

Speaking Up

In an effort to demystify the grantmaking process, the Mary Black Foundation is giving its partners a behind-the-scenes look at its work

By Melissa Delaney



Making Philanthropy Fairer, Clearer, and Better

As a former journalist, Rochelle Williams believes in transparency. Yet during her years in nonprofit fundraising, she often felt like she was fumbling in the dark.

"Securing enough funding each year felt like running an obstacle course – with a blindfold on," she wrote in a column for the Mary Black Foundation, where she serves as chief strategy officer and vice president of community impact. "Some days, the biggest challenge wasn't tackling urgent community issues – it was finding the time to complete overly complex grant applications."

Now that she's on the other side of the table, working for an organization that funds nonprofits, she had an idea: What if they could take off that blindfold?

In February 2025, the Mary Black Foundation, based in Spartanburg, South Carolina, launched Open Philanthropy, a series of articles that takes readers behind the scenes of the foundation, revealing everything from who reviews proposals and how they make grant decisions to challenges they're facing. It's a strategy centered around the longstanding discussion about trust and transparency in philanthropy. And in keeping with the spirit of the column, the Mary Black Foundation is eager to share some of what it learned from the series.

"We're used to trying to make the foundation look and sound great, polished, perfect," Williams said. The idea here was to let down their guard.

"We wanted to talk about things as we're thinking about them, as we're learning, even sharing what we're still trying to figure out or even what we got wrong," she said. "It's more of a conversation than just a presentation."

For instance, a column about a grantee survey shared how the responses helped streamline the application process. But Grants Manager Amy Page also admitted what they still need to work on: low response rate, biased feedback ("We tend to hear more from those who received funding," she wrote), lack of voices from organizations that didn't apply because they ran into barriers, and less-than-candid feedback due to fears that responses could affect future funding.

Nonprofits often feel they need to make themselves somewhat vulnerable to receive funding, Williams said. They have to share budgets and opt in to site visits. "You've got to sing for your supper a little bit because the foundation has to understand the partnership it's getting into,"



Molly Talbot-Metz, president and CEO of the Mary Black Foundation, said the Open Philanthropy initiative has increased transparency about the foundation's funding decisions. (Photo courtesy of Mary Black Foundation)

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**Rochelle Williams
Chief Strategy Officer
Mary Black Foundation**

she explained. Her hope is that opening the lines of communication will level the power differential between foundations and nonprofit partners and show their grantees how they rely on them, too.

Ultimately, the goal of the series is to demystify the grantmaking process, said Mary Black Foundation President & CEO Molly Talbot-Metz. "We want to be transparent about how we make decisions, what we are learning, and changes we make in response to the feedback we get."

Navigating challenges together

Soon after the Mary Black Foundation launched the series, shifting federal pri-

orities left the nonprofit sector with many unanswered questions.

Talbot-Metz was getting a lot of questions about what the foundation could do to support affected organizations. Rather than huddling with her team and staying silent until they had fully formed answers, she addressed the topic in an Open Philanthropy column, likening the situation to driving in fog. The smart course of action is to slow down and focus. "If we panic and act too quickly, it can result in accidents," she wrote. "More than likely we will find a way to carefully move through it."

The foundation sponsored forums to discuss the situation with partners and, Williams said, "the Open Philanthropy series provided us an opportunity to talk about how we were responding and what we were thinking about in a way that maybe we wouldn't have done before."

Talbot-Metz also shared how the Mary Black Foundation plans to use its voice to advocate for the nonprofit sector.

"Most concerning to me over the last few months is the underlying message that nonprofits are not to be trusted or that they have misused and wasted their charitable resources," she wrote. "It is my experience that their resources are stretched so thin that they could be more effective with more resources, not less."

"Our local nonprofits are leading through uncertain times," she added, "and we have a lot to learn and a lot to share about their steadfastness and resilience."



Amy Page (right), grants manager at the Mary Black Foundation, hugs a grantee staff member. (Photo courtesy of Mary Black Foundation)

The whys behind a big shift

The timing of the column also coincided with a big shift at the Mary Black Foundation. After years of investing in early child development and active living/healthy eating programs, it decided to narrow its focus to children and the adults who care for them, with an emphasis on birth outcomes and early school readiness.

"A lot of great thinking went into that," said Williams. "But when you announce it, it really is a swerve for a lot of your partners. Certain people aren't going to have the funding they've had in the past. We knew that our new focus could create stress or confusion for nonprofits, so we wanted to be transparent about it."

So the Mary Black Foundation team explained the rationale behind the shift.

Program Director Haley Wicker outlined the types of programs the foundation is looking to partner with going forward: Child care centers as well as less formal programs, including arrangements with family or neighbors, "that ensure all children have access to enriching opportunities and care with trusted adults who help promote positive brain development."

Natalia Valenzuela Swanson, senior director of community impact, outlined the steps the foundation was taking to ease the transition for longtime partners whose missions no longer aligned with the foundation's new focus, including one-on-one meetings, transition grants, and consultants to help them build their capacity.

The more the foundation shares – and the earlier – the more comfortable nonprofits feel asking candid questions. When organizations just report on a result, it can feel like they're making applicants needlessly jump through hoops, Williams said.

"So we try to include partners before we make changes," she added. "It reminds people that we have a mission, we have values, we have a theory of change, just like they do. It doesn't always mean that there's alignment, but I think it makes people feel a little better when there's not."

Starting a conversation

Deciding what to write about has been a process. "We're constantly like, is this even working? Is this even helpful?" Williams said. "It's a muscle we're building in writing in this way."

To help build that muscle, Cassidy Reynolds, Mary Black Foundation's communications and events manager, created a writing guide spelling out what is and what is not an Open Philanthropy column. It covers everything from story lengths (brief but thorough: 600-800 words) and tone (avoid technical or internal jargon) to what to avoid (successes that don't reveal lessons learned).

The foundation's newsletter already has a good open rate, but it receives more responses to the Open Philanthropy columns. "We have received much more engagement," Reynolds said.

Williams got a lot of feedback on a recent article about the grant review process. People told her they didn't realize the foundation had a community impact committee that included not only board members but also community members. Knowing who reviews those grants, some people said they'll probably write them a little differently. Another reader said the column gave them a better sense of how Mary Black Foundation team members shepherd those applications through the process and why it's important to build relationships with them.

"We haven't been hiding that information, but it's one more thing that can feel like a mystery," Williams said. "We're happy to share it. So it's a way to pull back a curtain that we haven't meant to feel like a wall, but it can."

Strengthening trust and relationships

After a recent column about how the foundation is changing the way it asks grantees to report and how it tracks outcomes, a reader shared an experience with another funder whose "hypocrisy, lack of respect for our time, and disregard of our knowledge of our own organization and field" led them to pass on the opportunity.

In a debrief, the nonprofit's team noted "how starkly different" that relationship was compared to their work with the Mary Black Foundation: "Your May newsletter beautifully illuminates why it feels different to work with you – because you define yourselves, and act, as real partners to non-profits, and trust the work and knowledge they bring to their community."

Talbot-Metz said it's been rewarding to hear how much the foundation's nonprofit partners appreciate the information. "More importantly," she added, "they appreciate the honesty and vulnerability of our sharing. That builds trust and, I hope, makes us a better partner to the nonprofits in our community."

A series like Open Philanthropy might not make sense for every foundation, but there are always opportunities to share information with partners, whether that's through a newsletter, an annual meeting session that's more of a conversation, or an AMA (Ask Me Anything) event, Williams said.

It won't eliminate every tension point between funders and nonprofits, but opening up can make the process feel less like running an obstacle course blindfolded and more like a conversation. ■