



CRISIS AS CATALYST

A Conversation Starter for
Re-Imagining What's Next



What This Is

This tool is meant to guide discussion of the role civil society institutions play in disasters and crises. With funders—specifically foundations—as its primary audience, this conversation starter challenges us all to **expand our understanding of “disaster,” rethink how to support civil society institutions during disaster response and re-imagine the role those institutions could play in strengthening civic and community health** in recovery, mitigation, and preparedness.

Why We Wrote It

While service and civic engagement often show up naturally and prominently in crisis *response* efforts, we need to invest in **elongating that civic response into recovery, mitigation and preparedness efforts** as well. We believe civic work can help ensure recovery is meaningful, sustainable, reflective of and responsive to the communities affected, and attend to ensuring the health of our social fabric in times of crisis as well.

In addition, civic engagement is key to effective and equitable efforts to mitigate the impact of, and prepare for, future crises. Further, we believe investments in such efforts can be **some of the most powerful ways to leverage and maximize philanthropic resources** over time.

Who We Wrote It For

The primary audience for this resource is the field of civic philanthropy, by which we mean funders who view strengthening civic life as core to their mission and purpose. This may include private, endowed, or public foundations, community foundations, intermediary funders, operating foundations, corporate philanthropy, and others.

Each may have unique roles, assets, and contributions based on their position and structure, so we have ventured to make this a broad tool for conversation that can be customized to reflect particular institutional needs or contexts.

What it Aims to Do

This guide exists to support civil society institutions in considering how they want to **engage as leaders in responding to and recovering from disaster or crises** (for example COVID-19, hurricanes and tornados, and terrorist acts, just to name a few). It doesn't prescribe or mandate answers, but rather assists funders in:

- determining their own leadership path as civic and community actors,
- considering how to utilize civic engagement as a tool in the recovery process,
- envisioning and imagining what healthy and vibrant civic life can look like on the “other side” of disaster or community crisis.

How to Use This Guide

See page 11 for questions to use in planning your own conversations.

WHEN	✓ More than once ✓ When crisis happens/disaster occurs & again in each phase (see pg. 7) ✓ In times of calm, with space for thoughtful planning ✓ When you're reviewing or revisiting policies, procedures, processes, and practices ✓ During annual budgeting, annual work planning, risk assessment planning, and/or strategic planning ✓ At a leadership team or board retreat ✓ As part of team meetings ✓ During grantee, stakeholder or community meetings ✓ During a transition to new leadership
WHERE	✓ Within your organization ✓ Within your networks of influence (leadership circles, membership groups, trade associations, etc.) ✓ At industry convenings or conferences ✓ At community forums, town hall meetings
WHO	✓ Team ✓ Board ✓ Elected officials ✓ Community leaders (including grantees and partners) ✓ Peers in similar organizations
HOW	✓ In partnership with grantees, community leaders and other stakeholders ✓ By leading with questions, rather than answers ✓ By making assumptions and beliefs explicit, rather than implicit ✓ With equity as a priority ✓ Without prescribing outcomes ✓ By including voices of those most affected

We Need a Conversation (and More)

Crises and disasters are obvious tragedies. They often result in destruction, illness, death, and loss of property, livelihoods, or entire communities. They expose cracks in the foundations of our democracy, economy, and society.

And, at the same time, crises and disasters can be the catalyst to a better way of being. Human nature compels compassion, connection, and generosity in times of tragedy. That's a good thing.

Everyone sees the needs when disaster strikes. But the needs - and the cracks - remain long after the initial spike in attention, giving, and volunteering die down. Greater introspection is both possible and necessary to fix the real problems and decrease the likelihood of re-living the same crises.

What happens when the moment fades and the needs remain? Or the cracks, gaps, and weaknesses that made the crisis worse (or worse for some) or led it to happen in the first place remain exposed, but not addressed?

Do we respond differently based on the impetus or “cause” of the crisis? Do we interpret our responsibility differently if we perceive a disaster as “an act of God” versus a result of human action?

How do we strive to balance the urgency that response requires with the thoughtfulness, pragmatism, and sustained energy that recovery necessitates?

How do we see the opportunity for lasting sea change amidst the crashing waves of immediate need?

When will we start asking why instead of just what?

How do we do this *with* communities most impacted, instead of *for* them or *to* them?

Prompted by the COVID-19 crisis¹, this conversation guide is designed to extend the goodwill our human nature (and often our mission) compels us to respond with in times of need. This guide helps funders:

- consider how to sustain and elongate investments beyond initial disaster response;
- explore how seemingly different crises can have ramifications on each other;
- imagine how the future can look as a result of their investments and civic leadership;
- interrogate how structural racism and disparities show up *within* every disaster.

We offer some questions as a nudge for funders to think beyond the immediate needs to also consider what comes next. We know we must start with conversations. And, we know we must continue with action. **It's not either/or. It's both/and.**

¹ **Editor's Note:** The original impetus for the creation of this conversation guide was the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as we move to finalize it in early June 2020, communities across the country are deep in the throes of fighting for racial justice in response to the latest deaths of Black people. Further, the National Weather Service identified the earliest tropical storms on record and is projecting a difficult hurricane season. We edited the framing slightly to be less crisis-specific. But we add this acknowledgement to reinforce the idea that it is important to resist the (very natural human) tendency to “move on” from one crisis to the next. We hope this resource will spark us to think about community resiliency and civic response in ways that recognize the causal connection points between crises, and which can help us sustain philanthropic investment over time, including between and through crisis cycles.

The Opportunity We Almost Always Miss

On September 12, 2001, millions of Americans woke up wanting to do something. While well-intentioned, volunteers and money weren't needed as much in that moment as they would be in the coming months and years.

Do you remember what year Joplin was destroyed by an EF5 tornado? Or recall that Joplin is in Missouri? Do you know the average time it took for a Hurricane Katrina survivor to move back into their home? Or how many never did? What about the number of people in Puerto Rico who still don't have electricity after it was knocked out by Hurricane Maria? Can you name the sites of even three of the 417 mass shootings in 2019²?

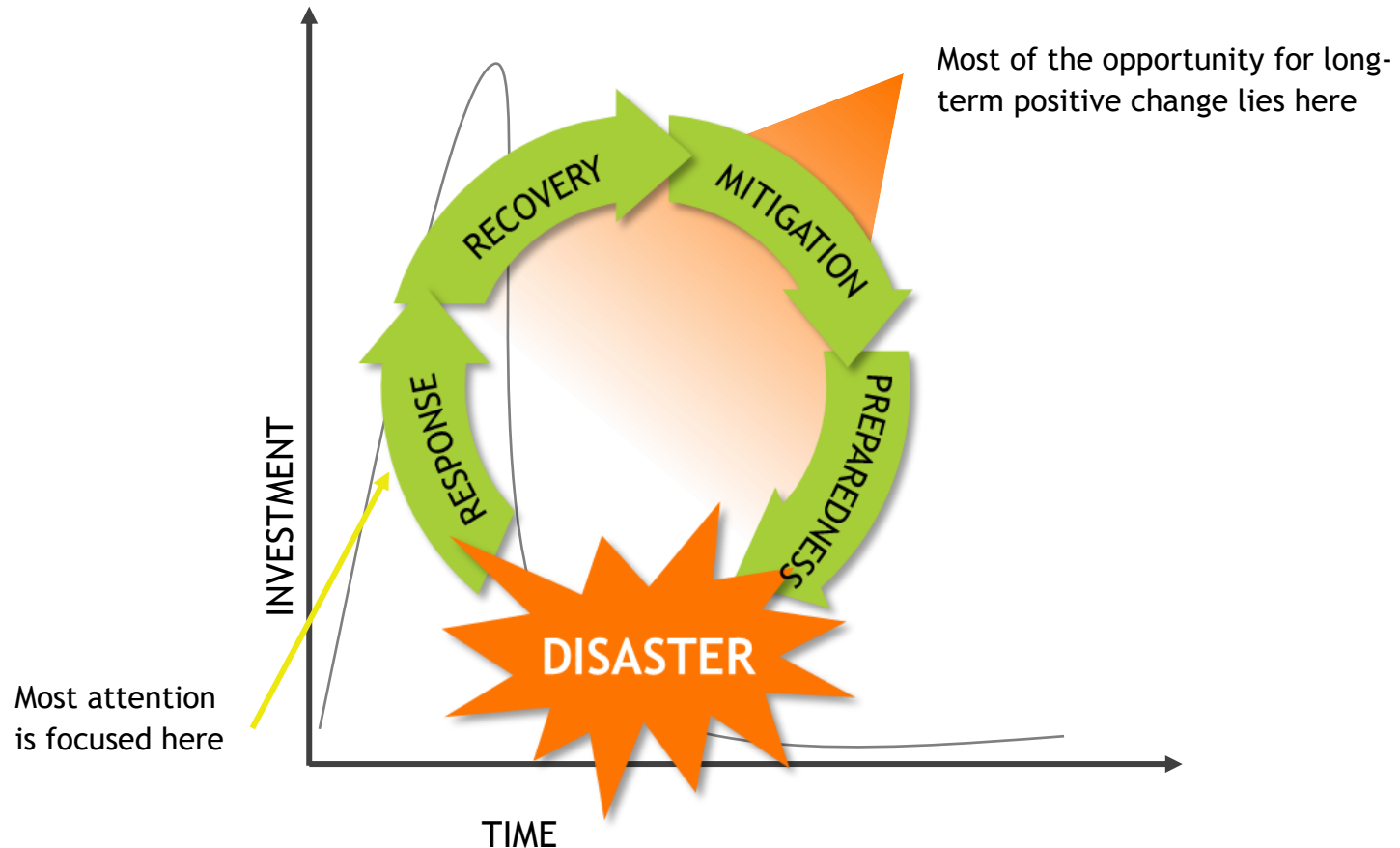
It's ok. If you're not sure, you're not alone.

What did we learn from these disasters, especially 9-11? A disaster that at the time no one thought we would ever be calling "limited" in scope and scale. And still, the needs for investment, advocacy, and community building didn't go away in three months or even a year. In fact, as Jon Stewart reminded us in 2019 with his emotional [testimony](#) on Capitol Hill, many needs persist nearly two decades later.

The needs go on. Where will you be then?

² <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>

FEMA defines four phases of any disaster (also applicable to other crises): response, recovery, mitigation and preparedness. This guide helps leaders think about where, how, and why our institutions show up in each phase.



Response: Activity from the moment the incident takes place through the time that basic human and emergency needs have been met.

Recovery: Collaborative efforts to re-establish a sense of normalcy, development, and growth in communities affected by the disaster, may extend for several years.

Mitigation: Reduce effects (e.g., loss of life and physical assets such as buildings and supplies) that lessen the overall impact of all kinds of disaster on organizations and communities.

Preparedness: Proactive efforts to place us in a better state of readiness to withstand or avoid the immediate impact of disasters.

Let's Not Miss the Opportunity This Time

The inequities, flawed systems, and under-investments that make disasters worse overall - or make them tragedies for some, yet minor inconvenience for others - didn't develop overnight.

But when we focus *only* on the immediate response needs, without also investing across the disaster cycle, we once again miss the opening to address them and consider how things can be different on the other side.

Human nature compels action in the face of tragedy and often results in immediately mobilized giving, service, and engagement. That is a good and important civic response.

But when we rely on it alone, we miss two big opportunities.

First, when we rely solely on human compassion to motivate response to crises, **we miss the opportunity to challenge the unequal biases reflected in society**, so that we might create more racially and socioeconomically equal institutional responses.

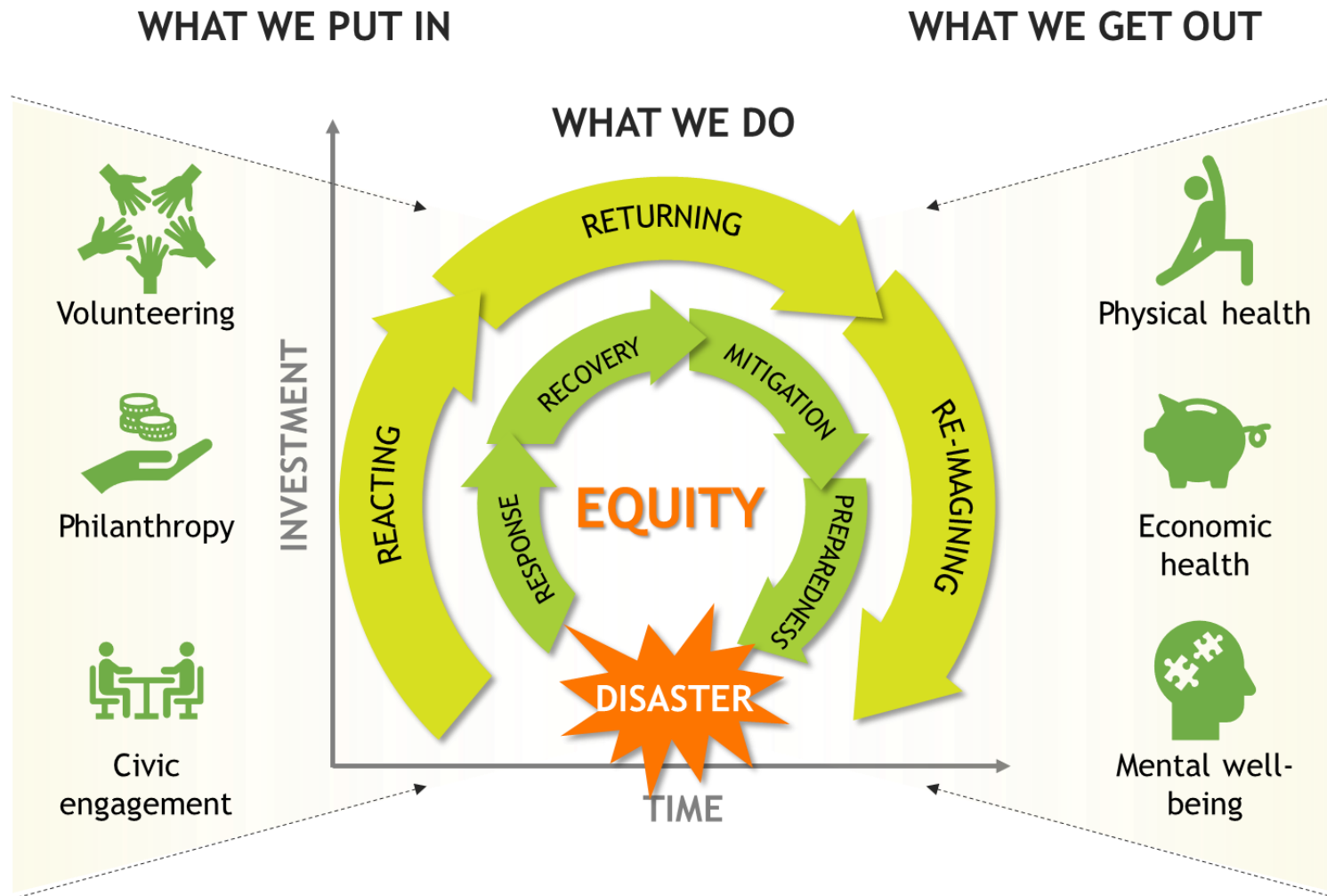
Second, **we miss the moment to sustain, sequence, and spread out the steadiness of our effort into a civic recovery**. By doing so, we can ensure there are the volunteers and financial resources we need when disaster strikes, but also money, advocacy, agency, and engagement for the long-term policy and practice solutions that come next.

Which compels the question: what if we could learn to act even in the absence of a tragedy?

What if we moved from deploying a traditional response at a moment in time to seizing the opportunity to imagine what could be?

What if we took the three existential challenges (reacting, returning and re-imagining) outlined by Heinz Endowments President, Grant Oliphant in [this *Chronicle of Philanthropy* article](#), and made them philanthropy's companion to FEMA's disaster cycle?

What if our engagement looked like this?



We have resources to create the future we want. What if we brought volunteering, philanthropy and civic engagement to the table at each stage?

What might that look like at an institutional level, and how can we create a sense of agency and efficacy at the individual level for people to tap into their civic spirit to become involved?

Inequality and inequities are exposed and can be made worse in a crisis. What role can personal and institutional civic agency play in an **equitable recovery and re-imagining plan**? How might we think about the various dimensions of equity (such as race, gender, socio-economic, ability) in order to put those most impacted at the center of our decision-making? What might it look like to bring “Earned Knowledge” into our approach?

If we approach our next steps differently than usual, we could **get different results**. Take, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis. A pandemic, by definition, is a public health crisis, but its impacts (and causes) reach far beyond the sphere of health, as the social determinants of health frameworks illustrate.

Societally, we already experience underinvestment and systemic inequities in critical areas like public health, wages and benefits, mental health, affordable housing, public education, and health care. That inequity and lack of resourcing exacerbated the severity of COVID-19, making socioeconomic disparities more prevalent in the pandemic’s impact. And the same inequities within these issues were exacerbated by the crisis as well.

How might a civic re-imagining plan help respond to the immediate health needs created by a pandemic (or other crisis) but also prioritize ensuring stronger health, economics, and social/emotional well-being as part of what comes next?

Ready to Start the Conversation?

We have an opening to **break the cycle of limited investment and engagement** that typically follows a disaster.³ And an opportunity to **proactively envision what we want our “future state” to look like**, rather than be pushed into a “new normal.”

When the status quo is in total upheaval, the previously impossible becomes possible.

This section offers strategic questions, civic questions (how philanthropy, service and civic engagement relate) and tips for action organized by the combined stages from FEMA’s disaster and philanthropy’s companion: Response/Reacting, Recovery/Returning and Mitigation and Preparedness/Re-Imagining.

The questions below are meant to help funders consider how you want to engage in all phases of disasters, and how you can help envision and imagine what community well-being looks like on the other side of the crisis.

³ For example, in 2017, a year tormented by earthquakes, wildfires, and hurricanes, [Issue Lab reported](#) that 64% of philanthropic disaster dollars went to response and relief efforts, 17% went to reconstruction and relief, and only 2% went to resilience and preparedness, respectively.



Response/Reacting



TIPS:

- Meet needs but be careful of jumping on the bandwagon of investing all available financial and human resources in this phase, if it might come at the potential expense of resources later.
- Take the 30,000-foot view to capture lessons, identify gaps or weaknesses in real-time to inform future preparedness and mitigation efforts.

Strategic Questions

- What was true before this happened that's still true - or even more true now?
- What was true before this happened that's no longer true?
- What kind of team/organization/community do we want to be (or be known as) on the other side of this?
- Where and when can our resources and leadership be most effective? What work is "ours to do" and is now the time to do it?

Civic Questions

- What do we expect from local, state and federal governments in the immediate aftermath of a disaster? How do we hold them accountable for fulfilling those roles? Where/how can we complement their leadership?
- Who else is responding/reacting? Where/how can we complement their leadership? Can we map out resource allocation to ensure all needs are met?
- What lessons can we learn from previous disasters? What worked or didn't work? Why?
- Who has been most affected? In what ways (physical harm, financial loss, psychological trauma, etc.)?
 - Why were they most affected? What factors or systemic failures led to this?
 - How can we listen to and learn from their experiences and engage them as co-creators in our response (without over-burdening them in a time of trauma)?
- How might we encourage, incentivize, and/or support volunteerism, service, civic engagement, and individual philanthropic giving right now?



Recovery/Returning



TIPS:

- Compile models and lessons of what works and disseminate them as useful guides.
- Work in partnership with governments to ensure accountability for equity in recovery efforts.
- Provide general operating support to nonprofits to ensure flexibility.

Strategic Questions

- What work is “ours to do” and is now the time to do it?
- With the status quo in upheaval, what things are now possible that seemed impossible before?
 - And if they are possible in this moment, can they be possible for the foreseeable future? Can they be possible forever? *Should* they be?
 - What could be on the table now that we were unwilling to put on the table before?
- Who experienced tragedy in this event and who experienced (comparatively) minor inconvenience? What did they experience and how do we know? What contributed to that? Did anyone benefit from this tragedy or event?

Strategic Questions (cont.)

- What does equity mean to us in this context?
 - What civic perspectives are considered (race, gender, ability, etc.) and how do we use those to ensure equitable support and investment decisions?
 - How can we make sure inequality and inequity are not accelerated during the crisis?
- Whose recovery are we prioritizing or privileging and why? What assumptions and beliefs are underneath those choices?
- How do we invest for resilience, not just survival?

Civic Questions

- How do we leverage our abilities for collaboration, coordination, and convening? With whom?
- When we determine what we can/should do, what do we call on from others? Do we ask them to join us, or provide suggestions of ways to complement/supplement our efforts?
- How can we help people find a sense of civic agency or efficacy right now, especially if recovery feels structural or institutional?
- How can we help identify, support and facilitate appropriate roles for individuals to play outside of organizations, institutions or formal structures?
- How might we encourage, incent and/or support volunteerism, service, civic engagement, and individual philanthropic giving right now?



Mitigation and Preparedness/Re-Imagining



TIPS:

- Ask for and cover the true cost of services and programs for nonprofits.
- Support the development of national strategies and standards related to equity in mitigation and preparedness.
- Help nonprofits strengthen their financial preparedness capacity, build reserves.

Strategic Questions

- What work is “ours to do” and is now the time to do it?
- What future state do we want to inhabit? How can we intentionally create that now?
- How do we ensure equity in mitigation and preparedness efforts and investments? What do racial equity, gender equity, rural equity, and other lenses of equity mean in this context?
- What can we do to avoid perpetuating under-investment in some communities?
 - What does “under-investment” mean in this context? Is it resources, policy, culture, something else? Why does this under-investment take place and who is best positioned to correct for it?

Strategic Questions (cont.)

- Are there policy solutions that should be explored? What is the role of civil society/voluntary institutions in encouraging and supporting practices that address issues of under-investment?
- What relationships should we build and nurture that will allow us to be most effective in a disaster response?
 - What existing relationships do we need to re-evaluate?
 - Where are our conflicts of interest?
- Do we have a crisis plan to ensure continuity of our own operations? Have we empowered or supported this type of plan development in our grantees or community partners?
- Do we have clear and appropriate protocols in place to engage with grantees or partners in the wake of a disaster? If so, do they still make sense based on how we have used them? If not, what should they include?
- If it's possible to ease grant restrictions in an emergency, why did we have so many restrictions in the first place? Are they really necessary? Whose needs do they serve? Should we ever reinstate them?
- What level of accountability is absolutely necessary to fulfill our mission?
 - Who are we holding accountable? Who will hold us accountable?
- How do we balance accountability and flexibility? How can we meet our needs with the least possible burden to grantees?

Civic Questions

- How can we strengthen the capacity of communities/nonprofits/civil society/government to resist the effects of disasters? What do appropriate sector roles look like in this context?
- How do we invest or sustain the infrastructure that equips our readiness for next time?
 - What are the “dimensions” of infrastructure? For example: physical infrastructure, relationship infrastructure, narratives and messaging, public spaces (e.g., libraries, parks), public utilities and goods (e.g., water, Internet access)
 - How can we prioritize this type of civic infrastructure during “normal” times?
- How might we encourage, incent and/or support volunteerism, service, civic engagement, and individual philanthropic giving right now?

Philanthropy in Action

For decades, funders have stepped up as conveners, connectors, coordinators, champions and catalysts before, during and after disasters and crises. Below are a few of the many examples available to spark your own thinking of the roles you might play throughout the disaster cycle. Know of others? Please share them with us [here](#) so that we can build a repository.



Phase: Response/Reacting

In the early days of 2020 COVID-19 pandemic spread in the U.S., Bauman Foundation [catalyzed other funders](#) to minimize the impact of the coronavirus on voting in the 2020 election cycle and on participation in the 2020 census. They highlighted the importance of protecting our democracy in times of crisis by recognizing the immediate need to help nonprofits make the transition to virtual communications and digital organizing strategies.



Phase: Recovery/Returning

Following Hurricane Harvey in 2017, Simmons Foundation championed best practices in disaster philanthropy, specifically advocating trauma informed care for vulnerable youth populations in the Houston area. During the first six months of 2018, they ran a 10-part [webinar series](#) to educate local and national grantmakers on post-disaster mental health needs. They also partnered with the Trauma and Grief Center and Harvey Resiliency and Recovery Program at Texas Children's Hospital to promote awareness of and treatment for post-traumatic stress.



Phase: Mitigation and Preparedness/Re-Imagining

In 2002, The UPS Foundation leveraged its convening power to bring together FEMA, National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster and Points of Light Foundation's Volunteer Center National Network to address difficulties engaging unaffiliated volunteers during disasters. Using the experience of 9-11 terrorist attacks to identify lessons, the group produced "[Preventing a Disaster Within the Disaster: The Effective Use of Unaffiliated Volunteers.](#)" This report led to national guidelines, standards, practices and protocols still in use today.

What's Next?

Right now, so much is happening that we never thought could happen.

Why do we ever have to go back to the way things were?

Instead of new “normal” we could **create the future state we want.**

So, what do we really want? We can choose. It starts with a conversation.

Want more? Need some help to get started?

Strategy Quick Start 3-2-1 Workbook: Covid-19 Edition

Free, downloadable PDF resource for organizations feeling like their strategy needs a “do over” in these rapidly changing times, but they don’t have the time, patience or money for a lengthy process.

SHIFT: A Lab for Change Leaders

This crisis version of the Intrapreneurs Influence Lab offers practical, applicable tools, techniques and support for leading change in changing times. It’s a 6-month program to give leaders exactly what they need right now to shift from pushback to buy-in, insecurity to confidence, firefighting to momentum-making, anxiety to advantage.

PACE Imagination Sprints

PACE leads “Imagination Sprints” on a variety of topics. They are opportunities for funders and other civic leaders to engage in the creative and collaborative process of re-imagining a new reality for our future.

Center for Disaster Philanthropy

A resource to help donors make more thoughtful disaster-related giving decisions, maximizing the impact.

Authors

Kristen Cambell, Executive Director of PACE

Prior to joining PACE in 2015, Kristen served the National Conference on Citizenship as its Chief Program Officer, and has held philanthropic roles at the Case Foundation and Points of Light. Kristen is an AmeriCorps Alum and serves on the board of United Philanthropy Forum and Citizen University, as well as the advisory groups of several national groups, including the working group of the Philanthropy Initiative at the Smithsonian Institution.

Decker Ngongang, PACE Fellow

Decker has spent the last decade mobilizing the next generation of changemakers, building community organizations, and providing strategic support to social sector leaders and institutions. His previous leadership includes work with Frontline Solutions, Echoing Green (where he launched the Black Male Achievement Social Entrepreneur Fellowship), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Mobilize.org and Generation Engage.

Nancy Murphy, Founder & President of CSR Communications

Nancy's experience includes a decade leading the corporate responsibility practice for APCO Worldwide, executive leadership roles with Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and the Case Foundation, and consulting for Annie E. Casey Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and The UPS Foundation, among others. While working with UPS, she led the initiative to re-imagine disaster volunteerism in the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attacks.

About PACE (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement)

PACE is a member-centric philanthropic laboratory for funders seeking to maximize their impact on democracy and civic life in the United States. Our members share a belief that America will be healthier and more successful, resilient, and productive, if democracy is strong and the office of citizen is treated as central to how it functions. We believe that American democracy will thrive when all of its people are informed and engaged in the process of creating it.

About CSR Communications

We work with *intrapreneurs* - leaders of big change within established organizations - to help them get unstuck, create a clear vision and goals, and design a path to realize them. Our proprietary processes for strategy development (Goal Getter), message development and communication (Mine the Essence) and board development (Board Booster) ensure social change agents achieve their desired results. We're also the home of the SHIFT Change Leaders Lab that helps isolated individuals become influential intrapreneurs, especially in times of crisis.

