

Key Findings and Recommendations Maine Health Access Foundation’s 2024 Grantee and Applicant Perception Report

Prepared by the Center for Effective Philanthropy

In June and July of 2024, the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) conducted a survey of Maine Health Access Foundation’s (“MeHAF” or “the Foundation’s”) grantees and declined applicants. This memo outlines CEP’s summary of key strengths, opportunities, and recommendations from the Foundation’s Grantee Perception Report (“GPR”) and Applicant Perception Report (“APR”). It builds on results from similar surveys CEP has conducted for MeHAF every four to five years since 2004.

This memo accompanies the comprehensive survey results from 61 grantees (a 37 percent response rate) and 24 declined applicants (a 26 percent response rate) found in the Foundation’s interactive online report and downloadable materials at <https://cep.surveystats.org>. The Foundation’s full report also contains more information about survey analysis, non-response analysis, and methodology.¹

Context

In the period between MeHAF’s last survey in 2020 and now in 2024, both the organization and the field of philanthropy have undergone meaningful change. For MeHAF, these changes in programs – including a major gift from Mackenzie Scott – and approaches to trusting partnership with nonprofits have been felt, often in quite positive ways. Ratings for many measures in the 2024 report are very positive, often at the highest point since surveying began in 2004, and nearly always higher than typical when compared to responses of other funders’ grantees and declined applicants. Nonprofits do provide advice to the foundation about opportunities for future funding, and these survey results identify a few potential areas for improvement. However, the primary recommendation from this assessment is one of continuation: maintaining and honing approaches that are currently working well for nonprofits.

Meaningful Impact on and Understanding of Grantees’ Fields and Organizations

Grantees provide strong ratings – in the top fifteen percent of CEP’s benchmarking dataset – for MeHAF’s impact on their fields and organizations—with both ratings higher than in the past.

- ▶ In their written comments, grantees describe the Foundation’s support as “pivotal,” “transformative,” and “significant.” In a question asking respondents to share big ideas, many

¹ Throughout this summary, MeHAF’s ratings are defined as “higher than typical” when it is rated above the 65th percentile in CEP’s overall dataset, “lower than typical” when it is rated below the 35th percentile, and “typical” when it is rated between those thresholds. Ratings described as “significantly” higher or lower reflect statistically significant differences at a P-value less than or equal to 0.1.

focused on opportunities for MeHAF to help improve “access to care and services” especially for harder-to-reach communities (e.g., rural, immigrant, older, etc.).

- ▶ Similarly, MeHAF receives ratings that are at or above those of the typical funder for all measures related to perceptions of its understanding of nonprofits and their context, with particularly strong ratings related to its understanding of the fields in which nonprofits work.

Grantmaking Characteristics

- ▶ CEP’s research has shown that grant characteristics – size, length, and whether the grant was restricted – are meaningful predictors of perceptions of a funder’s impact on nonprofits.
 - The Foundation’s grants (\$75K at the median) are slightly larger than in 2020, and a roughly typical proportion are multi-year and unrestricted compared to the grants of the typical funder in CEP’s dataset. However, compared to 2020 a significantly smaller proportion of MeHAF grantees indicate that they received multi-year unrestricted support, 17 percent compared to 30 percent in 2020. One reason for this might be that more than half of Health Advocacy grantees indicate in the survey that their grants are restricted, even though MeHAF awarded those as unrestricted.
- ▶ When asked what effect MeHAF funding had on their organizations, over 75 percent of grantee respondents indicate that it improved their organization’s capacity to meet their mission and goals and around half indicate that it increased the number of people they serve.

Beyond the Grant Assistance

- ▶ Another meaningful way that MeHAF creates impact for its grantees is in its provision of non-monetary assistance. 72 percent of MeHAF’s grantees report receiving at least one form of beyond the grant assistance from the Foundation—with nearly half reporting attending grantee convenings (opportunities for networking and shared learning with other MeHAF grantees).
 - Grantees who receive at least one form of beyond the grant assistance provide significantly more positive ratings across the many measures in the report, including most measures related to MeHAF’s understanding of them and their context, as well as aspects of relationships such as candor, openness, and transparency.
 - Grantees, on average, largely agree that this non-monetary assistance met an important need for their organizations/programs, strengthened them, was a worthwhile use of their time, and that MeHAF would be open to feedback about this assistance.
- ▶ Suggestions about MeHAF providing more of this type of support are the second largest theme in grantee written comments. They encourage MeHAF to provide even more convenings, as well as additional capacity building and technical support and further connections to other funders.

CEP Recommendations

- ▶ Maintain the aspects of MeHAF’s approach that have contributed to strong perceptions of the Foundation’s impact on grantees’ fields and organizations, including consideration of the role of meaningful beyond the grant assistance, particularly convenings.
- ▶ Consider ways to clarify MeHAF’s intended grant structure to partners, especially for programs that grantees perceive to be more restricted than MeHAF might intend.



“...MeHAF plays a pivotal role in setting standards and best practices within our sector, offering guidance and support that elevates the work of numerous organizations. By fostering a culture of innovation and excellence, the Foundation encourages us to explore new approaches and solutions, which enhances our effectiveness and expands our reach...”





“MeHAF brings people together to learn from each other and support each other's priorities. Their convenings have allowed us to make connections with others in the field, shape shared policies, and collaborate on advocacy that results in better health care for Maine people.”

Positive Grantee Relationships

In their written comments, grantees describe staff as “hard-working,” “fantastic,” and “so easy to work with.” Overall, ratings in the report suggest excellent relationships with grantees.

- ▶ Across nearly all survey measures of quality of relationships with grantees, MeHAF receives high ratings from grantees – both on an absolute scale and compared to other funders. For the extent to which grantees are comfortable approaching the Foundation if a problem arises as well as the extent to which it is open to ideas from grantees about its strategy, ratings are in the top 20 percent of CEP’s benchmarking dataset.
- ▶ Survey responses suggest possible opportunities for MeHAF to even further improve.
 - In one of the Foundation’s lower comparative ratings, ratings are trending down for the extent to which MeHAF exhibits candor about its perspective on grantees’ work, with ratings now lower than typical.
 - Secondly, a growing proportion of grantees report interacting with their program officer infrequently. In 2024, over a quarter of grantee respondents indicate interacting with their program officer yearly or less often, compared to 13 percent in 2020 and 7 percent in 2015. This is a potential warning sign: Grantees who report yearly or less frequent interaction provide significantly less positive ratings for many measures in the report including those related to impact and understanding, as well as many relationship and communication measures.
 - A similar pattern holds true for those grantees that report receiving a MeHAF site visit, either virtual or in-person. Just over a quarter of grantee respondents indicate having received a visit from MeHAF over the course of their grant, whereas nearly half of grantees at the typical funder do. Grantees who receive a visit provide significantly more positive ratings for a number of measures in the report, especially those related to relationships and communication.

Consistently Strong Communications with Grantees

- ▶ As in past surveys, MeHAF receives strong ratings for all measures related to communications.
- ▶ Grantees provide ratings in the top ten percent of CEP’s dataset for both how clearly the Foundation has communicated its goals and strategy to them as well as how well they understand how their work fits into MeHAF’s broader efforts.
- ▶ Grantees also provide strong, higher than typical, ratings for how clear and transparent the Foundation is about the selection process requirements and timelines as well as the criteria it uses to decide whether an application would be funded or declined.

CEP Recommendations

- ▶ To ensure strong funder-grantee relationships are carried into the future, MeHAF should explore opportunities to create the time and resources to enhance engagement levels where possible:
 - Acknowledging different organizations may have different needs, reflect on the why nearly a quarter of grantees are in direct contact with MeHAF only infrequently – and whether this is optimal.
 - Consider opportunities to visit with partners, either virtually or in-person, during the lifetime of their grant.



*“Foundation staff are easy, approachable, and *human*. They feel like partners in the work, not Grand Overlords (as is the case for some foundations!).”*



“Communications are clear, and I see a real attempt to be transparent about the ways in which the foundation administers its grants. There is plenty of notice given for due dates, requested feedback, etc.”

Streamlined and Helpful Processes for Grantees

Overall, grantees find the Foundation’s processes to be helpful and an appropriate level of effort. One grantee writes, “...Their application process and reporting is always realistic. Some other foundations have more requirements than are worth the funds received.”

- ▶ These sentiments are reflected in the quantitative data. MeHAF grantees report spending less time on funder requirements over the lifetime of their grant compared to the typical funder—spending a median of 17 hours on process compared to 27 at the typical funder. Time spent on MeHAF’s grantmaking process has declined in each survey since 2015 from a high of 63 hours.
- ▶ The Foundation also receives typical or higher ratings for aspects of the reporting and evaluation processes, with particularly strong and significantly improved ratings for the straightforwardness and relevance of its reporting — where ratings are in the top five percent of CEP’s dataset.



“Very clear, efficient, reasonable processes (application, reporting, evaluation) - nothing seems ‘extraneous’ or ‘busy work...’ There is clear intention and thoughtfulness in their work.”



“MeHAF has provided consistent feedback and helpful advice promptly and professionally. We appreciate that MeHAF has opened its funding mechanisms to provide operational support rather than just projects. This has been a game changer for us and the people we care for.”

Overall More Positive than Typical Experience for Declined Applicants

Maine Health Access Foundation’s declined applicants’ ratings, like its grantees’ ratings, are comparatively high on most survey measures in the report – including on all survey measures related to interactions and communications. As one applicant notes: “Out of all funders we’ve tried to work with, the Foundation is a stand out...” Declined applicants tend to be slightly smaller in budget than

successful grantees, and ratings suggest that opportunity remains for MeHAF to better understand why organizations are applying and how it may, or may not, want to support them for in future applications.

MeHAF's Application Process

- ▶ When asked about their reasons for applying to MeHAF for funding, the majority of applicants indicate that they read the funding guidelines and thought their proposal fit (71 percent). Half indicate having phone, email, or in-person/video contact before they applied.
- ▶ In a shift from 2020, only 23 percent of applicants report receiving feedback on their application compared to nearly 60 percent of MeHAF applicants in 2020. Acknowledging that many respondents were declined at the LOI stage, nonetheless, only half of applicants who indicated requesting feedback received it.
- ▶ Finding ways to clarify applicant fit and provide feedback may be particularly important because nearly all applicants (92 percent) would consider applying for funding from MeHAF again.

Declined Applicant Interactions and Communication with MeHAF

- ▶ Applicant ratings are higher than typical for MeHAF's fairness, accessibility, and responsiveness.
- ▶ Additionally, applicants provide ratings in the top 15 percent of CEP's dataset for the Foundation's consistency of its communications and overall transparency.

CEP Recommendations

- ▶ Consider ways to ensure that only the most viable nonprofits apply:
 - Consider ways to ensure RFPs and open programs are described precisely to applicant organizations, especially those who do not have an interaction with staff, including information about the types of organizations MeHAF funds, the size of these organizations, and the level of organizational capacity required to receive funding.
 - Consider the potential to provide an indication to more nonprofits about whether or when they should consider applying again in the future.



"The foundation's grant process was straightforward and consistent. The time following submission to the announcement that the project was not funded was minimal. It would be helpful for emails announcing a proposal rejection to highlight some key points from the submission that resulted in its rejection..."



"I don't know if the process has changed, but the amount of staff time that it took for the LOI and proposal made us think that it was not a good investment for us. I work for a sizeable organization with the capacity to apply for funding, but even for our organization, it was a heavy lift. I wonder whether the onerous process discourages smaller organizations from applying."

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