Despite Pandemic-Era Uncertainty, Many Southern California Fundraisers Optimistic

In the midst of a year filled with both challenges and opportunities, Southern California nonprofits are reflecting on the past 12 months and preparing for the next. As the region continues to recover from the pandemic, fundraisers are optimistic about the future of philanthropy in their communities.

Amy Sausser, director of development for the Advancement Project California, highlighted the importance of maintaining relationships with donors even during times of uncertainty. "It was overwhelming in the nicest way," she said of the support her organization received in 2020. "It was really lovely and such a relief to not have to write a proposal." This sentiment was echoed by Bess Walkes, vice president for development at Planned Parenthood Los Angeles, who noted that her organization’s donors stepped up in a big way to support its work.

The pandemic also brought new opportunities for fundraising, as more donors shifted to virtual events and programming. "It’s been a really grounding about this whole year," Walkes said, "It’s changed my relationships with donors. It all got more personal."

Going forward, Sausser said Advancement Project California will take this opportunity to work on cultivating those relationships and engaging new donors. "I have to say, my mouth dropped," she said, noting that her organization received a $2 million grant from a new donor.

Both corporate and individual funding increased last year for both OCAPICA and Advancement Project California, a trend that is expected to continue in the coming year. "We’re really optimistic about the future," said Sausser, "We’re asking donors to think long term and see us as a partner in solving intractable problems."}

These organizations we spoke with, though, generally fared well financially during the pandemic. And for many, it was a time of surprising opportunity. For those working on issues that took on greater resonance during the events of the last year and a half—for instance, the dramatic increase in food insecurity experienced during the pandemic, funder interest in the issue was on the wane. "I asked whether funders will continue acknowledging the expertise of those long on the front lines of these issues," said Sausser. "Some have noted that a few funders will retreat to their traditional beliefs, which is a problem."

Although fundraisers are optimistic about the future, they recognize that there are still challenges ahead. "We’re going to continue to work on cultivating those relationships and engaging new donors," said Sausser. "It’s been a really grounding about this whole year," Walkes said, "It’s changed my relationships with donors. It all got more personal."

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Ventura and Port Hueneme, which are focused on youth development, raised a majority of the funds they needed to add STEAM centers to all their sites, while the Santa Barbara Public Library Foundation, which is focused on supporting education, raised funds to continue its work on educating students on digital literacy.

Veteran fundraising consultant Rebecca Merrell of Netzel Grigsby Associates agreed that funders in both Ventura and Los Angeles are expected to continue supporting these types of programs. "I think we’re going to see a lot more funding for education and STEAM programs," she said. "We’re seeing a lot more interest in those types of programs."

Merrell noted that many funders are also interested in supporting organizations that focus on community development and social justice. "We’re seeing a lot more interest in those types of programs," she said. "We’re seeing a lot more interest in those types of programs."