

South Saskatchewan Community Foundation: Response to COVID-19 January 2021

Adriana Davis PhiLab

This report is part of a series of case studies exploring the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canada's philanthropic community, as well as the adaptive capacity of Canadian foundations in response to the current crisis. Our goal is to capture some of the novel initiatives developed, and/or supported, by Canadian foundations in response to the outbreak. We also aim to provide some sense of the impact these initiatives might have on the public, as well as the philanthropic community, both amidst, and after, the COVID-19 pandemic. The data from our analysis complements the findings of a systematic survey undertaken by Philanthropic Foundations Canada (PFC), as well as a Delphi method-based examination of the perspectives of experts in the field.

Introduction

The current report outlines how the South Saskatchewan Community Foundation (SSCF) has responded to the COVID-19 outbreak. It is based on a conversation with Donna Ziegler, the foundation's Executive Director, about specific actions taken by the SSCF. We use the conversation as a starting point to identify other relevant philanthropic initiatives developed by additional philanthropic organizations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our conversation identified several initiatives undertaken by the SSCF. Some of these initiatives were developed and implemented by the SSCF exclusively, while others were collaborative projects with other organizations that the SSCF launched or adapted in response to the outbreak.

The report is organized into two sections: (1) SSCF's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and (2) future directions for the SSCF. The first section focuses on changes in grantmaking practice, operations, and collaborations. The second section describes long-term changes in grantmaking policy, programming and initiatives, and the day-to-day operations of the SSCF.



1. Response to COVID-19 by the SSCF

About SSCF

The South Saskatchewan Community Foundation (SSCF) connects donors and charities by facilitating the distribution of donations to charities and non-profit organizations located in Regina and in Southern Saskatchewan. In comparison with other Canadian foundations, the SSCF oversees the largest geographical community in Canada, covering approximately 472,000 people and 481 communities. The SSCF states that their mission is to build a “strong, inclusive, and fair place to live, work, and play” by investing in the community. They achieve this by working with donors, distributing donations, researching community needs, and investing pooled philanthropic and organizational funds for a higher return. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the SSCF has been successful in distributing almost \$10 million back to nearly 500 charitable organizations across their vast geographical area.

The SSCF was established in 1969 and is a member of Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) – a national membership organization with over 191 community foundations across Canada. In 1969, the SSCF

had an asset base of \$60,000; currently, it has an asset base of close to \$80 million made up of a variety of fund types including: donor-advised, agency, and designated funds, as well as more traditional philanthropic assets to be distributed through competitive granting processes, and their own discretionary grant: Smart and Caring. These funds include endowed and nonendowed funds, community building funds, business funds, and individual funds. The SSCF board is comprised of 12 board members who oversee the governance structure and the policies of the organization. There are 7 full-time staff members that control the SSCF's day-to-day operations, and one consultant that aids in communication between the foundation, donors, and grantees.

The SSCF's membership includes a group of 45-50 charities that regularly take part in the Vital Signs community network: a network of communities that works to assist SSCF with local research and information on immediate community needs. Vital Signs provides the SSCF with information regarding the health of the community, the needs of charities, and how communities and charities can collaborate with one another in order to provide solutions for one another.

1. Response to COVID-19 by the SSCF

Initial Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The SSCF anticipated that the COVID-19 pandemic would have enduring consequences on marginalized communities that experience poverty, and mental health crises. They understood that the communities that would suffer most would include:

- those living in poverty, who may not be able to ‘stock up’ on supplies, nor find a safe place to isolate;
- those with mental health challenges, who may be uniquely impacted by COVID-19’s impact on daily life, including the disruption of key in-person social services;
- those marginalized by race, gender, or other axes of identity;
- those experiencing domestic violence.

Following the World Health Organization’s declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, Saskatchewan went into lockdown on March 16th of 2020. The government of Saskatchewan told the public that there would be four stages to their response to the pandemic, each with a different focus or strategy, in order to return to ‘life-as-normal’. In the first phase of the re-opening process, there were only a few cases of COVID-19 in Saskatchewan; however, the SSCF recognized the urgency for immediate support to nonprofit organizations and charities across the province. As demand for charitable services grew, it became increasingly challenging for charities to fundraise in order to meet that demand. The support given to these charities by the SSCF was largely focused on food security, shelters, necessities for children, and necessities for marginalized individuals. The SSCF was in contact with other community foundations across Canada and the Vital Signs Community Network to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on communities in their respective geographic locations.

Financial Aid for the SSCF

In an immediate response to COVID-19, the SSCF put out a call to past and present donors—using both email and phone call correspondence—to ask for financial support. To accommodate the new needs of communities, donors were asked if they would demonstrate flexibility and allow charities to direct existing earmarked grants towards immediate needs (e.g., towards operations and supplies, computers and technology for remote upkeep, and staff employment), rather than directing funds towards programs that do not address the immediate needs of the community (e.g., ‘in-person’ programs that were no longer possible). The Board of Directors of SSCF met on March 12th and recommended a ‘matching’ program for donations up to \$500,000 total in order to support an Emergency Response Fund for Community Need. SSCF staff members contacted friends and donors of the SSCF to solicit financial support and the matching grant was achieved within four weeks through the generosity of the Saskatchewan people and of both new, and old, SSCF donors. The Emergency Response fund totalled \$1.1 million, and went back into the community approximately 8 weeks after the establishment of the matching grant. The federal government provided an additional \$900,000 in June to the SSCF. These funds were directed back into the community with the help of Community Foundations of Canada. The federal government provided an additional \$333,000 in a second round of federal funding that was distributed back into communities. While not through the SSCF, the provincial government offered some support to about four shelters in the amount of \$178,000. However, while this effort was welcomed, it was not enough to meet the huge influx of grant applications from community organizations.

1. Response to COVID-19 by the SSCF

SSCF Donor Response

The SSCF is in communication with various donors who provide financial support to charities and non-profit organizations of their choosing through donor advised funds. In addition to matching the \$500,000 grant provided by the Board to SSCF's Emergency Response Fund, donors were also asked to be flexible in their grantmaking, offering extensions to grantees unable to use the funds for specific projects. These extensions allowed grantees to put their funding on hold until they could use it, or redirect it towards operational costs. Some donors changed grant application criteria to include COVID-19 challenges. This allowed grantees affected by COVID-19 to put the money towards operational supplies or other immediate needs. Through community data gathered by the Vital Signs Community, as well as the information provided by a local shelter and food organizing group run by the City of Regina, the SSCF was well-informed regarding emergent needs and was successful in helping donors understand these needs and where funds would be most helpful. Overall, donors were very appreciative of the information and agreed with the adaptations. The donors were proud to help and appreciated regular communication in regards to where change was required. The money given by donors was, and continues to be, put primarily towards social or health programs, aligning with COVID-19 relief needs.

Operational Changes & Commitments

The daily functioning of the SSCF was impacted by the pandemic. Staff and donors were forced to adapt to the new restrictions and guidelines put out by both the federal and provincial government. This meant that staff were required to work from home in a virtual setting. To help transition to these new working conditions, the SSCF provided staff with: home equipment, money for cell phone use, extra time off when needed to avoid burnout, and nominal reimbursement for printing and/or incidentals required. Upon receiving the initial \$900,000 from the federal government, the SSCF hired a local grantmaking consultant to aid in the transfer of funds from the CFC to aid in the transfer of funds to communities.

In order to accommodate the increase in applications alongside the increase in grant funds, certain policies needed to be amended. For example, the SSCF's Executive Director was granted the ability to approve funding requests to the Community Response Fund, the Emergent Need Fund, and the Investment Readiness Program, as well as grant requests up to \$50,000—double the previous limit of \$25,000. The criteria for grants were also revised in collaboration with other organizations (e.g., the Red Cross and the United Way) so as to prevent charities from applying to each or-

ganization for the same funding, thereby preventing 'double dipping' for the same funds. Administrative policies shifted as well. For example, written cheques were replaced by electronic fund transfers that could be approved via digital consent from the board twice a week. SSCF's mailing address was changed to the Executive Director's home address at the beginning of the pandemic, though this was later changed to a separate Post Office Box number. Board committee work was put on hold for approximately six weeks to ensure necessary COVID-19 practices were being carried out, and regular updates were provided to the board bi-weekly.

Board members reached out to their networks to try and find individuals who would be interested in supporting the fund, and double their impact through the matching \$500,000 grant. In response to the donors' efforts, the SSCF quickly put out ads in the newspaper, sent emails, and made phone calls to thank the donors for their generosity. Board members were enthusiastic about attending educational seminars that would provide information on helping staff members through the pandemic, as well as the responsibilities of the board through the pandemic. Additional support was offered in the form of sessions on how to deal with COVID-19. These were created in collaboration with the University of Regina Community Engagement and Research Centre. The SSCF also increased flexibility around staff work times, accommodating their needs at home and at work.

1. Response to COVID-19 by the SSCF

Collaborative Efforts

During the pandemic, collaborations have been extremely important for offering support to communities, as well as keeping philanthropic donors informed of what supports are being offered. The SSCF is a collaborative foundation that reaches out to other foundations to ask questions and gain insights. It makes use of the network of foundations that communicate with one another (CFC), sharing information about governance and policy, allowing for growth and improvement in the way each foundation conducts business.

In the face of the pandemic, the SSCF has used this network many times and has been in contact with the city of Regina, CFC, the Red Cross, the United Way, the Community Initiatives Fund, the Saskatchewan Non-Profits Association, and numerous charities that serve the needs of marginalized communities. The United Way uses a 211-phone number in Saskatchewan that acts as a 24/7 service to connect individuals with human services in the area. From these calls, the United Way can understand who is calling and what their needs are, and share this information with the city of Regina and others organizations like the SSCF. If a charitable request does not fit the SSCF criteria for funding, that person or organization can be referred to one of the collaborating foundations (e.g., the United Way, the Red Cross).



2. Future Directions for SSCF

Funding for Charitable Organizations by the SSCF

When discussing the second phase of the re-opening process (~June 16th) with the Executive Director of the SSCF, the focus shifted towards rebuilding; namely, understanding the permanence of the pandemic in the years to come, and what this means for the delivery of services by charitable organizations. By the fall of 2020, many charitable organizations recognized the need to re-evaluate their operations by reducing staff sizes, cutting work hours, and moving away from an ‘open office’ setting that prioritizes face-to-face communication and collaborations with one another. This is not possible, however, for front line charities such as the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) shelter, Regina Transition House, Carmichael Outreach Regina and North Central Family Services

because the individuals seeking their services do not have anywhere else to go. As a result, their doors have had to remain open to accept people into their shelters with the appropriate COVID-19 precautions. These services were able to apply for funding through the SSCF, which allowed them to change the way they deliver services including, for example, delivering food baskets and delivering essential services to seniors in the community.

Long-term care facilities received funding from the SSCF which allowed for virtual communication between residents and their family members, and paid for additional security to prevent visitors from coming and going from the complex, thereby mitigating the risk for the spread of COVID-19 to the residents. They also provided 25 Chrome computers to a First Nation reserve, Cowessess, which gave grade 11 and 12 students an opportunity to continue their education, and communicate and collaborate with members of their community.

Permanent Initiatives

The SSCF hopes to remain flexible in their delivery of services and in their daily operations, and maintains that all internal online administration procedures will endure beyond COVID-19. For example, their software database system allows staff to work from home and deliver services. However, they have made plans to keep a ‘blended approach’; that is, some walk-in opportunities will open with reduced staff and hours. Distance working and electronic relations are expected to continue. The SSCF has also provided financial support for a virtual counselling service software that will enable long-term support beyond COVID-19. They remark that “[...] some investment in technology will outlive the COVID immediate requirement and help deliver services differently in the future” (Executive Director of SSCF).

2. Future Directions for SSCF

Relational Changes

Established collaborations with other foundations and with Vital Signs are expected to remain in place in order to continue generating insights on where and who needs funding. The SSCF will continue to contact donors if there are pressing needs within a particular population or charity. Donors have also demonstrated flexibility and confidence in terms of the charities they have supported during the pandemic and are sensitive to new target populations affected by COVID-19. Donors recognize that charities do not run solely on volunteers; rather, there are operational expenses that require funding in order for charitable organizations to offer support to those that are not protected by government funding. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a realization that fundraising for charities must be adaptable. Fundraising opportunities for charities will not always be available in terms of operational dollars that allow for the continued distribution of services. Thus, new ways of supporting charities must be uncovered to provide support to those organizations during a crisis. This is especially true for those charities that are dependent on a physical showing of support such as the arts, museums, and sporting events. During the pandemic, it has become clear that these charities play an important role in maintaining the mental health of the members of their community.



Conclusions

The SSCF recognizes that marginalized populations are most affected by COVID-19 and has made the appropriate adjustments to their foundation policy and practice in order to address this reality. The donors that help to supply grant money have demonstrated flexibility to meet the needs of communities during the pandemic and remain in constant contact with members of the SSCF. Operations at SSCF have changed to follow health guidelines and are expected to remain stable for the foreseeable future. Staff members have increased flexibility and are able to work remotely as well as offer in-office services with reductions in staffing and hours. Collaborative efforts to understand target populations are expected to remain stable in order to collect information on community vitality and needs. Despite the efforts of foundations and donors, community needs are much greater than philanthropy's ability to distribute funds. The SSCF will continue to document which communities lack the funding they require, and will reach out to donors that may be interested in providing financial support to those in need.

The SSCF's response to the COVID-19 pandemic reflects many of the strategies, policies, and practices implemented by grantmaking foundations throughout Canada. What is particularly noteworthy about the SSCF case, however, is how their well-established relationship with the Vital Signs Network allowed for a rapid and well-informed response to grantee and community needs. While this pre-existing open line of communication and dialogue between funders, grantees, and communities certainly facilitated the sharing of important grassroots knowledge for a speedy and informed COVID-19 response, it can also serve as a model for a more responsive, democratic, and collaborative philanthropic sector post-COVID.