

WCGN Roundtable: Leveling the Playing Field: Fairness in Grantmaking 10/16/25

Panelists:

Peggy Schapiro, Baltimore Women's Giving Circle, Baltimore, MD (Primary Presenter, *original prepared notes inserted in italics below*,) [margaretschapiro@gmail.com]

Linette Liebling, The Philanthropy Connection, Boston, MA (Facilitator)
[netgrace@aol.com]

Bronwyn Belling, Anne Arundel Women Giving Together, Annapolis, MD (Scribe)
[bbelling@aol.com]

A. Summary Highlights of each organization:

BWGC: 15 years old, 475+ members, \$1,100/member per year, fund of Baltimore Community Foundation. Grants awarded: No minimum to \$20,000; Two pilot 2-Year grants for \$50,000 each; some smaller (\$3,000 grant last year), \$4 million raised and awarded to date; Focus: Help women and families achieve self-sufficiency

AAWGT: 10 years old, 205 members, fund of Comm. Foundation of Anne Arundel County; \$550/member per year; 9 grant cycles to date, approx. \$700K raised and awarded in total; grants range from \$5,000-15,000; Modeled after BWGC; Focus: Improving the quality of life for women and families in our county in areas of health and welfare, education and prevention of and treatment for domestic violence and abuse

The Philanthropy Connection (TPC): 3 years old, 245 members, \$1,100/member per year, third grant cycle underway; Grantmaking also modeled after BWGC; serves low resourced individuals.

B. Focus on Three Questions re: Fairness in Grantmaking

1. ***BWGC/Schapiro: With an average of 100 grant applications from non-profits of varying sizes, what steps does the BWGC take to ensure that each application is treated fairly?***

- *Host a **Grant Applicant Training**-step by step explanation of our application*
- *Put grant readers into **small teams** -7 to 8 members read 6 to 8 grant proposals.*
- *Training for grant readers on how to read grant proposals. **Grant Readers Worksheet** covers all aspects of evaluation a grant proposal.*
- *Encourage **Site Visits**, 59 last year. Helps organizations explain their program. Especially helpful to smaller organizations who may not have a professional grant writer*
- ***Conflict of Interest Policy**-Grants proposals are not assigned to grant readers who have a personal interest in an organization nor can they attend the site visit.*

- **No Member Can Advocate for or against a Grant Applicant.** *“Any member who volunteers or is on the board of a non-profit organization seeking a grant shall not seek to influence the grant selection process by speaking or writing to grant readers to advocate for or against a non-profit organization that has submitted a grant application.”*
- **Grant Applicants cannot speak at any Circle function during the grant vetting period**
- **Confidentiality is vital**
- **Using Foundant Technologies/Grant Life Cycle Manager software now for online applications and grant reading/reviewing (following AAWGT)**

Comments/Questions from audience?

- How to best narrow down large numbers of applicants?
 - Look at compelling needs through community interviews
 - Letter of Intent (LOI) also narrows process and is more fair for applicants
 - Not as much work required of applicants up front if they are not a serious contender
- Applicants may not reapply for 5 years for BWGC (AAWGT- 3 year limit)

Other Comments:

- BWGC seeks wide distribution through information sharing to nonprofit community as prospective applicants
- Seattle: Solicits proposal by invitation only

2. **BWGC/Schapiro: What steps does the BWGC take to ensure that with an average of 100 members reading grants that each of them will have a positive learning experience and treat all applications fairly?**

- *Train grant readers and put experienced readers on a team with a new grant reader*
- **Team Leaders are trained in Team Building-** consensus, mentoring participation, scheduling, communication, etc.
- **Site visits** – Encourages community involvement and membership loyalty. This is where the grant readers become invested in the success of a grant application.
- *Guidance and support are given to grant readers when they are putting a proposal forward for funding (34 recommended programs last year). Paragraphs describing recommended programs are sent out before a 4-hour meeting where grant readers give an oral presentation for the programs that would like funded.*
 - **Readers Worksheet** standardizes review process (copies available)
 - **Guidelines for Writing Summary Paragraphs for Recommended Proposals**
 - **Guidelines for Preparing and Making a 3-Minute oral Presentation.**

- **Practice Your Pitch**, a practice session for the oral presentations of recommended grants. This session greatly improved the timing of the presentations as well as the quality.

Other Comments:

BWGC Reader training starts in fall; AAWGT in January; BWGC Reader Commitment: 37 hours (estimated)

TPC uses Captain and Deputy Captain titles; gives training authority to Teams

3. BWGC/Schapiro: How is the BWGC voting process designed so that it is fair to the grants applicants and the grant readers?

- Voting is done by **Survey Monkey**- Grant readers who attended the oral presentation meeting have 4 days to vote for the candidates
- **Consensus Voting**- Only programs that get more than 50% of the votes are funded. This is accomplished through two rounds of voting. On the first round each grant reader is given votes totaling approximately 1/3 of the total number of recommendations. The results are ranked from highest to lowest. Those programs receiving more than 50% of the vote are approved, usually around 1/3. The lower 1/3 of the proposals are eliminated, and the remaining recommendations are eligible for a second vote. This allows people an opportunity to change their vote from items that have no chance to those where their vote can have some effect.
- **Two-Year Impact Grant Pilot** - \$50,000 over two years. Has limited number of candidates, approximately 5. A representative of the non-profit presents the program to the full Circle. Members who attend this session have four days to vote for three candidates on Survey Monkey. **Votes are ranked**. Members indicate their first, second and third choices when they vote. 3 points are awarded for a first place, 2 for second and 1 for third. Points are then added. Two highest get the grant awards. The Survey Monkey default chart shows the rating average, not the weighted total, so you have to do your own calculations

AAWGT/Belling Comments: AAWGT voting methods differ -- Reviewers narrow down list of about 30+ applicants via site visits to about a dozen finalists. Finalists are all approved by CFAAC. Their proposals are confidentially summarized and given to membership on which to make their six votes in person or by fax or email in advance. No weighting or ranking of votes. Funds are made available based on highest number of votes until funds are gone. Last program to be funded is often offered smaller award amount; if accepted, modified scope of work is negotiated accordingly with CFAAC.

Other Comments:

San Diego: Hard not to take voting results personally when pitched application not approved by voters;

Indian River: Experienced disappointment from no funding decision

How to deal with 'Falling in Love' on site visit? Standardize presentations to members for voting if at all possible

AAWGT: Community Foundation connects AAWGT-vetted proposals not selected to other donor advised funds within its 'family' of funds; funding has occurred from those sources later = win/win when it happens

Seattle: Lesson learned after it was discovered that a reviewer had written an application; they strengthened their Conflict of Interest policies to prevent this from happening in future years.

Charlotte: Value of grant leadership team (from previous years) to carry institutional memory forward.

Reston: Vital to ensure mission alignment

Boston: Importance of criteria alignment too