make Contact.** While you may encounter difficulties making personal contacts, try to build these relationships if possible. But respect the time constraints placed on program officers and their position as spokespeople for organizations that have defined guidelines and priorities.
- **Talk Diversity.** Help program officers understand why and how people with disabilities are legitimately included in diversity initiatives. Many foundations have an understanding of diversity as it relates to race and gender. Build on that knowledge to communicate the needs of people with disabilities as an aspect of diversity funding.
- **Think Collaboration.** Demonstrate how disability issues intersect and/or are incorporated into other issues of importance to your community. Illustrate how your organization interacts with others addressing the need targeted in your proposal.

Once again, the keys to successful foundation fundraising are knowing the interest of the particular foundations you are targeting, finding common ground so that you present your program goals in a way that is consistent with their priorities, and working as closely as possible with foundation staff.

## About DFN

The Disability Funders Network (DFN) was created to provide information about the socioeconomic aspects of disability to grantmakers and to advocate for the inclusion of people with disabilities on the boards and staffs of foundations.

Over the years, the organization has come to function as a bridge between organized philanthropy and the disability community. DFN's primary activities are:

- Collecting, analyzing and disseminating disability-related information in formats that are accessible and compelling to funders.
- Convening grantmakers to discuss both the importance of disability as a programmatic issue and the inclusion of a disability perspective across the range of other programmatic issues.

DFN is an organization made up of funders but is not a grantmaking organization itself. While we cannot provide a referral service for grantseekers, a low-cost membership option is available for nonprofit organizations, which includes newsletters, membership list and listserv distribution service.

The research study on which this publication is based, *Disability Funding in California*, was funded by The California Endowment. The study provides a detailed portrait of disability giving in a populous state with active disability communities and is also intended to serve as a model for similar studies in other states and regions. For an executive summary and the complete study, go to [www.disabilityfunders.org](http://www.disabilityfunders.org).

## For More Information

Jeanne Argoff, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Disability Funders Network  
2529 Kirklyn Street  
Falls Church, VA 22043  
Phone: (703) 560-0099  
Fax: (703) 560-1151  
E-mail: [NJArgoff@aol.com](mailto:NJArgoff@aol.com)  
[www.disabilityfunders.org](http://www.disabilityfunders.org)

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# Bridging the Knowledge Gap: Working with Foundations to Attract Disability Funding

## Disability Funders Network

*A bridge between the disability community  
and organized philanthropy*

2529 Kirklyn Street  
Falls Church VA 22043  
(703) 560-0099 • (703) 560-1151 FAX  
E-Mail [NJArgoff@aol.com](mailto:NJArgoff@aol.com)  
[www.disabilityfunders.org](http://www.disabilityfunders.org)