

“Working with Foundations” Podcast Transcript

Introduction:	00:04	Welcome to the Delta Center podcast. Launched in January 2018 with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Delta Center for Thriving Safety Net is a national initiative that provides technical assistance to state primary care associations and behavioral health state associations to advance value based payment and care.
Introduction:	00:22	The Delta Center is led by JSI Research & Training Institute, the Center for Care Innovations, and the McCall Center for Healthcare Innovation at Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute, and also brings together the National Association for Community Health Centers and the National Council for Behavioral Health.
Introduction:	00:40	During this episode, Jason Patnosh from the National Association of Community Health Centers and Mohini Venkatesh from the National Council for Behavioral Health will be speaking with Andrea Ducas, a Senior Program Officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation about strategies for nonprofits to use in working with foundations.
Mohini Venkatesh:	00:59	Well, Andrea, let's go ahead and dive right in here. Let's start at the beginning. So when a nonprofit is researching and getting to know a foundation, what would you say are the key things that they should really be looking for?
Andrea Ducas:	01:14	Yeah. So that's a great question. And something to keep in mind is that every foundation is pretty unique. There's a wide range of different types of funders out there, they range from family foundations to operational foundations that raise money and make grants, to big national entities like ours at Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
Andrea Ducas:	01:38	So my recommendation for any organization that's thinking about soliciting foundation funding, would be obviously first and foremost to check for fit with mission. So you'll want to spend some time on the foundation's website, pick up the phone and make some calls if necessary and just get a sense of, does the work that that foundation supports, does that seem to be consistent with what your organization is doing or what your needs might be?
Andrea Ducas:	02:06	Sometimes it's easy to find information about this on a website. Sometimes it's a little harder, especially for smaller foundations, in which case, probably one of the best things to do is take a

look at their filings. So every foundation in this country has to fill out a tax filing called the 990 PF. Sometimes you see it on their website, sometimes you can go to a place like GuideStar or Foundation Center online and you can look those up. And for a lot of the foundations, it will list the grants that they've made, you could do some research on those organizations and that can give you a sense of their mission as well.

Andrea Ducas: [02:40](#) So I would take a look at fit with mission. I do a quick skim to try and understand what their grant making policies are. So there are some foundations like ours that don't normally accept what we call unsolicited proposals, so like cold asks. But there are other foundations that do and they just sort of review anything that comes across their desk and consider for funding. Sometimes foundations will put out competitive funding opportunities. Sometimes it's the same competition once a year and you can see what they put out in years prior and who is funded. Sometimes it's different and topical, that tends to be true for Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for example.

Andrea Ducas: [03:25](#) So I would just take a look, try to get a sense of what is this organization, how does it appear to tick and function? Does it seem like our missions might be aligned? And then what might my opportunities for pursuing funding be? There's a lot more to consider, but at first blush that would be my recommendation.

Jason Patnosh: [03:44](#) Thanks Andrea. I want to take this a little bit deeper and a little more of the current news environment that we're in, this day and age of the Sackler family who was behind Purdue Pharmaceuticals or even Jeffrey Epstein, how should nonprofits assess when a foundation or donor aligns with their organization's values? How can they predict and even look ahead to problems that might come down the line from a donation or a partnership?

Andrea Ducas: [04:10](#) That's another really great question. Again, I think doing some early due diligence is a really great way to try and get ahead of that. So again, this is going to vary based on the organization, but many foundations on their website list their trustees and list their staff. Like ours for example has bios of all of our trustees and our staff. You could take a look at those, peruse them, see who is helping to make decisions for the organization. You get a feel of industry or sector they come from. If the foundation doesn't have a website, directors are listed on that 990 PF, so you can take a look at them, you could do some quick Googling.

Andrea Ducas: [04:55](#) You could also do some research into where foundations made their money, where did the money come from? If they are

foundations that fundraise, then you'll also be able to take a look at their donor list either on their website or again through their filings. But that's one thing you could do. I understand definitely that that's something that's become more and more in the public eye, recent or to the top of the public conscious recently. But those would be some initial recommendations.

Mohini Venkatesh: [05:34](#)

And then moving past that stage of researching and getting to know a foundation, when a nonprofit starts thinking about building a new relationship with the foundation they don't know yet at all, do you have any particular suggestions for how to get that rolling?

Andrea Ducas: [05:52](#)

Yeah. So something that's sort of interesting, before RWJF, I worked at a client services nonprofit and did almost all of their development and proposal writing. And one of the things that I did, and I think it's very common still in my role was we knew what we wanted and we knew what we needed and we would just sort of look for any place that might be able to provide that level of support, and that's what we would come to them with. Like, "Here's our issue, here's our opportunity. Wouldn't it be great if we had your support?" And that was true when it came to submitting a proposal that was unsolicited if there was a call for proposals, I might look at that and say, "This really isn't about what we do but I think I could squish it and shape it so it aligns with this." And that's incredibly transparent to funders.

Andrea Ducas: [06:50](#)

Now, sitting on the other side of that table and also just I think feels very transactional. And so much of philanthropy is still very relational. At the end of the day, the people working for these organizations they're all humans, right? And we all appreciate relationship development. Often the people working at foundations are not an expert in what you're doing as you are. So something that really helps, and something that I love as a funder, is working with organizations who sort of approach their introduction with me or will approach my introduction with them as one that's first and foremost about relationship building, where initially you have conversations, you help people understand what it is you do. You ask or they would ask me, "What is it RWJ does? What is it that RWJ cares about? And we have those conversations sort of in an ongoing way.

Andrea Ducas: [07:51](#)

So that tends to work better than from the get go starting with an ask because usually as a program staff person, I might lack the context for that ask. It might not make sense given where our organization is, but perhaps it makes sense in the future. So I would suggest going about making initial contact and even in a little bit after that initial contact, really thinking about the

interactions as relationship building and having an opportunity to share your story and learn from the foundation about their story and where they're coming, from as opposed to pursuing something that feels a little bit more transactional from the get go.

Mohini Venkatesh: [08:38](#) Well you've already begun to allude to this a little bit, but I'm also just wondering, are there particular don'ts that come to mind for you in building a relationship with the foundation?

Andrea Ducas: [08:51](#) Let's see. Other don'ts. Definitely the starting with an ask. I think another don't, another real clear don't is, and I started alluding to this earlier is, what we as funders are constantly trying to avoid is working with an organization that has to sort of twist itself into a pretzel to fit with one of our funding opportunities. So as different nonprofits, as the kinds of organizations, as the folks listening to this, as the kinds of organizations you are, you know what you're doing, you know why you're doing what you're doing and you know where you want to go.

Andrea Ducas: [09:43](#) The most compelling thing possible is to have a very clear line of sight about that and a really clear sense of why, and a good solid rationale for that why. It comes across as really authentic. It's usually a real opportunity, like I said, for foundations to learn. And the worst thing in the world to us would be to say, "This organization that's doing such great things really felt the need to make this unnatural pivot to try and fit this particular funding opportunity," which isn't necessarily good for the organization, nor is it necessarily good for what the foundation is trying to do. So that would be another don't. It's like don't try to make your organization into something it isn't just for the purposes of a particular grant funding opportunity.

Jason Patnosh: [10:34](#) So Andrea, another question. In health care, much of the longterm work needed to improve access and quality while finding cost savings at the same time will take legislative and regulatory change, both at the state and federal levels. How can nonprofits work with their foundation funding partners to advance some of this work, to make the true longterm sustainable changes that are needed?

Andrea Ducas: [10:58](#) Something that's been very interesting for me working in a philanthropy is I think that there are some misconceptions around what philanthropy can and can't do and how that translates into how we work with our partners. So as a foundation, we actually have much more strict limits on how our dollars can be spent than organizations - like your members

- have the flexibility to do so. But because of that, we have a number of different ways that we can partner with grantees that allows them to have more budget flexibility than a grant could otherwise provide.

Andrea Ducas: [11:43](#) So as an example, general operating grants to an organization that have other funders, provide a lot more flexibility for organizations to do their work, because we're not funding a specific set of activities. We also have a type of grant that we can make that is sort of in between a program grant and an operating grant, that allows for more flexibility in terms of how work is done on the ground, so long as there are other funders supporting that particular project or program.

Andrea Ducas: [12:20](#) So I say that because we can actually support a fair amount of policy advocacy work and our dollars can sometimes also be used for activities that go a little bit further, so long as we're not the sole funder on a project and so long as it's not an RWJ program, again through general operating grants or in other ways.

Andrea Ducas: [12:49](#) This is the benefit of whenever you have a program that's more focused on advocacy or policy change, that it's really, really helpful when other funders are involved like state or local funders because it just allows for more flexibility. I also make that point because I would say state and local funders also tend to have a pretty sophisticated understanding of the state legislative landscape or state regulatory landscape in their area and have a good sense of sort of which levers to pull on and how to do that. And I think they just bring a degree of sophistication, certainly at that level that might be lacking for a national funder.

Andrea Ducas: [13:32](#) But there's a lot of work that we can support that isn't lobbying, of course. Policymaker education, advocacy, different briefs, legal and technical support. And then with respect to what the organizations we support can actually do, we can definitely support an organization that has the ability to lobby, we just can't fund it directly or we can't fund it at all, I should say.

Mohini Venkatesh: [14:04](#) Well Andrea, thank you so much for sharing your feedback and experiences and for supporting the work of the Delta Center.

Andrea Ducas: [14:13](#) Oh, absolutely.

Jason Patnosh: [14:15](#) Thank you.

Wrap Up:

[14:18](#)

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