

“An open letter to council members and other leaders of our field”

October 9, 2008

Dear Colleagues,

At the conclusion of the Council’s 57th annual meeting in Pittsburgh, we committed that we would work to ensure that philanthropy will step up and take on “the challenges of our time.” That commitment served as the theme and framework for the 2007 Annual Conference in Seattle, as a point of departure for the 2008 Summit at National Harbor and the upcoming 2009 conference scheduled next May in Atlanta.

Little did any of us know or expect that “the challenges of our time” would include an economic situation of the scope and magnitude now facing our nation and the world. Even so, there is no avoiding the question: what could it mean for philanthropy to step up in these circumstances? How can we play a constructive role without raising unrealistic expectations?

This is a conversation that has started already and will continue for sometime. We look forward to listening carefully, participating when and how we can and providing whatever technical assistance and support would seem appropriate. For starters, we have three broad recommendations:

1. Let’s reach-out to the nonprofit sector in general, especially those organizations, leaders, and networks we currently support. Our non-profit partners will bear the brunt of shrinking resources and growing need. Within parameters defined by our respective missions, resources and work, we should actively look for creative ways to assist the sector in weathering this storm and serving those most impacted.
2. Let’s play an active and visible role in helping communities and regions figure out the scope and extent of the challenges they face, and in finding and crafting solutions that make sense. We know that some regional associations and community foundations already are using the convening role of philanthropy to build the “big tent” under which diverse stakeholders can gather to create shared understanding and to search for common sense solutions. The exciting work of the Dade Community Foundation, the Arizona Grantmakers’ Forum and the Clinton Center for Community Philanthropy represent just the tip of the iceberg of what our colleagues and peers are doing already. We’ll share these examples in the toolkit.

3. Let's pay special attention to those situations where the loss of philanthropic resources could be the unintended consequence of mergers and consolidations that are the inevitable products of economic restructuring. In the D.C. area, there is considerable concern that the takeover of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac could result in an annual reduction of up to \$47 million in philanthropic support for programs around child welfare, hunger and homelessness. We know that this was not what was intended and we are hopeful that federal officials will work with local philanthropy and the nonprofit community to rectify the situation.

Having offered up these three recommendations, the Council will move expeditiously to provide some backup on each. First, we will work with partner organizations to compile a list of promising ideas and practices employed throughout the field. Second, we will work with the Forum of Regional Associations, the affinity group Philanthropy for Civic Engagement (PACE), and others to assemble a toolkit designed to assist with the stakeholder convenings we will have recommended. Third, we will produce talking points designed to make the case for preserving philanthropic commitments during takeovers and consolidations. We have more to say on each of these within the next ten days. Please stay tuned.

Finally, we know that, even if fully implemented, these three recommendations do not constitute a sufficient response. We expect to hear and learn more and have more to say in the weeks and months to come. What we also know is that these recommendations offer us the opportunity to continue to provide critical philanthropic leadership in these uncommon times. From our point of view, this is an important way to step up and take on one of biggest challenges of our time.

We look forward to hearing from you. Thanks for all you do.



Ralph Smith
Chair of the Board



Steve Gunderson
President & CEO