

# Inside Philanthropy

## How the Zellerbach Family Foundation Transformed Its Giving to Better Support Grantees

Mike Scutari | May 14, 2025



ZFF STAFF WITH JOURNEY TO JUSTICE PARTICIPANTS IN NEW ZEALAND. CREDIT: ZELLERBACH FAMILY FOUNDATION

Before November's election, IP would periodically track funders' post-pandemic inability — or unwillingness — [to be more flexible](#) in their grantmaking, such as by providing sustained general operating support.

Funders' inaction on this specific point [was problematic](#) before the Trump administration [took a chainsaw](#) to the nonprofit sector. Now, I suspect some nonprofit leaders' long-simmering frustration has turned to anger. After all, if grantmakers went all-in on increased unrestricted support these past few years, perhaps organizations that used the funding to [set up endowments](#) or strengthen their reserve funds would be better positioned to withstand the abrupt [cancellation of federal dollars](#).

The [Zellerbach Family Foundation](#) (ZFF) provides an instructive counterweight to some of the field's more intransigent funders. The San Francisco-based grantmaker increased the percentage of its grants earmarked as "general operating support" from 4% in 2014 to 86% in 2024, replaced a traditional outcomes-based evaluation model with a more collaborative and qualitative approach it calls the "Learning Agenda," and eliminated formal reports for its Community Arts grantees.

"What stands out for me is that the updates we've made to all of our grantmaking and partnerships over time weren't part of a 'trust-based' branding or any other trend in the sector," said ZFF President and Executive Director Allison L. Magee. "They were made as a result of authentic curiosity and a practical understanding of what we actually need and don't need to achieve our goals in partnership with the community."

Here's a quick look at ZFF, which [serves organizations](#) in San Francisco, Alameda, and Contra Costa counties across its two investment areas — Safety and Belonging, and Arts and Culture.

## A brief history of the Zellerbach Family Foundation

Born in Bavaria in 1832, Anthony Zellerbach emigrated to America in 1846 and made his way to San Francisco, where, with his son Jacob, he founded the [Zellerbach Paper Company](#). Another son, Isadore, was married to prominent Bay Area arts philanthropist Jennie Zellerbach.

Jennie founded what was the Zellerbach Family Fund in 1956 with an initial contribution of \$54,600. In 1965, she passed away and left most of her estate, valued at approximately \$4 million, to ZFF, making it one of the Bay Area's largest grantmakers. Thomas Zellerbach, who currently serves as chair of the board, is Isadore's great-grandson.

As of November 2024, the foundation has awarded 13,082 grants [totalling \\$158 million](#) to 2,645 grant partners.

## A close look at the Zellerbach Family Foundation's strategic evolution

Over the past several years, the foundation has “re-interrogated our systems and processes to ensure they are designed around the needs of our grantees, rather than the convenience of foundation staff,” Magee said. These efforts led foundation stakeholders to adopt [trust-based practices](#) across multiple operational areas.

After Magee started at ZFF in 2014, she instituted what she called a “traditional” outcomes-based evaluation model with “short-, mid- and long-term goals.” As readers know, this is a standard practice across philanthropy — foundations [set performance metrics](#), and organizations attempt to meet them. However, after a few years, Magee and her team recognized that the model was flawed, she said.

“Given our very long-game approach to the systems work and the broad nature of our portfolio, it was impossible to fit an almost exclusively quantitative method of tracking very nuanced and complex work that involves many players and inputs,” Magee said. “It also didn’t make sense to ask our many small, grassroots partners to take the time and effort to complete these reports for our purposes, especially without training or augmenting their organizational capacity to do so.”

As a result, ZFF replaced its outcomes-based evaluation model with the “Learning Agenda,” which includes questions aimed at generating more responsive grantee partnerships and greater community impact. [Sample questions](#) include “How does the community ensure that an increase in funding for the arts leads to a more diverse arts and culture sector?” and “How are organizing and advocacy efforts focused on our priority areas best connected to other issues/needs?”

“Rather than a punitive tool,” Magee said, “the Learning Agenda is designed to allow us to learn alongside our partners, ensuring our work is current, responsive and impactful.”

In a similar vein, ZFF eliminated formal reports for Community Arts grantees and replaced them with optional updates about a particular event or production. “The reports didn’t add much, if any, value to assessing the success of a given performance or whether an organization would be funded again,” Magee said. All other ZFF grantees have the option of submitting written or oral reports. Last but not least, ZFF partnered with two other Bay Area funders — the [Fleishhacker](#) and [Kenneth Rainin](#) foundations — to create a common and time-saving application for grants that support performing arts organizations. You can read more about that effort [here](#).

## Digging into the foundation's most recent 990

According to the foundation's [Form 990](#) for the fiscal year ending December 2023, it had \$158 million in end-of-year assets and received \$385,000 in contributions from three Bay Area funders — the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#) (\$180,000) and the [San Francisco Foundation](#) (\$155,000), both of which support ZFF's Community Arts Program, and the [Dean and Margaret Lesher Foundation](#) (\$50,000). Add it all up, and all of the \$1.1 million in contributions ZFF received from 2019 to 2023 came from external funders.

ZFF disbursed 239 grants totalling \$6.1 million in 2023. The five largest flowed to Bay Area organizations: the [Immigration Institute of the Bay Area](#) (\$175,000), [Legal Services for Prisoners with Children](#) (\$100,000), [Life Learning Academy](#) (\$100,000), [New Venture Fund](#) (\$100,000) and [Youth Law Center](#) (\$100,000). Each gift was classified as general operating support, except the New Venture Fund gift, which was earmarked to “support a public/private coalition-building effort.”

## An overview of key Zellerbach Family Foundation initiatives

Magee cited a few projects that exemplify the foundation's work across its two issue areas.

In Safety and Belonging, ZFF recently launched [Journey to Justice](#), a six-month learning cohort of youth justice system thought leaders working across sectors that aims to reimagine youth justice systems in the Bay Area.

The program's highlight was a week-long visit to New Zealand, which embeds Māori cultural values into its youth justice system. The country's “community-oriented and culturally responsive approach works to divert youth from detention, leaning heavily on restorative principles through every contact youth have with the legal system,” Magee said. “Through this shared experience, we hope to strengthen relationships among community and county stakeholders — leaders within the [youth justice](#) system, advocates and community service providers — in Alameda and San Francisco counties, create the space for imagination and exploration, and, ultimately, a shared commitment to action among participants.”

The New Zealand trip was supported by the San Francisco Foundation, the [California Wellness Foundation](#), the [Akonadi Foundation](#) and the [California Funders for Boys and Men of Color](#).

In acknowledgment of the rising threats posed to [immigrant communities](#), ZFF, which has funded immigrant-serving organizations in the Bay Area for over 50 years, is increasing its support for immigration legal services as part of its Safety and Belonging program. This includes contributions to multiple pooled funds such as the [Alameda County Immigrant Legal Education Partnership](#), as well as state-wide efforts to defend immigrant communities across the Bay Area.

In the Arts and Culture priority area, ZFF is deepening its investments in Contra Costa County, especially in the arts sector, which is woefully underfunded. Its efforts are guided by a recent, first-of-its-kind report ZFF commissioned in partnership with the Dean and Margaret Leshner Foundation. [The report](#), titled “Creative Pulse: A Baseline Study of Contra Costa County’s Arts and Culture Sector,” includes recommendations about how to holistically support the sector, preserve cultural institutions and infrastructure, and invest in historically marginalized communities and artists. (In an important sidebar, ZFF awards Community Arts grants through an [open application process](#).)

It’s been a little over two years since ZFF did away with an outcomes-based evaluation model in favor of its “Learning Agenda,” and Magee’s takeaways comport with what we’re seeing here at IP, such as the philanthrosphere’s halting attempts to embrace [trust-based practices](#). “Since there are so few funders who take this approach,” she said, “it’s difficult to find a community with which to exchange ideas.”

On the other hand, grantees have come to appreciate ZFF’s efforts to make its grantmaking more flexible, streamlined and collaborative. “I often tell my board that our program officers are the first to know when there is a problem with an organization that we fund,” Magee said. “Not from a progress report, but from the conversations they’re having with grantees and other partners in the field.”