

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for
Mental Health

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ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mental health conditions—also commonly discussed in medical circles using the term “behavioral health”—have long remained a philanthropic blind spot, with annual grant totals for the sector lagging not only far behind other health and social causes, but far below levels commensurate with the burdens these conditions place upon individuals and society. Disorders such as major and persistent depression, anxiety, addiction and substance use, and effects of adverse childhood experiences, among others, interfere not only with the patient’s wellbeing, but negatively affect families, communities, careers and finances, national economic productivity and healthcare costs. And despite rising recognition of the unmet needs that mental health conditions present and the extensive spill-over harms, grantmaking for these causes has remained relatively flat in recent years.

While some large health-focused funders devote annual grantmaking to mental health, it is rarely a significant portion of their overall giving. Similarly, nonprofits and grantseekers active in mental health say individual grants tend to be smaller than those for other diseases such as cancer. Instead, mental health funding and innovation is largely driven by smaller, often family-run charitable foundations with a particular or personal commitment to the sector. These smaller and more nimble givers are working both regionally and nationally to advance broad policy-level approaches to transform how communities and the country prevent harm, and provide and pay for mental healthcare.

Among the largest funders of mental health are national foundations with interests in general health that have dedicated funding streams for mental health. Corporate funders are mostly absent, though a few are involved in the sector. Cumulative funding trends for recent years show only slow increases in funding for mental health nationally. In those years, research institutions and universities, veterans, crisis and suicide intervention, and community mental health resource centers and services, including substance use and addiction treatment centers, have received the most philanthropic support.

Mental health funding is wide-ranging and sometimes hard to categorize — often crossing over into social services, youth programs, juvenile justice reform, education and other program areas — but among the grants that Candid catalogs specifically dedicated to mental health projects, the largest subcategories are direct service provision types. Because mental health overlaps with many systems of care (social services, family wellbeing, health, education) and challenging social issues (justice, poverty, racial equity) most of the challenges facing the field cited by experts have to do with making connections within and across systems, and focusing on particularly vulnerable populations.

There are two major trends shaping the mental health field today. One is the increasing number of major health-focused foundations devoting greater resources to mental health and making connections across their portfolios. The other is a nationwide effort to advance policies and public understanding that would reimagine how mental health is viewed and treated in the United States, and to integrate it seamlessly with health and wellbeing more generally.

Like just about every corner of philanthropy, the funders leading discussions on mental health directions are talking a great deal about racial equity, although fewer seem to be centering those discussions in their work than many other program areas like the arts and community economic development. Still, equity issues are a vital part of the mental health conversation, and many funders also have a strong history of directing funds for the special mental health needs of women, LGBTQ people and people with disabilities.

Private and family foundations dominate the philanthropic landscape for mental health nonprofits. Among the most influential foundations funding mental health, there is a significant set of very large private foundations in which this program area comprises a relatively small portion of their total portfolio or funder identity and smaller family foundations that either focus almost entirely on mental health or center it as a major emphasis of their philanthropic identity often inspired by a close family member with personal experiences with mental health issues.

While there are several associations representing the nonprofit organizations of the mental and behavioral health world, up until recently, there hasn't been a funder affinity group dedicated to mental health philanthropy. The nonprofit Grantmakers in Health has long dedicated a section of its website to behavioral health, but has not organized a discrete subgroup. In March 2020, a small assortment of funders announced a new group, separate from GIH, specifically for mental health funders, which is doing collaborative funding and taking on many aspects of a funder affinity group.

For nonprofits raising money to combat mental illness and behavioral problems with treatment, research, and services like advocacy work, the current fundraising environment is especially fraught. With frequent news reports and studies showing that the pandemic is causing rates of depression, stress, substance misuse, anxiety and other psychological problems to rise sharply, the health crisis has only underscored the urgency of work by nonprofits that address mental health disorders. But rising coronavirus cases and deaths and the related economic fallout have also made it harder for many mental health charities, particularly those that rely on special events, to secure donations.

There are several areas of opportunity in mental health cited by experts, and all relate to the current moment. There is growing public discussion of mental health difficulties now exacerbated by COVID-19 and resultant social isolation, as well growing awareness of the relationship of social isolation to the opioid epidemic, which present opportunities for funders to take on the systems and symptoms of social isolation. Another major opportunity of the era is technology's ability to connect people to therapy and other treatments, wherever they are, through telehealth.

Longtime grantseekers tell Inside Philanthropy they are cautiously optimistic about directions in philanthropy, suggesting that overall awareness of mental health issues and a broadening social acceptance have been working to erase old stigmas that have traditionally separated these concerns from physical health. This trend, experts say, represents a watershed moment with the potential to bring the additional funding, energy and broad-based commitment necessary to address this under-resourced sector.

Introduction

The philanthropic sector's support for mental health causes is essentially the same in 2020 as it has been for many years: vastly underfunded in proportion to the pervasiveness, seriousness, and burden that mental health problems place on individuals and society. These burdens weigh not just upon those suffering from these conditions but engender knock-on effects that ripple through personal and family wellbeing, compromise financial security and professional success, and contribute to other direct and indirect costs to society.

According to statistics published by the National Institute of Mental Health (NAMI), brain disorders (comprising mental, neurological, and substance misuse disorders) are the [single largest source of disability in the U.S.](#), representing nearly 20% of the total of disability from all health causes. According to NAMI, the country's largest grassroots mental health nonprofit, one in five U.S. adults experience mental illness symptoms each year. One in 25 experience a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression. Children and teens experience similar rates of illness; suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people aged 10 to 34. In addition, people with mental illness face a significantly elevated risk of other serious health conditions.

As one respondent said in an August 2020 Inside Philanthropy survey, “[Funding for mental health is] very, very small relative to the outsized influence of ‘big bets’ and mega-gifts.”

Depression alone affects an estimated 9% of Americans, approximately 30 million people. Depressed people face a 20-fold higher risk of

suicide than the general population, but also a higher risk of death from cardiovascular illness. So-called “deaths of despair” due to factors including depression, addiction and suicide, are the acute expression of mental illness, but the broader impact of these conditions is even more widespread.

Depression is also associated with lower productivity and increased absenteeism in the workplace, contributing to lower income and higher unemployment. All are burdens on the individual with the condition, their families, healthcare systems, and society. Yet despite the work of some funders and a broadening social recognition of the sector, mental health professionals report that philanthropy does not adequately address these longstanding and well-recognized needs.

The sums the philanthropic sector is giving for mental health work, while never commensurate with the scope of the problems, have shown hints of growth in recent years, according to data from Candid. In 2014, institutional philanthropic support for mental health organizations totaled approximately \$569 million, coming from 9,518 grantmakers, across just over 27,000 grants. But in 2015, that amount more than doubled to \$1.27 billion, with more than 12,000 grantmakers making more than 39,000 grants. The next three years saw more modest growth: 2016 was roughly similar to the previous year in terms of total dollars, givers and number of grants. But in 2017, cumulative giving rose slightly to \$1.38 billion, and in 2018, cumulative giving in mental health jumped again to \$1.59 billion.

The number of national funders who give for mental health is limited. A few major foundations operate in this space, but many grantmakers who focus on mental health are smaller; some are family

foundations with the assets to make a big difference to a single research institution—and backing research is often a priority. Other funding priorities are delivery of care, counseling, addiction services, psychiatric care, and residential mental healthcare.

What is it about mental health as a category that has kept philanthropy away? For one, as a condition of health or illness, mental health presents a very different—and in many ways more complex—problem than so-called physical diseases. Mental health as a philanthropic category includes support at the community level for care and treatment, such as for counseling and addiction services. But it is also a towering challenge for biology, neuroscience and related health research: The brain and mental health disorders don't yield their secrets easily.

The disease model of mental health itself may hinder giving. Though certain conditions such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia are believed to have substantial physiological components, applying a similar approach as one might for other diseases with more clear-cut causes and treatments in medical settings can fail when applied to mental health conditions. The disease model can be a less productive approach for conditions like persistent depressive disorder or addiction, in which social and community factors including poverty, racism, adverse childhood experiences, social isolation or other issues are believed to play a major role. In addition, efforts to address mental health must address the complex interplay and roles of the criminal justice system, schools, public health clinics, and of course, health insurance coverage.

Perhaps its sheer complexity has kept some funders away from mental health, though they may be major and eager contributors to research and care in other areas. This complexity occurs in broad and

narrow contexts. Mental health is frequently interwoven with social issues such as poverty, though people in every tax bracket experience mental health challenges, too.

An Inside Philanthropy survey respondent observed, “Mental health research support has increased only incrementally over the past 10 years. [It is] an area that is greatly in need of more attention and funding.” This and similar comments reflect widespread frustration among those in mental health nonprofit work who struggle to raise funds to continue operating while critical needs in their communities or topics of focus go unmet.

Additionally, the physiology and function of the brain remain deeply complex and mysterious. While recent exciting advances have given researchers new abilities to study the brain and raised the potential for the eventual development of treatments, the rate of development of new drugs and other treatments for mental health disorders has been slow for decades. “With things like cancer and Alzheimer’s, research is driven toward a cure,” says Ken Zimmerman, a distinguished fellow at NYU’s Furman Center and the former director of U.S. Programs for the Open Society Foundations. “It’s a north star that’s easy for people to get their head around. If you look at funding for nonprofits involved in cancer and Alzheimer’s, even the biggest mental health nonprofit is small by comparison.”

Funders often want to see concrete, measurable progress or documentable benefits in feel-good stories from their programs and investments. But mental health issues and associated biomedical research, which address difficult questions of brain function and potential treatments, don't easily provide that sort of data. Similarly, some mental

health conditions, such as anxiety or depression, are often managed—rather than cured—through healthcare and therapy providers. Again, not an easily quantified impact.

“What we do in this field doesn’t always translate well to the kind of measurement of outcomes that funders like to see with other programs,” said Katrina Gay, national director of strategic partnerships for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, which pursues advocacy, education, support and awareness related to mental illness. “It’s hard to capture cure rates.”

And in specific areas where funding appears to be in good supply, such as suicide, the data is not improving. “There is a good deal of support and attention for suicide prevention, but numbers have gotten worse, not better,” she said.

And yet, should philanthropy significantly increase its commitment to mental health funding, the potential returns for society are immense. As [Inside Philanthropy](#) has reported, a joint analysis by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine showed that every \$1 investment in prevention and early intervention for mental illness and addiction programs yields \$2 to \$10 in savings. And those estimates don’t account for the potential sphere of benefits that a truly functional, compassionate and innovative mental healthcare system in this country could produce across many measures of wellbeing.

Sector professionals and advocates have long sought to erase what many call a societal stigma around mental health, one that makes these conditions somehow more shameful or embarrassing to admit than physical disease. This sentiment—not that

many years ago associated with breast and prostate cancer—have indirectly hampered philanthropic giving as it has patients’ willingness to seek and receive care and treatment. Some observers told *Inside Philanthropy* that they believed broader public conversations and openness about mental health struggles are having a positive impact, that the aversion to the mere acknowledgment of mental health issues, much less a willingness to seek help, is finally starting to wane. Just one driver of broadening social acceptance and compassion for mental health is the COVID-19 pandemic, say sector professionals: Not everyone contracted the disease, but many came to a better appreciation of how stressful conditions can trigger mental and emotional reactions.

Despite the longstanding inadequacy of funding, mental health professionals are increasingly optimistic about 2020 and beyond. “More funders are reaching out to us, realizing that that behavioral health issues are important,” said Alyson Ferguson, chief operating officer of the Thomas Scattergood Behavioral Health Foundation, a mental-health-oriented funder based in Philadelphia with under \$30 million in assets. “It feels like we’re at a tipping point.” But while sector observers say they are optimistic that philanthropy may finally be boosting funding for mental health causes, the chasm between the need and the grant support is unlikely to close anytime soon.

What remains to be seen is the extent to which this apparent openness will translate into significant giving for mental health nonprofits, advocacy and related work. With a few exceptions, corporate givers have been largely absent from the field; their increased involvement could catalyze broader and deeper giving, say experts.

The mental health crisis in this country cannot be fixed with a pill. In some respects, addressing mental health doesn't so much resemble a medical challenge as a more complex social challenge, similar to criminal justice reform. Significant mental healthcare improvement will require a similarly multifaceted approach. Unlike most other disease-specific philanthropy, mental health affects many major institutions and causes in society not just health and the healthcare system, but also education, racial equity, the criminal justice system, the economy and more. Said Zimmerman: "There's growing recognition that longstanding philanthropic priorities can't be addressed without addressing mental and behavioral health more broadly."

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

Among the top 10 funders for mental health causes during the five-year period 2014–2018 (including addiction and substance abuse programs) are several national foundations with major interests in general health and some funding for mental health. Corporate funders are less well-represented in the ranks of the largest funders of mental health, though some corporate givers do indeed take on these causes—and their involvement is important. As one sector expert noted, corporate givers hold outsize influence culturally, with the unique ability to raise public awareness and galvanize giving toward the larger scale that all experts say is necessary. Despite reportedly stronger support for specific areas within the category of mental and behavioral health such as suicide prevention, cumulative funding trends—with the exception of 2014–2015 where funding doubled—show only slow increases.

The top 10 list illustrates the variety of funder types giving in big ways for mental health, with a mix of private foundations, family foundations (some with a strong emphasis or primary focus on mental health) and public foundations. And while mental health does not show up as a large percentage of total giving from managers of donor-advised funds, those giant and growing giving institutions now show up among the largest funders of mental health (as well as just about every other program area).

Bloomberg Philanthropies, with substantial assets of \$8.9 billion, is one deep-pocketed foundation that has taken on mental health and substance misuse causes, particularly the opioid epidemic

that has emerged in recent years as a leading cause of death for Americans. In 2018, Bloomberg committed \$50 million to opioid use issues, a significant portion of the approximately \$276 million it committed to mental health causes overall during the 2014–2018 period. As the period's largest private mental health grantmaker, Bloomberg's commitment is also significant because it constitutes over 45% of its total giving during those years, even as it was giving on a wide range of global issues.

Grantmaker	Dollar Value of Grants Awarded
Bloomberg Philanthropies	\$276.05M
Steve & Alexandra Cohen Foundation	\$71.67M
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation	\$61.34M
Conrad N. Hilton Foundation	\$57.01M
Stanley Family Foundation	\$51.85M
Anne & Henry Zarrow Foundation	\$37.43M
Duke Endowment	\$35.07M
California Endowment	\$34.18M
William K. Warren Foundation	\$30.42M
Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Foundation	\$33.08M

Source: Candid

Another of the relatively few national funding organizations known for a longtime commitment to mental health causes is the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, which has included substance misuse prevention for youth and young adults as a program area. In 2018, Hilton gave just over \$11 million for work to prevent substance and alcohol use among young people.

Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

“Mental health and addiction are rising concerns but the funding commitment levels have not risen correspondingly. There is increased awareness and there have been changes in insurance to allow coverage but resources and access remain limited.”

—Fundraiser, Franklin, Tennessee

Many of the grantmakers with ongoing interest in mental health are family-run outfits, sometimes driven by personal experience with mental illness. For example, in 2014, the Stanley Family Foundation, following a family member’s diagnosis and treatment for bipolar disorder, made a newsworthy \$650 million gift to the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, a biomedical research center, to advance understanding of genetic and other biological factors in psychiatric disorders. At the time, it was the largest private gift for psychiatric research. Sector professionals describe this sort of research as an area of particular need, citing the short list of effective or novel drugs and treatments for serious mental illnesses including bipolar disease and schizophrenia, among others.

Public concern for the disproportionate mental health challenges of veterans of the U.S. military (and their families)—including stress disorders, homelessness and substance use problems—has also spurred big-dollar donors to address these issues outside the sphere of the Veterans Administration. In recent years, for example, the [Steven & Alexandra Cohen Foundation](#)—known for its support of children’s health and education, the arts, the environment, and leading research on Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses—pledged \$275 million to create a national network of free mental health clinics for military veterans and their families.

Efforts to boost impact by small and medium donors through collaborative funds, organized by intermediaries such as the [Foundation for Excellence in Mental Health Care](#) (AKA Open Excellence), are providing support for new approaches to mental health needs. Open Excellence, an international organization established in 2011 that hosts donor-advised funds,

has been promoting approaches to care that rely less on traditional medical/pharmaceutical models and more on addressing and engaging families and communities. In a recent year, Open Excellence operated some 20 funds tackling a range of mental health needs in areas including research, treatment and education.

When it comes to local access to treatment and care, [community foundations](#) fill in many of the funding gaps related to mental healthcare and services. In states such as Florida, one of 14 states that have not accepted Medicaid expansion dollars through the Affordable Care Act, services and support for mental health are in short supply. Funders such as the Community Foundation for Northwest Florida have made grants to train and staff mental health professionals for adults and youths.

Research into the brain and physiological components of mental health tend to be funded by science-oriented outfits such as the Brain & Behavior Research Foundation and the Simons Foundation, and private funders, many of whom experienced mental illness within their families and learned about the field’s need for increased support for care and research.

While corporate funders don't make the lists of largest givers, there are some significant ones that are prominent in certain niche areas.

Pharmaceutical companies like Bristol-Myers Squibb and Johnson & Johnson fund mental health as significant portions of their overall health philanthropy, while other companies like Pepsico and Nationwide Insurance give in big ways to mental health for reasons that are less directly tied to core business concerns.

Who's Getting

The list of recipients of the greatest giving for mental health during the period 2014–2018 include research institutions, veterans, crisis and suicide intervention, and community mental health resource centers and services, including substance use and addiction treatment centers. IP's analysis of data from Candid showed the greatest number of individual grants going to categories described as addiction services with community mental healthcare following close behind. Smaller numbers of grants went to recipients providing mental health counseling, crisis intervention and residential mental healthcare.

Among the top grant recipients shown in an IP analysis of Candid data was the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, which received an estimated \$117 million across some 86 grants. Smoking, itself an addiction behavior, is strongly associated with mental and behavioral health conditions such as depression and anxiety. IP's analysis of Candid sector data shows top grantees for research on mental health include the Broad Institute, which received \$49.43 million, and the Laureate Institute for Brain Research (\$30.37 million) and the Child Mind Institute (\$22.20 million).

As noted, significant and even potentially transformative gifts have gone to major research and training institutions that explore mental health within neuroscience, psychiatry and other departments. In 2020, a few new foundations (discussed in greater detail in the "Giving & Getting Deeper Dive" section) have emerged to focus on the emotional and mental health of college students, aiming to help them cope with the new and potentially more intense stresses after high school, including social, educational and financial pressure.

Top 10 Grant Recipients: Mental Health 2014 - 2018 ²	
Recipient	Dollar Value of Grants Received
Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids	\$116.69M
SMA Behavioral Health Services	\$84.67M
Cohen Veterans Network	\$71.25M
Broad Institute	\$49.43M
Crisis Text Line	\$42.83M
Laureate Institute for Brain Research	\$30.37M
George West Mental Health Foundation	\$29.39M
Drug Policy Alliance	\$26.75M
CDC Foundation	\$22.41M
Child Mind Institute	\$22.20M

Source: Candid

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

Mental health funding is a wide-ranging subject, one that crosses into social services, youth programs, juvenile justice reform, education and other program areas. But among the grants that Candid catalogues specifically dedicated to mental health projects, the largest subcategories are direct service provision types.

As a result, there is a bit of a disconnect between recipients of the bulk of philanthropic dollars in the mental health sector and the giving priorities among some of the more high-profile leaders shaping discussion in the field.

By many accounts, mental healthcare in this country is in need of broad systemic change, intersecting with other societal challenges such as poverty, racism and physical health. Addressing this many-tentacled issue also means considering or rethinking the roles of the judicial system and prisons, of schools, of insurance policy and the integration of mental health with physical health. Grantseekers and other professionals suggest that the complexity of mental health challenges, as well as the incompletely understood interaction of social and biological factors, has contributed to the reluctance of givers to take on challenges for which success, in the form of clear returns on investment, is hard to measure.

The population of college students is attracting more philanthropic attention, following broader recognition of the high incidence of anxiety, depression, substance misuse, suicide and other problems. Major higher education donors have traditionally not directed their funds to the mental health needs of students, but there are signs that mental health on campus is starting to draw more attention.

Top 5 Funding Priorities: Mental Health 2014 - 2018²

Subject	Amount Funded
Addiction Services	\$2.21B
Community Mental Healthcare	\$940.00M
Mental Health Counseling	\$625.99M
Crisis Intervention	\$578.81M
Residential Mental Healthcare	\$375.91M

Source: Candid

In late 2019, for example, the Utah-based Huntsman family committed **\$150 million** over 15 years to establish the Huntsman Mental Health Institute at the University of Utah. The funds established a center for the academic study of mental health with a particular focus on college students. In addition to research on genetic risks and other factors in mental health, the funds support mental health services and screenings for the university's 32,000 students, as well as expanding mental health services for the state's broader community. Late 2020 also saw the establishment of the Radical Hope Foundation, an organization created to address the mental health and wellbeing of college/university students, joining a few other groups that address the mental health of teens and young people more generally.

Some funders take on a specific mental health concern, such as depression. As its name suggests, the [Hope for Depression Research Foundation](#) was established to address one type of mental health disorder. The organization was launched in 2006 by longtime philanthropist Audrey Gruss, who witnessed her mother's long and difficult battle with serious depression and learned firsthand of the limits of scientific knowledge of the brain and current medical treatment options. Hope for

Depression Research Foundation has for the last decade and a half funded broad-based and coordinated research into the function of the brain and the causes of mood disorders and depression, including factors like molecular biology and epigenetics, requiring all grantees to share data and findings. In 2020, the foundation announced a new \$30 million initiative to translate that basic science into potential therapies.

The year 2020 introduced a new element of great concern to mental health professionals: COVID-19. The pandemic and its many associated social and financial stresses placed new burdens on an already overtaxed U.S. mental healthcare system and has further revealed its gaps in both public and philanthropic funding. Minority and vulnerable populations are at particular risk, but no one is immune to the physical or mental effects of the epidemic. The widespread gaps in insurance coverage for behavioral health diagnoses means that people across the socio-economic spectrum will suffer and experience inadequate access to care.

The Big Issues & Beyond

Because mental health overlaps with many systems of care (social services, family wellbeing, health, education) and challenging social issues (justice, poverty, racial equity) most of the challenges facing

the field cited by experts have to do with making connections within and across systems, and focusing on particularly vulnerable populations. Getting systems that interact with children and the justice system to better address mental health issues is a big concern. But so too are basic crisis response services and greater funding for research on causes and treatments.

A growing number of funders are focusing on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These are described by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control as potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (from birth through age 17) that are associated with lifelong mental health problems. They include the experience of violence, abuse or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; and having a suicidal family member. Also considered ACEs are aspects of the child’s environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability and bonding, such as growing up in a household with substance misuse, mental health problems of family members, and instability due to parental separation or incarcerated household members. ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness and substance misuse in adulthood—illustrating the complex relationship between social, emotional and physical conditions in the mental health space.

Year	Dollar Value of Grants	Total Number of Grantmakers	Total Grants Awarded	Total Number of Recipients
2014	\$569.02M	9,518	27,209	6,467
2015	\$1.27B	12,159	39,458	7,936
2016	\$1.26B	11,194	42,805	8,581
2017	\$1.38B	10,979	29,795	8,027
2018	\$1.59B	11,883	32,128	8,873

Source: Candid

Nationally, according to the CDC, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for adolescents ages 15 to 19. As serious as this statistic is, the situation is typically more dire for LGBTQ youths, who have a significantly higher risk of suicide. Rates of depression and other mental health issues are similarly concerning for LGBTQ youth. Recognition of the specific and sometimes unique needs of LGBTQ youth is prompting donors to address this population. For example, a charitable crowdfunding effort by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) employees on behalf of the Trevor Project, is focused on suicide prevention and other support among LGBTQ youth. And though crowdfunding is increasingly popular in the engagement of individual donors, as we discuss elsewhere in this report, it is unusual among corporate givers. Still, as Inside Philanthropy observed, PwC's 2019 crowdfunding effort raised \$6 million, both the largest-ever grant by the PwC Charitable Foundation as well as the largest-ever grant to the Trevor Project.

Veterans are another population of particular concern for funders. Following long and difficult wars in Iran and Afghanistan, the unique stress-related disorders that military veterans are at risk of experiencing are becoming more broadly appreciated. Veterans, an especially popular cause among many conservative funders, present special challenges, but also opportunities for funders that might not usually work together. Needs among veterans—and their families—remain high. And while the Veterans Administration provides care for post-traumatic stress and other psychiatric disorders, many veterans lack access to care or embrace mental health treatment. In 2016, the [Steven & Alexandra Cohen Foundation](#) pledged \$275 million to create a national network of free mental health clinics for military veterans and their

families. The Cohen Veterans Network aimed to open about two-dozen clinics.

Unfortunately, in a cause as poorly resourced as mental health is, experts consider the basic expansion of crisis response services and availability of addiction and substance use treatment among the most pressing big issues for the field, even though this is hardly a new concern. Still, experts say it is a case that must be made more compelling to the public, government and other funders.

The role and impact of police officers in responding to mental health emergencies is under scrutiny now, and novel approaches in communities could prevent unnecessary violence or tragic events. Some emerging initiatives for philanthropy include additional training for law enforcement personnel, or developing other models for response to emergency and crisis response. About 40% of those awaiting trial have mental health conditions, according to Scattergood Foundation's Ferguson, highlighting the well-recognized but insufficiently addressed the intersection of mental health and law enforcement.

The deinstitutionalization movement that began in the 1960s, which shut down state mental hospitals and similar facilities, had the effect of shifting many people with serious mental illness into jails and prisons; others become homeless and live on the streets. This lose-lose situation has served neither society nor individuals whose mental illnesses have interfered with their basic needs and wellbeing.

“While it is getting less stigmatized, funding for mental health and homelessness is still far below what is needed,” said an Inside Philanthropy survey

respondent. “It would be important for donors to recognize that funding for treatment could divert future costs for criminal justice and shelters.”

Addiction and substance use disorders have long plagued American society, their harms brought into even sharper relief in recent years with the rise of opioid use. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, drug overdose deaths in the U.S. rose 4.6% in 2019 to approximately 71,000, with more than 50,000 of those deaths involving opioids. Despite the epidemic of drug overdoses and use, [writes Andrew Drazan](#), CEO of Wellbridge Addiction Treatment and Research, “philanthropy has been barely visible when it comes to addressing the crisis and supporting new approaches to addiction treatment based on scientific research.” Many people with substance use issues are arrested and incarcerated, rather than treated for their substance use or the related mental health issues that may be driving or contributing to that use. As a top public health crisis in America, addiction and substance use presents an urgently needed opportunity for philanthropy.

Cutting across many of these big issues for funders of mental health, say experts, is the need for greater investments in research. Research into the biological components of mental health and mental illnesses holds great promise for the development of new treatments and even cures. And though progress in these fields has been slow for decades,

newer technologies to study and understand the brain are sparking optimism.

Funder Trends & Strategies

There are two major trends shaping the mental health field today. One is the increasing number of major health-focused foundations devoting greater resources to mental health and making connections across their portfolios. The other is a nationwide effort to advance policies and public understanding that would reimagine how mental health is viewed and treated in the United States, and to integrate it seamlessly with health and wellbeing more generally.

No grantmaker better exemplifies the trend of major health foundations increasing their attention to mental health than the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. With \$11 billion in assets, RWJF is the country’s largest public-health-focused philanthropic organization, whose “culture of health” ethos has long guided its grantmaking work. RWJF gave approximately \$66 million for mental health causes from 2014– 2018. One focus of RWJF giving in this field is for adverse childhood experiences within the home environment. As discussed above, ACEs have become a subject of increasing attention within the mental health field, as funders seek to address stressful or traumatic experiences that have been shown to have harmful impacts on the developing brains of children and on subsequent mental health throughout life.



“At a moment when the nation as a whole is trying to better address the mental health needs of young people, the Hogg Foundation’s TAYF (Transition-Age Youth and Families) Grant Initiative builds on the

strengths, hopes and dreams of young people, actively involving the youth and their families in developing an individualized plan for their future independence and success.”

—Vicky Coffee, director of programs, Hogg Foundation for Mental Health

Funding strategies vary and include efforts to address broad social stressors such as poverty, which are associated with increased rates of behavioral health problems; and support for medical and scientific research aiming to illuminate the biological components of mind and mental illness toward the development of treatments and cures.

In recent years, a new generation of foundations and organizations has emerged that seeks to reimagine from the ground up how mental health is viewed and treated in this country, and to integrate it seamlessly with health and wellbeing more generally. The [Scattergood Foundation](#), for example, advocates for what it calls major disruption in mental healthcare. The foundation also funds groups fighting the stigma of mental illness, building workforce capacity in the behavioral health field, and fighting to include mental health as a larger part of integrated healthcare. Making about \$1 million a year in grants, Scattergood is not a large funder, so the organization focuses on new ideas in policy and practice.

A relatively new foundation working for broad systemic change in the country's mental health system is the [Well Being Trust](#). The foundation was established in 2016 by Providence St. Joseph Health as an independent 501(c)(3) with an initial endowment of \$100 million, plus an additional \$30 million to be invested in California. The organization seeks to drive change at the policy level to include mental health fully into general healthcare systems. The Well Being Trust has outlined its framework in a policy guide, "[Healing the Nation: Advancing Mental Health and Addiction Policy](#)," available on its website. The trust's framework offers federal policy guidelines to address areas like existing health systems that

people already use, as well as the judicial system, education systems, the workplace and employment –what it calls a “whole community” approach—and a category of specific focus populations.

Such global changes to mental health are the goal of the philanthropic advisory organization Mindful Philanthropy (discussed in greater detail in the “Associations & Intermediaries” section of this brief). The organization seeks to advance clinical transformation toward a “whole-person” design of healthcare that integrates “body, mind and spirit.” Other focuses are community transformation and national mental health and addiction policy.



While funders of all sizes provide varying levels of support for mental health, sector professionals say the most reliable and innovative grantmaking support often comes from smaller and regionally focused funders. For example, Peg's Foundation awards approximately \$5 million in grants in counties throughout Northeast Ohio.

The foundation focuses primarily on chronic, severe and episodic mental illness, investing in innovative projects in the region with potential for national impact.

Its investments include programs to support people and their families by improving care, engaging stakeholders to develop new solutions that address gaps in the system, and to increase public knowledge and understanding of serious mental illness.

Perspectives on Equity

High-quality behavioral healthcare services can be difficult for many Americans to access, but people of color face even greater obstacles. Federal reports have documented “striking disparities for minorities in mental health services and the underlying knowledge base.” In other words, racial and ethnic minorities have less access to mental health services than whites, are less likely to receive care and are more likely to receive poor-quality care when treated. Obstacles include cultural and language barriers, and historical and present-day racism and discrimination.

There is also a dearth of therapists and caregivers from minority backgrounds, which can mean less successful, less culturally adapted care. In addition, minorities are disproportionately represented in certain vulnerable and high-need groups, such as the homeless and incarcerated people. Philanthropy that aims to both expand access and develop and expand culturally appropriate mental healthcare services for minorities is an important step in advancing equity in mental healthcare.

Some foundations concentrating on mental health are also centering racial equity in their funding strategies. For example, The Hogg Foundation says at the top of its homepage: “The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health declares that not only is racism a public health crisis, but it is also a mental health crisis, and it is about time we named it.” Further, it

asked fellow funders and mental health organizations to [sign onto this statement](#): “By co-signing this declaration, you are publicly acknowledging your awareness of the problem, and your organization’s commitment to doing what it can to address it.”

The Hogg Foundation is hardly alone among mental health funders seeking greater racial equity, but few funders with strong commitments to this cause have placed the issue so centrally in their messaging.

While discussions of racial equity have become much more prominent in mental health funding circles over the past five years, relatively few mental health grantmaking strategies seem to center race in their discussions of vulnerable populations. In fact, the trend of creating new foundations that focus on the mental health needs of college students living on some of the most elite campuses in the United States could be critiqued as an unfortunate misdirection of charitable resources away from larger, under-resourced populations experiencing far greater socio-economic and mental health challenges. It is, at the least, an important consideration.

In part because LGBTQ populations have publicly fought against mental health diagnoses and stigma for decades, the needs of queer people have also had a long history in conversations about funding for mental health. Many funders concerned about LGBTQ populations direct resources to social



“We think it’s really important to make sure that we’re bringing in really important disciplinary perspectives from epidemiology, public health, psychiatry, psychology because oftentimes, so many parts of the mental health world are siloed, and suicide is too big a public health crisis and too complex to not be tapping into every source of knowledge and wisdom that we can.”


—Amit Paley, CEO and executive director, The Trevor Project

services, counseling and other mental health needs, especially for young queer people. However, most mental health funders rarely specify a distinct interest in this particularly vulnerable population, one that experiences family isolation and suicide at frighteningly higher rates than other groups.

Women's mental health needs have also been underserved in some respects. While there has been a great deal of public conversation and hand-wringing in recent years about so-called “[diseases of despair](#)” and their impact on rural middle-aged white men—and most mental health discussions seem to use men as an archetypal measure—there are some funders of mental health that pursue deeper explorations of women’s mental health.

One such giver is the [Hope and Grace Initiative](#), a project of the New Venture Fund in partnership with global skincare brand Philosophy, Inc. Philosophy USA dedicates 1% of all sales toward the fund. Hope and Grace represents an “unending commitment by Philosophy to support mental health and wellbeing,” calling mental health issues “one of the greatest challenges women face.” The fund awards grants to groups promoting the mental health and wellbeing of women, as well as the prevention and treatment of related mental health matters. Specific grantmaking priorities include overcoming stigmas, barriers to treatment, access to treatment, and support systems for women with mental illness.

Similar to the LGBTQ funding space, there are many women’s foundations that dedicate resources to mental health for women and girls. The Atlanta Women’s Foundation, for example, has the [Promoting Women and Girls’ Mental Health & Wellbeing Project](#), a collective-impact approach to



BEAM
BLACK EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
COLLECTIVE

“We must acknowledge the historic causes of mental health challenges: the legacy of racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, economic stressors, and systemic failures that contribute to our mental health struggles.”

—Yolo Akili Robinson, executive director, Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective

creating large-scale community change. Since 2015, AWF has awarded approximately \$800,000 to 15 local nonprofit organizations “providing mental and behavioral health services to women impacted by poverty.” The foundation says the initiative believes “women in poverty often neglect their own health and that of their children because of all of the other struggles they deal with in their daily lives. The lives of women and girls in poverty are filled with many challenges, often compounding each other. These women experience stress, grief and depression without the resources or networks in place to handle these strong emotions in the healthiest way.”

The mental health funding space, by the nature of its programmatic focus, is centered on a particular set of disabilities of the mind. But how much do funders consider the specific mental health needs of people who experience physical disabilities? Health-focused funders have long discussed and directed funding to populations that have overlapping chronic conditions using the term “comorbidities,” but those tend to be such things as obesity and lung disease. Mental health funders often make the connections between overlapping mental health conditions like substance misuse and

bipolar disorder. A significant [body of research](#) indicates that people with physical disabilities are particularly prone to decreased social interactions and the depression that is highly associated with isolation. But there doesn't seem to be much discussion in philanthropic circles about the mental health needs of people experiencing physical disabilities or a movement toward directing greater philanthropic resources.

Inside **Philanthropy** August 2020 Survey

“While it is getting less stigmatized, funding for mental health and homelessness is still far below what is needed. It would be important for donors to recognize that funding for treatment could divert future costs for criminal justice and shelters.”

—Fundraiser, Cleveland, Ohio

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private & Family Foundations

Among the most influential private and family foundations funding mental health, there is a significant set of very large private foundations in which this program area comprises a relatively small portion of their total portfolio or funder identity (such as Bloomberg or Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, discussed earlier) and smaller family foundations that either focus almost entirely on mental health or center it in their giving identity (such as the Jed Foundation, Hope for Depression, or Radical Hope Foundation); often, this philanthropy is inspired by a family member's experience with mental health issues.

In addition to private foundations among the top 10 by dollar amount discussed in the “Who’s Giving” section, such as Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Steven & Alexandra M. Cohen Foundation, and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, there are several larger or particularly influential private and family foundations with which grantseekers should be familiar.

One of the largest is the massive health funder Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which focuses grantmaking on vulnerable populations. Access to quality, affordable healthcare is a major concern, so groups working in this field may have a leg up with this funder. Another huge mental health funder working within the context of a larger health strategy is the Duke Endowment, which focuses on the states of North Carolina and South Carolina. The foundation “seeks to accomplish lasting change by working to expand prevention and early

intervention programs, to improve the quality and safety of services, and to increase access to care.”

There are a number of foundations that may not make the top 10 list, but which are nevertheless regarded as leaders setting the pace and priorities of the field. These include the Hogg Foundation, the Well Being Trust, Meadows Foundation and the Thomas Scattergood Foundation. These and several other leading funders were recently profiled in the Philanthropy Roundtable report titled [“A New Frame of Mind: Philanthropy’s Role in Mental Health’s Evolving Landscape.”](#)

The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health focuses on the people of Texas. “Mental health is a concept that should be promoted beyond the walls of health clinics and instead integrated into everyday life (such as our conversations, actions, decisions and responsibilities),” the foundation states on its website. Hogg takes “an inclusive approach through which communities, particularly those that have been historically marginalized or excluded, take an active role in identifying and improving conditions that impact mental health.”

Additionally, a growing number of family foundations focus on specific niche areas of mental health, such as suicide in college, often influenced directly by the traumatic experiences of children or other relatives. Among the growing number of such foundations that are dedicated to advancing understanding and treatment of specific conditions are the Danny Alberts Foundation (bipolar disorder), the Sidney R. Baer Jr. Foundation (schizophrenia and bipolar disorder), Christopher D. Smithers Foundation (alcoholism and substance misuse), Daniels Fund (alcoholism and substance misuse), and the Andrew Kukes Foundation (social anxiety), to name just a few.

Corporate Funders

Mental health nonprofit leaders told Inside Philanthropy that corporate funders have not deployed substantial portions of available grant support in the broad category of mental health. But a few have invested grant dollars in the area. In addition to Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Johnson & Johnson, Pepsico and Nationwide Insurance, mentioned in the “Who’s Giving” section above, there are several other corporate givers listed in Inside Philanthropy’s ongoing tracking of [notable mental health funders](#), including Cathay Bank, Medica Health Plans, Dr. Scholl, and TJX Companies, the retailing corporate parent of TJ Maxx, Marshalls, Home Goods, Sierra Trading Post and Home Sense.

Not surprisingly, many of the corporate funders that are active in mental health philanthropy come from the pharmaceutical or healthcare industries, as well as insurance.

New York Life Foundation is one corporate funder that addresses mental health causes. Its approach is influenced by the organization’s collective experience as a life insurance company: A top priority is bereavement issues. According to Maria Collins, foundation vice president, it’s an issue whose profile has risen since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. “It’s become so much more relevant this year. Many people in the mental health field are talking about grief and the mental health effects on both adults and children following the loss of a loved one,” she said.

The Aetna Foundation has traditionally focused on issues of equity in health access, promotion of community wellness, and [mHealth](#) and health information systems. But in the spring of 2020,

amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the corporate funder made some significant grants in the mental health space. It announced donations of \$500,000 to the AmeriCares COVID-19 Mental Health and Psychosocial Support project, which aims to help frontline healthcare workers, particularly those serving low-income populations, to improve their mental health awareness, knowledge and resiliency, and understand the mental health concerns impacting their patients. In a related move, Aetna Foundation also announced a \$300,000 grant to the Crisis Text Line, which provides 24/7 confidential direct mental health support for those on the front lines, including healthcare workers dealing with stress, anxiety, fear, depression and/or isolation associated with COVID-19.

Funder Spotlight



NEW YORK LIFE
FOUNDATION

The New York Life Foundation has prioritized bereavement issues, particularly for children. COVID-19 has amplified this problem and attracted new awareness. “This work is so much more relevant now because of COVID-19,” said Maria Collins, vice president at New York Life Foundation. “More people are talking about grief and the mental health effects on adults and children. The sense of loss is so great now—the loss of loved ones, the loss of routine, the loss of connecting with people.”

The COVID-19 pandemic also illuminates the dearth of funding for the mental health impacts of disasters—both natural disasters and human-made, such as school shootings. Less than 1% of public support for disasters has targeted mental health issues that result from those disasters.

Astellas USA Foundation, the U.S. charitable arm of the Japanese-based pharmaceutical company, has supported a fairly wide range of mental health causes, including scientific and educational work. It makes grants through three main programs: Health and Wellbeing, STEM Education, and Disaster Response.

Baxter International Foundation, a charitable entity of the large healthcare corporation, has also supported a wide range of mental health needs, including substance misuse services, and a range of psychotherapy and other services for children.

Community Foundations

Community foundations, which provide billions for many causes in communities across the country, are important supporters of behavioral health services, particularly in rural and less-populous regions of the country, where access to mental healthcare can be limited. Community foundations provide particularly important support to nonprofits and care providers, although individual grants from community foundations are generally small, in the tens of thousands of dollars.

The Rhode Island Foundation partnered with Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island (BCBSRI) to create the Behavioral Health Fund in August 2018. The fund addresses both mental health and substance use in Rhode Island. The fund's first grant, for **\$2.6 million**, was split between several nonprofits serving communities that are disproportionately impacted by behavioral health issues, giving each organization between \$200,000 and \$600,000.

The California Community Foundation includes support for access to mental health services in Los

Angeles County as part of its overall health funding strategy. The Santa Barbara Foundation seeks to expand availability and access to behavioral healthcare in its communities, making grants for substance misuse issues, and treatment by psychiatrists and psychologists, among other work.



“What we do in this field doesn’t always translate well to the kind of measurement of outcomes that funders like to see with other programs. It’s hard to capture cure rates.”

—Katrina Gay, national director of strategic partnerships, National Alliance on Mental Illness

Major Donors

Major individual donors are an important part of the funding mix for the mental health sector, but can be hard to identify and access when not associated with a foundation that welcomes communications from grantseekers.

Billionaire hedge-funder Jim Simons and his wife Marilyn, through the Simons Foundation, fund basic science discovery, and have made autism spectrum disorders a key plank in their mission. Simons has pioneered research into the genetic and other components of the condition. The Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative (SFARI) spends approximately **\$75 million** per year on grants and program costs.

Philadelphia philanthropist couple **Lisa Yang and Hock Tan** announced in 2020 a \$28 million gift to MIT establishing the K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Center for Molecular Therapeutics in Neuroscience, to advance study and treatments for autism and other neurological mental health disorders. The new institute will be part of MIT's McGovern Institute

for Brain Research, a group the couple has funded previously, including a 2017 gift of \$20 million. Tan, who is CEO of Broadcom Inc., and his wife Yang have children on the autism spectrum, and have been directing funds into the field for years. In 2015, the couple gave \$10 million to Cornell University (Yang's alma mater) to set up the [K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Employment and Disability Institute](#). That group focuses on helping people with disabilities find meaningful work. The couple's donations to MIT for autism and other causes now totals more than \$72 million.

A few substantial individual gifts clearly aim to expand and catalyze progress in the traditionally underfunded field. In 2019 the Utah-based Huntsman family, known for philanthropic support for cancer research and other health-related work, committed \$150 million to establish the Huntsman Mental Health Institute at the University of Utah. In 2016, Bay Area philanthropists Bill and Susan Oberndorf gave [\\$25 million](#) to the University of California San Francisco; the [Leon Levy Foundation](#) has given at least \$20 million for research fellowships in neuroscience at leading neuroscience research institutions in New York City.

K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan

[Institute on Employment and Disability](#)

"I'd like to see the world accept people with disabilities. In fact, there is so much talent and productivity that is being overlooked when you realize that the definition of disabilities is not confined to a condition from birth, but could be a result of physical and mental trauma arising from an accident or even from active duty service members in conflict."

—Lisa Yang

The late [Ted Stanley's](#) mammoth \$650 million commitment in 2014 to the Broad Institute backing psychiatric research was the largest private donation in the history of psychiatric research at the time. Stanley, who made a substantial fortune selling collectibles, was also moved to direct philanthropy to mental health following his son's diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

Finance industry businessman [Clifford Chiu](#) has also given generously for mental health over several years, including to Seton Ascension, a patient care nonprofit, and also directly to educational institutions with which he has personal connections, including University of Pennsylvania, University of Chicago, Pomona College, Dartmouth College and Hong Kong University Medical School. Chiu has on occasion provided annual endowments to support particular causes in perpetuity.

Kenneth G. Langone, a co-founder of Home Depot, and his wife, Elaine, for whom the New York University (NYU) School of Medicine is named, are also big supporters of a major initiative in youth mental illness. Expanded in October 2020, [RADical Hope](#) seeks to "address America's youth mental health crisis by building resilience in young lives. The foundation works with proven, front-line engagement programs that deliver on its core priorities: connectivity, empowerment, emotional regulation and engagement." It was established in 2018 by Pam and Phil Martin in honor of their son, Chris, who died by suicide during his junior year of college.

Associations & Intermediaries

While there are several associations representing the nonprofit organizations of the mental and behavioral health world, up until recently, there

hasn't been a funder affinity group dedicated to mental health philanthropy. Grantmakers in Health has long had a section of its website [dedicated to behavioral health](#), with research, opinion pieces, meeting information for interested funders, and other resources, but has not organized a discrete subgroup.

In March 2020, a group of funders announced [Mindful Philanthropy](#), which is separate from GIH and specifically for mental health funders. Launched by a group of well-known mental health funders previously discussed elsewhere in this brief—including the Well Being Trust, Scattergood Foundation, Peg's Foundation and John Heller Fund—the association features attributes of a funder affinity group (membership, information, meetings) but is also presenting collaborative funding opportunities. In the announcement, the leaders of the group said, “Mindful Philanthropy, the only national resource of its kind, aims to significantly expand philanthropy for mental health, addiction and community wellbeing initiatives.”

The new group is a partnership with the Center for High Impact Philanthropy at the University of Pennsylvania, which had previously produced the report “[Health in Mind: A Philanthropic Guide for Mental Health and Addiction](#)” and an accompanying FAQ outlining the association's [key strategies for philanthropists](#) to impact mental health and substance use disorders.

There are several other organizations in the mental health space that are also trying to increase connections between funders and innovative initiatives

Collaboration Spotlight



With the help of seed funding from the John Heller Fund, WellBeing Trust, Peg's Foundation and the Scattergood Foundation, Mindful Philanthropy supports organizations “seeking bold advancements in the fields of mental health, addiction, and community well being.”

Though mental health conditions and substance use disorders are the leading cause of disability in the country, they are largely overlooked by U.S. donors who give billions of dollars to charitable causes each year.

The [Foundation for Excellence in Mental Healthcare](#), based in Portland, Oregon, and formed in 2011, works to connect private philanthropy with researchers and programs in the U.S. and around the world. The international group works with philanthropists, researchers and clinicians, policy analysts and advocates, and people with lived experience of mental health issues. The organization seeks donations from individuals, corporations and other foundations. It also helps individual donors create funds and advises on donations to existing funds, among other work.

The [Brain and Behavior Research Foundation](#) funds individual researchers seeking prevention, treatments, and possible cures of mental illnesses. The BBRF (originally known as the National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression, or NARSAD) distributes grants to investigators at various stages in their careers,

supporting study of a number of mental/behavioral health conditions, including anxiety, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorders.

There are a number of national associations focused on specific mental disorders and concerns, including suicide prevention, that raise and redistribute money. These include groups such as the Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America, or SARDAA. Established in 2008, the organization works to help people affected by schizophrenia and related brain illnesses. The group promotes support programs, education, collaboration and advocacy, aiming to ensure that people with these disorders receive care and treatment. Another focused organization is the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), which was established to support the 30 million people in the U.S. affected by eating disorders, and their families.

Other associations are broader in their mental health concerns. One of the best known, the [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#), provides advocacy, education, support and public awareness to assist individuals with mental illness, as well as their families. Although NAMI is the largest such organization in the mental health space, the funding and individual donations it receives tend to be small in comparison to other high-profile causes like cancer or heart disease—in the thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars, rather than million-dollar donations.

Inside Philanthropy’s ongoing tracking of [notable mental health funders](#) also lists numerous grantmaking organizations that exist to gather

philanthropic resources, provide information and learning opportunities and, in many ways, function as grantmaking networks. They include the American Psychological Foundation, Brain and Behavior Research Foundation, Group Foundation for Advancing Mental Health Research, International OCD Foundation, Mental Health Foundation, and the Mental Health Research Foundation.

Funder Spotlight



When Philosophy established the Hope & Grace Initiative, it became the first company to place a “deep focus” on women’s mental health and the first major beauty brand to commit 1% of its sales to support the cause.

In 2017 Philosophy launched the *How are You Really?* campaign in an effort to open honest dialogue between those living with mental health issues and the people that want to help and support them. When speaking of the campaign, Marie-Pierre Stark-Flora, global SVP of Philosophy and Hope & Grace Fund Advisory Board member said:

“We all have mental health, whether a diagnosed mental illness or a moment in your life, so asking ‘how are you, really?’ creates a platform to open up about how we’re really doing - what we’re really feeling. Speaking freely is ultimately the first step in healing. The Hope & Grace Initiative is just helping facilitate the conversation to get there.”

Fundraising Now

For nonprofit organizations raising money to combat mental illness and behavioral problems with treatment, research and other services like advocacy work, 2020 was a year like no other. With frequent news reports and studies showing that the pandemic is causing rates of depression, stress, substance misuse, anxiety and other psychological problems to rise sharply, the health crisis has only underscored the urgency of work by nonprofits that address mental health disorders. But rising coronavirus cases and deaths and the related economic fallout have also made it harder for many mental health charities, particularly those that rely on special events, to secure donations.

At the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, a New York-based organization with chapters nationwide, donations made by participants in the charity's "Out of Darkness" walks have declined by 35% this year, said Michael Lamma, senior vice president of development. "It became a difficult fundraising environment once the pandemic set in." The walks, he added, have been a major revenue source, generating 60% of the organization's contributions, partly because they also help people fight isolation, a common trait in people with suicidal impulses and those who take their own lives.

Fundraising events by the National Eating Disorders Association, another New York-based charity, have fared even more poorly this year, raising 60% less than in 2019, according to Christine Novak Micka, the association's chief development officer. The organization's 100 community walks have been shut down for safety reasons and replaced with 15 virtual events that have not done as well, drawing 5,000 people



The Jed Foundation

"I want to get us to a place where we all feel comfortable talking about mental health—as comfortable as we do in talking about physical health—and it becomes normal to speak up and to reach out for support and help around emotional and mental health issues when you need it."

—John MacPhee, executive director/CEO, Jed Foundation

compared with 25,000 participants in the live events. The association also had to move its annual gala online in March, raising 30% less than its goal.

Charities working on mental health issues, just like other types of nonprofits, often find it challenging to move events online. On one hand, it's easier not dealing with the logistics of a live event, said Kristen Lynch, a senior development officer at Boston's International OCD Foundation, which helps people suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorders and related issues like hoarding. On the other hand, Lynch said, it was harder to figure out how to market the foundation's virtual walk this year. It raised \$189,000 compared to \$219,000 generated from last year's live event. But online events almost always have much lower costs, so the difference can work out in the nonprofit's favor.

As behavioral health organizations struggle to adapt their fundraising to pandemic realities, multiple studies and the firsthand experiences of these organizations reveal a substantial pandemic-related rise in psychological distress and potentially fatal behaviors such as addiction, substance misuse and attempted suicide.

In a nationally representative survey of 1,468 adults in April 2020, early in the pandemic, Johns Hopkins University found that nearly 14% reported symptoms of psychological distress, up from 4% in an identical survey conducted in 2018. Such symptoms can only have increased over the course of the pandemic. In Virginia, Mental Health America offers free online assessments for anxiety and depression. This year, it reported a 634% increase in people taking its anxiety assessment and an even greater jump of 873% among those measuring depression. And the National Eating Disorders Association reported a 40% increase in calls to its helpline this year, while online chat requests have exploded, growing by 90%.

As has been the case for many years with donations aimed at mental health, the amount of money being raised for this cause during the pandemic lags far behind the need, according to the 13 organizations reached for this brief's fundraising analysis. "All of us hear the news about an increase in depression and anxiety and exacerbation of symptoms due to COVID, but dollars aren't following the conversation," said Kathy Bernstein, vice president of development at the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance in Chicago.

The alliance has struggled this year to raise money to move 600 support groups operated by its 150

local affiliates to a virtual format, and about 80% of them are now online, said Bernstein. But the organization is still unable to serve hundreds of people who want to participate in other virtual support group meetings offered by the charity's national headquarters.

Like other types of organizations, charities focused on mental health have found that foundations supporting them in the past have been more flexible this year about evaluations and other requirements—and in a welcome change, more willing to provide general operating support. But it's virtually impossible to get new grants from other foundations they haven't worked with before. "You need a longstanding relationship to get in the door with foundations" this year, said Barbara Leshinsky, the top fundraiser at the Ad Council, which this year released a series of public service announcements to get young people to reach out to friends with mental health issues who may be at risk of suicide.

Overall, gifts from donor-advised funds have increased this year, according to the National Philanthropic Trust, which found that the number of grants made nationwide increased by 53% from March 1 to May 31, 2020, while the total amount of money DAFs distributed grew by 64%. However, none of the mental health organizations

Leadership Spotlight: Michael Lamma



American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

When he joined the AFSP, senior vice president of development and field management, Michael Lamma established the Out of the Darkness community walk series to raise funds for suicide prevention, public policy advocacy, and survivors of suicide loss. The fundraiser

walks have grown from 25 to over 600 nationwide and is one of the leading peer-to-peer fundraisers in the country. On the topic of suicide and suicide prevention, Lamma said, "It's hugely important that we talk about this issue and rally as many resources as we can to address this important national health issue."

interviewed for this brief said they had noticed any increase or change in what they've received from donor-advised funds this year.

A few charities working on behavioral health issues—particularly those not reliant on special events—have been able to raise more than they did before the pandemic hit. One such organization is the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, the addiction treatment organization headquartered in Center City, Minnesota. The nonprofit expects to raise \$12.5 million this year, up 20% from contributions in 2019, said Moira McGinley, its lead fundraiser.

McGinley said that since January, the number of people making major gifts of \$100,000 or more has doubled. Hazelden Betty Ford has been able to increase the number of lapsed donors who started giving again by 50% this year. Meanwhile, their average gift in 2020 has increased by 24%. “We did not stop asking, and we have been tracking above our goal all year,” McGinley said. “And we have a significant amount of new donors.”

Wellbridge Addiction Treatment and Research, a similar facility in Calverton, New York, that opened last spring, has had a very different experience. Its financial challenges are reflective of the difficulties many mental health organizations nationwide are facing this year.

While officials are still figuring out how to raise money going forward, as the new substance misuse facility builds its reputation and track record, the pandemic has already hurt revenues.

Funder Spotlight



The Meadows
Foundation

Serving the People of Texas

Larger health funders tend to support mental health as it aligns with other interests rather than as a core focus. But some smaller, regionally focused funders take on specific conditions and raise awareness within their communities.

The Meadows Foundation, based in Dallas, Texas, focuses on mental health needs of people in Texas, including veterans, children, incarcerated people and the justice system, and other policy solutions. It has recently given grants for public policy work, news and awareness, engaging young people, mental health needs in African American communities, high-impact projects, and programs for young people in mental healthcare systems.

Its sister organization, the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute, develops and provides policy and program guidance to improve mental health services in Texas.

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

Those involved in mental health philanthropy could be said to fall into one of two camps. Some call for continued and increased funding to address individual needs, such as substance misuse, suicide or depression. Others see a broken system that can't effectively address issues that are so complexly interconnected with so many aspects of life and health. These observers advocate for a wholesale revision of mental health and the system of care in the U.S. to one that integrates mental health needs in a coordinated manner. After all, mental health has immediate and long-term impacts on physical health, education, career, income and the judicial system. Failing to address mental health in these ways continues to cost society billions for other social programs and countless lost opportunities for better lives every year.

“For philanthropy, mental health is integral to the success of many key priorities,” wrote [Ken Zimmerman](#) in *Inside Philanthropy*. “Notably, criminal justice reform has risen to the top of philanthropy’s agenda, with a keen focus on reversing this nation’s historic treatment of Black and brown people. But the connection here to mental health has not received equal philanthropic attention. The biggest mental health institutions in the United States are our prisons and jails, with the L.A. County Jail the nation’s largest. Incarceration is both a cause of, and a failed response to, mental health issues.”

But it is mental health’s enormous impact that imbues it with such potential for dramatic progress—sparked, at least in part, by philanthropy. “There are promising seedlings for change that could lead to systemic transformation—if appropriately assessed, adapted and scaled,” Zimmerman wrote.

“By philanthropy’s own criteria, it’s time to recognize the potential of high-leverage grantmaking in this space.” Driving such giving are new organizations like [Mindful Philanthropy](#), which assesses current philanthropic priorities and guides giving.

There are several areas of opportunity that experts point to in mental health, and all relate to the current moment in which society finds itself. The growing public discussion of mental health difficulties exacerbated by COVID-19-related social isolation, as well as similar discussions of the relationship of social isolation to the opioid epidemic, present opportunities for funders to take on the systems and symptoms of social isolation. Another major opportunity of the era is technology and the ability to connect people to therapy and other treatments through telehealth.

Contemporary discussion of mental health needs must now include consideration of the COVID-19 pandemic. The U.S. healthcare system, including health-related philanthropy, has been rocked by COVID-19, and the full impacts will likely not be fully understood for years to come. But public health professionals now warn of a parallel epidemic of mental health issues already emerging as a result of the pandemic and its associated stresses.

A [Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#) released in April 2020 reported that the pandemic, including the economic slowdown and social disruption it triggered, has negatively affected mental health for nearly half of Americans, creating “new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders.” Some public health measures taken to slow the spread of COVID-19,

such as social distancing, business and school closures, and shelter-in-place directives, have led to greater isolation, job loss, and financial stresses—some of the important contributing factors in mental illness.

While at least \$600 million in federal disaster funding was released in response to COVID-19, only \$4 million addressed mental health causes, explained a vice president of one foundation that funds bereavement issues. “I see a lot of companies providing funding for basic needs like food and medical care, but mental health impacts from COVID are on the horizon and funders need to join us,” said Collins of the New York Life Foundation.

This parallel epidemic of mental health disorders will further stress the country’s already inadequate mental healthcare system and resources, and should figure into the funding strategies for grantmakers and grantseekers for the remainder of 2020 and beyond. Although a successful vaccine, or vaccines, could ease coronavirus concerns, it is nevertheless more than possible that the virus will remain a factor socially and economically, and that broad national concerns about mental health will remain through subsequent years.

While mental health disorders are a threat across all strata of society, as with most health issues, the most vulnerable populations face particular risks and have the fewest resources for care. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, donors of various types, community foundations and corporate givers have responded with emergency funding to maintain essential services crucial to vulnerable populations.

The CDC [published a paper](#) in June of 2020 exploring mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. It found significant increases of

reported depression and anxiety disorders, among other concerns. (“[Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, June 24–30, 2020.](#)”)

Should such pandemic-related health and economic pressures continue for months or even years, as is quite possible, these mental health concerns will continue to stress society and the already struggling mental healthcare system.

To mental health professionals, the pandemic did not just exacerbate these issues; it also revealed them to a broader public. Said one IP survey respondent: “Again, the pandemic has dug up so many issues that have been hidden for hundreds of years, so I will say that we should take humanity at its face value and address every connective tissue that needs to be healed. Globally and domestically, humans are suffering—in body, mind, spirit, soul. We must translate that suffering... into palpable programs.”

Funder Spotlight

Bloomberg Philanthropies

In 2019 Bloomberg Philanthropies announced a \$50 million commitment to address the opioid crisis in the U.S. Grants support programs accelerating access to treatment, improving prevention efforts, expanding naloxone distribution, and data collection to help strengthen state and national responses to the epidemic. Funding is earmarked to help states hit hardest by opioid overdose deaths. Pennsylvania and Michigan each received \$10 million grants to support high impact interventions and reduce the rate of opioid addiction and deaths.

As terrible as the COVID-19 crisis has been for the American people, it does offer at least one silver lining: It appears to have broadly boosted awareness and empathy about mental health. And perhaps it has also generated new empathy for those who suffer from these conditions. What remains to be seen is whether the longtime and evidently successful efforts to bring mental health out of the shadows, along with the additional focus energized by the pandemic, will translate into more philanthropic dollars.

Opioids and substance misuse, on the other hand, despite some new funder activity and substantial media coverage, remains poorly addressed by philanthropy (notable commitments from Bloomberg and others aside). The opioid epidemic that was widely reported upon in recent years may have taken a back seat to news of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the problem did not disappear: Americans are still dying by the tens of thousands in fatalities attributed to opioid use.

But with all this, expansion of telehealth could be a real game-changer for the mental health field. As with broader medical care, among the emerging responses to mental health needs are remote care, such as phone or internet-based videoconference support and therapy. The COVID-19 pandemic has advanced the adoption of remote healthcare services where possible. Philanthropic support for innovative uses of this efficient and cost-saving method of care could help an overextended mental healthcare system reach more people in need.



“Mental health is one critical part of the long overdue conversation about policing in the United States. Simply put, we need responses to mental health emergencies that do not center law enforcement. By prioritizing effective and culturally competent mental health supports, we can end the faulty overreliance on police in this area.”

—Ken Zimmerman, former director, U.S. Programs, Open Society Foundations

Resources for Mental Health Funding

Reports & Data Sets:

“Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, June 24–30, 2020,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Health in Mind, a Philanthropic Guide to Mental Health and Addiction,” University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy and Practice.

“A New Frame of Mind: Philanthropy's Role in Mental Health's Evolving Landscape,” Anna Bobb, Philanthropy Roundtable

Websites & Individual Pages with Key Information

“Creating Excellence in Mental Health Care,” Open Excellence.

“Advancing The Mental Health And Well-Being Movement Through Grant Making: Engaged Philanthropy,” Health Affairs.

“The Thread of Mental Health,” Gina Nikkel, Council on Foundations.

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Ken Zimmerman. Official Department of Labor Photograph. Used with permission under [Creative Commons BY 2.0](#).

Thank You

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¹Based on available grantmaker data from Candid. Excludes federal funding, funding by higher education institutions and major donor advised funds (DAFs.)

²Based on available grant recipient data from Candid. Excludes government organizations and higher education institutions.

Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project, each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. This brief was originally posted to Inside Philanthropy in November 2020. It has not yet been updated. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.org.