

# LISTENING DURING COVID-19: A FRAMEWORK FOR FUNDERS



<p><b>Relief</b> - Trust that your non-profit partners are tapped into community needs and support them to respond to those needs with as many flexible resources as possible. Plan for how you will listen to communities directly to hear from people who are being excluded from or ill-served by existing relief efforts.</p>	
<p><b>Priority for Funders Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners</b></p>	<p><b>Priority for Funders Listening to the People They Seek to Serve</b></p>
<p><b>Trust</b> that current non-profit partners are listening to the people they serve about what relief they need, and support non-profit partners to respond to those needs with flexible funding and other assistance.</p>	<p><b>Identify</b> gaps in your knowledge and the knowledge of your non-profit partners that can be filled by listening to communities directly.</p>
<p><b>Short-term Recovery</b> - Expand your listening efforts beyond current non-profit partners to include listening directly to the community you're seeking to serve at large. Listen and triangulate what you hear in order to create a fuller picture of gaps in the current response and better understand areas where your funding can have the greatest effect.</p>	
<p><b>Priority for Funders Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners</b></p>	<p><b>Priority for Funders Listening to the People They Seek to Serve</b></p>
<p><b>Triangulate</b> what you're hearing from current non-profit partners with what you're hearing from communities directly in order to create a fuller picture of community priorities and capabilities for recovery.</p>	<p><b>Invest</b> in identifying and listening to people who were excluded from or ill-served by relief efforts and who are at risk of being ill-served by recovery efforts.</p>
<p><b>Long-term Recovery</b> - Involve communities, current non-profit partners, and new non-profit partners in dialogue about long-term recovery needs and how to prevent systems from reverting to their old ways. Continue to evolve how you support communities and non-profit partners based on what you hear.</p>	
<p><b>Priority for Funders Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners</b></p>	<p><b>Priority for Funders Listening to the People They Seek to Serve</b></p>
<p><b>Turn up</b> as a true partner in the work of long-term recovery and rebuilding systems to be more equitable and effective.</p>	<p><b>Include</b> more people and organizations in long-term recovery efforts and planning for the transformation of inequitable systems.</p>
<p><b>Resiliency</b> - Dialogue with current non-profit partners, new non-profit partners and communities as you rebuild systems to be more equitable than they were before. Systematize your listening practice so that you are better prepared for future crises.</p>	
<p><b>Priority for Funders Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners</b></p>	<p><b>Priority for Funders Listening to the People They Seek to Serve</b></p>
<p><b>Transform</b> social contracts and systems to be more equitable than they were before.</p>	<p><b>Imagine</b> new systems and social contracts that are more equitable than they were before.</p>

Funders are feeling the need to confront the COVID-19 pandemic quickly and effectively. But what kind of listening should funders focus on to most effectively confront COVID-19? The answer is it depends what stage of pandemic response we're in. **Each phase of confronting COVID-19 - relief, short-term recovery, long-term recovery and resiliency - is different, and the type of listening that funders should focus on during each stage also varies.** Fund for Shared Insight has provided [excellent initial guidance](#) for funders listening to their non-profit partners, and this framework builds on that advice by laying out the most useful ways funders can listen to their non-profit partners and to communities directly during each stage of confronting the COVID-19 crisis. The framework is based on three propositions:

- 1 Our ultimate, long-term goal in response to COVID-19 should be to rebuild social systems to be more effective and more equitable.** COVID-19 has laid bare and made worse long-standing [inequities](#) and [weaknesses](#) in social systems. As we work toward creating a more resilient society with stronger social systems, our focus should be on eliminating those inequities.
- 2 In order to understand what equitable systems look like and how to build them, funders need to listen to the least heard, least served people.** The people who have been most affected by the failures of social systems during COVID-19 and the organizations working in close proximity to them have essential perspectives on how to rebuild systems to be more effective and equitable. Non-profit partners will be listening to some but not all of these people and organizations. That's why funders have an important role to play in listening directly to the least served, least heard people, in addition to listening to their non-profit partners and in a way that complements their non-profit partners' listening efforts.
- 3 The North star that guides our listening should be how responsive we are to what we hear, and how much that contributes to stronger relationships of mutual trust and respect with the people we seek to serve.** Listening is too often an extractive process, by which funders and non-profits take valuable knowledge from the people they seek to serve without giving much of value in return. Funders do not need to follow everything they hear from people as rigid directives, but they do need to listen with the intent of responding to what they hear. It is essential to monitor whether non-profit partners and communities feel the funders are responsive to what they say, and pay attention to whether listening strengthens mutual trust and respect within funder relationships with the people they serve.

**This framework will be most useful to funders with a fundamental understanding of the core principles of high-quality listening and funders that already listen to their non-profit partners and have non-profit partners that listen to the people they serve.** For funders and non-profit partners earlier on in their listening journey, we suggest reviewing the [core listening competencies](#) that both funders and non-profit partners can invest in to be prepared for a crisis. Feedback Labs also offers free [webinars](#), [resource pages](#), [brainstorming sessions](#) and [trainings](#) to help funders and non-profit partners develop high-quality listening practices during COVID-19.

## Goal of the Relief Phase

Fulfilling basic humanitarian needs of affected people. For example, supplying medical equipment or helping people with low mobility access food at the start of a pandemic lockdown.

## Timeline

One day to one month

## Goal of Funder Listening During the Relief Phase

Trust that your non-profit partners are tapped into community needs and support them to respond to those needs with as many flexible resources as possible. Plan for how you will listen to communities directly to hear from people who are being excluded from or ill-served by existing relief efforts.

### Priority for Funders Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners

**Trust** that current non-profit partners are listening to the people they serve about what relief they need, and support non-profit partners to respond to those needs with flexible funding and other assistance. Let your non-profit partners know that you are open to hearing from them while minimizing the burden you place on non-profit partners to answer your questions. Be aware that the time it takes your partners to fill out surveys or get on a call [multiplies quickly](#) if every one of their funders asks them to do so.

### Priority for Funders Listening to the People They Seek to Serve

**Identify** gaps in your knowledge and the knowledge of your non-profit partners that can be filled by listening to communities directly. Plan for how you can identify and listen to people who are marginalized, are excluded from or ill-served by existing relief efforts, and are not served by your current non-profit partners. Be explicit about what you don't know about the crisis, community needs and priorities, and strategies for recovery and resiliency. Set your priorities for listening to communities directly across your organization.

## Tips for Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners

- **Make emergency general operation support available to non-profit partners in an easy, low-lift way.** For example, the [Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation](#) gave each of their non-profit partners \$10,000 in unrestricted funds in response to the COVID-19 crisis, while GlobalGiving has made [unrestricted microgrants](#) available to their partners with an application that was only a few sentences long.
- **Ensure that conversations are convenient and add value for your non-profit partners.** For example, the [Robert Sterling Clark Foundation](#) convenes bi-weekly, optional non-profit partner meetings that not only allow the foundation to listen to non-profit partners but also provide value to non-profit partners as a space to learn from and support each other.
- **[Only request information from non-profit partners when you're willing and able to act.](#)** Avoid asking questions of your non-profit partners if you aren't able or willing to act on what you hear in response.
- **When you listen, be prepared for a genuine, two-way conversation.** Non-profit partners will ask you questions about your crisis response - ensure you are prepared to give them accurate, helpful information.

## Tips for Listening to the People You Seek to Serve

- **Scan the listening landscape** to understand what organizations are led by or already listening to the people you seek to help, especially those marginalized and excluded from or ill-served by existing relief efforts. Plan how you can reach out and listen to those organizations.
- **Take stock of what you already know about how different communities prefer to be listened to.** Plan your listening strategies to align with community preferences for communication and dialogue.
- **Find tools and approaches that will help you get proximate to communities** even in the face of social distancing or other constraints. Tips and tools from organizations like [60 decibels](#), [Kuja Kuja](#), [Socialsuite](#), [Ulula](#), [Upinion](#), [Ushahidi](#), and [Viamo](#), among others, can help.
- **Plan for how you will share what is heard** from communities across your organization and with other organizations in order to reduce the duplication of listening efforts and the burden on communities.

## Goal of the Short-term Recovery Phase

Bringing back a degree of reliable, everyday services after the immediate threat to life has subsided. For example, getting laptops to underserved students who have to learn remotely during a pandemic.

## Timeline

One month to three months

## Goal of Funder Listening During the Short-term Recovery Phase

Expand your listening efforts beyond current non-profit partners to include listening directly to the community you're seeking to serve at large. Listen and triangulate what you hear in order to create a fuller picture of gaps in the current response and better understand areas where your funding can have the greatest effect.

### Priority for Funders Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners

**Triangulate** what you're hearing from current non-profit partners with what you're hearing from communities directly in order to create a fuller picture of community priorities and capabilities for recovery. Be cognizant of how easy it can be to listen the most to non-profit partners with which you have the strongest relationships or those with the loudest voices - be intentional about listening across diverse non-profit partners in an inclusive and equitable way. Listen to current non-profit partners in order to understand what support they need from you in order to meet community priorities for recovery. Pay special attention to how these partners are listening to the people they serve and what support they need to continue those conversations in a responsive, non-extractive way.

### Priority for Funders Listening to the People They Seek to Serve

**Invest** in identifying and listening to people who were excluded from or ill-served by relief efforts and who are at risk of being ill-served by recovery efforts. Focus on listening to people who are not served by your non-profit partners, and in particular marginalized groups and the organizations that are led by those you're seeking to serve. Listen in order to understand what underserved and marginalized communities need and want from recovery and what they are capable of. Ensure that your listening efforts lay the groundwork for respectful, trusting relationships. Be aware that authoritarian governments may use the crisis as an excuse to tighten their grip on marginalized communities, and listen to find out if that is happening.

## Tips for Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners

- **Co-craft responses with diverse organizations.** For example, the [Silicon Valley Community Foundation](#) worked with a small advisory committee that included community-based organizations and foundations with their ears to the ground in communities to administer COVID-19 funds.
- In addition to asking non-profit partners for information, be **proactive about providing information** to them as a way of building trust and engendering two-way conversation.
- **Close the loop with non-profit partners early and often.** For example the [Moses Taylor Foundation](#) is letting all non-profit partners who have made requests for support know why they can only meet a fraction of the need and offering access to other resources and referrals to other funders whenever possible.
- **Be clear with your non-profit partners about what support for recovery and resiliency is on the table and what is not.**
- Examine how **racial bias may lead your funding or attention to go preferentially to non-profit partners led by white people over those led by people of color.** Be intentional about listening in an equitable, inclusive way that overcomes those biases.

## Tips for Listening to the People You Seek to Serve

- **Avoid duplicating listening efforts** by working with other organizations to listen together or scanning social media conversations to identify pressing issues without increasing the burden on communities to provide information. For example, the [Chicago COVID-19 Journalism Fund](#) established by the [John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation](#), the [Robert R. McCormick Foundation](#), the [Chicago Community Trust](#), the [Richard H. Driehaus Foundation](#), the [Polk Bros. Foundation](#), and the [Field Foundation](#) supports journalists to listen while reducing duplication.
- **Compensate people for the time they spend giving you information.** For example, if they answer a survey via SMS, provide phone credit to cover the cost of their time and the SMS charges.
- **Learn from community efforts to deal with the crisis,** for example the [mutual aid efforts that have arisen around the US and the globe in response to COVID-19.](#)
- **Use your listening efforts as a way to identify new potential non-profit partners or grantees.** Take note of which organizations you learn the most from, and which seem most responsive and proximate to the communities they serve.
- **Consider what weaknesses in existing systems the crisis has exposed** and how the patterns of who has been most adversely affected is reflected (or not) in your organization's funding patterns. For example, [Native communities in the US have been hard hit by COVID-19 yet only 0.4% of funding from large US foundations goes to Native communities.](#) Even if you aren't in a position to make major shifts or new investments, considering reserving a portion of your available funds to support the people who are most affected by the crisis and least served by social systems.



## Goal of the Long-term Recovery phase

Bringing back everyday life while planning how to rebuild systems that are more equitable than what existed in the past. For example, providing loans to small businesses during a pandemic while planning to advocate for changes to labor laws.

## Timeline

Three months to one year

## Goal of Funder Listening in the Long-term Recovery Phase

Involve communities, current non-profit partners, and new non-profit partners in dialogue about long-term recovery needs and how to prevent systems from reverting to their old ways. Continue to evolve how you support communities and non-profit partners based on what you hear.

### Priority for Funders Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners

**Turn up** as a true partner in the work of long-term recovery and rebuilding systems to be more equitable and effective. The crisis will have likely changed the ways you fund and relate to both current and new non-profit partners - listen to them to identify what is working and what is not. Build on what is working, not only in terms of your funding practices but also in terms of the other tools at your disposal. For example, can you use your convening power and ability to advocate to other funders to amplify the work of your current partners. Engage in dialogue with current and new non-profit partners, in addition to communities, to understand how you can support them in long-term recovery and rebuilding systems to be more equitable.

### Priority for Funders Listening to the People They Seek to Serve

**Include** more people and organizations in long-term recovery efforts and planning for the transformation of inequitable systems. Effective long-term recovery and rebuilding systems to be more equitable than before will require many types of people and organizations working together. Listen to and learn from communities to figure out how to enable that collaboration. Expand the types of long-term recovery needs you address and widen the circle of organizations you work with to address those needs. That may include making grants to new non-profit partners. Engage in dialogue with that wider circle as you plan for how to rebuild systems to be more effective and equitable.

## Tips for Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners

- **Invest in the [new mindsets and approaches](#)** that enable honest dialogue with your non-profit partners. For example, the [Moses Taylor Foundation](#) invested in their listening capacity by participating with non-profit partners in the [Listen4Good](#) program. That experience [paved the way for them to listen with phone calls and surveys during COVID-19](#).
- Use honest, two-way dialogue as another **opportunity to build trust** with non-profit partners and [narrow the power gap](#) between your organization and non-profit partners. For example, the [Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation](#) found that [inviting honest feedback and focusing on open dialogue has made their partners more willing to give them feedback during COVID-19](#).
- **Normalize and systematize the listening practices that have emerged during the crisis** including continuing a regular cadence of listening to your non-profit partners and the communities you seek to serve.
- **Leverage [participatory evaluation methods](#)** that involve your non-profit partners to interrogate what worked and what didn't in your COVID-19 relief efforts.

## Tips for Listening to the People You Seek to Serve

- **Invest in new non-profit partners** who are proximate to communities as a way of both supporting recovery efforts and learning about community needs and priorities for rebuilding systems. Pay attention to which organizations share the most valuable learning and which organizations are most responsive to the needs and voices of the communities they serve.
- **Invest quickly.** For example, the [Piper Fund](#) and RISE Together Fund [deployed rapid-response funds against attacks on democracy within 1 to 2 weeks](#). By mid April the [Ford Foundation](#), [Schmidt Futures](#), [Open Society Foundations](#), The [JPB Foundation](#), [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#), the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), and [Amalgamated Foundation](#) launched a [fund to support and advocate for policy responses for working families affected by COVID-19](#).
- **Use the provision of recovery funding as an opportunity to build trust** with communities and new non-profit partners by demonstrating support and by [following best practices for increasing the flexibility and decreasing the restrictions on funding](#).
- Continue to build trust by engaging in honest, two-way **dialogue about what rebuilding should look like**, rather than only extracting information from communities.
- Use approaches like [social labs to build coalitions of people who aren't necessarily aligned on every issue but who can achieve more together than they can individually](#).



## Goal of the Resiliency Phase

Rebuilding systems to be less susceptible to future disasters and more equitable than they were before the crisis. For example, strengthening health systems after a pandemic.

## Timeline

One year to one decade

## Goal of Funder Listening in the Long-term Recovery Phase

Dialogue with current non-profit partners, new non-profit partners and communities as you rebuild systems to be more equitable than they were before. Systematize your listening practice so that you are better prepared for future crises.

### Priority for Funders Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners

**Transform** social contracts and systems to be more equitable than they were before. Listen to your new, wider circle of non-profit partners as you work together to rebuild systems to be more resilient, more effective and more equitable. Continue to build on the trust you've built with your non-profit partners and communities by listening, trusting and supporting them through the relief and recovery phases to enable honest, productive dialogue and effective action.

### Priority for Funders Listening to the People They Seek to Serve

**Imagine** new systems and social contracts that are more equitable than they were before. Convene dialogue with a broad range of diverse communities to create a collective vision for more resilient, equitable systems. Listen and respond to what you hear in a way that continues to build the trusting relationships of mutuality between you and communities in order to achieve your collective vision. Use your convening power to support on-going dialogue amongst diverse community actors that is not centered on your organization.

## Tips for Listening to Current Non-Profit Partners

- **Use your convening power** to bring non-profit partners together to make sense of what happened during the crisis and envision what should happen next.
- Where possible, **support** and **lend your voice as a funder** to non-profit partner advocacy efforts
- **Support collective action** and [consider funding intermediary organizations that enable collective action](#).
- Seek out tools like the [Center for Effective Philanthropy's Grantee Perception Report](#) that help you **systematize listening to non-profit partner feedback** on the support you offer them.

## Tips for Listening to the People You Seek to Serve

- **Center equity and justice** in your on-going work and discussions with community members.
- Seek to learn how to **support communities to build power** as you listen.
- **Invest in the network, coalitions and knowledge sharing** that [enables people to participate in economic decision-making](#).
- **Shift more power** over foundation endowments to [community members and groups that work directly with them](#).
- **Use your convening and information sharing power to help all community members see the big picture.** For example, the Piper Fund and RISE Together Fund created a [listserv to share policy analysis with over 400 subscribers working to protect democracy](#). This is particularly important when a crisis [catalyzes big changes in the status quo](#).



## Preparing for the next crisis

Non-profits and funders with strong systems for listening to the people they seek to serve will be better prepared to respond to the next crisis. There are four key listening competencies that non-profits and funders should have in place before a crisis hits so that they are able to respond effectively, efficiently and equitably. This blog features the four key listening competencies that non-profits and funders should have in place before a crisis hits.

*These phases were adapted from the four stages of emergency management to construct a useful framework for funder listening in slow-moving crises like pandemics. In this framework the relief phase encompasses the response phase of emergency management. The recovery phase of emergency management has been divided in this framework into short- and long-term recovery, as this differentiation is important to funder listening. The resiliency phase of this framework encompasses both the mitigation and preparedness phases of emergency management. This framework is in Version 1.0. If you want to help refine it or adapt it to be more useful to your organization, please be in touch!*