

COMMENTARY | TARYN PALUMBO

# To build trust in philanthropy, nonprofits and funders must intentionally connect

Without trust, philanthropy's ability to achieve social change is limited. Trust is essential — and it's a two-way street.

Funders must trust that nonprofits are equipped with the expertise to strategically meet the long-term, ever-evolving needs of the communities they serve. Nonprofit leaders must place trust in funders and share not only their organizational wins but challenges and failures so they can be empowered to pivot as circumstances change.

We are moving into an era of trust-based philanthropy, an approach to giving that fosters collaboration while rebalancing the delicate dynamics between those who invest and the stewards of those funds. But even as this movement gains momentum, philanthropy often falls back on the old habit of working in silos. Nonprofits and donors talk and engage with one another, only connecting when it's time to talk about funding.

To create an environment where it is safe to learn, change course and grow together to produce results that will change communities, it takes work. As an organization that strategically aligns local nonprofits and philanthropists to advance equity throughout the region, Orange County Grantmakers (OCG) is helping these relationships flourish so that trust can thrive.

By bringing Orange County's community of nonprofits and philanthropists together outside of the grant funding process through events, workshops and more, we are authentically creating opportunities for shared learning, engagement and



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE** officer Madelynn Hirneise stands with the diaper shelves at the Families Forward food pantry in Irvine. The nonprofit is one of several allied with other groups through Orange County Grantmakers.

dialogue that have nothing to do with money — at least at first.

## MAKING SPACE FOR PHILANTHROPY AND NONPROFITS TO CONNECT

To be effective partners in creating systems change, it takes more than a once-a-year meeting to discuss funding for the next grant cycle. Trust develops over time, when there are opportunities for nonprofits and funders to gather on a level playing field.

OCG has filled this gap with an ongoing slate of more than 70 events each year where the nonprofit and the philanthropic communities have an opportunity to connect with no financial agenda. Every quarter, we host happy hours in partnership with OneOC and OC Non-profit Professionals Network that provide an op-

portunity for nonprofits and funders to build a stronger sense of community in a fun, relaxed environment. Four times a year we also host a Meet the Funder program in partnership with OneOC where nonprofit leaders have a chance to connect with individual funders and learn more about their areas of focus.

Several times a year, we bring nonprofit leaders and funders together for joint exploration at issue table convenings. At these meetings, there's an opportunity for in-depth dialogue around community issues like early childhood, housing and immigration, with no expectation of pooled or joint funding. It provides a collaborative space for knowledge-sharing and engagement with others who share a passion for advancing equity around a specific issue.

These gatherings do more than allow leaders to network — they are shifting the ways in which funders are engaging with nonprofits and vice versa. It creates a sense of accessibility, leading to more informal coffee meetings and get-togethers throughout the year and reducing some of the formality of grant applications and impact reports.

Our events are giving members like CalOptima Health an opportunity to learn about nonprofits such as Families Forward, which provides life-changing supportive services to improve health through housing. They lead to new collaborations that pay off in big ways for the community. Recently, CalOptima Health and Families Forward formed a partnership that is leveraging public and philanthropic funding to build a community in

Tustin for up to eight previously unhoused families with children. Once completed, it will be the city's first-ever affordable housing community that started as a ground-up new construction.

"The access to safe housing and critical supportive services emerging from true collaboration and targeted investments in affordable housing development demonstrates what is possible when we are able to connect in meaningful ways," said Madelynn Hirneise, chief executive officer of Families Forward. "CalOptima Health is giving more local families opportunities to build economic mobility and create a healthy, nurturing environment where their children can thrive."

With the kind of regular, authentic places OCG provides to build relationships throughout the year, the dynamics between nonprofits and funders can shift — fostering a feeling of trust that paves the road to true social change here in Orange County.

## CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SHARED LEARNING

Another critical element of building trust in philanthropy is ensuring nonprofits and funders have opportunities to learn from one another. As an industry where one group holds the resources the others need, the power dynamics in philanthropy can often lead to an imbalance that OCG is striving to correct.

One of OCG's newer events is the Beyond Equity Learning Series launched in 2023, which brings together participants from a multitude of sectors, including nonprofit, philanthropic, students and businesses. With the help of

subject matter experts, we're helping the community understand the historical and cultural context for inequity in our region and discuss strategies to address its root causes, from anti-migration policies to deconstructing media stereotypes.

Most importantly, the Beyond Equity series underscores an important message that funders are not the experts in social impact — nonprofit leaders are. Events like this help even the playing field and create an environment for funders and nonprofits to learn together, alongside each other as equals.

We have seen some exciting, intentional partnerships take root as a result of shared learning opportunities, like the OC Hunger Alliance, which is creating efficiencies and maximizing resources to tackle food insecurity. A collaboration between the county's three largest anti-hunger organizations, the Community Action Partnership of Orange County, Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County and Abound Food Care, the alliance demonstrates how cross-sector leadership can learn from one another to address a major issue in our community.

This kind of collaboration is a testament to the power of connection in philanthropy. When we create opportunities for nonprofits and funders to engage and learn, we're not only changing the giving landscape — we're making space for true partnerships to form that will achieve equity for Orange County's most impacted communities.

**TARYN PALUMBO** is the executive director of Orange County Grantmakers.

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THE DAILY COMMUTER PUZZLE

By Stella Zawistowski

**ACROSS**  
1 Belgrade natives  
6 As well  
10 Restaurant bigwig  
14 \_ Boothe Luce  
15 Animated character  
16 German auto  
17 Song from the past  
18 Genie's home  
19 Actress Moran  
20 Bridle attachment  
21 "Emma" author: 2 wds.  
23 Mysterious puzzles  
25 Pro bono ad: Abbr.  
26 Plant, as seed  
27 Cheap ship passage  
32 Batman's sidekick  
35 Brooks Robinson's base  
36 Salty body of water  
37 "You said it!"  
38 "\_ you sure?"  
39 Is the right size  
40 Tom Collins liquor  
41 Sounded disapproving  
43 Clear a whiteboard  
44 Reached  
46 Night before a holiday  
47 Pitcher's stat: Abbr.  
48 Hidden away  
52 Repair shop items: 2 wds.  
57 Valorous one  
58 Mysterious glow  
59 Ballet bend  
60 Intelligent  
61 Narrow cut  
62 "Anything \_?"  
63 Occult deck  
64 Keep out of sight  
65 Artificially

**SUDOKU**

By the Mephram Group

Complete the grid so each row, column and 3-by-3 box (in bold borders) contains every digit, 1 to 9. For strategies on how to solve Sudoku, visit [sudoku.org.uk](https://sudoku.org.uk).

1	2			6	5	8		
	5	8						
		3		5		6		1
4			1		9			7
7				2		4		
	8					5	7	
		7	5	4			9	8

**For answers to the crossword and Sudoku puzzles, see page A6.**

colored  
66 Contest submission

6 Book of maps  
7 Mortgage, e.g.  
8 Nonspecific amount  
9 In theory: 2 wds.  
10 Julius —  
11 Injured  
12 "The Sopranos" star Falco  
13 Helsinki native  
21 Crocodile

feature  
22 Pre-owned  
24 Day after Sun.: Abbr.  
27 Tear to bits  
28 Made a knot  
29 Continent with pandas  
30 Obtains  
31 Simplicity  
32 Indian musical work  
33 Leave out  
34 Not straight  
35 Grab  
39 First-year student  
41 Lose steam  
42 Lost one's cool  
43 Actress Longoria  
45 Add bubbles to  
46 Aliens, for short  
48 Trusty horse  
49 Organ that pumps  
50 Mistake  
51 Daft  
52 Window frame  
53 Dog with a corded coat  
54 Dry as a desert  
55 Friend in battle  
56 Ascend  
60 Sault \_ Marie

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