

Donors Are Key Partners to Help Bridge Funding Gaps

Engage the head and the heart of donors to fill gaps in government funding for those served by community behavioral health

By Patrick Evans and Susan Bean, Sound Mental Health

For every one of the 65,000 King County residents who receive publicly funded behavioral health services each year, our system fails countless other individuals living with mental illness, addiction or homelessness. Real solutions require the support of people who understand how important behavioral health services are – not just to those who need those services but to everyone who lives in our community.

The Puget Sound region continues to struggle with how to address the escalating concern of homelessness and the rise in addiction disorders – just two of the pressing societal problems that can stem from mental illness and other behavioral health issues.

Fortunately, we live in a caring, progressive place where city, county and local governments try their best to provide sufficient resources for programs that are proven to work. Federal funding helps, too. But ever-shifting priorities, coupled with skyrocketing costs for providing services, lend uncertainty and volatility to a public funding system that challenges our ability to sustain programs that are making great strides in reclaiming lives.

That's where philanthropy and an engaged donor community comes in.

Instead of focusing exclusively on responding to RFPs from funding sources, community-serving behavioral health organizations that have long over-relied on government contracts to heal and support vulnerable people are now increasingly turning to individual and corporate donors to fill the gaps.

Our colleagues at more traditional nonprofit human service organizations have long fueled their missions by appealing to the kind hearts and compassion of their donors. For other organizations, however, the stigma associated with behavioral health and the task of serving severely ill clients often make compassion difficult to engender among some prospective donors.

It's not enough to simply argue that we are helping vulnerable people, even though we do



that every day. As we seek to engage philanthropic partners, we need to better marry the “mission” with the “business” of our work. It's not just a matter of being compassionate. It's good sense.

For example, according to a 2016 study published in *Lancet Psychiatry*, we know that every \$1 invested by donors in community behavioral health programs reaps a return of \$4 in community benefit. Once people are in recovery, once their struggles are under control, they rely less on the health care system. Many can find employment, build relationships again and re-engage with the community. They become taxpayers and contributors to society. They share their stories, help to reduce stigma and, by sharing their experiences, encourage others to seek care. The benefits of investing in good behavioral health care not only have an economic return on investment, but a societal one, as well.

Armed with this and other clear statements of value, coupled with compelling real-life success stories that show donors the impact of their support, community behavioral health organizations will inspire them, ignite their sense of the

possibilities and involve them as real partners in the change that our work makes possible.

The more community behavioral health organizations can actively demonstrate and market our tangible value, the better case we make for continued support. When we communicate with prospective donors, we must go beyond vaguely worded and overgeneralized mission or vision statements. We must make our case for support by appealing to donors' hearts and their heads.

We have the capacity to address homelessness, substance use, mental illness, domestic violence and many of the other most serious societal issues of our day. When we focus on the value community behavioral health organizations provide – value to those we serve and value to the community – we will be able to sustain our essential work in volatile times and ensure that we deliver quality, consistent care for thousands of our neighbors.



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