



Mat-Su Health Foundation: A Grantmaker Story

**Beyond Equity Aspirations: How the Mat-Su Health
Foundation Aligned Process with Purpose**

Background

In 2020, the year that changed many of us in some way, the Mat-Su Health Foundation in Wasilla, Alaska faced its own dual reckoning. The Matanuska-Susitna Borough, the fastest-growing community in the state and a sprawling region as big as West Virginia, was wrestling with residents' profound isolation and strain from the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis ignited a nationwide movement for racial justice that reverberated some 3,100 miles away in Wasilla and neighboring communities. Locally, similar incidents of violence exposed deep inequities and intensified public demand for institutional accountability, transparency and change.

There was a lot of work for community advocates and organizers to do, but also an opportunity to learn a better way to do it.



A long history and deep connections in the community

The Mat-Su Health Foundation has served as a trusted partner in championing health equity and has supported its community in a variety of iterations over the past seven decades.

The foundation has its roots in the Valley Hospital, a community hospital founded in 1948. The hospital then merged to become the Mat-Su Regional Medical Center in 2003.

In 2005, the Mat-Su Health Foundation (MSHF) was founded to return revenue back into the community through grants to support health and wellness and to provide scholarships for residents pursuing training in health and human services.

MSHF has been instrumental in addressing the unique needs of its vast and diverse borough. From funding critical behavioral health initiatives to supporting transportation improvements for aging adults, MSHF has fostered healthier, more resilient communities.

This success is grounded in the foundation's commitment to listening to its residents, empowering local organizations, and building strong community partnerships.

Nationally, the conversation about health equity gained urgency in 2020. That year, MSHF recognized that as a grantmaking organization, health equity required more than immediacy—it demanded systemic change, both in its internal systems and its relationship with stakeholders.



1948
Valley Hospital founded

2003
Mat-Su Regional Medical Center

2005
Mat-Su Health Foundation



Establishing a vision for change

In 2020, MSHF embarked on a bold transformation journey, implementing a deliberate approach guided by a central question: How can we better serve our community and model health equity in every aspect of our work?

The answer, in the form of a first step, was the evaluation and selection of a new grants management system that would serve as the operating backbone of the organization. The second step was introspection, community feedback, and an alignment of their systems and processes with models of equity.

In 2021, MSHF distributed internal surveys to better understand staff needs, particularly around diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). They also conducted an external survey of stakeholders and grantees to better understand their grantee experience, identify opportunities to reduce grantee burden, and align their values around equity with external facing systems.

The internal and external survey findings were revelatory. Results from the internal survey revealed that staff desired more clarity on equity goals and guidance on how to embed DEI principles into their day-to-day work. The external survey identified the need to reduce grantee burden related to grant applications and reporting as well as an opportunity to more clearly communicate to external stakeholders how the foundation was evaluating and awarding grants.

“We’ve always been committed to equity, but this process pushed us to embody it in new ways—for our staff, our grantees, and the community we serve.”

Victoria Flint

Mat-Su Health Foundation, Grants Manager

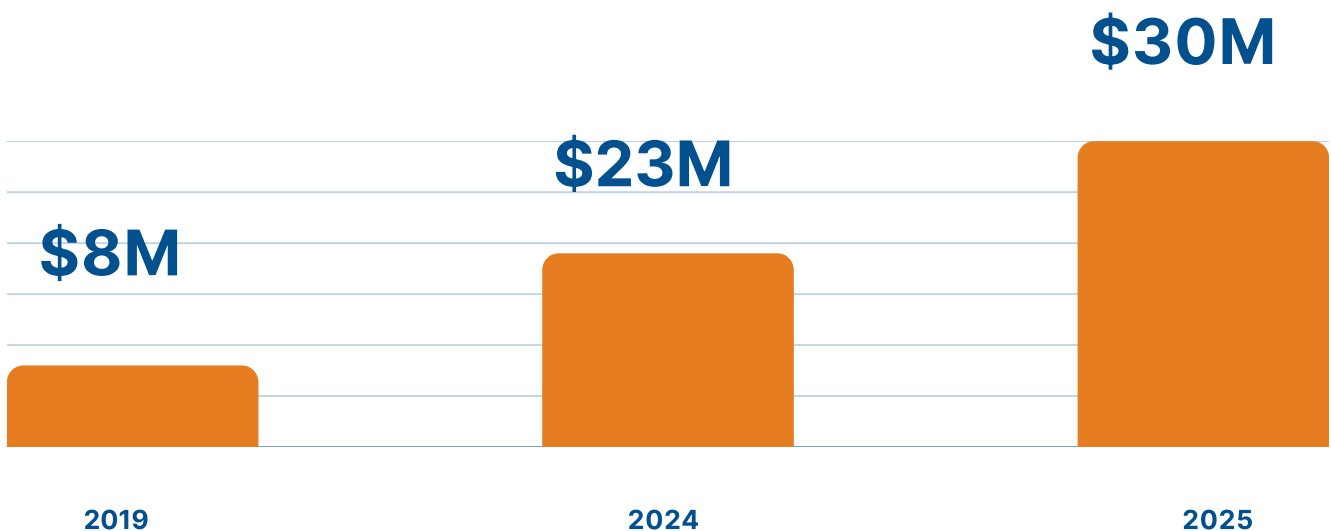
This focus on systems and introspection was also prompted by a scaling up of grantmaking efforts throughout the borough. In 2019, MSHF awarded just over \$8 million in grants and scholarships.

That number would grow to over \$23 million in 2024, with MSHF planning to surpass \$30 million in grants and scholarships in 2025. This rapid growth was kickstarted in 2020 by the incredible nonprofits in the community that stepped up to meet the needs of residents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To accommodate this growth MSHF expanded their grants department, growing from a single Grants Manager in 2022, to a team of three.



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Identifying priority areas

Spanning several years, MSHF’s journey included three key areas for improvement. These priorities would align their technology, systems, and process with their larger goals and aspirations around health equity.

Replacing their cumbersome Grant Management System (GMS):

The system that once worked well enough had started to create inefficiencies that drained staff time and morale. In the spirit of making it work, team members configured their own ways to manually bypass the outdated grant management system that started as a paper application and had only been minimally updated since 2008 (to be fair, by the lone staff member whose job it was to manage the process). The system crashed frequently, lacked responsive customer support and had a cumbersome design. Staff had found themselves doing administrative work outside the system and then manually transferring it in. For staff, the technological shortfall was a distraction from higher-impact, higher-value strategic work.

Balancing data needs & reducing grantee burden

Externally, the foundation’s processes around data collection had introduced unnecessary burden on grantees. In the external survey, grantees had expressed being overwhelmed by the application process. One applicant noted that the complexity of the application had deterred smaller organizations like hers from seeking funding.

Building organizational capacity around equity and DEI

The internal survey surfaced a desire among staff for greater clarity and a more formalized commitment to DEI. It also surfaced the need for greater internal capacity and subject matter expertise in the area of learning and evaluation. Specifically around balancing the needs of grantees, the philanthropic team, and the board.



“We realized that some of our application questions, particularly about race, ethnicity, and geographic service areas, were overwhelming and led to guesswork from grantees. We don’t want that— that’s not useful data to us.”

Dani Reed

Mat-Su Health Foundation, Director of Learning & Evaluation

Priority Areas

Aligning technology, systems, and processes with goals for health equity.



Replacing their cumbersome GMS



Balancing data needs and reducing grantee burden



Building organizational capacity around equity and DEI

A purposeful approach to change management

With clear areas for improvement identified, MSHF set out to ensure that their processes and systems were aligned with their greater goals around health equity. They were laser focused on streamlining systems while balancing the needs of grantees, the larger community, and their teams across the organization.

MSHF understood that this journey was essentially change management. Grants Manager, Victoria Flint, approached change through the lens of industrial-organizational psychology and leveraged her experience in system selection, implementation, and training. She focused on coaching and leadership, making sure that staff had the tools and training necessary to successfully navigate technical and systems changes.

In 2022, Raegan Nicholson joined MSHF as a Grants Management Associate and helped support this systematic approach to change. For Raegan, one of the most important dimensions of change management is addressing loss — loss of familiar processes, job roles, or sense of security. She encouraged a culture mindful of psychological safety as MSHF established change across the organization.



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Raegan Nicholson

Mat-Su Health Foundation, Grants Management Associate

Rolling out a new Grant Management System (GMS)

Recognizing the need for a new “operating system” for the foundation, MSHF embarked on a GMS evaluation. They wanted a technology that would streamline workflows, integrate coding and data collection, and enable dynamic reporting — empowering staff to focus on strategic community engagement rather than navigating technical hurdles. After evaluating various options, the foundation selected Foundant’s Grant Management Solution, a platform purpose-built for modern grantmaking. The transition marked a turning point in the organization’s operations.

The new platform simplified workflows and made it easy for staff to create tools, use conditional logic and copy templates, dramatically reducing the time spent on repetitive administrative tasks. Foundant also fostered collaborative teamwork by allowing staff in programs, grants, operations, and leadership to work in harmony, bridging silos that had previously hampered collaboration.

The Customer Relationship Management tool (CRM) allowed the philanthropic team to record all interactions with prospective and existing grantees and provided a single source of truth for relationship management. This allowed staff to focus on building deeper, long-term relationships with stakeholders throughout the borough.

“The GMS is really easy to use to create applications, to copy applications, to ask the right questions, to do the conditional logic and formatting that took us a long time in our old system.”

Victoria Flint

Mat-Su Health Foundation, Grants Manager

Reducing grantee burden while maintaining data integrity

The MSHF team reimagined its grant application process by prioritizing simplicity and transparency. That meant eliminating or reframing questions that were confusing, unnecessary, or generally difficult to answer. The grantmaking team asked themselves not only what information they needed but why they needed it. They also reevaluated when in the process it was important to collect certain data points, understanding that all data isn't needed during a single touchpoint and that data could be collected across the application, progress report, and final report phases.

The team leveraged Foundant's Grantee Portal as a single point of entry for grantees. They also identified alternative ways to collect essential data and integrated Demographics via Candid with Foundant. This meant they could access data directly from Candid, allowing grantees to simply share their demographic information once. MSHF is also starting to lead by example and is making a commitment to transparency, having set-up their own profile on Demographics via Candid. Once fully implemented, this will ensure that their demographic data is publicly available.

By revising their application and rolling out the grantee portal, MSHF aligned their processes with their larger goals around transparency and equity. Grantees noticed, and sent unsolicited feedback applauding the new application and congratulating the foundation for the improved process.



Simplicity and Transparency

- Eliminating or reframing questions that are confusing, unnecessary, or generally difficult to answer
- Identifying alternative ways to collect essential data
- Reevaluating when in the grant process it is important to collect certain data points.

Adding capacity around learning, evaluation

MSHF rolled out a formal Leadership Team to ensure that equity values are embedded across the organization. The team has a formal charter and is composed of volunteers that represent every department in the foundation. They meet once a month, while smaller sub-groups meet to work through various initiatives. The team's goal is to ensure that equity is embedded in each department's work and that the momentum around equity is maintained. The team also provides a venue to explore questions and engage in a regular equity dialogue.

In their external surveys, MSHF learned that grantees were unclear on how the foundation was making funding decisions. This forced some introspection as MSHF turned the question on themselves. Working together, program and grants management teams reviewed and ultimately rewrote their grant guidelines, eliminating vague language and making the guidelines clearer and more concise. The foundation also made a commitment to be more transparent with their guidelines and communicate funding decision criteria directly with potential and existing grantees.

A Leadership Team was created to ensure that EQUITY IS EMBEDDED IN EACH DEPARTMENT and that the momentum around equity is maintained.

Recognizing the need for added staff capacity and expertise around evaluation and learning, MSHF expanded its team, bringing on Dani Reed as their Director of Evaluation and Learning. Dani's background in data analysis and survey design became instrumental in driving change as she served as a bridge between the grantees, the philanthropic team, and the board, ensuring that all stakeholders' needs were being met.

Dani also worked in tandem with the philanthropic team to frame grant application questions through an equity lens and limit the application to only those questions that are needed to make an immediate funding decision. This resulted in a grantee experience that was more intentional, reducing friction, and limiting frustration and pushback. Dani also served as a bridge between the philanthropic team and leadership, ensuring that while the grant applications got leaner, leadership got the reporting and impact data that they needed.

Results

An alignment of principles and process.



- 1. Building efficient systems and empowering staff to focus on strategic goals.**



- 2. Reducing grantee burden while maintaining disciplined reporting.**



- 3. Operationalizing equity and embedding it into every department's work.**



A continued commitment

The impact of these changes has been profound. Internally, MSHF staff have reported a renewed sense of purpose and efficiency, with less time spent troubleshooting technology and more time devoted to strategic initiatives. By streamlining workflows and fostering cross-team collaboration, the foundation has reinforced a culture where innovation can thrive. Staff across the foundation also feel encouraged to approach their work through an equity lens.

Externally, grantees have expressed greater satisfaction with the application process, noting its clarity and accessibility. By revising grant guidelines, simplifying applications, and integrating demographic tools, the foundation has strengthened relationships with grantees and reaffirmed its commitment to serving the community equitably.

There's so much more ahead. MSHF is focused on using these new systems and processes to measure long-term impact. This includes conducting follow-up surveys to reassess grantee satisfaction, and continuing to revisit the application and reporting phases to ensure continuous improvement. As a team, MSHF's commitment to listening, learning and adapting underscores the foundation's dedication to its community and the ripple effect of actualized equity.

“Amidst all this change, we call ourselves a learning organization because we are constantly reflecting and evolving to better understand and support the nonprofits in our community.”

Raegan Nicholson

Mat-Su Health Foundation, Grant Management Associate

More than a Model for Health Equity

MSHF's transformation is a testament to the power of intentionality and collaboration. They've been doing work with a profound impact for decades. With that length of service in the community, and a scaling up of activity, inefficiencies in their processes had slowly emerged over the years. By aligning their systems and practices with their mission, the foundation moved beyond transactional grantmaking to building transformative partnerships with its grantees and larger community.



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To see how it can work for your foundation, schedule a demo with our team:
www.foundant.com/contact



At Foundant + SmartSimple + GivingData, our comprehensive software solutions empower mission-driven organizations to manage their data, workflows, and impact. From grant management and foundation management to process automation and data collaboration, our combined expertise supports a diverse range of organizations—from private and family foundations to community foundations and charitable entities to corporations and governments.