Resourcing resilience and prosperity: Philanthropic investment in New Orleans' nonprofit sector after Hurricane Katrina

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Overview

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, and the federal levees protecting metropolitan New Orleans failed, it marked one of the most devastating disasters in U.S. history. Less than a month later, Hurricane Rita slammed ashore on September 24, 2005, adding to the already catastrophic impacts felt in across the Gulf Coast region. From Hurricane Katrina alone, more than 900 Louisiana residents were killed, some 500,000 homes were damaged, and more than a million people were displaced.[1]

Regionally, total damages were estimated at $151 billion.[2] Approximately $75 billion of the $120.5 billion administered in federal aid focused on immediate emergency efforts, alongside contributions of $6.5 billion in philanthropic support.[3] The scope and scale of the disasters, exacerbated by infrastructure vulnerabilities, the destruction of community networks, and the exposure of deeply entrenched inequities that had long been felt throughout the New Orleans metropolitan area, prompted what would become one of the most notable philanthropic responses ever witnessed.

New Orleans' philanthropic and nonprofit ecosystem after Hurricane Katrina has been dynamic, fraught with tensions, characterized by innovation, and marked by both remarkable successes and persistent challenges. The initial emergency response transitioned to long-term recovery and rebuilding efforts, which in turn evolved into transformational initiatives that sought to address the root causes of vulnerabilities while restoring the treasured vibrancy of the city and region that had been so tragically upended.

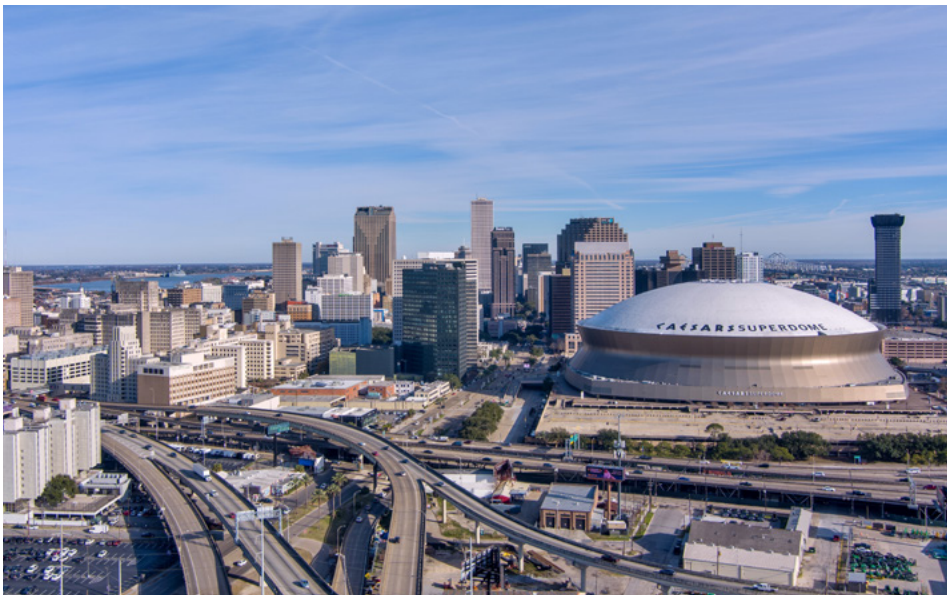


Photo source: Shutterstock

This report examines these complex dynamics through multiple lenses, and in doing so, seeks to quantify the scale and distribution of philanthropic investment, explore the tensions between external and local priorities, and investigate the factors that have influenced the long-term sustainability of nonprofit efforts. This retrospective analysis serves multiple purposes: documenting a significant chapter in American philanthropy, exploring the benefits and challenges of philanthropic support after Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita, and informing future strategies for building genuine community resilience.

The discussion is informed by the perspectives and expertise of community leaders who regularly engage with the philanthropic community, nonprofits, advocates, and individual philanthropists. Eleven such interviews were conducted from April to July 2025, with local and national leaders reflecting experiences ranging from the immediate response efforts to present-day initiatives.[4]

While acknowledging that a holistic view of philanthropy is inclusive of volunteerism, skilled expertise, advocacy, and engagement beyond financial donations, this analysis focuses on monetary contributions from philanthropic foundations to charitable organizations classified as tax-exempt under Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(3).[5] By analyzing how the sector navigated changes in service capacity, leadership, workforce composition, resource allocation, and policy environments, this analysis aims to contribute a nuanced understanding of philanthropy's role in shaping metropolitan New Orleans over the past 20 years since Hurricane Katrina.

Central to this analysis is the recognition that philanthropy does not operate in isolation. Its effectiveness and potential are influenced by government policies, market forces, community leadership, cultural contexts, and historical patterns of development. In New Orleans, these factors include deep racial disparities; complex political dynamics at the local, regional, and state level; unique cultural assets; environmental vulnerabilities; and economic challenges that both preceded and followed Hurricane Katrina.[6]

This discussion holds great value with regards to regional resilience, because the function of 501(c)(3) public charities is to provide programs and services in the interest of the public good as nonpartisan organizations. With work in areas including human services, education, arts and culture, economic development, health, and many other areas that impact social well-being, nonprofits and philanthropy are viewed as trusted partners and advocates in addressing community needs.[7]

Central to this credibility is the ability of nonprofit groups and philanthropic organizations to establish strong relationships with the people most directly affected by the issues they work to address.[8] A 2024 report on trust in nonprofits and philanthropy from the Independent Sector and Edelman Data and Intelligence notes that on a national scale, trust in nonprofits increased by five points, to 57 percent, from 2023 to 2024, while trust in philanthropy remained relatively steady at 33 percent over the same period. These levels of trust stand in contrast to other sectors such as government, business, and media—all of which declined from 2023 to 2024.[9]

As policymakers and community leaders look to address contemporary challenges while shaping future possibilities, this report offers insights into how philanthropic resources might more effectively support nonprofit organizations in serving the public good, meeting the needs of those most directly affected by persistent issues, and advance progress toward a more resilient and prosperous New Orleans. Specifically, the report suggests that based on the lessons learned over the past 20 years, philanthropic investment should focus on:

- Integrating community knowledge and professional expertise
- Investing early in coordination infrastructure
- Balancing structure and flexibility
- Supporting operational capacity

By presenting these lessons learned and offering these insights, this report contributes to broader conversations about the ever-evolving role of philanthropy in advancing society.

Early philanthropic responses to Hurricane Katrina

The philanthropic responses to Hurricane Katrina unfolded in distinct phases, beginning with an unprecedented mobilization of emergency resources. The initial wave of philanthropy focused primarily on meeting basic needs—providing food, water, shelter, medical care, and evacuation assistance. Within days of the disaster, major foundations, corporations, and individual donors began directing funds toward immediate relief efforts.

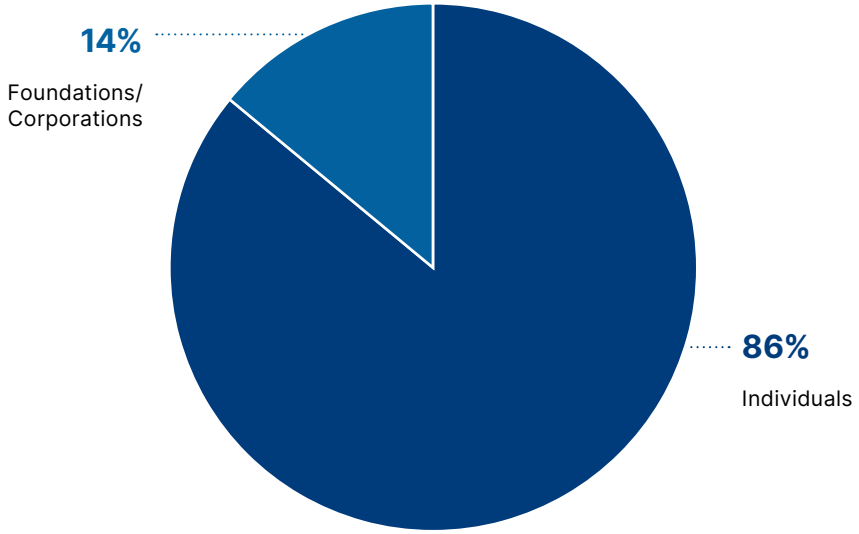
The American Red Cross reported raising approximately $2.1 billion for Hurricane Katrina relief. These funds focused on prioritized needs, including emergency assistance, food and shelter, physical and mental health services, case management, and information sharing.[10] The Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund reported raising more than $130 million, which was awarded to initiatives focused on rebuilding schools and libraries, restoring housing, health services, employment, as well as support for the region's cultural environment.[11]

Nationally, public and private foundations developed special funds dedicated to recovering from Hurricane Katrina across the Gulf Coast, and countless small-scale fundraising efforts emerged spontaneously to galvanize individual giving through community organizations, schools, and informal networks.[12] According to Center for Disaster Philanthropy reports on private giving to respond to Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita through June 1, 2007, out of a total of $6.5 billion in private donations, individual donors represented 86 percent, while corporations and foundations comprised the remaining 14 percent. In examining the response to Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita through June 1, 2007, specifically from foundation and corporate funders, corporations and corporate foundations represented 57 percent, while independent and family foundations comprised 33 percent of the more than $906.3 million contributed by foundations and corporate funders (see Figures 1 and 2).

FIGURE 1

The early philanthropic response to Hurricane Katrina, through June 2007

Charitable giving by foundations, corporations, and private individuals, August 2005 to June 2007



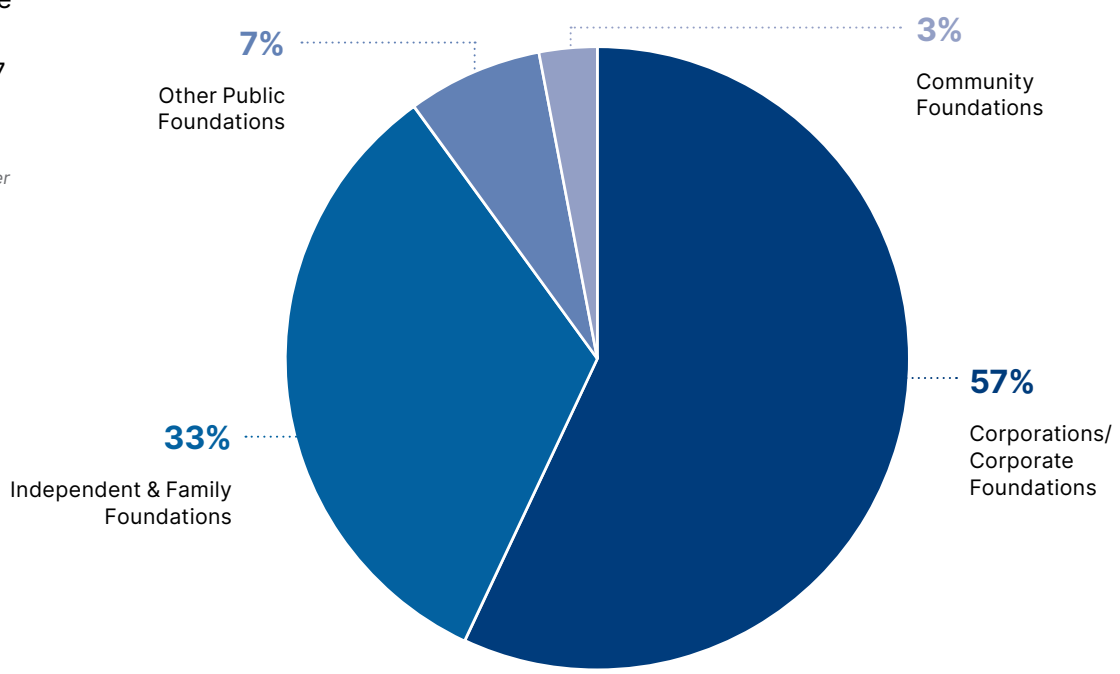
Source: Private Philanthropy and Hurricane Katrina, Center for Disaster Philanthropy, August 2015. Available at: https://disasterphilanthropy.org/blog/private-philanthropy-and-hurricane-katrina/.

FIGURE 2

The early response by foundations and corporations after Hurricane Katrina

Breakdown by type of donors, August 2005 to June 2007

Source: Private Philanthropy and Hurricane Katrina, Center for Disaster Philanthropy, August 2015. Available at: https://disasterphilanthropy.org/blog/private-philanthropy-and-hurricane-katrina/.



Regional distinctions existed as well, with 31.5 percent of foundation and corporate contributions coming from New York, California, and Texas. Additionally, populations identified as most vulnerable to the impacts of Hurricane Katrina were a key focus of funding efforts, as the majority of funding was allocated to the needs of the economically disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities, and children and youth (see Table 1).[13]

Contributions also led to the establishment of response-and-recovery organizations specifically designed to address local needs, such as the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation (now the Foundation for Louisiana).[14] Established September 5, 2005, this fund identified as a "people-first organization," and responded to the devastation with a mission to "transform the disaster caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita into an unprecedented opportunity for a new Louisiana—providing resources for the relief, recovery, and betterment of all its people by ensuring access and opportunity in rebuilding their communities and culture."

Embedded in this mission was a call to consider long-term resilience and community-visioned futures that supported the prosperity of those most vulnerable to the impacts of these disasters while also addressing immediate urgent needs. In 2008, the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation reported mobilizing more than $29 million in grant funding to 144 organizations supporting initiatives that focused on small business recovery, housing, and training citizens for advocacy.[15]

TABLE 1

Foundations and corporations in New York, California, and Texas led the early response to Hurricane Katrina

Top 15 states by charitable funding, August 2005 to June 2007

Source: Private Philanthropy and Hurricane Katrina, Center for Disaster Philanthropy, August 2015. Available at: https://disasterphilanthropy.org/blog/private-philanthropy-and-hurricane-katrina/.

	State	Number of donors	Percent of total donors	Donation amount	Percent of total donation amount
1	New York	120	13.8	$123,881,959	13.7
2	California	102	11.7	$80,579,999	8.9
3	Texas	58	6.7	$80,298,362	8.9
4	Illinois	52	6.0	$59,435,655	6.6
5	Washington	21	2.4	$56,245,037	6.2
6	Michigan	37	4.2	$54,012,283	6.0
7	Minnesota	30	3.4	$50,630,463	5.6
8	New Jersey	33	3.8	$40,111,264	4.4
9	Connecticut	30	3.4	$37,197,458	4.1
10	Indiana	13	1.5	$36,869,400	4.1
11	Georgia	27	3.1	$35,175,453	3.9
12	Arkansas	5	0.6	$35,136,971	3.9
13	Ohio	58	6.7	$33,972,796	3.7
14	Virginia	16	1.8	$22,894,555	2.5
15	Louisiana	17	2.0	$22,338,634	2.5
	Subtotal	**619**	**71.1**	**$768,780,289**	**84.8**
	All Other States	252	28.9	$137,568,468	15.2
	TOTAL	**871**	**100.0**	**$906,348,757**	**100.0**

Linetta Gilbert, managing partner at Gilbert and Associates, LLC, former Ford Foundation senior program officer, and founding board member of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation following Hurricane Katrina, saw the need to ensure that residents directly benefited from aid being sent in support of local response and recovery efforts:

> *When Katrina happened, our real impact was unveiled. We had a few community-based nonprofits that had the capacity or the inclination to really be in relationships with residents in the community, and to really mind the abilities of the people on the ground in their communities to do next-level work. Whatever 'next level' was. What I saw when the president of Ford Foundation said to me, 'What do we do?' Well, my biggest and first concern was that we not fund big NGOs exclusively because I had watched them in other places in the South, where there had been disasters, and their money almost never got to the people on the ground that were most affected by the storms.*[16]

While there was a range of efforts—varied in degrees of effectiveness—the scale and complexity of the disaster quickly exposed significant challenges in coordination. Gaps existed in philanthropic management infrastructure and in many cases, funding was not strategically aligned with community-determined priorities. While there was an influx of resources, local organizations were themselves navigating increased service demands, loss of physical infrastructure, destroyed equipment and records—all of this overwhelming for staff who were themselves displaced.[17]

Alongside these infrastructure issues, long-standing inequities that pervaded metropolitan New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina made it that much more difficult to get resources to historically disenfranchised residents and those most vulnerable to the myriad consequences of the devastating storm. Christy Wallace Slater, founder and CEO of Slater Consulting Group and the first place-based program officer for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, describes the challenges navigating these complexities and the impacts of the historic disparities of working to get national resources to local organizations:

> *That's how the work was. It was all over the place. And that was a big part of the challenge. How do you get information to folks when people were not here? You had a lot of folks that were all over the country. How do you build back community in a way that's community-led? How do you get resources to the folks who knew what to do with it? But one thing that I kept hearing, especially since I worked with Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, a local foundation, [is that] you had national funders coming in [and] I kept hearing from everybody that we have a weak nonprofit infrastructure. And I was like, 'Okay, well, then, give us the money, and then we can be stronger.'*
>
> *Even with that, the organizations that had the ability to weather the storm [could do so] only because maybe they had their computer systems backed up someplace else, or they were in a building that wasn't completely flooded and destroyed, or they had a way to get back up and running quickly. Those organizations received resources. And the folks who could pass the financial due diligence of some of the national funders, they received more resources because it was a way to get money out quickly, while the folks more proximate to the challenges on the ground were held together with duct tape and bubble gum. It took a lot to be able to get national dollars to those organizations. That's why there was a need for LDRF. That's why there was a need for funder collaboratives.*[18]

This period also saw the emergence of new philanthropic actors in the New Orleans landscape. National foundations that had previously limited engagement with the city—including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation—began making significant investments. The sudden influx of external funders brought much-needed resources, but also created tensions around decisionmaking authority, access to relationships that yielded funding, and service priorities.[19]

The philanthropic transition toward recovery and rebuilding in metropolitan New Orleans

By late 2006, approximately one year after Hurricane Katrina, the philanthropic response began transitioning from emergency relief toward recovery and rebuilding. This shift was marked by increased attention to longer-term issues such as housing reconstruction, education reform, rebuilding the health care system, and economic revitalization.[20] This transition also coincided with growing recognition of the need for more coordinated approaches among foundations.

The Greater New Orleans Foundation emerged as a critical intermediary during this transition period. As the region's community foundation, it combined local knowledge with connections to national philanthropy networks. Locally, the Greater New Orleans Foundation reported awarding close to $41.4 million across 3,290 grants focused on recovery across New Orleans. One such award led to the development of the Unified New Orleans Plan, which addressed challenges such as affordable housing.[21]

This spurred the foundation's development of the Community Revitalization Fund, which engaged large national and global funders such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.[22] The fund became an important vehicle for pooling and strategically directing philanthropic resources. Concluding in 2014, this initiative raised $23 million (see Table 2).

The Community Revitalization Fund sought to achieve the following goals:

- Strengthen the affordable housing sector
- Fund housing production
- Promote the redevelopment of New Orleans based on equitable and smart growth principles[23]
- Increase the Greater New Orleans Foundation's capacity as a leader for rebuilding efforts

TABLE 2

The Community Revitalization Fund's top funders to recover and rebuild after Hurricane Katrina

The national and metropolitan New Orleans foundations that provided $23 million to grantees by 2014

Community Revitalization Fund National Foundations	Community Revitalization Fund Local Foundations
blue moon fund	Capital One
The Capital Group Companies Charitable Foundation	Ella West Freeman Foundation
Annie E. Casey Foundation	Entergy
Chrysler Foundation	Goldring Family Foundation
The Ford Foundation	Greater New Orleans Foundation
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	JP Morgan Chase
Conrad N. Hilton Foundation	Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	Woldenberg Foundation
Kresge Foundation	Patrick F. Taylor Foundation
Prudential Foundation	Zemurray Foundation
Rockefeller Foundation	
Surdna Foundation	

Source: Summative Evaluation of the Community Revitalization Fund, Magnolia Research and Writing Group, 2015. Available at: https://crfnola.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/GNOF-CRF-evaluation.pdf.

While initially intended to be a 5-year initiative, the Community Revitalization Fund made 75 separate awards to 59 grantees over the span of seven years, which resulted, directly and indirectly, in the production of 9,378 housing units.[24] The grants awarded through the Community Revitalization Fund mostly resourced organizational capacity-building functions such as operational expenses rather than building materials or land financing. Grantees reported that this indirect support for housing production made it possible to build more homes and serve more individuals.

By 2014, the philanthropic landscape in New Orleans had been clearly transformed by Hurricane Katrina-related engagement. Traditional boundaries between local and national funding, emergency relief and long-term development, and service provision and advocacy had been reshaped. New relationships, priorities, and operating models were emerging as early as 2006.[25]

Reflecting on the horizon of opportunity born out of the emergence of resources and attention that New Orleans witnessed in the wake of the hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Flozell Daniels, Jr., who was the CEO of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation in 2007, described not only the challenges felt but also opportunities to address long-standing issues and persistent inequities. Daniels subsequently led the organization's 2011 transition to becoming what is now the Foundation for Louisiana, and remained there until 2022, when he became the CEO of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, a private social justice family foundation that funds across 11 southern states.

> *We saw the nonprofit community, the smaller nonprofit and even some of the more significant ones, decimated by both physical damage, as well as some real financial struggles and real challenges in getting staff set up to be secure and getting folks home where possible. It was really calamitous...when you look at the full breadth of it. One of the stories I tell all the time about the nonprofit community in relationship to [Hurricane] Katrina is the bad news, obviously, is what I just mentioned. The good news is that it attracted a level of funding. Philanthropy and donors that we'd never seen before...And it really also created space for us, for the first time, to have conversations about equity and about justice.*
>
> *There really was a sentiment that folks wanted to make or recreate the city better than the storm found it. That didn't mean we didn't love and appreciate the fact that New Orleans is one of the most culturally rich cities in the world [and] that the Gulf Coast doesn't have its own sort of beauty and history and legacy. But we knew that there was an opportunity to be more inclusive, and nonprofit communities and philanthropy were really leading the charge, thinking through strategies, thinking about how to execute, asserting a different level of policy orientation that we hadn't quite frankly seen. You saw some real power coming out of the nonprofit and philanthropy space really focused on what does it mean through an equity lens to improve the outcomes for this community.*[26]

Quantifying the philanthropic response to Hurricane Katrina and beyond

Understanding the full scope and distribution of philanthropic investment in metropolitan New Orleans 20 years after Hurricane Katrina requires navigating a complex data landscape. Systems such as the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities and the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) have proven productive for contemporary philanthropy scholars in analyzing contributions to nonprofit organizations.[27] Yet comprehensive data capturing all charitable giving directed toward recovery and rebuilding efforts are varied given the scope of funding sources, methods, and social nuances related to philanthropic engagement and practices.

As a data source, the Foundation Directory (now Candid) is relevant to this report as it reliably provides

localized details that delineate funding sources, amounts, programmatic focus, and populations served, along with combined giving, total number of grantmakers, and other metrics that offer comparative insights on a national level. Recognized across the nonprofit sector and philanthropy, Candid data is compiled from IRS return filings, as well as individual grantmaker sources such as websites, annual reports, application guidelines, and trade publications. Candid database information is verified by the monitoring of more than 35 information sources as well as ongoing grantmaker reporting and communication outreach.[28]

Additionally, data collected and maintained by the Urban Institute's National Center for Charitable Statistics, or NCCS, offers trend-related insights reflecting details on the size and financial standing of nonprofit organizations as well as funding expenditures of foundations. This data comes from IRS Form 990 and associated files, disclosing information to ensure the sector remains transparent and accountable to the public. NCCS data discussed in this report have been categorized by organization type, subsector, asset size, geography, and time period.[29]

NCCS data reflect that in 2005, 4,210 nonprofits classified as 501(c)(3) public charities existed in the New Orleans-Metairie metropolitan area, representing nearly 35 percent of the nonprofit organizations across Louisiana. By 2024, the number of nonprofit organizations in the New Orleans-Metairie metropolitan area had grown to 6,057, representing 33 percent of the nonprofits in the state (see Figures 3 and 4).

FIGURE 3

Total number of New Orleans metropolitan area nonprofits reported after Hurricane Katrina

Breakdown of New Orleans metropolitan area nonprofits, 2005 to 2024

Source: Number of Nonprofits Metropolitan New Orleans, Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2005-2024. Available at: https://nccs-urban.shinyapps.io/sector-in-brief/

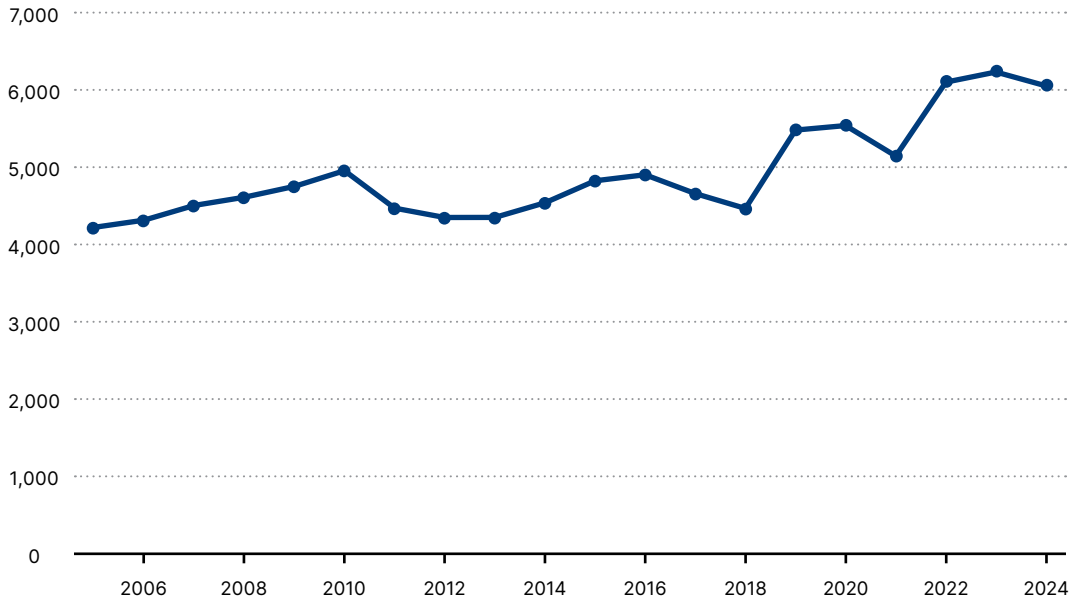
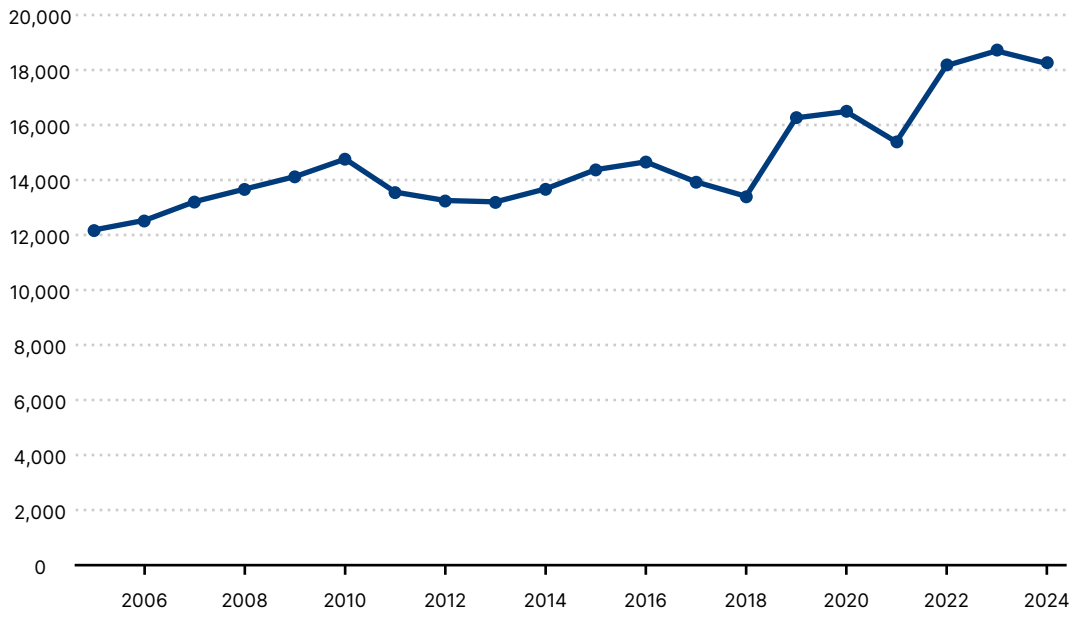


FIGURE 4

Total number of Louisiana nonprofits reported after Hurricane Katrina

Breakdown of Louisiana nonprofits, 2005 to 2024

Source: Number of Nonprofits Metropolitan New Orleans, Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2005-2024. Available at: https://nccs-urban.shinyapps.io/sector-in-brief/



Of the New Orleans-Metairie metropolitan area nonprofits classified as 501(c)(3) public charities in 2005, the vast majority—3,283—reported less than $100,000 in assets, while 211 reported assets totaling $1 million to $4.99 million. Comparatively, across Louisiana during the same period, 9,638 public charities reported less than $100,000 in assets, while 512 reported assets totaling $1 million to $4.99 million.

By 2024, 4,928 of nonprofit organizations in the New Orleans-Metairie metropolitan area reported less than $100,000 in assets, while 277 reported assets totaling $1 million to $4.99 million. Comparatively, across Louisiana during the same period, 4,928 reported less than $100,000 in assets, while 277 reported assets totaling $1 million to $4.99 million (see Figures 5 and 6).

FIGURE 5

Number of New Orleans metropolitan area nonprofits by size after Hurricane Katrina

Reported assets of New Orleans metropolitan area nonprofits, 2005 to 2024

Source: Number of Nonprofits in Metropolitan New Orleans by assets, Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2005-2024. Available at: https://nccs-urban.shinyapps.io/sector-in-brief/

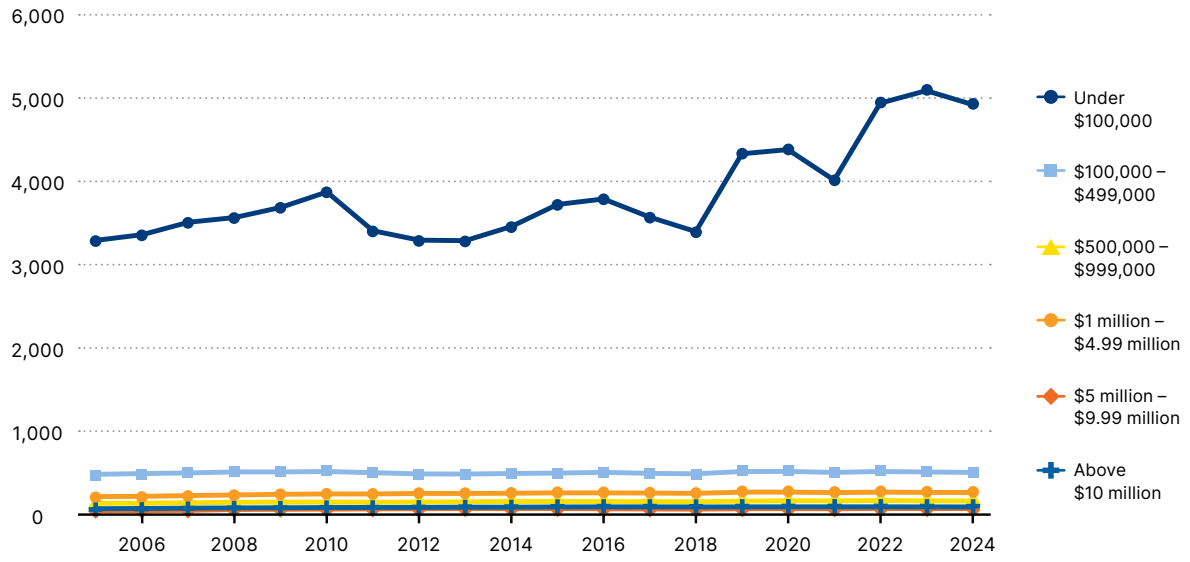


FIGURE 6

Number of Louisiana nonprofits by size after Hurricane Katrina

Reported assets of Louisiana nonprofits, 2005 to 2024

Source: Number of Nonprofits in Louisiana by assets, Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2005-2024. Available at: https://nccs-urban.shinyapps.io/sector-in-brief/

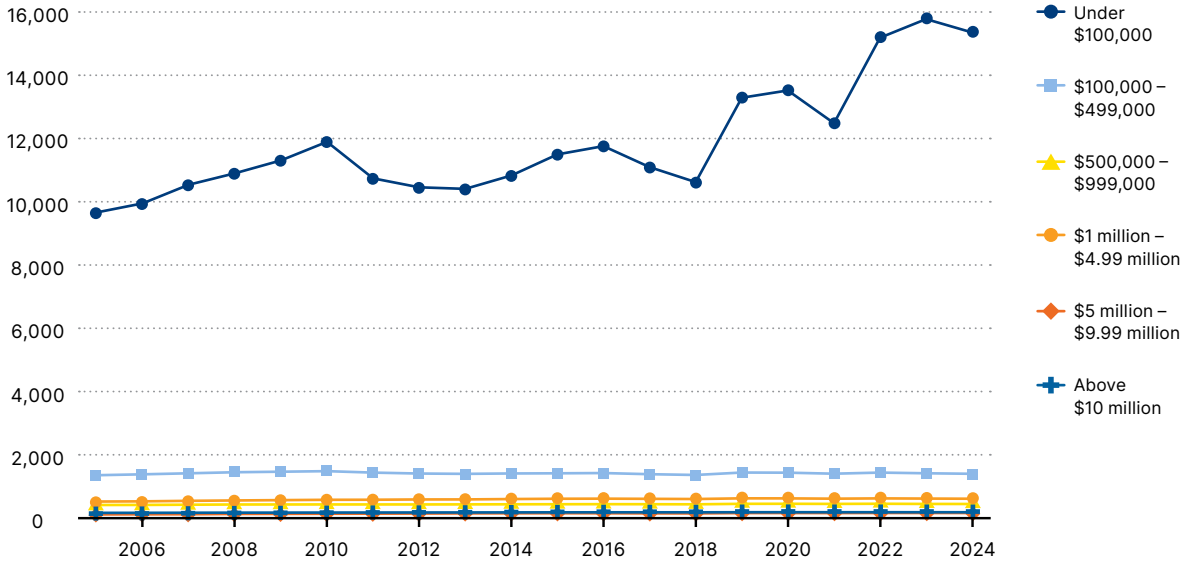
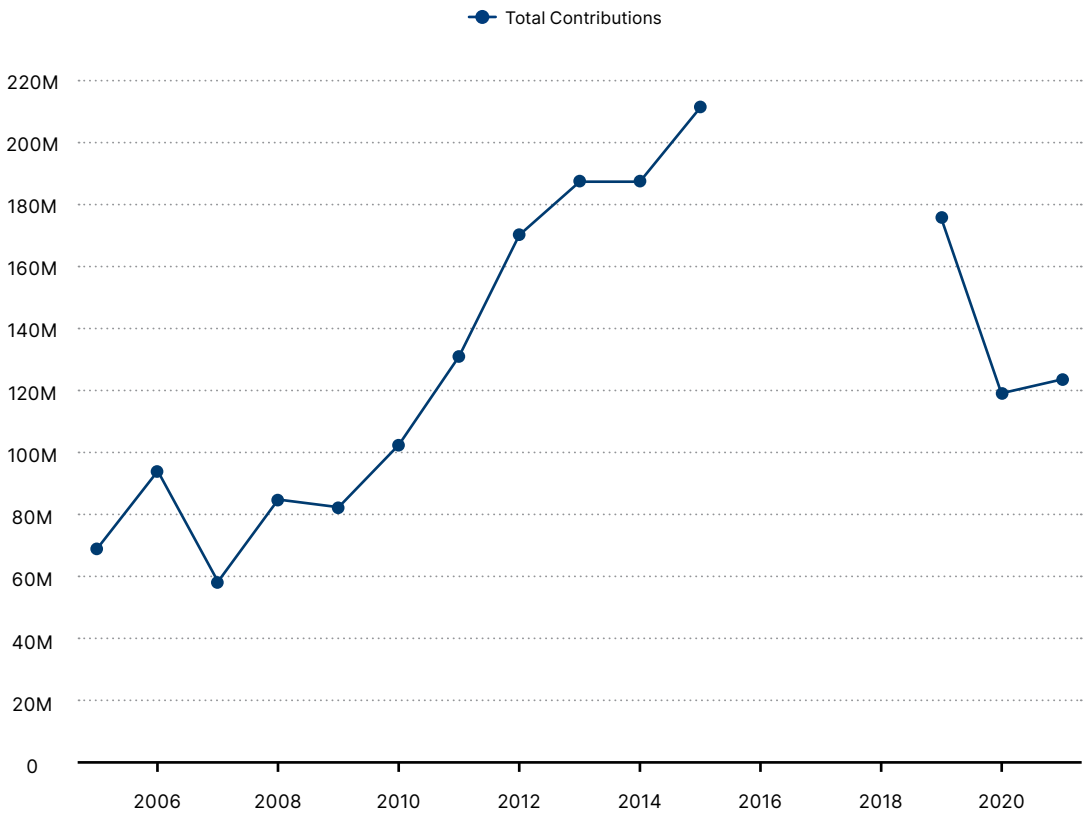


FIGURE 7

Grants made by New Orleans-Metairie metropolitan area foundations

Reported grants by New Orleans-Metairie metropolitan area foundations, 2005 to 2021

Source: Total Grants Made by New Orleans-Metairie metropolitan Private Foundations, Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2005-2021. Available at: https://nccs-urban.shinyapps.io/sector-in-brief/



A recent analysis from The Data Center of funding reported by Candid databases found that in 2023, 10,511 grants totaling $731,136,676 were awarded in the metropolitan New Orleans area by 398 local and national grantmakers.[30] The capacity of local foundations to provide adequate resources for local nonprofit organizations and their subsequent need for growth is a consideration of note, as the National Center for Charitable Statistics reported grants made by New Orleans-Metairie metropolitan area foundations in 2005 totaled nearly $69 million. By 2021, grants made by New Orleans-Metairie metropolitan area foundations were reported at more than $123 million (see Figure 7).

While there have been significant increases in grants from these funders over time, the question remains of how to best engage philanthropy in responding to local needs and aspirations. Recognizing that philanthropy's role in working toward New Orleans' resilience is not one of singular responsibility, statewide, regional, and national collaborations with both public and private partners offer great potential for meaningful impact.

Discussing these realities, Alicia Oliver, managing director of the Greater New Orleans Funders Network—a convener that brings funders together and works in collaboration with local residents, nonprofits, and policymakers in ensuring investments throughout Southeast Louisiana are positioned to provide systems-level solutions while prioritizing regional sustainability, resilience, and justice—described the importance of partnership in advancing systemic change.

> *In addition to the grant making, I think it's still listening and learning, and it's the social capital. And we cannot ignore that the policies have to change, and so where there's alignment, where there's an opportunity for cross-sector and intersectional funding and work to stand up the organizations that work for systemic change...We are fostering coalition-building, and partnerships amongst nonprofits, so that we're addressing some of the gaps, but really fortifying the organization, [and] providing those safety net services. Philanthropy needs to resource that in a way that [is] meaningful.*[31]

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures, charitable donations raised by nonprofits for relief efforts reached approximately $3.27 billion within the first year,[32] representing one of the largest philanthropic responses to a domestic disaster in U.S. history. As the response transitioned from emergency relief to recovery and rebuilding, the focus of philanthropic investment shifted to become more diversified and strategic, with several national foundations such as the Ford Foundation, Kresge Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation prioritizing equity and justice, organizational capacity-building, and engaging in partnerships, such as the Community Revitalization Fund, established in 2006,[33] and the Greater New Orleans Funders Network, established in 2015.[34]

While emergency relief, recovery, and rebuilding funding was robust on a national scale, local foundations have continued to take measures to bolster their ability to sustain local programming by engaging, coordinating, and mobilizing, national partners. These efforts represent the value of local organizations to convene externally based partners and broaden conversations of the relevance of local concerns (and opportunities) on statewide, regional, and national levels.

The period from 2010 to 2015 saw a significant decline in Hurricane Katrina-specific philanthropic funding, though some major initiatives continued or began during this phase. This decline reflected both the natural transitions of disaster recovery funding cycles and increasing competition for philanthropic dollars following the emergence of shocks and crises, including the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, extreme weather disasters, and other challenges influencing funder priorities, particularly the health impacts of extreme heat (see Figure 8 and Map 1).[35]

During this time, the distribution of funding shifted, particularly for New Orleans-based foundations. Funding for education remained a top priority, arts and culture funding declined, while public societal benefit and human services funding increased. Funding for environmental initiatives grew, reflecting increased attention to coastal restoration and climate resilience.

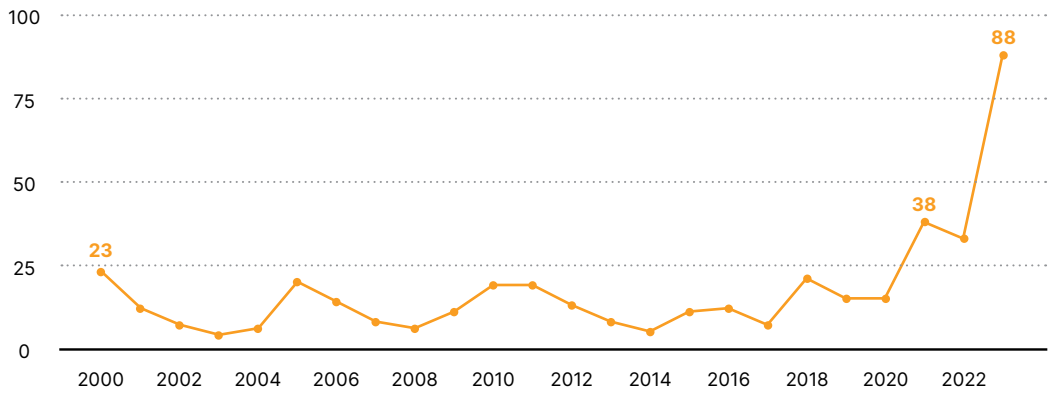
In assessing these patterns of foundation engagement over the course of time, it is important to note that while philanthropy provided crucial resources for recovery, these investments were modest compared to public sector funding. Nevertheless, philanthropic dollars played a distinctive and often positively catalytic role. Foundation funding was frequently better positioned than public sources to support emerging needs, including advocacy, innovation, community organizing, and systems-level change efforts. Philanthropic dollars also often arrived more quickly and with greater flexibility than government resources.[36]

FIGURE 8

Heat-related deaths in Louisiana have skyrocketed since 2020

These deaths went from an average of 12 over the previous two decades to an annual average of 44 since 2020

Source: "Pathways to Prosperity Louisiana," The Data Center, February 2025. Available at: https://www.datacenterresearch.org/reports_analysis/pathways-to-prosperity-louisiana/

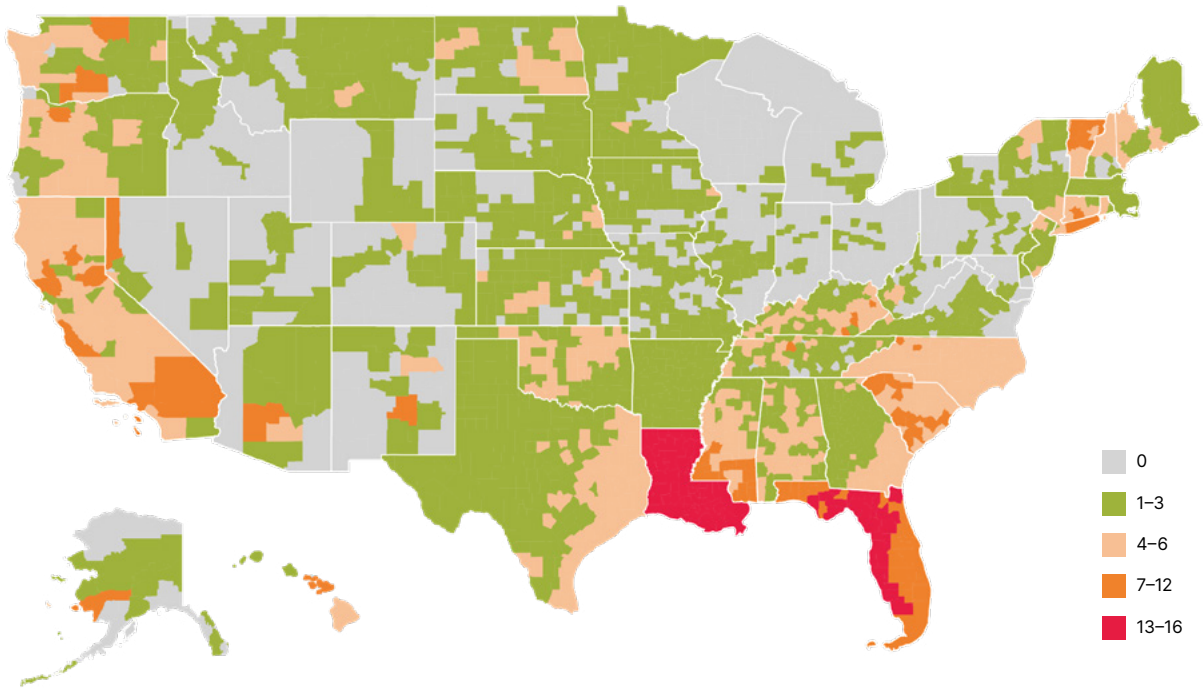


MAP 1

Every Louisiana parish has experiences at least 13 disaster declarations since 2020

These FEMA declarations are four times more than the national average. In total, Louisiana has registered more than 900 disaster declarations since 2020

Source: "Pathways to Prosperity Louisiana," The Data Center, February 2025. Available at: https://www.datacenterresearch.org/reports_analysis/pathways-to-prosperity-louisiana/



Lessons learned and recommendations for the future

Several key lessons have emerged in the two decades since Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures. Over time, investments by philanthropies and foundations in the New Orleans metropolitan region have evolved after Hurricane Katrina and a myriad of other both local and national developments, including the COVID-19 pandemic, increasingly severe weather events, and a range of socio-political issues. As we look toward philanthropic investment focused on community sustainability, resilience, and a thriving New Orleans, we can extract valuable insights. I offer four of them in this report:

- Integrate community knowledge and professional expertise
- Invest early in coordination infrastructure
- Balance structure and flexibility
- Support operational capacity

Let's briefly examine each of these recommendations in turn.

Integrate community knowledge and professional expertise

Successful coordination efforts among nonprofit foundations, philanthropies, and community organizations found ways to value both the contextual knowledge of community members and the technical expertise of professionals, while actively managing power dynamics. This collaborative awareness fostered greater development of integrated approaches that capitalized on diverse perspectives.

The Greater New Orleans Foundation's Nonprofit Leadership and Effectiveness programming, in particular, served to strengthen governance and management skills for local and regional nonprofit organizations. Investment in skills development of local nonprofit leaders serves to address the need for effective infrastructure not only for individual organizations, but also for the greater nonprofit ecosystem.[37]

Invest early in coordination infrastructure

Communities that invested in coordination mechanisms early in the recovery and rebuilding process generally achieved more coherent, equitable outcomes than those that attempted to integrate disconnected efforts after patterns were established. This was demonstrated in the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation's approach to establishing partnerships that were explicit in prioritizing the needs of citizens in response and ongoing recovery efforts.[38]

Now named "Foundation for Louisiana", the 2011 name change signaled a shift of the foundation's focus from recovery to addressing historic challenges and creating new opportunities for social innovation, economic opportunity, and sustainability for communities statewide.[39]

Currently led by President and CEO Charmel Gaulden, who was previously the foundation's chief operating officer, Foundation for Louisiana's continued work prioritizes key impact areas: resource distribution, promoting intersectionality, amplifying impact, and shared power.[40] The early intentions of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation played a significant role in setting the stage for the pillars of Foundation for Louisiana's present-day disaster grantmaking strategy: emergency stabilization and immediate response, urgent and mid-term response, and then leading to long-term response, mitigation, adaptation, and systems change.[41]

Balance structure and flexibility

The most effective approaches to coordination combined clear structures and processes with the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and emerging opportunities. This can readily be seen not only in the evolution of organizations such as

Foundation for Louisiana, but also in the Community Revitalization Fund's investment in organizational capacity-building.

In their 2020 study exploring the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nonprofits across Southeast Louisiana, the Greater New Orleans Foundation's report noted that access to flexible resources was found to be critical for nonprofit program effectiveness as well as meeting increased needs.[42] This was a key lesson learned after Hurricane Katrina.

Support financial sustainability and operational capacity

Investing in bolstering nonprofit organizational capacity offers the needed flexibility for organizations to be equipped not only for immediate responses to disasters, but also for shifts in funding experienced over time. Supporting nonprofit financial sustainability strategies, such as diversification of funding sources, social enterprise development, individual donor engagement, and development of tangible assets can bolster nonprofit sustainability by reducing operating costs, generating revenue, and expanding opportunities for securing revenue.

The Kresge HBCU Initiative offers insights on the organizational and sector-wide impacts of strategic investment in capacity-building. Funded by the Kresge Foundation, the initiative was an $18 million fundraising capacity-building program for historically Black colleges and universities.[43] Launched in 2001 and spanning five years, the program provided five grantee HBCUs—including New Orleans-based Dillard University and Xavier University of Louisiana—with training, technical assistance, and funding to aid in the development of enhanced and sustainable fundraising operations.[44]

Investment in strengthening operational capacity has expanded to address the issues such as burnout faced by nonprofit employees and leaders through programs such as the Women's Foundation of the South's WŌC @ Rest initiative. By providing women of color leaders with resources for self-care, leadership development, and operational needs, this program addresses the compounded stress experienced by nonprofit leaders as they work to support community needs, often amid disasters, crises, and trauma.[45] Recognizing the importance of this issue, other funders are investing in similar restorative approaches. Alicia Oliver, the managing director of the Greater New Orleans Funders Network, shared collaborative efforts:

> *GNOFN's next 10 years, next 20 years, GNOFN will invest in the leadership and individuals so that we can do our part to keep them in the work for as long a time as they want...We are supporting individuals with restoration, rejuvenation, respite in ways that they see fit so that they can carry on this challenging work for justice and equity. We know burnout is real. We know turnover is real. So, we are launching a fund for well-being and that fund will enable us to really respond rapidly, and have a pool of money, so that if an organization has a variety of types of emergencies, we can respond.*[46]

Conclusion

Great attention has been given to the impact of philanthropy on metropolitan New Orleans' response to Hurricane Katrina and the region's long-term recovery. Today, two decades after that pivotal event, there exists a unique vantage point of reflection from which to assess the role, impact, and evolution of philanthropic investment in New Orleans' nonprofit sector. Today, conversations have shifted to the need for sustainability alongside broader discussions of community resilience—the capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from various shocks and stresses.

This evolution reflects growing recognition that philanthropy and sustainability must be understood within the context of the communities and systems. From the immediate response to natural to manmade disasters to the recovery and rebuilding for continued progress toward prosperity, New Orleans' experience of philanthropic investment since Hurricane Katrina

offers many inspirational examples of success while presenting the realities faced when disaster collides with persistent challenges of racism, inequity, and injustice. This complexity holds a wealth of lessons as we hold fast to the resolve of mobilizing philanthropic resources to build a thriving, prosperous New Orleans.

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Acknowledgments from the Author

> *The real test…of the advance of any group of people in civilization is the extent to which they are able to organize and systematize their efforts for the common weal.*
>
> *W. E. B. Du Bois (1898)*

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About The Data Center

The Data Center, a project of Nonprofit Knowledge Works, is the most trusted resource for data about Southeast Louisiana. Founded in 1997, we provide fully independent research and analysis to offer a comprehensive look at issues that matter most to our region. With a mission of democratizing data, The Data Center has, and continues to be, an objective partner in bringing reliable, thoroughly researched data to conversations about building a more prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable region.

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The Center for Community Uplift at Brookings (CCU) seeks to increase economic security and well-being for people across racial and geographic lines.

About The New Orleans Index at Twenty Collection

The New Orleans Index at Twenty collection includes contributions from The Data Center, the Brookings Institution, and a dozen local scholars. The aim of this collection is to advance discussion and action among residents and leaders in greater New Orleans and maximize opportunities provided by the 20-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

The New Orleans Index at Twenty: Measuring Progress toward Resilience analyzes more than 20 indicators to track the region's progress toward metropolitan resiliency, organized by housing and infrastructure, economy and workforce, wealth and people. Essays contributed by leading local scholars and Brookings scholars systematically document major post-Katrina reforms, and hold up new policy opportunities. Together these reports provide New Orleanians with facts to form a common understanding of our progress and future possibilities.

The New Orleans Index series, developed in collaboration with the Brookings Institution, and published since shortly after Hurricane Katrina, has proven to be a widely used and cited publication. The Index's value as a regularly updated, one-stop shop of metrics made it the go-to resource for national and local media, decisionmakers across all levels of government, and leaders in the private and non-profit sectors.

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