

Honoring Donor Intent in Times of Crisis

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Those of us in the philanthropic sector recognize the immediate call to action when a natural disaster or devastating event occurs. I can still vividly recall the helpless feeling after 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the destructive 100-year flood in my home state of Colorado. We now find ourselves navigating perhaps the most challenging crisis we've faced in our lifetime. The current global pandemic and disastrous economic fallout are testing us in ways we never dreamed possible. The world seems to be shifting like sand beneath our feet with every day bringing new, unanticipated difficulties. As human beings, we feel morally compelled to help. As foundation representatives, we feel duty-bound to help. After all, we're in the business of helping others. However, in the midst of devastation and urgency it can be challenging for foundations to respond in a way that's swift and impactful, but also in a way that thoughtfully honors their donor's core values.

The Daniels Fund is a private foundation headquartered in Denver, CO with assets of \$1.5 billion. In the spirit of our founder, Bill Daniels, the Daniels Fund is dedicated to making life better for the people of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. Bill Daniels was a cable television pioneer known for his compassion for those in need and his unwavering commitment to ethics and integrity. Upon his death, Bill Daniels left very specific direction as to how his foundation's resources should be used and outlined specific areas of focus that carried deep personal meaning for him. In the two decades since his death, the Daniels Fund leadership has taken extraordinary measures to codify Bill Daniels' wishes and ensure his values and intentions are reflected in every aspect of our work. In fact, the Daniels Fund is often held up as a national exemplar for its faithful adherence to donor intent.

Given our commitment to keeping Bill Daniels' values at the core of our work, the first question I asked myself when considering how the Daniels Fund could respond to the current health and economic crisis was, "What would Bill Daniels do?" Knowing that people and relationships were central to Bill Daniels, I started there. Reflecting Bill Daniels' personal style, we leveraged the personal and trusting relationships we've developed over the years to quickly understand the community's greatest needs. Our program officers spent the initial weeks of the pandemic proactively reaching out to key grant partners to understand how the situation was affecting them and the people they serve, and how the Daniels Fund could help. For some organizations, additional funding was urgently needed, for others, it was the flexibility to repurpose existing grants to general operating support. In all scenarios, we were able to help.

The result of our ongoing response has been \$5 million dedicated to emergency funding in areas important to Bill Daniels – basic human needs, food and housing, employment and job training, childcare, and K-12 education. We've also sought ways to address the social isolation being felt by home-bound elderly, youth, and those in addiction treatment. Our Board of Directors quickly modified our quarterly grant approval process in favor of a more nimble approach which allowed us to get checks out the door weekly. And financial resources were not the only way we assisted our grant partners. Learning that many nonprofit organizations were struggling to adapt their fundraising to a virtual environment, we connected them to a variety of resources, webinars, and even individualized pro-bono consulting to help them build capacity.

We are grateful for the life-changing work of our nonprofit partners during these unprecedented times. Their selfless efforts are what strengthen our communities and provide a critical safety net for those most vulnerable. The Daniels Fund is both humbled and honored to play a supporting role in this vital work. And I can't help but look to the heavens and feel that Bill Daniels would be proud of how his foundation has responded. We've focused on people and relationships, we've been nimble, flexible, and responsive – all through the lens of his core values and intentions. Suffice it to say, I'm a firm believer that it's not only possible to balance crisis grantmaking and donor intent, but it's an imperative.