

Foundations Rethink Research Dollars as Funding Is Pulled

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Debbie Koenig

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This spring the notices came without warning: Federal funding for thousands of approved research projects, many already under way, had been delayed or canceled. Among those left in the lurch were grant recipients seeking to do things like reduce vaccine hesitancy, improve access to healthcare for minority populations, or [treat an aggressive form of brain cancer](#).

All told, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation withdrew or placed on hold almost \$4 billion in funding. And that money may be gone for the foreseeable future because the [White House's proposed budget](#) for the next fiscal year slashes support for those agencies themselves by 40% and 56%, respectively.

“So much has been cut by the wrecking-ball, bludgeoning approach that went on at NIH,” said Alonzo Plough, PhD, chief science officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), Princeton, New Jersey. “They’re not just cutting bureaucrats and funding for projects that are not efficient. These are the pipelines that have put American bioscience at the forefront of the world, provided treatments that saved your family members’ lives.”

Foundations are trying to meet the moment, doling out emergency support to the extent they can. RWJF, for its part, has several such initiatives, including grants for information gathering on climate change and health, tracking AIDS/[HIV](#), and science-based assessments of childhood

vaccines. Still, foundations can't replace the government.

"The billions and billions that have been cut are orders of magnitude bigger than anything philanthropy can patch," Plough said. "We can keep certain things on life support, but life support is not a good thing to be on."

Private-Public Partnerships Drive Discovery

It won't surprise you to hear that medical and health research requires a lot of money — [\\$245.1 billion in 2020 alone](#). Industry investment accounts for more than half of that, but corporations generally don't step up until a concept is pretty far along, when they're confident it will pay off. Most early-stage research doesn't qualify.

"Basic, fundamental research may not have an obvious application. Some of it may never lead to one," said Cynthia Friend, PhD, chief executive officer of the Kavli Foundation, Los Angeles, which helps fund early research. "When those applications do come forth, the time scale is on average 20 years to end up at something useful."

Support for the long haul, beginning at a stage when researchers may not know the usefulness of their findings, is where the federal government has made a big difference. It normally supplies 25.1% of all medical and health research funding. In comparison, foundations, associations, and societies provide just 1.2%.

"All of science philanthropy together, if you add it up, doesn't come close to the amount of support in the federal budget," Friend said.

The government also plays a large role in building and maintaining complex machinery and large-scale facilities where significant discoveries may be made. Case in point: the synchrotron, a sophisticated x-ray machine used, for example, with CRISPR gene editing technology. The one at Brookhaven National Laboratory [costs nearly \\$1 billion](#).

"An individual could never make these things or have them," Friend said. "But individuals can go use them because they've been built for the overall community."

There's a compelling upside to such spending: Economists estimate that for every dollar invested in research, the US gets \$5-\$20 [in benefits](#).

Foundations Seek New Strategies

Although they can't match the government's financial clout, philanthropic organizations are looking for ways to address the extraordinary, nationwide funding gap.

When the Council on Foundations [surveyed its members](#) in March, 80% of respondents said they were making or considering at least one change to their approach. Many indicated that they were open to ideas like collaborating with other funders, reexamining priorities to address the gaps, and increasing their flexibility in grant-making.

“Philanthropies that care about a particular area have an opportunity,” said Shaady Salehi, co-executive director of the [Trust-Based Philanthropy Project](#). “What’s the range of things they fund as an institution — and what is being defunded? They can step in and support the necessary research.”

While many science-focused foundations have yet to comment on how they’re dealing with the new reality, some have gone public:

- The Kavli Foundation is offering bridge funding to early-career scientists who’ve lost federal support, Friend said. Its relatively small, individual grants are good for up to 2 years.
- The Spencer Foundation — along with the Kapor Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation — has also made bridge funding available: [\\$25,000 grants](#) to “address immediate needs following grant cancellations.”
- The Prebys Foundation has designated [\\$7 million in emergency support](#) for biomedical research in San Diego.
- The American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) has created new AACR Trailblazer Cancer Research Grants: [\\$15 million](#) to support early-stage and mid-career researchers.
- The [Breast Cancer](#) Research Foundation has announced [new grants](#) for early-career investigators facing delays or disruptions, emergency funding for affected projects, and nine new research grants.

Funders Emphasize Coordinated Efforts

Even before the current crisis, the Kavli Foundation had invited fellow funders to preliminary discussions. That conversation will continue as the foundation works with scientists to shape the projects that receive its support.

“The idea is that if you have more resources to focus in a particular area that you think is important, that will accelerate progress,” Friend said. “And it will also accelerate if something doesn’t work out. We have to be prepared for things not working.”

Other foundations are also looking for fresh ways to work together. More than 170 philanthropic organizations of all kinds have signed on to a [pledge](#) from the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. It calls for them to go beyond business as usual — to collaborate, to pool funds, and to be responsive to grantees in a coordinated way.

As Salehi sees it, this is essential. “I think the next level up is going to be a higher level of coordination among private funders, comparing notes on who they’re funding, who’s not funding, who’s being left behind,” she said. “Where are the gaps?”

Debbie Koenig is a health writer whose work has been published by WebMD, The New York Times, and The Washington Post.

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