

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY



Letters to the Editor

Correspondence from Chronicle readers.

Readers Respond to Gates Wind-Down With Calls for Change

MAY 19, 2025

Small Foundations Should Follow Gates's Lead

To the Editor:

The Gates Foundation's decision to spend down its assets by the end of 2045 is huge news for philanthropy, especially as massive cuts to USAID and other federal agencies disrupt health and humanitarian aid around the globe. ("[The Gates Foundation, the World's Biggest Philanthropy, Announces Plans to Shutter in 2045](#)" May 8.) I hope this move will inspire other big foundations to rethink how they use their resources. But it should also shake up small philanthropy, particularly foundations that serve rural areas, such as the one I lead in Alabama, the [Black Belt Community Foundation](#).

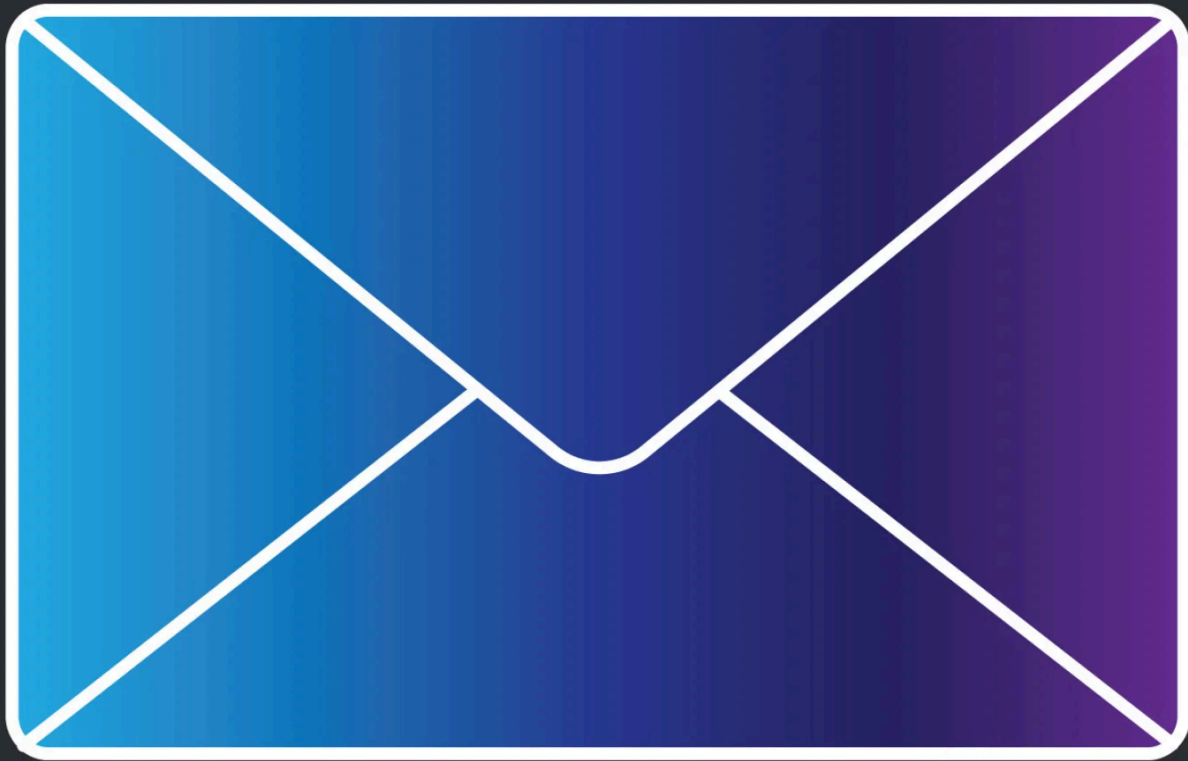


ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH HAUGH; ISTOCK

Rural areas in the South and throughout the country are facing a humanitarian crisis. Many rural hospitals, already under-resourced, [will likely close](#) without support. Head Start, which provides educational and social services for low-income children and their working parents, is [under threat](#).

The government can't be excused for generations of underinvestment in the rural South — or for the dangerous funding cuts [coming our way](#). But small philanthropy shares some blame and should have adopted aggressive approaches long ago given the area's outsized challenges.

Now we have no choice.

As the people we serve face unprecedented threats, we must do everything possible to help. That should involve acknowledging that traditional funding and operating strategies aren't enough and thinking differently about both our endowments and role in our communities.

That was the approach taken by the [Black Belt Community Foundation](#) when it started 20 years ago. Serving 12 rural and mostly poor counties in Alabama, the founders weren't comfortable building a large endowment in an area with so much need. Today, our endowment totals just \$1.9 million, and each year we make discretionary grants that exceed that value. In our 20-year history, we've granted nearly \$100 million, focusing not on protecting a pot of gold, but on raising and giving away funds to advance community priorities and our mission.

This mindset guided us when we took over the region's Head Start program eight years ago when a lack of funding and resources threatened its survival. Leaders in our community said they wanted us to manage the program, which serves 307 children across the region, because they didn't trust an outside organization to get the job done. Most community foundations would have said this went beyond their mission and expertise. While that's probably true, we saw greater risk in dismissing the people we serve. To live up to our ideals as a community foundation, we knew we had to meet their most pressing needs.

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Today, the Head Start program provides care and education for the region's children and families, but as one of the many critical programs that could be [defunded](#) by

Congress, its future is again uncertain.

As rural areas across the U.S. face unfamiliar and urgent needs, more small foundations should consider the course we've chosen. That means not only tapping into endowments but deploying every available resource to address current challenges. In the Black Belt of Alabama, we're doing this by raising our voices to educate elected officials about what's at stake and leaning more heavily into trust-based philanthropy practices that allow us to both listen and act on the issues that matter to our community.

Such actions can feel risky when resources are limited and local needs are great. But amid recent threats, small philanthropy must move outside its comfort zone. If lawmakers fail to protect the most marginalized, we must ensure that the children, working poor, disabled, and elderly people we serve aren't plunged further into crisis.

The Gates Foundation's decision to put all its assets to work proves it recognizes this reality. Small philanthropy has long punched above its weight. Now, it should follow Gates's lead and act big.

Felecia Lucky

CEO and President

Black Belt Community Foundation

More of the Same?

To the Editor:

I'm a queer, Black, disabled Latina who has spent two decades in fundraising, philanthropy, and social justice advocacy. I've worked shoulder to shoulder with the people most affected by systemic failure. That's why I appreciate the [Gates Foundation](#) for recognizing what marginalized people have known for years: Slow-

dripping dollars distributed through incremental grant cycles won't eradicate inequity.

The Gates Foundation's plan to spend the rest of its \$200 billion by 2045 is both historic and overdue. Many of us working in grassroots organizing have long pushed for precisely this — bold action over perpetual preservation.

But the decision raises an important question: Will the next two decades of funding be more of the same, or will the Gates Foundation invest in strategies, people, and organizations that transform unfair systems and promote equity?

If Gates is truly committed to building just societies around the world, it should match every dollar spent on direct services with a dollar invested in movement and civic infrastructure and long-term narrative change.

This question is crucial given that the foundation's adherence to strategic giving has limited its scope and effectiveness. Gates has poured critical dollars into addressing global health crises such as malaria and tuberculosis but has not invested enough in changing the conditions that allow those diseases to persist, namely poverty, infrastructure collapse, and political instability.

If Gates is truly committed to building just societies around the world, it should match every dollar spent on direct services with a dollar invested in movement and civic infrastructure and long-term narrative change.

It's not just a matter of equity. Democracy is at stake, too, both in the United States and globally. Without significant investment in strengthening civil society, reforming

domestic policy, shifting cultural norms, and reinventing political systems, the foundation will continue patching holes in a sinking ship.

Dedicating even a fraction of its spend-down to bolstering democratic institutions and movement-led organizing could help fix broken housing, education, and health-care systems, thereby strengthening social safety nets. This would free up Gates to invest funds more strategically, rather than as a stopgap.

In its final chapter, Gates has a rare chance to reimagine what a thoughtful exit looks like. The foundation can demonstrate what it means to realign resources with the organization's values to ensure everyone can live a healthy, productive life. This is particularly important at a time when many other foundations implement plans to sunset and reallocate resources even as the authoritarian right gains more power.

For the Gates Foundation, this might involve giving funds directly to organizers and local leaders; ending internal processes that hinder equity, including burdensome applications and restrictive eligibility criteria; and releasing resources not just efficiently, but ethically and creatively. In doing so, the Gates Foundation can shift not just numbers, but sector-wide norms.

My hope is that this sunset becomes a sunrise. The Gates Foundation's next two decades of grant making can create far greater change than its first 25 years and inspire bolder action across all of philanthropy.

Sadé Dozan

Vice President of Advancement, Borealis Philanthropy

Founder, Melanate

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