

TWO PERCENT IS NOT ENOUGH

Philanthropy Can No Longer Ignore Older Americans



**By Gary A. Officer, President & CEO
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The White House and Congress have just passed a \$2 trillion economic stimulus package to assist those hardest hit by the global pandemic. Given the severity and scale of this threat, it is likely that additional funding packages will be required. However, government aid will only be able to address a limited set of needs. As always, the philanthropic sector will need to rise to the many challenges that this crisis will present. Let us hope our foundations' philanthropic response to COVID-19 does not continue the decades-long trend of failing to provide adequate funds to those organizations that serve our increasing population of older Americans.

If the last 60 days in China, Iran, Italy and elsewhere can serve as our guide, it is clear that the United States is in the lull before the storm. We are facing an unprecedented public health crisis brought on by the global COVID-19 pandemic and must prepare for a protracted battle. Essential allies in this long fight will be the vast army of dedicated front-line professionals who provide daily comfort and support for our nation's older residents, as older people are disproportionately harmed by COVID-19.

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At this critical moment, the philanthropic community must make a determined effort to think in the long-term, despite the frightening and immediate concerns of emergent illness. It will be a challenge to do so, but as Grant Oliphant, President of The Heinz Endowments recently wrote, “It is important for us all to remember that this moment will pass. Those of us who have been around a while know that. What will define us when that moment comes is how we respond between now and then.”(1)

Historically, the philanthropic community has provided crucial

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resources and support in times of crisis. For example, in 2015 following the Ebola outbreaks, our largest U.S. foundations poured \$32.6 million into addressing disease outbreaks and epidemics. (2) In the United States, the high point for mass philanthropic engagement following a major crisis remains Hurricane Katrina. In the 6 months after Katrina hit, charitable giving reached nearly \$3.7 billion. (3) It is clear that the coronavirus pandemic is this decade’s Hurricane Katrina — only on a significantly larger scale. To give a sense of the response to the COVID-19 crisis, the global philanthropic response to COVID-19 is at \$2.2 billion (4) with only \$284.5 million in grants to the U.S. (5)

COVID-19 disproportionately impacts adults over age 60. Now is the time for the grant making sector to acknowledge this crisis and increase its commitment to the network of organizations supporting our older adults. The philanthropic community has the opportunity to play just as critical a role as they did after Katrina and in response to the Ebola outbreak.

In this time of unprecedented giving, foundations and philanthropists would be wise to mobilize around the existing network of nonprofit organizations that support our older adults. While medical care and intervention are obviously the emergent concern, it will be vital in the coming months to be able to serve the millions of older Americans who will be affected — but not necessarily infected — by the illness.

Failure to provide now for the coming needs of the months following the initial waves of infection will cause further hardships not only for our older citizens, but their families, caregivers, and medical providers as well. Those agencies with expertise in serving aging populations offer a ready inroad to deliver support in these difficult times.

Yet organizations that support healthy, active aging have historically been ignored. As John Feather, CEO of Grantmakers In Aging has observed, only approximately 2% of philanthropy



dollars are allocated to organizations that support older adults.(6) Furthermore, Feather notes, this percentage has remained stable for decades, even as the number of older Americans has continued to increase. This funding bias persists despite a robust network of nonprofit organizations that have expertise serving our older population.

Our organization, SSAI, has for over 60 years provided workforce training for older low-income Americans who are seeking to re-enter the workforce. Our mission has become more urgent as our workforce ages. By 2024, older workers will represent the largest single segment—25%—of our labor force. We partner with some of the most impressive local non-profit organizations across the nation whose primary mission is to ensure that our older population live their remaining years without fear of hunger or isolation. This community now needs financial support.

Philanthropic dollars are critical to reinforce our response and operationalize our services, not just today but also for the continued needs of our older adults once this crisis stabilizes. Let's use this crisis to spur us to make a long-term commitment to these valuable members of our country, and to prepare for the days to come.



REFERENCES

- (1) <http://www.heinz.org/blog-the-point/blog-detail/?id=70>
- (2) <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/large-u.s.-foundations-gave-158.1-million-for-disaster-relief-in-2015>
- (3) <http://theconversation.com/american-generosity-after-disasters-4-questions-answered-83277>
- (4) <https://candid.org/explore-issues/coronavirus>
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) <https://www.asaging.org/blog/engaging-private-philanthropy-aging-its-time-new-approach>

Senior Service America, Inc. (SSAI) is the only national nonprofit specializing in workforce development for older, low-income job seekers across the public and private sectors. We create a pathway to personal dignity and self-sufficiency for our job seekers while building a pipeline of trained talent for local employers.

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