

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 – also commonly discussed in medical circles in connection to the broader term “behavioral health” – has long been under-resourced by philanthropy, with annual grant totals for the sector lagging not only far behind other health and social causes, but also far below levels commensurate with the impact of mental health issues upon individuals and society. Major and persistent depression, anxiety, addiction and substance use, and effects of adverse childhood experiences, among other issues, not only interfere with the patient’s wellbeing, but also affect families, communities, careers and finances, national economic productivity and healthcare costs.

Despite rising recognition of the unmet needs that mental health conditions present and the extensive spillover harms, grantmaking for these causes was relatively flat for years. There are signs that this is changing, as increased visibility and discussion of mental health across society has prompted some large gifts from major donors in recent years to address mental health and promote research and care.

This State of American Philanthropy brief explores these main aspects of giving for mental health:

Who’s Giving

- 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.
- Mental health funding and innovation has largely been 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.
- At the same time, there are funders that do not have mental-health-focused portfolios who are nonetheless making grants to fund mental health services and advocacy because they – and the organizations they fund – understand the intersections of mental health, economic instability, community wellbeing, housing, the criminal legal system and many other issues.
- 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.

Who’s Getting

- The COVID-19 pandemic and a broader increase in visibility around mental health has sparked a significant increase in philanthropy for this long under-resourced area.
- 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 typically 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 as specifically dedicated to mental health projects (which notably does not cover grantmaking for mental health research), 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.
- Some substantial grants are going to mental health programs through philanthropic portfolios not specifically focused on mental health but rather on criminal justice reform, children’s wellbeing, or another intersecting issue.

Big Issues and Trends

- Increasing awareness of the intersections between mental health and issues such as criminal justice and education is bringing more funders, and thus more funding, to the mental health field.
- 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.
- The lack of funding for research on mental health is a perennial issue. While more philanthropic support is going to research, these resources pale in comparison to amounts going for cancer, heart disease and other conditions that affect similar numbers of people.

Equity in the Sector

- 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.
- 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.

For nonprofit organizations 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 caused 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.

Mental health experts IP spoke with cited several areas of opportunity for funders of mental health. The combination of pandemic impacts and increasing visibility of high-profile celebrities and athletes publicly discussing their own mental health struggles has led to growing public discussion of mental health is one. 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 about mental health 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 and coordination necessary to address this under-resourced sector.

Introduction

The philanthropic sector's support for mental health causes has for many years been vastly unmatched to the pervasiveness, seriousness and impacts that mental health issues place on individuals and society. These impacts are felt not only by those living with these conditions. The knock-on effects ripple through personal and family wellbeing, compromise financial security and professional success, and contribute to other direct and indirect costs to society.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the country's largest grassroots mental health nonprofit, 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year. One in 20 experience a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression. Children and teens experience similar rates of mental illness. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people aged 10 to 14. In addition, people with mental illness face a significantly elevated risk of other serious health conditions. NAMI also reports that, as of 2019, 1 in 5 people receiving Social Security Disability Insurance was receiving benefits due to a mood, psychiatric, or other mental disability.

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.”

Major depression alone affects more than 8% of Americans, approximately 21 million people annually. Depressed people face a 20-fold higher risk of suicide than the general population and also a higher risk of developing cardiovascular and metabolic diseases.

Substance use disorders and addiction, which often intertwine and overlap with mental health, affect tens of millions of Americans directly, and even more people when you consider the impacts on families, communities and society. (See also our separate State of American Philanthropy report on [Giving for Substance Use Disorders and Addiction](#).)

The vast majority of people with a substance use disorder, and more than half of adults with a mental illness, do not receive any treatment, reports Mental Health America.

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. All mental health issues impact not only the individual with the condition but also 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.

Philanthropic giving for mental health, while not yet commensurate with the scope of the problems, may be showing signs of growth. According to Chronicle of Philanthropy tracking, in 2021 wealthy donors publicly gave more to mental health than in any other year over the past decade, with 15 donors giving high-profile donations of \$1 million or more.

“This is a transformational moment in mental health,” Ken Zimmerman, a longtime advocate for changing America's approach to mental health, said upon being [appointed CEO](#) of the national mental health nonprofit Fountain House in 2022. “Federal investment is increasing, new innovations are

emerging, and people at a large scale are grappling with what's needed, including in areas like criminal justice and education. The idea that transformation is both possible and needed is taking hold.”

Inside Philanthropy is watching to see how sustained and transformational this moment might be. The number of national funders who give for mental health has been scant for a long time. 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 and counseling, addiction services, psychiatric care and residential mental healthcare. Areas of increasing philanthropic interest are youth-focused care, such as school-based mental health programs, and supporting alternatives to carceral approaches to mental illness.

What is it about mental health as a category that has kept philanthropy away? Are things really changing or is this moment of increased philanthropic attention an exception? 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, even though they may be major 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 in 2020, “[Mental health 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 Zimmerman. "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.

IP has published a State of American Philanthropy brief on "[Giving for Neuroscience Research](#)," which touches on general brain research that could lead to new treatments for mental health patients. The bulk of funding that paper documents is directed to Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, autism and other conditions that fit more neatly into the disease model. However, basic research into neurological functioning is producing significant applications for a variety of mental health concerns.

Katrina Gay, who was national director of strategic partnerships for the National Alliance on Mental Illness when IP interviewed her in 2020, said, "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." The alliance pursues advocacy, education, support and awareness related to mental illness.

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 Ken Zimmerman stated in [Inside Philanthropy](#), 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. The World Health Organization stated in 2020 that "for every US\$1 invested in scaled-up treatment for common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, there is a return of US\$5 in improved health and productivity." 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 – has 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. The COVID-19

pandemic was just one factor in the broadening social acceptance and compassion for mental health, sector professionals say. 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 have been optimistic. “More funders are reaching out to us, realizing 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. When IP interviewed her in 2020, she said, “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.

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 large private foundations in which this program area comprises a relatively small portion of their total portfolio or funder identity (Bloomberg Philanthropies is an example) and smaller family foundations that either focus almost entirely on mental health or center it as a major emphasis of their philanthropic identity (Hogg Foundation, Danny Alberts Foundation and Sidney R. Baer Jr., Foundation are examples), often inspired by a close family member with personal experiences with mental health issues.

While there are several nonprofit 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 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.

What remains to be seen is the extent to which this apparent openness will translate into significant and sustained 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 largest U.S. funders of nonprofit mental healthcare (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.

The funder types giving in big ways for mental health are a mix of private foundations (both national and regional in focus), family foundations (some with a strong emphasis or primary focus on mental health) and community 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, one of the largest institutional funders in the United States, 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; the program was expanded in 2021, with the announcement of a new five-year, \$120 million commitment to help

combat the overdose crisis, with a focus on public health and prevention, not punishment.

Another of the relatively few national funding organizations known for a longtime commitment to mental health causes is the Hilton Foundation, which funds initiatives related to mental and behavioral health through its foster youth program as well as substance abuse prevention.

10 Mental Health Funders to Know

Anne and Henry Zarrow Foundation

Ballmer Group

Bloomberg Philanthropies

Blue Meridian Partners

Cleveland Foundation

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Duke Endowment

Steve & Alexandra M. Cohen Foundation

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Stanley Family Foundation

Many of the grantmakers with ongoing interests in mental health are family foundations, 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. Steve Cohen’s father and son have both served in the military.

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 addition to hosting donor-advised funds, Open Excellence has a general fund that makes grants for research, education and outreach, and direct services related to mental healthcare.

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

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 11 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 Hope for Depression Research Foundation, and private funders who have 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

Among the largest and most frequent recipients of philanthropic giving for mental health are research institutions and universities, veterans services, crisis and suicide intervention hotlines, and community mental health resource centers and services, including substance use and addiction treatment centers. Grants also support services for

survivors of sexual assault, residential mental healthcare, substance abuse prevention, bereavement counseling, suicide crisis intervention, transitional mental health services, and psychiatric care, among other programs.

Nonprofits to watch in this field include national organizations such as NAMI, an established leader with over 40 years' experience and more than 600 local affiliates, and Fountain House, whose model of peer-led, community mental healthcare has been replicated in 40 states and 30 countries. In 2022, significant new funding came Fountain House's way including \$12 million from MacKenzie Scott, \$750,000 from the Ford Foundation and large grants from Trinity Church Wall Street Philanthropies and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, [IP reported](#).

Among the top grant recipients in terms of dollars received, according to an IP analysis of Candid data for the years 2015 to 2019, was the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a project of Bloomberg Philanthropies' initiative to reduce tobacco use. Smoking, itself an addiction behavior, is strongly associated with mental and behavioral health conditions such as depression and anxiety. Whereas Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids ranks as a top recipient because of the large amount of philanthropic dollars it receives, largely from huge foundations such as Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Gates Foundation, when you look at number of grants received, other organizations, such as the Trevor Project and the Child Mind Institute, are leading recipients of grants in the mental health sector. They receive fewer dollars, but more (if smaller-sized) grants.

Nonprofits providing community mental healthcare and serving specific populations like

young people or veterans also receive significant grant support. TRAILS (Transforming Research into Action to Support the Lives of Students) is getting support from major funders such as Blue Meridian Partners for their work to address the student mental health crisis by making mental healthcare accessible in schools. The Trevor Project has received philanthropic support since its founding in 1998 to provide crisis support services to LGBTQ young people, who are at higher risk for suicide because of mistreatment and stigma.

15 Nonprofits Advancing Mental Health to Watch

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Big Brothers/Big Sisters

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids

Child Mind Institute

Cohen Veterans Network

Crisis Text Line

Drug Policy Alliance

Fountain House

Johns Hopkins University

McClean Hospital

Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute

NAMI

Transforming Research Into Action to Improve the Lives of Students (TRAILS)

Trevor Project

Youth Guidance

Candid does not have a category that shows how much institutional funding is going specifically to mental health research, but research is an area that has received high-profile gifts and grants from major donors as well as institutional funders in

recent years. So while it's difficult to track total philanthropic giving for research, given the number of individual major gifts we know about in the tens or hundreds of millions, it's clear that research is receiving a substantial share of philanthropy in the mental health field. This funding flows mostly to universities and research institutions such as Johns Hopkins University, the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, and funder-named centers such as the Huntsman Mental Health Institute at the University of Utah and the Ballmer Institute for Children's Behavioral Health at the University of Oregon.

As noted above, 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 recent years, a few new foundations (discussed in greater detail in the "Giving & Getting Deeper Dive" section of this report) 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.

Regional funders are often the innovators in mental health philanthropy. 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. 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 like depression, substance use and anxiety, and raise awareness within communities that they do not occur in a vacuum, that they cannot be separated

from the more complete social and economic context of an individual's life. Poverty, race, racism and other status can play an important role in mental health and access to care.

For example, [Peg's Foundation](#) makes grants to address chronic, severe and episodic mental illness, and to improve the lives of individuals with serious mental illness, in 18 counties in northeast Ohio. The foundation invests in innovative projects in the region with potential for national impact, such as 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.

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 a hospital initiative related to depression, to add mental health counseling to a career-readiness program and for community-supported crisis care, among other projects. Its sister organization, the [Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute](#), develops and provides policy and program guidance to increase access to behavioral healthcare in Texas.

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

Mental health funding is a wide-ranging program area, one that crosses into research, social services, youth programs, criminal justice reform, education, and other program areas. Among the grants that Candid catalogs as specifically dedicated to mental health projects (with a reminder that Candid does not have a mental health research category), 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 predictable returns on investment, is hard to measure.

Top 5 Funding Priorities: Mental Health*

Substance Abuse Treatment

Community Mental Health Care

Substance Abuse Prevention

Residential Mental Health Care

Sexual Assault Survivor Services

*Not including grants for research

The mental health of young people is an area of growing funder concern. Even before the pandemic, around 1 in 5 young people in America had a mental, emotional, developmental or behavioral disorder, and mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people.² The pandemic added to those challenges — and drew more attention to them, including the attention of private funders.

² U.S. Surgeon General Issues Advisory Youth Mental Health Crisis Further Exposed by COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2022, the Ballmer Group announced a massive \$425 million gift to the University of Oregon to establish the Ballmer Institute for Children’s Behavioral Health, which aims to be a “new national model” for behavioral and mental healthcare that unites university training and research programs with public schools, families and other community support programs that can deliver help and treatments to K-12 students. The University of Oregon says it will also propose new degree and certificate programs to expand the workforce of professionals trained to address children’s mental and behavioral health needs, [IP has reported](#).

Blue Meridian Partners — a funder collaborative focused on lifting children and families out of poverty whose members include the Ballmer Group as well as MacKenzie Scott, the Duke Endowment, and the Gates and Hewlett Foundations — is supporting TRAILS as part of its COVID-19 Education Recovery grantmaking. TRAILS works to increase access to mental health services to all students by bringing mental health services to schools.

The population of college students is also 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 such students, but there are signs that mental health on campus is starting to draw more attention.

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 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.

The year 2020 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.

Grantee Spotlight



In an effort to bring effective mental health strategies to schools, TRAILS offers its partners training, materials and help with program implementation. Its 3-tiered model focuses on social and emotional learning; helping students cope with COVID-19; cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness; and suicide prevention and risk management. The organization receives support from state and national governmental organizations such as the Michigan Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Education, as well as, private funders including the Kresge and Skillman foundations. More than 10,000 educators, school staff, and mental health professionals have access to TRAILS resources.

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 so learned firsthand of

the limits of scientific knowledge of the brain and 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. Research into depression received another big funding boost in 2022 when the estate of philanthropist Audrey Steele Burnand gave \$57.75 million to the University of California at Irvine, \$55 million of which is to fund research into depression, [IP reported](#).

Bipolar disorder, one of the least funded areas of mental health research, has recently gained some substantial philanthropic support. Jan Ellison Baszucki and David Baszucki (founder and CEO of the Roblox gaming platform), Kent and Liz Dauten (Kent is cofounder and chairman of Keystone Capital), and Google cofounder Sergey Brin in 2022 collectively gave \$150 million to launch an initiative called [BD²: Breakthrough Discoveries for thriving with Bipolar Disorder](#), which is meant to function not only as a funder, but also as a global platform to coordinate science across disciplines and national borders to tackle this complex and still poorly understood disorder, [IP has reported](#).

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, 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its many associated social and financial stresses placed new burdens on an already overtaxed U.S. mental healthcare system and further revealed its gaps in both public and philanthropic funding. Minority and vulnerable populations are at particular risk, but no one was 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 socioeconomic spectrum suffer and experience inadequate access to care.

Resourcing Trauma-Informed Care. 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 experiencing 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.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Hogg Foundation for Mental Health and Tauber Family Foundation are among the funders who have made grants in this area. The Ramesh and Kalpana Bhatia Family Foundation has stepped up to support multi-generational healing from trauma as a way to end violence and abuse, with grants to [Sakhi for South Asian Women](#).

Chronically Underfunded Basic Services Attracts Funding That Might Otherwise Go to Prevention and Research. Unfortunately, in a cause as poorly resourced as mental health, experts consider the basic expansion of crisis response services and availability of addiction and substance use treatment among the most pressing issues, even though this is hardly a new concern. Many argue it should be the domain of government and our general healthcare system, but given its deficits, philanthropy helps fill the void. Still, experts say it is a case that must be made more compelling to the public, government and other funders. Frequently, this means that donors focus on specific populations that are closest to their hearts.

Initiative Spotlight



BD² is committed to “the 40 million people living with bipolar disorder, those not yet diagnosed and their loved ones.” The initiative's Discovery Grants program supports multidisciplinary teams of investigators, scientists and clinicians developing research examining the mechanisms of bipolar disorder including molecular, cellular, circuit and behavioral. Grants awards are \$1.5 million per year over three years, up to \$4.5 million.

Veterans are one 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. As mentioned briefly in the “Who’s Getting” section, the [Steven & Alexandra Cohen Foundation](#) pledged \$275 million in 2016 to create a national network of free mental health clinics for military veterans and their families. The Cohen Veterans Network operates dozens of clinics across the United States.

Queer youth is another population that gets a lot of funder love. Nationally, according to the CDC, in 2020, suicide was the second-leading cause of death for people ages 10 to 14 and 25 to 34, and the third leading cause of death among people ages 15 to 24. As serious as these statistics are for all young people, the situation is typically more dire for LGBTQ+ youth, 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. 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 IP observed, PwC’s 2019 crowdfunding effort raised \$6 million, at the time the largest-ever grant by the PwC Charitable Foundation as well as the largest grant to the Trevor Project.

Decriminalizing Mental Health and Improving Mental Health Emergency

Response. The role and impact of police officers in responding to mental health emergencies is under scrutiny, 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.

Forty-four percent of people in local jails in the United States and 43% of people in state prisons have a diagnosed mental disorder, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. And most people report that they do not receive mental healthcare while incarcerated in the United States, while PTSD, anxiety and other mental health issues are among the impacts of being incarcerated. Further, PPI reports, 27% of police shootings in 2015 involved a mental health crisis. All of this highlights the well-recognized but insufficiently addressed the intersection of mental health and law enforcement.

“There is absolutely a link between criminal-justice-system contact and unmet mental health need,” said Scott Nolen, senior director of portfolio strategy and management at Blue Meridian Partners, a donor collaborative that funds at this intersection. For example, Blue Meridian has invested in LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion), which works with police departments to divert people toward trauma-informed case management, including mental health or substance

abuse treatment, instead of booking or detaining them for violations driven by unmet behavioral health needs.

Decriminalization of mental health is the primary focus of the Sozosei Foundation, the philanthropic arm founded in 2019 by Otsuka America Pharmaceutical Inc. One of Sozosei's first grantmaking priorities was supporting the rollout of 988, the new mental health crisis hotline that advocates hope will reduce involvement of police in responding to mental health crises. They are one of several funders investing in the supportive and connecting infrastructure to make 988 a success. Encouraging funders to join the effort, Mindful Philanthropy created [a guide](#) for how philanthropy can support 988 as an important step in reforming and improving the U.S. mental health crisis response system.

The deinstitutionalization movement that began in the 1960s, shutting 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 is the Elephant in the Mental Health Funding Room. 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, there were an estimated 107,622 drug overdose deaths in the U.S. in 2021, with more than 80,000 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.

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 in grants to support high-impact interventions and reduce the rate of opioid addiction and deaths.

The Dearth of Funding for Research. 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.

Mental health in a social and political context. Mental health is not an isolated or purely individual issue. As discussed above, it intersects with social and economic issues from housing to mass incarceration. Social, economic, political and cultural contexts all affect mental health. For instance, the current rise in anti-trans and transphobic legislation and discourse in the United States has real impacts on trans people and communities, and funders that care about impacted communities are responding. The crisis hotline Trans Lifeline received a 40% increase in funding in 2020 compared to 2019, the Chronicle of Philanthropy [reported](#). Still, programs focused on trans people receive a scant portion of overall philanthropy.

Another issue of concern is the relationship between social isolation and mental health. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the AARP Foundation and the Einhorn Collaborative are among the funders making grants to address social isolation and build more connected communities.

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

These are just two examples of the many ways philanthropists are giving for mental health as related to social, political and cultural contexts.

Funder Strategies & Trends

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 more 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 more than \$14 billion in assets as of 2021, RWJF is the country’s largest public-health-focused philanthropic organization, whose “culture of health” ethos has long guided its grantmaking work. RWJF gave close to \$73 million for mental health causes during the five-year period of 2015-2019, according to data from Candid. One focus of RWJF giving in this field, for example, 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 impact on the developing brains of children and on subsequent mental health throughout life.

Funding strategies 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 into 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. It also funds grants to groups fighting the stigma of mental illness, building workforce capacity in the behavioral health field and advocating 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 it 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 foundation'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.

Funder Spotlight



NEW YORK LIFE
FOUNDATION

The New York Life Foundation has long prioritized bereavement issues, particularly for children. COVID-19 amplified this problem and attracted new awareness. Through funding of direct services, research and evaluation, and education and awareness, the foundation sees an opportunity to address and prevent potential lasting mental health impacts that can affect children who have lost a parent or sibling. "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."

Perspectives on Equity

High-quality behavioral healthcare services can be difficult for most 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 white people do, 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 also develop and expand culturally appropriate mental healthcare services for minorities would be an important step in advancing equity in mental healthcare.

Some foundations that concentrate on mental health are also centering racial equity in their funding strategies. For example, The Hogg Foundation has a “racial justice declaration” on its website: “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 cosigning 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 in recent 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 socioeconomic 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 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 and their 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](#), the philanthropic branch of the beauty care company Philosophy USA. It 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.

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. The initiative supports community-based mental health efforts and since 2014 it has donated over \$5.8 million, awarded 99 grants, and supported 79 organization helping an estimated 2 million women around the world.

Similar to the LGBTQ funding space, there are many women’s foundations that dedicate resources and special initiatives 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 creating large-scale community change. Since 2015, AWF has awarded more than \$1 million to 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 use and bipolar disorders. A significant body of [research](#) indicates that people with physical disabilities are particularly prone to decreased social interactions and that depression 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.

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private 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 Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Steven & Alexandra M. Cohen Foundation, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Stanley Family Foundation, there are several other large 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 also major national foundations that give significantly for mental health even though they do not have grantmaking programs dedicated to this area. For example, the Ford Foundation has made sizable recent grants in the mental health space through its gender, racial, and ethnic justice and disability inclusion programs.

A number of smaller foundations are regarded as leaders setting the pace and priorities of mental health philanthropy. These include the Hogg Foundation, Well Being Trust, Meadows Foundation and Thomas Scattergood Foundation. These and several other leading funders were recently profiled in a [Philanthropy Roundtable report](#) titled “A New Frame of Mind: Philanthropy's Role in Mental Health's Evolving Landscape.”

The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health is dedicated to the subject, with a focus 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 Foundation 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.

Other private and family foundations giving in this space include the Utah-based Huntsman Foundation, which followed their \$150 million 2019 grant to create a mental health institute at the University of Utah with a 2022 commitment to support a seven-year campaign by the Ad Council to raise awareness about mental health in the U.S.

Funder Spotlight



The Meadows Foundation, based in Dallas, Texas, focuses on the mental health needs of people in Texas, including veterans, children, incarcerated people, those involved in 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 Black communities, high-impact projects, and programs for young people in mental healthcare systems.

Corporate Funders

Mental health nonprofit leaders told Inside Philanthropy that corporate funders, as a whole, 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-Myers 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.

Blue Shield of California is working with the California Department of Education (CDE) to boost mental and behavioral health services for the state’s 6 million students, [IP has reported](#).

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.

Reflecting increased awareness of children’s mental health issues, the Morgan Stanley Foundation has launched a children’s mental health initiative that makes grants to nonprofits such as the Jed Foundation and the Child Mind Institute.

New York Life Foundation’s 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. 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 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 front-line 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 the stress, anxiety, fear, depression and/or isolation associated with COVID-19.

A newer entrant is the [Sozosei Foundation](#), the philanthropic arm of [Otsuka America Pharmaceutical Inc.](#), which was established in 2019. Sozosei's primary focus is the decriminalization of mental health.

Dr. Christina Miller, president and CEO of [Mental Health America Los Angeles](#), highlighted a source of corporate funding that is perhaps smaller in scale but significant in impact on individual organizations: local businesses: "Look at where you are headquartered ... a lot of companies have corporate giving programs and employee giving programs ... Look in your backyard. People want to give where they live." [MHALA](#) has received notable support from local businesses. "I have found an enormous amount of empathy and support," Miller said.

Funder Spotlight

Sōzōsei Foundation



A number of complex factors contribute to the criminalization of individuals with mental illness and far too many people with serious mental health issues are booked into jails and prisons each year. These are among the reasons why decriminalizing mental illness is the primary focus of the [Sozosei Foundation](#). Sozosei supports organizations improving access to care before, during and after emergencies; building awareness through arts and communications; conducting research; and those scaling community-based mental health programs. Recent grantees include [Black Men Heal](#), [Children's Rights, Inc.](#), and [Fountain House](#).

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 and Blue Shield of Rhode Island](#) 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.

Community foundations focused on specific demographic populations rather than geographic community are another source of funding for mental healthcare, support and movement-building to transform systems of care, especially at the grassroots level. For example, the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice makes small grants for healing justice work such as training nonprofit staff and community organizers to better support community members experiencing trauma. Recent community grants by the Horizons Foundation, an LGBTQ community foundation based in San Francisco, include support for groups working on community solutions to healing from violence and cycles of trauma, as well as community mental health and substance abuse treatment programs.

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.

Steve and Connie Ballmer stand out in the mental health field, with their \$425 million donation in 2022 to establish an institute for children's behavioral health at the University of Oregon that they hope will be a new national model. They have also given big to the University of Washington to increase the number and diversity of students preparing for work in community-based behavioral health programs, among other gifts.

Funder Spotlight

ballmer
GROUP

The Ballmer Group's overall grantmaking focuses on a range of intersectional mental health issues including early childhood, child welfare, housing and homelessness and criminal justice reform. Recent grantees include Delivery Associates, which received \$2 million to support an alternative crisis response effort in L.A. County for people experiencing mental health crisis events; and Health Alliance for Violence Intervention, which received \$7.5 million to support its work for its equitable trauma-informed care, violence intervention, and violence prevention programs.

MacKenzie Scott is also making large gifts for mental health, including support for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services, the JED Foundation and Active Minds.

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 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 with 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. As discussed previously in this report, 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](#) (still led by Levy's widow Shelby White) has given at least \$20 million for research fellowships in neuroscience at leading neuroscience research institutions in New York City.

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 cofounder 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.

Jan Ellison Baszucki and David Baszucki are newer and already impactful entrants to the field, focusing much of their philanthropy on serious mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and major depressive disorder. David founded Roblox, an immersive gaming company, and the couple founded the Baszucki Brain Research Fund after Roblox's IPO. The Baszuckis have also partnered with Liz and Kent Dauten and Google cofounder Sergey Brin on the funder collaborative BD2: Breakthrough Discoveries for Thriving with Bipolar Disorder.

Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation is focused on the mental health of young people. The foundation, established in 2012, has funded more

than 1,600 classroom mental health programs and donated a total of about \$3 million to hundreds of nonprofits in its first decade. While celebrity wealth—and thus celebrity philanthropy—tends to be on a smaller scale than finance or tech wealth, a celebrity major donor’s visibility can play an important role in raising awareness about an issue. The foundation’s Kindness in Community Fund is focused on community- and youth-led mental health organizations.

Intermediaries & Associations

While there are several associations representing nonprofit organizations in the mental and behavioral health world, until recently, there hasn’t been a funder affinity group dedicated to mental health philanthropy. Grantmakers in Health has long maintained a [dedicated behavioral health](#) section on its website, with research, opinion pieces, meeting information for interested funders, and other resources, but has not organized a discrete subgroup.

In 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 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.

Collaboration Spotlight



With 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.

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

Blue Meridian Partners, a donor collaborative focused on increasing economic mobility for children and families, brings together some of the nation’s largest grantmakers, such as the Duke Endowment, the Ballmer Group, MacKenzie Scott and the Gates, Hewlett, Sergey Brin and Schusterman foundations. While Blue Meridian does not describe itself as a mental health funder and does not have a portfolio dedicated to mental health, the group makes major, multiyear investments in several organizations whose work includes mental health access, services and advocacy.



“Our core mission in our funding and investments is to assist youth and families in attaining social and economic mobility, and we recognize that there are many things that impact access to mobility and opportunities, and mental and behavioral health are among that list of things, so many of the groups we invest in are working in [the mental health space] as part of their larger goal,” said Blue Meridian’s Scott Nolen. Recent grants include support for Youth Villages’ LifeSet program, which addresses emotional and behavioral challenges as part of holistic support for youth transitioning out of foster care, and TRAILS, which is working to increase access to mental healthcare in schools.

“Our investments are performance-based using milestones. So if the milestone is children being ready to enter kindergarten, there are lots of factors that might play into that, including maternal mental health,” said Nolen. So while Blue Meridian Partners might not be specifically focused on mental health, given the enormous philanthropic capacity of its members, the large size of its grants focused on scaling up promising solutions and the group’s recognition that mental health intersects with its primary focus (social and economic mobility), some mental-health-related initiatives are receiving substantial, flexible and often multiyear funding from this intermediary.

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“I think the focus on direct services is shifting away and needs to be revived. Mental health supports for adults, as well as for school-aged children warrant more focus, as well as efforts that support whole family well-being. Additionally, programs that target the middle and lower middle class who need support but don’t qualify for assistance and can’t afford to pay.”

—Foundation professional, Haymarket Virginia

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 cures for 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 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.

The Upswing Fund for Adolescent Mental Health is a donor collaborative focused on the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ adolescents and adolescents of color. The fund was created amid the COVID-19 pandemic to provide resources to front-line organizations providing direct services to young people, while also aiming to support policy advocacy to increase access to mental healthcare. Upswing was seeded by Melinda French Gates' Pivotal Ventures. The Klarman Family Foundation has also contributed.

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 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.

Collaboration Spotlight

PSFC Psychedelic Science Funders Collaborative

The Psychedelic Science Funders Collaborative raises money for research into psychedelics as a treatment for PTSD. Founded in 2017 by social entrepreneur Joe Green and social justice advocate Graham Boyd, the fund galvanized more than 2,500 donors in its capstone campaign, among them Steve and Alexandra Cohen and the Bob and Renee Parsons foundations. Boyd says there are also many younger donors who are learning about philanthropy through their giving in the psychedelic space. In its first five years, PSFC has mobilized or granted \$47.5 million and made grants ranging from \$5,000 to more than \$3 million, according to Boyd.

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 use disorders, 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 America to one that coordinates mental health needs and integrates them in a coherent 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 in mental health that experts cite, and all relate to the current moment in which society finds itself. The growing public discussion of mental health difficulties in response to pandemic-related stress and isolation as well as increasing instances of high-profile celebrities and athletes being open about their mental health struggles present opportunities for nonprofits working on mental health and those who fund them. Another major opportunity of the era is technology and the ability to connect people to therapy and other treatments wherever they are through telehealth.

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. Workforce shortages and stresses on the country’s already inadequate mental healthcare system and resources should figure into the funding strategies for grantmakers and grantseekers for the present and future.

One area nonprofit professionals highlighted to IP is how the broader workforce shortages are a serious concern in the mental health field. “The national workforce shortage is acute, especially for people staffing direct service programs. But the shortage of mental/behavioral health providers (psychiatrists, Ph.D. psychologists, psychiatric nurses and social

workers) is especially dire. Not only do we have difficulty recruiting and retaining experienced, qualified staff in these positions for the benefit of our clients, but it also affects the ability of our staff to get the kind of trauma-informed help they need to deal with the secondary effects of our clients' challenges," wrote one anonymous respondent to an IP survey conducted in 2022. Mental Health America Los Angeles's Dr. Christina Miller mentioned nonprofits' struggles to pay mental healthcare providers competitive salaries. Unrestricted or general operating funds to pay for staffing, as well as grants for programs educating and training the next generation of mental healthcare providers, are areas of opportunity for funders seeking to make an impact on the mental health field.

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 responded with emergency funding to maintain essential services crucial to vulnerable populations. The challenge and the opportunity for funders now is to sustain that funding beyond the moment of emergency response.

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"Funders talk a lot about systems change, but fail to see how direct service providers are addressing the inequities in the systems and therefore are shifting funding away. There is a lot of ambiguity as well around what systems change actually means."

—Fundraiser, Falls Church, Virginia

The expansion of telehealth could also be a 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. 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare many issues, including mental health struggles, that had long been more hidden. And in recent years, a number of high-profile celebrities and athletes have been open about their own mental health struggles and about what they do for mental healthcare. All of this has 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 will translate into more, and sustained, philanthropic giving.

"And as increased attention is starting to put at the fore the seriousness with which people will take up mental health, I do have concern that as opposed to undertaking the system-oriented changes that are needed, we will revert to feel-good, superficial ways of addressing it," Ken Zimmerman said.

"Philanthropy's role is important because philanthropy can take on those things that may not happen overnight but are the most critical for the kind of transformational change that is needed." That might include breaking out of silos and investing in advocacy for policy and systems change.

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Ken Zimmerman, CEO, Fountain House

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 and updated March 2023. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com.