CALL TO FUNDERS FOR NONPROFIT TECH SUPPORT

How to Support Digital Infrastructure During COVID-19 and Beyond

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OVERVIEW

COVID-19 HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

This global crisis requires two cures – one to keep people safe and healthy from COVID-19, the other to enable the world to work, mostly by using technology from home. Most nonprofits in 2020 use technology in some form to deliver on their mission but many, especially international nonprofits, work in poorly connected areas and rely on the office to share power, computers, scanners, printers, applications and connectivity. Working from home creates demand for more equipment at a time when resources are at their lowest, creating an instant digital divide that hampers mission delivery.

Today, in the middle of a global pandemic, this digital divide is clearer than ever. Nonprofits that are able to continue working right now are doing so by leveraging **personal** resources rather than **organizational** ones. Staff at countless nonprofits are working with personal devices and personal internet access, all without support for tools implementation, security, and digital literacy. Compounding the challenge, almost 33 million Americans[1] and 3.7 billion people worldwide[2] lack reliable internet access making service delivery during a pandemic nearly impossible without health risks.

> **The COVID-19 pandemic underscores an urgent reality: The baseline of digital preparedness at global nonprofits is lower than we imagined and requires new funding and support.**

In this call to philanthropy, NTEN, NetHope, and the Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG) identify the most pressing technology needs for nonprofits worldwide today as they cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and tomorrow as recovery begins. Additionally, we provide inspiring examples of grantmaker responses and provide suggestions for additional investment in a digital infrastructure for civil society. Through this appeal, we aim to begin bridging the digital divide exacerbated during today's crisis and to continue furthering social good.

[1] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/22/some-americans-dont-use-the-internet-who-are-they/
[2] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS

WHAT NONPROFITS NEED MOST

Now more than ever, nonprofits need support from funders that recognizes the entire cost of their work – work that is critical for communities across the globe right now. The full cost of digital infrastructure is significant and includes not only the hardware and software to shift virtual teams and program delivery, but also the skills and training to select, implement, and use these tools, as well as the long-term need to make strategic decisions about their technology roadmap.

> **"In the COVID-19 response phase, emergency measures needed now include reliable power, devices, connectivity, and software, as well as cashflow relief from short-term technology costs, to ensure business continuity. In the recovery phase, grantmakers can likewise pool resources to provide collective solutions to the nonprofit sector. A pooled Technology Recovery Fund for nonprofits would help the sector to "build back better" to achieve greater impact."**
>
> **- Liz Bronder, CEO, NetHope**

According to research by NTEN, TAG, and NetHope, the greatest technology needs for nonprofits throughout the COVID-19 crisis are the following:

1. Reliable internet access
2. Hardware, such as laptops, mobile devices, connectivity, and reliable power in vulnerable countries
3. Software for remote work, paperless billing, virtual events, process approvals, fundraising, etc.
4. Funding to enable program continuity in their transition from in-person to remote service delivery
5. One-on-one support for tool selection, implementation, remote training strategy
6. Training resources
7. Flexible funding for reallocation according to needs

Finding out what nonprofits and grantees need right now means asking and then listening deeply. Needs vary greatly depending upon staff size, skills, hardware, geographic location, and baseline internet connectivity, so responsive funders are opening direct and rapid communication channels between program staff, IT staff, and grantee partners.

HOW FUNDERS CAN RESPOND

While the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) has made headlines in 2020, there is also a pressing lack of digital infrastructure that is preventing millions globally from accessing vital services funded and delivered by civil society. This digital inequity is especially prevalent in communities with the greatest need for services, exacerbating inequities even further during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> **The question for philanthropy is this:** *Are we ready to transform grantmaking to fund, build, and sustain the digital infrastructure needed for social change in 2020 and beyond?*

Already, some funders have responded to the urgent needs of nonprofits by providing tool licenses, flexible funding for technology, and direct access to foundation IT staff and consultants for tech support. While this is a new approach for many grantmakers, such immediate responsiveness directly supports the mission of philanthropy in strengthening global communities. The Arcus Foundation, for example, is providing support to some grantees for remote working licenses and software to enable operations, such as bill paying services. In some cases, such as Energy Foundation, grantees are being provisioned directly with licenses for remote work tools. "The Zoom licenses," says Lupine Seran, Senior Director of Knowledge Systems at Energy Foundation, "are a first attempt at helping people continue to do their work with tools more appropriate for our new reality."

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE BY GRANTMAKERS

What can your foundation do, both in the short-term and long-term? Below are pragmatic approaches already underway as grantmakers begin to address the immediate gap in digital infrastructure for nonprofits, which is even more pronounced in emerging economies.

NOW	ONGOING
• Donate or purchase hardware • Provide software licenses • Provide funding for software (e.g., TechSoup) • Provide funding to rapidly deploy technology and digital literacy (e.g., NTEN and NetHope) • Provide grantees access to direct tech support and training via in-house IT staff or consultants • Remove grant restrictions • "Top off" grants to support IT and operations needs	• Include implementation and maintenance costs for technology within grants • Provide more general operational funding • Provide knowledge and learning spaces for cross-grantee collaboration • Develop digital skills within foundation program staff • Fund or develop programs for digital skills and capacity within nonprofits (e.g., NTEN and NetHope) • Encourage digital investments to increase program efficacy and impact

COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR RECOVERY

While immediate effort by individual funders is vital, the digital infrastructure gap laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic will only be addressed through **sustained and collective** action. This gap is hardly new as organizations have been calling for civil society infrastructure since 2016[3], and yet this pivotal moment of stress makes strategic investment imperative.

> **"An economy needs roads, bridges, and train stations to thrive. A community needs schools, parks, and houses of worship to ensure the flowering of human potential. And civil society needs infrastructure to ensure that nonprofits and foundations can act with integrity and impact."**
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> **— From "Investing in Infrastructure," a letter from 22 Philanthropy Serving Organizations to the sector (May 13, 2016).**

NetHope, NTEN, and TAG share a commitment to highlighting the need for digital infrastructure in civil society. As mentioned in this document, the immediate **response phase** calls for funding and support to equip the humanitarian sector to carry out their charitable work using remote and digital means. In the longer-term **recovery phase**, new ways of funding technology and building a digital infrastructure for the nonprofit sector must be supported. Below are four ways to consider engaging:

1. Join Independent Sector and other advocates' call to educate policymakers about the immediate need for more government funding to support a public digital infrastructure in future COVID-19 legislation, particularly through the Institute for Museum and Library Services. Please contact publicpolicy@independentsector.org for more information on the full spectrum of upcoming policy proposals and advocacy opportunities to build the digital infrastructure needed for a 21st century civil society in which all people thrive.
2. Help promote access to devices and the internet for U.S. nonprofits and communities by partnering with organizations that refurbish and distribute devices via the AFTRR network.
3. On a global scale, join NetHope's Nonprofit Response and Recovery Technology Fund to enable digital adoption in response to immediate remote working needs and to drive digital transformation of humanitarian services in recovery to "*build back better*" and create a more efficient and impactful system of aid.
4. Invest in NTEN's educational work to strengthen nonprofits of all sizes and mission-focus by expanding their capacity to address their communities' urgent needs. Learn more at nten.org/fund.

Investing in civil society is as important as investing in roads and bridges as we rebuild our societies and restart our economies. We invite you to join us.

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[3] https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/investing-infrastructure

RESOURCES

Student Access to Digital Learning Resources Outside of the Classroom, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017098/index.asp

Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/

"*Digital divide persists even as lower-income Americans make gains in tech adoption*," https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/07/digital-divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/

"*Digital Divide Resources During the Pandemic*," https://www.nten.org/article/digital-divide-resources-during-the-pandemic/

The Center for the Digital Nonprofit, https://solutionscenter.nethope.org/digital-nonprofit

NetHope COVID-19 Partner Resource Listing, https://solutionscenter.nethope.org/nethope-covid-19-response-partner-resources

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This call to funders is provided by the Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG) in conjunction with NTEN and NetHope.

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