Being a Good Relative

A Guide for Individuals and Organizations to Support Native-Led and -Controlled Initiatives
These recommendations were developed by the authors in partnership with Native community leaders, individual donors, and institutional funders through interviews conducted by First Nations Development Institute and Melvin Consulting PLLC, a Hopi-founded and -led firm. The authors are grateful to nonprofit leaders and allies for their insights and commitment to lifting up equitable funding practices.

These recommendations were initially developed for individual donors who are starting or increasing investments in Native communities through donor advised funds, but led to important conversations about how institutional funders can support the Native nonprofit sector as well. Thus, these recommendations are for various types of funders. The project team included additional resources and actions to take on your journey to being a Good Relative.

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About the Authors

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Give Native, Give Today
Prioritize Giving to Native-Controlled and -Led Nonprofits

Currently, only four-tenths of one percent (0.004) of private foundation funding supports Native causes, with about half of this amount directed to organizations that may be Native-serving, but are not Native-led.¹ Allies need to support Native-controlled and -led organizations by directly investing in these organizations’ efforts to strengthen their communities through developing effective solutions that advance their work. The immediate need is great, especially for grassroots initiatives that receive even less funding from mainstream private philanthropy than larger, more established organizations.

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If you are already supporting Native organizations, thank you. If you can increase your support, it really helps. If you haven’t invested yet, get started right away. The best way to learn about investing in Native communities is to invest in Native communities.

Support organizations that are committed to shifting and building power through training and growing their own by developing Native people in positions in their organizations. Native-controlled is often defined as 51% of the governing board being Native. Native-led means the executive director or CEO is Native and the organization has or is moving toward an actionable plan to have executive leadership positions held by Native people. Having a majority Native staff is also an important consideration.

Donors who utilize donor advised funds (DAFs) and their sponsor administrators can play an important role in increasing resources to Native-controlled and -led nonprofits. DAFs are utilized by individuals and organizations as a tax-advantaged mechanism to make charitable contributions. In 2023, according to the National Philanthropic Trust, grants from DAFs totaled an estimated $45.74 billion, representing a 28.2% increase compared to 2020.² There is an opportunity for DAF holders and DAF administrators to better understand the need in Native communities and direct more funding to Native-controlled and -led nonprofits. Through education and direct investing, DAFs can play a critical role toward more equitable funding.

Provide unrestricted and multi-year support to promote sustainable nonprofits. This helps organizations in long-term planning and allows them to be creative, innovative, nimble and responsive to community needs and community-defined solutions.

Support organizations that are vetted by Native-controlled and -led intermediaries. Search First Nations’ database of grantees (1994-2022) organized by state [here](#). Also, sign up for email lists for Native-controlled intermediaries for announcements of the community partners they fund.

Remember, Small is Big Impact
Make Direct (Unrestricted, Multi-Year) Investments in Small and Medium Native-Controlled and -Led Nonprofits

Managing one’s own assets via grants is an essential step in being a nonprofit or initiative that is sustainable and responsive to community needs. While supporting intermediaries or re-granters is an important part of building the emerging Native nonprofit sector, directly supporting small and medium nonprofits is equally critical. This allows these organizations to diversify funding, create operating reserves, start long-term planning, build endowments, develop investment policies, and build their financial strength. In a few words, it helps them become sustainable and flourish on their own terms. Multi-year unrestricted support positions all nonprofits to plan, be strategic, hire staff, and ensure they are meeting community needs with responsive programs—it breaks the unhealthy and dysfunctional cycle of funding that barely allows nonprofits to get by.

Why This Matters

What You Can Do

Identify a diverse group of organizations of varying sizes to support each year. Organizations with a few staff members or a mix of volunteers and staff generally will have smaller budgets and would benefit from unrestricted, multi-year funding. Please note: This is not an “either/or”—it’s a “both/and.” Investments in all sizes and types of Native-controlled and -led organizations are critical to support an innovative and strong Native nonprofit sector.

Keep up and connect with the smaller organizations you support to better understand the sector. One way to do this is to make a gift and then follow the organizations on social media and sign up for their emails for the latest news on their events and activities.

Deepen your understanding of Indigenous perspectives on sustainability. Read Trisha Moquino’s (Cochiti) 2019 Nonprofit Quarterly article, Let’s Talk about Fundraising: A Perspective from Cochiti Pueblo. Moquino is the founder and Education Director of Keres Children’s Learning Center in Cochiti Pueblo, New Mexico.
Streamline for Impact

Use Existing Information from Nonprofits—Instead of an Elaborate Grant and Reporting Process

Native-controlled and -led nonprofits have always been underfunded. Many do not have the infrastructure or any dedicated fundraising staff to respond quickly to funder emails and phone calls. Many lack reliable internet as they are located in rural areas and reservations, and they often juggle providing programs and services with conducting necessary fundraising and administrative duties. Some have only one to two staff members and volunteers. What surfaced again and again in the interviews with nonprofits is that they “wear a lot of hats” and they greatly appreciate the funders who trust them and have streamlined their application and reporting processes.

It is estimated that it takes 30 to 50 hours to prepare and submit a private foundation grant proposal. If you consider that only a small percentage of proposals get funded, this is time that can be better spent on community programs and services.

Nonprofits deliver significant results through their work, but many do not have the time to format and neatly package impact reports or annual reports for funders. One staff member of an Indigenous language immersion program shared her frustration: “I don’t have fancy brochures. I just have kids that are speaking our language.” Tracking and reporting specific metrics that are unique to every funder can be arduous.

Why This Matters

Utilize information that’s already available on organizations’ websites, annual reports, newsletters and social media feeds for proposals and reports. Allow nonprofits to submit a proposal with data they utilized for another funder, and glean the information you need from that.

Let communities tell their stories of success in ways that are meaningful to them and their communities.

Switch to verbal proposals and reporting. Some funders are already doing this. Set up a 30-minute call and place the onus on grantmaking staff to write up proposal notes and reports from the conversation. Seek to understand where equitable reporting lies and how you can help achieve that goal. Remember to communicate expectations in advance for any meeting or site visit and send the agenda in advance. It saves everyone time.
Attend an existing community event, instead of a special site visit, and use it to obtain your information. One nonprofit leader shared that she holds one event a year for funders and that serves as their report because they can’t accommodate a lot of site visits as they work with children at an immersion school.

Explore the need for flexible, multi-year grants that support nonprofit capacity building. Read Sarah EchoHawk’s (Pawnee Nation) 2019 Nonprofit Quarterly article, Unpacking Capacity Building. EchoHawk has been the President of AISES (American Indian Science and Engineering Society) since 2013.
Make Meaningful Connections
Take the Time to Understand and Respect Indigenous Worldviews and Share Yours

Although there are differences among Native communities, Indigenous ways of knowing and being generally see all things as interconnected. Foundations may not initially see a “match” with their programmatic work, which can be siloed. We ask foundations to look a little deeper, make connections, and ask questions to understand the relationship between a foundation’s priorities and the nonprofit’s programs. For example, perpetuating Native languages is foundational and deeply connected to many other areas, including early childhood development, food sovereignty, traditional arts, governance, environmental stewardship, and so on. If you support language perpetuation, you are strengthening these other areas as well.

Relationship building is reported as a core value by most of the Native nonprofits interviewed for this project. Take the time to listen to stories and learn from your nonprofit partners. It’s also important for nonprofits to better understand the people who work in philanthropy in order to build stronger relationships and do great things together. Funders are encouraged to take the time to share more about their institutions (including the origins of the funds that established their foundations) and their personal journeys to work in philanthropy, and to be transparent about the funding process.

**Do your homework.** Where possible, learn as much as possible about the nonprofit and their communities through websites and social media leading up to calls and meetings with them.

**Read Sarah Kastelic’s 2019 Nonprofit Quarterly article,** *Philanthropy is Reciprocity.* Sarah Kastelic (Alutiiq) has been the executive director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association since 2015.

**Deepen your understanding of an Indigenous worldview and approaches to relationship building.** Read *Nature Needs a New Pronoun: To Stop the Age of Extinction, Let’s Start by Ditching “It”* or *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi).

**Follow Native news to better understand Native issues through publications such as** *Indian Country Media Network.*
Support Tribal Sovereignty by Making Grants to Tribes
Get Expert Advice to Get Started

Foundations and individuals can and do directly support tribes and tribal entities. The nonprofit sector in Native communities is small and emerging. Because it is small, tribal governments often offer the essential services that nonprofits typically provide in the U.S. to fill in the gaps in responding to community needs. Tribal governments provide youth services, elder programs, workforce development, housing, land management, and cultural, arts, and language perpetuation programs, and so much more. Building physical infrastructure is also an area that needs support and is foundational to a thriving sector. Some foundations and individuals are already funding tribal governments and their programs using Internal Revenue Code (IRC) § 7871. This designation makes it possible for foundations and individuals to grant directly to tribes to support their programs. This allows tribal governmental entities or programs to receive tax-deductible donations from individuals and grants that count as qualifying distributions for foundations. While it may sound like an esoteric tax code to some, IRC § 7871 is a critical mechanism to ensure support for these essential programs and increase equitable funding.3

Why This is Important

Make a commitment today. Foundations can build a strategy to give to tribal governments as part of their commitment to increase support for Native communities. Foundations can enlist support and guidance from Native-controlled intermediaries like First Nations Development Institute, peer grantmakers that currently make grants to tribal governments or philanthropic consultants with expertise in this area.

Read First Nations Development Institute's Charitable and Sovereign: Understanding Tribal 7871 Organizations. This report sheds light on § 7871 organizations or charitable organizations that are formed as part of a tribal government. Drawing on a national survey and five case studies, the report describes opportunities and challenges facing these organizations, and identifies best practices and lessons learned. Furthermore, the report highlights the benefits and methods of giving to § 7871 organizations. Read the document here.

Update bylaws and advertise eligibility. Some foundations already have strategies in place to support tribal governments, and have added tribal governments as eligible grant recipients on their websites, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Northwest Area Foundation. Foundations should amend their bylaws as necessary to extend eligibility to tribes and advertise
that eligibility on their websites and social media. An example of philanthropy supporting tribal governments directly is McKenzie Scott’s $250 million Open Call to Support Advancing Voices through Yield Giving, where tribal governments are eligible via IRC 7871 (https://www.submittable.com/help/yieldgivingopencall/rules/).

Share your story to empower other foundations to support tribal sovereignty through grantmaking to tribal governments. If you are already giving to tribal governments or just starting, help amplify the message by sharing your experiences with other funders, as well as the resources below.

Give through your donor advised fund. If you have a donor-advised fund, work with the institution that is holding your fund to give directly to tribal government programs. Hire a Native philanthropic advisor to assist you.

Learn more about effective ways to lend support. Read How to Give to Native Communities? It’s About Good Grantmaking and Partnership by Kevin Walker, CEO of Northwest Area Foundation.

Deepen your understanding of tribal sovereignty. Read the National Congress of American Indians’ 2020 guide, Tribal Nations and the United States: An Introduction. This report outlines the principles of tribal governance. Check out the Native Governance Center’s short video, What is Tribal Sovereignty?

* Individuals can also make tax-deductible gifts under § 7871.