

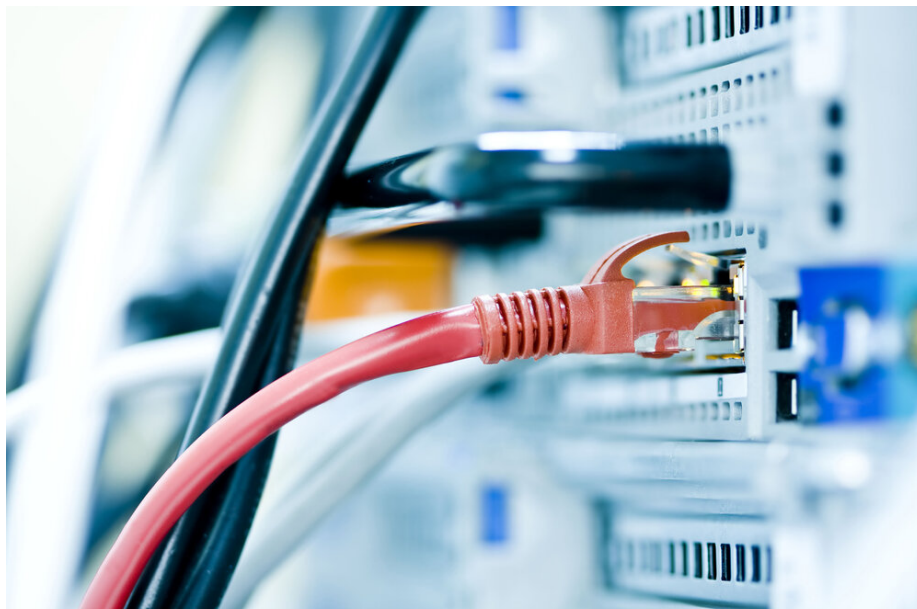
Inside Philanthropy

ISSUES PLACES LEARN CAREER CENTER GRANTFINDER HELP 



Why These Two Very Different Family Foundations Agree On the Importance of Nonprofit IT

Dawn Wolfe



Follow the Money!

Want to get inside funders' heads? Sign up for our email updates.

Email Address

LUCHUNYU/SHUTTERSTOCK

Despite some surface similarities, the Shavlik Family Foundation and the Pierce Family Foundation take different approaches to their work. But both funders agree on the vitally important role that IT plays in the nonprofit universe. With **less than 1% of global giving** paying for the infrastructure that makes nonprofits' work possible, these funders are setting an example that, if followed, could potentially have a powerful impact on the sector's ability to fulfill its mission.

Both foundations are family-oriented efforts with few staff, and both are relatively new and relatively small. Pierce's 990 from 2018 shows total assets of just over \$1.1 million with grants of nearly \$1 million, while Shavlik's 2019 filing (under the name "Shavlik Family Charitable Trust") reports \$310,288 in grants and total assets of just over \$5.9 million. But Shavlik is getting ready to grow, and is thinking about increasing its one-person staff now that it has been in business for a decade. At 14 years old, Pierce has a small but established staff.

Shavlik requires potential grantees to present formal proposals that have been so well researched (down to the specific type of technology to be purchased, and from whom) that it lacks only the money to begin.

"We advise all our nonprofits that they are the experts in their operations, and that they should figure out what their systems requirements should be," founder and Executive Director Rebecca Shavlik told me.

On the other hand, the foundation isn't picky about what kinds of nonprofits it supports. "I always joke that we're programming-agnostic and that we fund everything from

SIGN UP

Featured Jobs

Find Jobs

GO

Senior Director of Development, College of Arts and Sciences

Chicago, IL - **Confluence Philanthropy**

Director of Development & Communications

New York, NY - **Confluence Philanthropy**

Director of Development

Chester, CA - **National Immigration Law Center**

Development Director (Remote)

Washington, DC - **Solar Electric Light**

Fund

Senior Officer of Leadership Giving

CA - **Animal Equality**

Post a Job

More jobs

Powered by **ymcareers**
by communitybrands

very large health and human services agencies to small community theaters,” Shavlik said. “What we’re generally looking for is the next best technology project.”

While the Shavlik Foundation is a generalist funder with a formal process that makes grants across the state of Minnesota, Pierce is a specialist funder with an informal, hands-on approach. Pierce focuses its funding **primarily on Chicago nonprofits** that serve people who are homeless.

Before COVID, the Pierce Foundation’s co-founder and chief technologist David Krumlauf spent roughly a week every month on the road, consulting with grantees and doing everything from ordering laptops and printers to checking into (and approving checks for) needs like HR and accounting support. When the pandemic’s first lockdowns arrived, Krumlauf was on the phone with grantees’ internet service providers to ensure the grantees were ready to move online when the first COVID lockdowns arrived. Rather than expecting grantees to understand what they might need, Krumlauf helps them figure it out.

In the beginning, there were tech companies

Unsurprisingly, the founders behind both the Shavlik and Pierce foundations support nonprofits’ IT needs because they understand those needs firsthand. In Shavlik’s case, it was Rebecca Shavlik and her husband, Mark, who endowed their foundation with funds from the 2011 sale of the company they co-founded, Shavlik Technologies.

Pierce’s backstory is slightly more involved. By the time Krumlauf and his friend, Denis Pierce, had the conversation that eventually led to the Pierce Family Foundation, Krumlauf had co-founded and sold the first ISP in the Traverse City, Michigan, area and another firm

focused on increasing efficient point-to-point communications using microwave technology.

Meanwhile, Pierce's wife, Martha, had encountered frequent IT problems at the small Chicago nonprofit where she served as executive director. Pierce was already thinking about formalizing his philanthropic giving, and after a game of golf in 2007, Krumlauf said, Pierce suggested hiring Krumlauf to take care of IT at Martha's nonprofit. Soon, that remit expanded to helping with the IT needs of the first seven nonprofit grantees of the new foundation, including Martha's. Since then, Krumlauf estimates that he has assisted approximately 500 organizations with their IT and other infrastructure needs.

Forty years of nonprofit accounting records, one dying computer

After they launched, the people behind both the Shavlik and Pierce foundations soon realized just how much nonprofits needed their help.

During their first year, the Shavliks were advised that they should expect to receive 40 to 50 grant applications. They got 135. More recently, that number has grown to an average of 150 to 250 proposals a year.

Over at Pierce, Krumlauf has seen the need for adequate IT one nonprofit at a time—and the potential dangers when it's absent. At one organization, he said, he was visiting the accountant's office when he heard one of the computers making a horrible noise and was told, "Oh, that computer always sounds like that." In that case, the computer was solely responsible for 40 years' worth of the organization's accounting data. He said he has also visited nonprofits without working printers, and others that were still storing their passwords on a single yellow legal pad in someone's office.

And while most people picture major problems like malicious hackers when we consider the things that can go wrong with IT, even the smallest details can trip up an organization.

At one nonprofit that Krumlauf assisted as a personal project outside of his work with Pierce, the new executive director decided to take over management of the organization's domain name—the name, usually the same as the name of an organization, that redirects to that organization's web page in search engines. When the ED forgot to renew the domain name, it was purchased by a pornography studio in New Zealand.

“I talk to a lot of funders [and say] nonprofits need everything that a business needs” to operate efficiently and safely, Krumlauf said. That includes (obviously) someone who knows how and when to renew the organization's domain name.

Advice for funders—and nonprofits

While the Shavlik and Pierce family foundations take different approaches to serving their grantees, both have advice for funders interested in stepping up in this arena.

The Shavlik Foundation advises funders to build a team of experts to help with vetting grant proposals. After their first year resulted in what has become a dependable avalanche of grant proposals, Shavlik said she quickly dispensed with the assumption that she and her husband would be able to do due diligence on them all.

“Just assembling that team that can sit down and really think about how technology plugs and plays within the larger structure of a nonprofit and how it can be impactful... finding those people has been the best thing I ever did,” she said.

When it comes to potential grantees, Shavlik advises nonprofits to “really sit down and do your planning, look at your infrastructure, look at what your needs are [and] prioritize them” according to which project or projects will have the greatest impact—whether that be freeing staff to focus on mission, cost savings or saving time. “At the end of the day, I think most funders want to hear about impact,” she said.

For Krumlauf’s part, in addition to helping other funders see how essential proper IT is to nonprofits’ missions, “I would advise funders to get to know their grantees more,” he said. Krumlauf suggests site visits to determine where a group’s IT is serving them and where it’s hindering them. If a funder is leery about starting with tech grants, he said, “just start with general operating grants. Give them money, [and] just say, ‘This is just your money to use as you see fit, and you don’t have to report back any huge thing about it.’” He also encourages funders to allow their own IT staff to volunteer at grantee organizations. “The few foundations I know that have tried that, their IT staff just love it,” he said.

The important thing, he said, is for funders to “just bite the bullet and do something. Like imagine [that] your email stopped working, and you had no idea who even to call about it.”

While funding for IT infrastructure often isn’t considered “sexy,” adequate technology can assist nonprofits with everything from the security of client and employee data to saving staff time and allowing organizations to scale their missions—while an understanding of IT can avert issues far more urgent than preventing an organization’s web address from pointing to a porn site. Nevertheless, as I learned last month, funding in this critical arena is “**subpar at best.**”

And while funding new IT is seldom a matter of giving “one-and-done” kinds of grants, capacity building in this space isn’t so different from other areas of perennial need that foundations have thrown money at for decades.

“A lot of funders are like, ‘We don’t want to get into the technology thing because it’s going to go on and on and on,’” Krumlauf said. “What’s the problem? Aren’t you going to just keep giving money away? Isn’t that what your job is? [Or are we] gonna quit funding [issues] like reading for preschool kids, because that’s just gonna go on and on, too?”

Featured



Why Big Philanthropy Falls Short at Supporting the Grassroots—and How it Can Do Better

Why These Two Very Different Family Foundations Agree On the Importance of Nonprofit IT

As Conservatives Stoke the Critical Race Theory Culture Wars, Where Is Philanthropy?

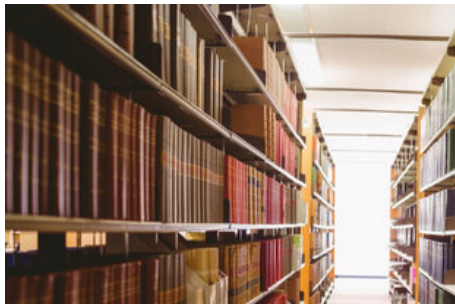
A Closer Look at Who Charity Fraud Targets, and How to Avoid It

August 30, 2021

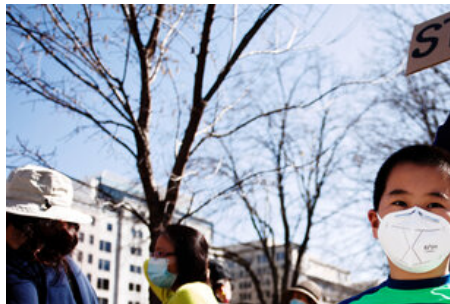
0 Likes Share

[These 3 Walton Heirs’ Foundations New Funding Flows for State-Level](#)

EDITOR'S PICKS



As Conservatives Stoke the Critical



How the Asian American Foundation



We’re Facing an Oral Health Crisis. Here’s