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# How a Community Foundation's Disaster Framework Guided Rapid Pandemic Response

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**Keywords:** *Disaster response, equity, resilience, sustainability, civic participation, community foundations, pandemic*

## Introduction

The Greater New Orleans Foundation, established in 1923, serves a 13-parish region surrounding the city of New Orleans in Southeast Louisiana (Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2022a). Serving as an intermediary between donors and a wide variety of regional causes they support, the foundation provides philanthropy and civic leadership to address community challenges.

Since Hurricane Katrina devastated the region in August 2005, the foundation has become a recognized expert in philanthropic response to disasters, lauded for the strategic principles underlying deployment of its standing Disaster Response and Restoration Fund and broader disaster response framework (Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2022b). This article shares the foundation's strategic principles and disaster framework, how they were developed through direct experience with multiple disasters, and how they were applied to guide rapid and long-term response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

New Orleans is no stranger to disasters. Most obviously, Katrina caused approximately 1,800 deaths, damaged 70% of the city's housing stock, and remains the costliest weather-related disaster in U.S. history (Harris, 2020). Since then, the city and its surrounding region have endured 16 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster declarations, including three hurricanes during the record-breaking 2020 season in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (FEMA, 2021a; National Oceanic

## Key Points

- Disasters create opportunities for philanthropy to rebuild equitably by prioritizing the most vulnerable community members in disaster response and addressing existing disparities and structural inequities in the recovery phase. As intermediaries between donors and local communities, community foundations are well-positioned to lead transformational disaster response.
- Through its experience with Hurricane Katrina and subsequent disasters in the region, the Greater New Orleans Foundation developed a flexible disaster framework that emphasizes four broad principles — resilience, sustainability, civic participation, and equity — and specific practices in each area to guide rapid and long-term disaster response and preparedness. This article describes how the foundation is applying that framework to respond to COVID-19 and concurrent disasters in ways that mitigate immediate harms while laying the groundwork for an equitable long-term recovery.
- Based on a review of organizational documents and interviews with high-level staff involved in disaster grantmaking over the past decade, the article details how the foundation inductively developed its disaster framework through experiences supporting nonprofits and community members after Hurricane Katrina and subsequent disasters. It then explains how the foundation has adapted the principles to pandemic response.

and Atmospheric Administration, 2020). Most recently, in August 2021 on the 16th anniversary of Katrina, the region was struck by Category 4 Hurricane Ida, resulting in widespread evacuations and power outages of up to a week or more amid a surge of COVID-19's Delta variant.

So-called “man-made disasters,” caused by failure of human systems, have likewise threatened the region. Hurricane Katrina was so destructive because flood waters breached levees built to protect the city (Pruitt, 2020). Hurricane Ida seized on vulnerabilities in the region's power grid. The BP oil spill, caused by the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, devastated the regional aquatic ecosystem and economy for more than a decade and instigated the largest financial settlement for an environmental disaster in U.S. history (Haines, 2020).

Local nonprofits helped residents weather the storms — both literal and figurative — by creatively leveraging a variety of public and philanthropic funding sources for disaster response (Jenkins et al., 2015). Along with substantial government funding, foundations and other institutional funders invested more than \$1.3 billion in post-Katrina response and recovery, most of which came within 16 months following the disaster (Renz, 2009). Over time, waning external support for reconstruction and recovery efforts threatened the financial sustainability of local nonprofits (De Vita et al., 2012; O'Neil, 2015), a pattern that is not unique to the philanthropic response to Hurricane Katrina (Candid & Center for Disaster Philanthropy [CDP], 2020).

In 2020, disaster struck again — not only in New Orleans, but also around the world — through a global pandemic that put unprecedented strain on nonprofits to respond. Following packed annual Mardi Gras festivities in late February, the first COVID-19 case in New Orleans was reported on March 9, two days before the World Health Organization declared a pandemic (Shervington & Richardson, 2020). In the U.S., New Orleans became an early epicenter of the outbreak as it quickly seized on the health

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vulnerabilities of the population — particularly, as a result of long-standing racial inequities, among the city's majority Black population (Harris, 2020). As in prior disasters, community foundations were called upon to help sustain local nonprofits and shepherd regional stakeholders through an equitable disaster response (Candid & CDP, 2021).

Community foundations embedded in a particular place may play a critical role in disaster response, both as intermediaries for raising and disbursing immediate response funds and as stewards of post-disaster redevelopment (Candid & CDP, 2020). Community foundations connect donors to community-based nonprofit organizations working to address local needs. Their history in and close ties to the region, as well as their commitment to serving it over the long haul, often engender cultural competence and trust, guiding inclusive and responsive rebuilding efforts in partnership with nonprofits and community members (Phillips et al., 2016).

Through intentional “community leadership” prioritizing proactive community change (Easterling, 2011), community foundations are positioned to catalyze equitable transformation

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in ways off-limits to private foundations, including lobbying. According to Easterling, these foundations acting as community leaders go beyond traditional grantmaking to convene diverse stakeholders and catalyze cross-sector solutions to community challenges. For instance, during the BP oil spill, the Greater New Orleans Foundation pressed Congress to amend provisions for citizen engagement and permanent set-aside funds for unforeseen issues to the RESTORE Act<sup>1</sup> providing federal relief (Barry et al., 2012). Thus, community foundations might take advantage of brief opportunities created by disasters to address otherwise entrenched deficits and disparities facing their communities, introducing large-scale social innovations which might in turn enhance community resilience (Westley, 2013).

### **The Foundation's Post-Katrina Growth**

The Greater New Orleans Foundation was founded as a “community chest” — a permanent endowment funded by an array of local donors

to collaboratively address local issues — in 1923 (Lowe, 2004). It was incorporated as a community foundation in 1983, following changes in tax regulations during the 1970s that spurred growth in these conversions. The foundation exhibits the prototypical characteristics of a community foundation, including local leadership and networks, direct attention to local needs, and — consistent with its status as a public charity as opposed to a private foundation — participation of community members on its board, which provides additional accountability and justifies its tax advantages and greater flexibility in advocacy and lobbying. Showing early signs of community leadership, the foundation incorporated community organizing and capacity building into its grantmaking in the 1990s, centered on housing rehabilitation and community development. However, its impact was initially constrained by limited opportunities for philanthropic fundraising in the southern U.S. (Lowe, 2004), although this regional deficit has abated in recent decades (McGill, 2020; Southeastern Council of Foundations & MDC, 2017).

The Greater New Orleans Foundation's work in community organizing for housing rehabilitation at the turn of the millennium established its reputation as a trusted community liaison among local and national funders, as well as nonprofit and political leaders, which in turn set the stage for its rapid expansion in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Before that disaster, the foundation had about \$100 million in assets, primarily in the form of independent donor-advised funds, and employed seven staff members. After Katrina, the foundation benefited from a wave of national giving to New Orleans, distinguishing itself as one of the top recipients of Katrina-related philanthropy and simultaneously as the top grantmaker in terms of number of grants disbursed (Renz, 2009). In addition, federal requirements that communities undergo participatory planning to receive public funds for post-disaster priorities such as affordable housing cemented the foundation's role as a

<sup>1</sup> The Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act, signed into law on July 6, 2010; see <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-markets-financial-institutions-and-fiscal-service/restore-act>.

convener and facilitator. By the end of 2015, the foundation had tripled its assets to well above \$300 million (Foundation Center & CF Insights, 2016). Its staff has now grown to 25 employees.

The foundation's response to Hurricane Katrina was initially reactive, focused on distributing rapid-response funds with the urgency demanded by the immediate crisis. Through this experience, the foundation expanded its nationwide network of partners — donors, community and private foundations, multiple layers of government, and community-based nonprofits — and gained expertise in navigating federal red tape to release disaster funds. Later on, compelled by inequities and missed opportunities in the post-Katrina recovery, the foundation began proactively preparing itself and the communities it serves for future disasters, including by streamlining its internal grantmaking processes and strategically funding and facilitating holistic disaster-resilience efforts addressing social determinants of health, environmental conservation, and economic equity.

### Development of a Disaster Framework

In the 2010s, in partnership with the mayor's office in New Orleans, the foundation instituted a “pay it forward” approach to disaster grantmaking by distributing funds to other Gulf Coast regions impacted by disaster and establishing reciprocal relationships with neighboring community foundations. This network gradually evolved into a national philanthropic learning community around issues of equitable disaster response (Kavate, 2021). Through the larger geographic purview of this network, the foundation gained additional experience supporting disaster response in neighboring communities, including Baton Rouge after severe flooding in 2016, and Houston, Texas, in response to Hurricane Harvey in 2017. At the same time, more localized disasters continued to afflict the New Orleans area, such as tornadoes in New Orleans East in 2017.

Following those experiences, leadership at the foundation, including a president and CEO who had led statewide recovery efforts after Hurricane Katrina and a vice president of

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programs with extensive expertise and nationwide contacts in equity-focused grantmaking, recognized both the need and opportunity for the foundation to define its emerging disaster response strategy. A framework for providing community support in the wake of disasters would allow the foundation to act quickly yet strategically, incorporating its leaders' lived experiences and organization's lessons learned, and helping to align and coordinate efforts across its programs and staff. Working closely with two co-authors of this article, the foundation's leadership set about identifying broad principles and related practices that might enhance their ability to respond to inevitable future disasters — including by determining how and for whom the foundation was best positioned to make an impact, and in what activities to engage government or other partners — and establish the Greater New Orleans Foundation as a national leader in disaster philanthropy.

**TABLE 1** Greater New Orleans Foundation's Disaster Framework

Principle	Guiding Assumption	Related Practices
<b>Resilience</b>	Grantmaking should improve a place holistically to make it stronger than it was before the disaster.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish holistic visions for resilience at the levels of individual, group, organization, and community, aligned across multiple programs.</li> <li>• Preapprove nonprofits involved in disaster response for rapid ACH transfer of grant funds when disaster strikes.</li> <li>• Build expertise and relationships to navigate requirements for public assistance.</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainability</b>	Grantmaking should take into account a long-term view of an uncertain funding future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set aside long-term disaster recovery funds.</li> <li>• Incentivize and support nonprofits in building operating reserves during nondisaster times.</li> <li>• Build the adaptive capacity of nonprofit leaders and organizations.</li> </ul>
<b>Civic Participation</b>	Grantmaking should equip and empower the most vulnerable to influence what happens in their communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Call upon and support nonprofits as community intermediaries to identify specific problems, solutions, and an agenda for change.</li> <li>• Authentic participation requires sufficient time and resources, especially in post-disaster contexts.</li> <li>• For more immediate response, leverage relationships with trusted nonprofits that can represent the needs of various constituencies.</li> </ul>
<b>Equity</b>	Grantmaking should take historical inequity into account and inform investments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritize the most vulnerable community members in disaster response.</li> <li>• Leverage funds for recovery and rebuilding to address disparities.</li> <li>• Center equity in all of the practices above.</li> </ul>

Over the next year, the foundation became more explicit in its strategic disaster framework, documenting its components in 2018. At the same time, flexibility remained essential, as no two disasters require the same response. The resulting framework therefore rests on four broad principles: resilience, sustainability, civic participation, and equity. A concern for resilience emerged directly out of the foundation's long-standing environment, economic opportunity, and workforce program areas, while sustainability reflected its relatively more recent attention to nonprofit capacity building through its Nonprofit Leadership & Effectiveness initiative (Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2022c). Civic participation and equity had always been central to the community foundation's mission and vision for the region, even more so since Hurricane Katrina when the foundation recognized the potential for inequitable disaster

response to harm vulnerable community members. Specific practices related to each principle were culled from experiences navigating past disasters, as well as lessons learned shared by funders across the field of disaster philanthropy, such as the recognition that long-term disaster recovery requires substantial operational capacity and set-aside resources (Candid & CDP, 2020). The evolution of the four principles and related practices is further detailed in the next section.

**The Disaster Framework:  
Four Principles**

The Greater New Orleans Foundation's disaster framework comprises four principles. (See Table 1.) These evolved out of its response to Hurricane Katrina and other natural and man-made disasters, as well as insights shared from the field of community philanthropy:



1. *Resilience* serves as the guiding vision for recovery and informs strategies for preparedness and immediate relief when disaster strikes.
2. *Sustainability*, specifically referring to nonprofits' long-term financial sustainability, positions local nonprofit organizations as critical disaster responders and calls attention to their longer-term funding and capacity needs.
3. *Civic participation* leverages relationships with these nonprofits to channel the voices of local community members toward shaping priorities for long-term recovery and rebuilding.
4. *Equity* centers the most marginalized and vulnerable community members in every stage of response.

These principles are flexible enough to apply to many different types of disasters, while still serving as reliable guideposts for community foundations and other philanthropic institutions to navigate through the turbulent post-disaster context toward a long-term vision of equitable community transformation and assess progress along the way (Lynn et al., 2021). Each principle's evolution post-Katrina and some examples of related practices are discussed below; however, note that the framework is intended to guide holistic disaster response, and thus there are significant overlap and interconnections among the four principles.

### Resilience

The first principle of resilience, or “the *process* of maintaining positive adjustment under challenging conditions” (emphasis in original; Bonilla, 2015, p. 8), serves as an overarching vision for the Greater New Orleans Foundation's disaster framework. As Lynn et al. (2021) note, resilience is an often imprecise and contested concept that can seem to advocate for preservation of an inequitable status quo and place the onus on marginalized communities to withstand undue hardship. However, the foundation's use of the term proactively follows these authors' advice to promote “not merely bouncing back to a

*The foundation has a vision for Southeast Louisiana in which community members and the nonprofits serving them are prepared and able to activate resilience processes as soon as disasters strike. By realizing this vision, community members would be more able to withstand and recover from sudden shocks, while also enjoying improved well-being in nondisaster times.*

predisturbance state, but rather a ‘bouncing forward’ toward something new” (Lynn et al., 2021, p. 54). Thus, resilience connotes an effort to build communities' overall adaptive capacity for preparing for and responding to future disasters in ways that reduce harms.

The exact process followed for coping with adverse conditions may differ at various levels, from the individual to the group, organization, and community. Nonetheless, common attributes required at all levels include resource slack and lean operations, agile and flexible structures and mental models, leaders who promote adaptive capacity, and learning from reflection on past experiences with similar challenges (Bonilla, 2105; Lynn et al., 2021). The foundation has a vision for Southeast Louisiana in which community members and the nonprofits serving them are prepared and able to activate resilience processes as soon as disasters strike. By realizing this vision, community members would be more able to withstand and recover from sudden shocks, while also enjoying improved well-being in nondisaster times.

*The foundation thus recognized that long-term community resilience and disaster preparedness involve a host of intersecting capacities, including sustainable housing, environmental conservation, and well-paying jobs permitting household savings, to name a few.*

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Immediately after Hurricane Katrina, the foundation attended to nonprofit and community member resilience first in terms of survival, by distributing unrestricted disaster-response grants to support organizational operations and individual basic needs. The foundation also aided eligible organizations and individuals in accessing federal disaster assistance through FEMA, an often-arduous process requiring documentation — for instance, of property title — that was difficult to produce after the destruction and dislocation caused by Katrina. This attention to rapid response in the form of emergency funds continued after subsequent disasters such as the BP oil spill. The charitable approach also evolved in strategic sophistication, as the foundation began preapproving nonprofits and fundraising for its Disaster Response and Restoration Fund in nondisaster times, allowing rapid disbursement of grant funds via automated clearing house (ACH) transfer immediately following sudden disasters (Kavate, 2021).

Over time, the foundation shifted its vision for disaster response beyond meeting urgent needs for resources toward regional communities that might thrive in the long term, thereby mitigating the harms caused by future disasters. The genesis of this shift began with the establishment of a Community Revitalization Fund in 2007, which

pooled resources from 22 local and national foundations to distribute \$23 million over seven years toward equitable and sustainable post-Katrina redevelopment in New Orleans, particularly through constructing ecologically safe and affordable housing and building the capacity and reach of organizations throughout the housing sector (Magnolia Research & Writing Group, 2016). The foundation likewise strengthened its environmental grantmaking to build additional “green” infrastructure and buffer vulnerable communities from future flood risk. For instance, in 2010, it launched a “Water Challenge” competition, awarding funds to social enterprises based on their plans for market-based solutions to local flooding.

The foundation also strengthened its grantmaking concerned with creating economic opportunity for the region’s low-income residents disproportionately impacted by disasters (FEMA, 2021b), in the form of workforce development initiatives. Almost 24% of New Orleans residents live in households with incomes below the poverty line, which is almost double the national poverty rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020, as cited in Census Reporter, n.d.). Low-wage jobs in the area are centered on the volatile hospitality and tourism industries, leaving many residents — especially people of color — vulnerable to economic shocks caused by disasters. The Greater New Orleans Foundation’s workforce development programming focuses on individual-level job training and financial coaching, delivered in partnership with local nonprofits. The foundation thus recognized that long-term community resilience and disaster preparedness involve a host of intersecting capacities, including sustainable housing, environmental conservation, and well-paying jobs permitting household savings, to name a few (Chandra et al., 2011). In response, the foundation expanded programming in all of these areas (Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2022d).

### Sustainability

The foundation intentionally works with community-based nonprofit organizations to promote and begin to realize its vision of a resilient region. Resilient communities depend on a



strong and resilient nonprofit sector, composed of organizations that can nimbly adapt and respond to changing conditions and emergent needs (Hutton et al., 2021). Local nonprofits were critical actors in the post-Katrina response and relief efforts, but their long-term financial sustainability was threatened by a rapid influx and then drawback of one-time grants from national funders. In the decade following Hurricane Katrina, the regional nonprofit sector expanded and then contracted along with the phase of disaster recovery, with implications for the essential services available to residents still recovering from disaster.

Thus, financial sustainability — or nonprofits' ability to maintain financial solvency and adequate services in times of disaster and throughout a protracted recovery — is necessary for community resilience (Hutton et al., 2021). One essential element of a sustainable nonprofit sector is long-term operational funding, which the Greater New Orleans Foundation prioritized through its continuous fundraising appeals to national donors. The foundation also leads a “reserve challenge” matching fund, incentivizing and seeding nonprofits to set aside funds for a flexible operating reserve even during challenging financial periods; indeed, reserves are critical to service continuity and sustained staff capacity during disasters of all kinds (Kim & Mason, 2020). These grantmaking efforts helped create resource slack and operating margins essential for organizations to resiliently respond to disasters (Bonilla, 2015).

The foundation also worked to build the non-financial capacity of nonprofits. Although it had dabbled in nonprofit capacity building since the 1990s, it did not institutionalize these efforts into what is now its Nonprofit Leadership & Effectiveness (NLE) program area until after Hurricane Katrina. As the foundation expanded its own capacity, it began to formalize coaching and capacity-building initiatives in areas such as leadership development, board governance, financial management, and continuity of operations planning, based on two rounds of capacity needs assessments it conducted with nonprofits during the 2010s. By the end of 2019,

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NLE was conducting almost 50 capacity-building workshops per year, reaching more than 300 nonprofits and 900 individuals through a variety of programs, often through high-touch series that helped nurture robust social networks among nonprofit leaders in the region. In this way, the foundation helped build the adaptive capacity of local leaders to expand sustainably and address community members' chronic needs.

The foundation likewise made internal changes to enhance its own financial sustainability and overall capacity. It educated its donors and board members about the risks of chronic vulnerabilities and the need to address them outside of crises, marshalling support to set aside 40% of disaster relief funds for long-term recovery needs. It also established adequate “pass-through” fees on fund transfers to support its operations and provided technical assistance to help the city of New Orleans secure substantial federal funds designated for specific services like food delivery. While responding to the BP oil spill primarily affecting coastal parishes, the foundation learned to work across language barriers — for example, with the region's sizable Vietnamese population — and gained trust with isolated rural communities lacking a robust nonprofit presence. The foundation integrated these experiences into its disaster framework and coordinated across multiple departments — including development, finance, communications, and multiple programs — to codify the framework as a road map for its disaster-response decision-making.

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### Civic Participation

Consistent with its role as an intermediary within the communities it serves, the Greater New Orleans Foundation serves as a convenor and facilitator of broad-based community planning efforts. As the practice of community leadership has gained currency among community foundations in the United States and beyond, these foundations have increasingly taken on facilitative roles of enabling others to set the vision and agenda for community change (Easterling, 2011; Lynn et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2016). Rather than prescribe specific changes sought, community foundations can bring attention to issues, connect stakeholders, and build communities’ capacity and knowledge base for transformational collective action. In this way, community foundations are prioritizing and enabling authentic and meaningful civic participation to address community issues.

The foundation demonstrated antecedents of community leadership in its civic participation efforts in the 1990s, such as by initiating collaborative networks to promote community development (Lowe, 2004). The approach was amplified in the post-Katrina landscape. Most significantly, as a method to release federal funds and gather input from a dispersed community of displaced New Orleans residents after Hurricane Katrina, the foundation facilitated development of the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), meant to guide public priorities for rebuilding all citywide systems for the following decade (New York Regional Association of Grantmakers, 2008). This was “new territory” for the Greater New Orleans Foundation, necessitating support of financial resources and an executive-on-loan from the Rockefeller Foundation. After several stalled attempts by other facilitating entities, in 2006 the foundation

helped lead an intensive, five-month deliberative planning process across more than 20 cities where New Orleans residents were relocated. The resulting \$14.5 billion plan, combining 13 district plans, was approved by the New Orleans City Council in 2007.

The foundation’s experience with UNOP and lessons learned cemented its prioritization of inclusive civic engagement. Later on, when the W.K. Kellogg Foundation selected the Greater New Orleans Foundation as a partner in its response efforts in the aftermath of the nearby Baton Rouge floods of summer 2016, equitable inclusion rose to the top of the agenda, including through more robust engagement processes and close analysis of potential disparate impacts on vulnerable community members. The foundation has since led planning efforts for the Greater New Orleans Water Plan, intended to improve water management and alleviate flooding in New Orleans’ urban core, and an effort to equitably revitalize the neighborhood surrounding the former Charity Hospital destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, among other initiatives.

Although labor- and resource-intensive, especially in challenging post-disaster contexts, participatory planning efforts are crucial for cultivating community members’ sense of “belonging” and ownership of redevelopment efforts (Phillips et al., 2016). Indeed, “community” can be conceived as a dynamic process of co-creation, with civic participation as its vehicle. More recently, in line with its evolved understanding of nonprofits’ role as the engine of community resilience, the foundation has moved away from formal public meetings and toward other, more natural leverage points for engaging residents in community transformation: specifically, collaborating with member-driven nonprofits representing particular neighborhoods and constituencies. By building connections with these nonprofits, including through formal grants and contracts that compensate community partners for their time and expertise, the foundation is able to benefit from their local knowledge and create more authentic access to planning processes, especially in the midst of disaster response when

community members are consumed by concerns for their basic needs.

### Equity

As Hurricane Katrina starkly exposed, disasters prey upon and exacerbate existing inequities within a community. Vulnerabilities based on income, race, disability, age, language, and rural location all worsen a disaster's initial impact and lessen opportunities to access assistance and resources in the recovery period (FEMA, 2021b). Therefore, equity — or the insistence that everyone have access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive and overcome historical systems of oppression (Berry-James et al., 2021; Blessett et al., 2019; McCandless & Ronquillo, 2019) — is a fundamental principle of the foundation's disaster framework, essential to fully realize its vision of widespread community resilience throughout the region. Centering equity is not only the right thing to do, but it makes economic sense: closing the racial equity gap in New Orleans could produce an additional \$43 billion in economic output by 2050 (Turner & Beaudin-Seiler, 2018). A strategic disaster framework, then, would naturally leverage the response and rebuilding process as an opportunity to target entrenched disparities and move communities in a more equitable — and thus resilient, sustainable, and participative — direction.

The Greater New Orleans Foundation's approach to equity in disaster response is infused in the three principles discussed above. Its vision for resilience centers equity and racial justice, and it supports nonprofits that share these values and are deeply connected to community members closest to problems and their potential solutions. Grantmaking and capacity-building initiatives explicitly engage and prioritize nonprofit leaders and target populations from underrepresented groups (Beer et al., 2021). In this way, the foundation aims to help address the long-standing racial leadership and funding gaps confronting the nonprofit sector (e.g., Ford et al., 2021), including in racially and culturally diverse New Orleans (De Vita et al., 2012; Mumford, 2022). In turn, by more authentically engaging marginalized communities via

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trusted nonprofits that serve them (LeRoux, 2009), the foundation enhances civic participation and the likelihood of crowdsourcing and implementing an equitable and effective post-disaster reconstruction.

### Pandemic Strikes New Orleans

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck New Orleans in March 2020, it immediately overwhelmed the region's nonprofit health care system and, as it triggered trauma inflicted by prior disasters (Shervington & Richardson, 2020), strained the capacity of the behavioral health system (Louisiana Public Health Institute, 2020). In a politically conservative state with limited government resources and services, community members have looked to the nonprofit sector as their social safety net, much as they did after Hurricane Katrina. At the same time, the stay-at-home orders and economic fallout caused by shutdowns, combined with the greater demand for human services deemed "essential," have threatened the solvency of the regional nonprofit sector (University of New Orleans & Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2020).

Like previous disasters, the pandemic has preyed on longstanding inequities inflicted on the most vulnerable community members, particularly among New Orleans' majority Black population (Wright & Merritt, 2020). It has demanded rapid mobilization of funding resources, often led by community foundations serving as intermediaries (Paarlberg et al., 2020). Unlike prior disasters, however, the response phase of the pandemic has dragged on in duration, allowing only short-lived spurts of recovery before shutdowns and restrictions are reinstated. The pandemic has impeded social connections crucial to individual resilience except via technology. And it has necessitated new or strengthened relationships

**TABLE 2** The Foundation Adapts Its Framework to Pandemic Response

Principle	Relevant Components of Pandemic Response
<b>Resilience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediately disbursed flexible rapid-response grants to support operations of preapproved nonprofits within days of pandemic declaration and following concurrent hurricanes.</li> <li>• Gathered and distributed essential supplies to nonprofits and community members, including personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies.</li> <li>• Created programs for individual direct assistance grants for those affected by layoffs in hospitality and cultural industries.</li> <li>• Guided nonprofits in adapting continuity of operations plans designed for hurricanes to pandemic.</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediately organized webinars and consultants to guide nonprofits in accessing the first round of federal relief funds, including Paycheck Protection Program loans, as well as subsequent federal pandemic and hurricane relief funds.</li> <li>• Amplified its reserve challenge matching grant program.</li> <li>• Established grants and capacity-building opportunities to facilitate strategic partnerships, consolidations, and mergers among nonprofits.</li> <li>• Organized virtual town halls and held informal two-way communications with nonprofits to respond to emergent needs, such as concerns for staff burnout and self-care.</li> </ul>
<b>Civic Participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported nonprofits with engaging trusted community leaders and culturally responsive outreach staff to encourage reluctant residents to participate in COVID-19 testing and vaccination.</li> <li>• Leveraged university partnership to conduct needs assessment of regional nonprofits at multiple time points through surveys and focus groups.</li> <li>• Disaggregated data on regional nonprofit sector by race of leadership and populations served to identify disparities and unique needs.</li> </ul>
<b>Equity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Directed grants toward the most vulnerable community members to the harms of the pandemic, such as the elderly.</li> <li>• Established a Racial Equity Fund for Black-led nonprofits and prioritized them in annual regional fundraising events and other programming.</li> <li>• Prioritized leaders of color in leadership development programs.</li> <li>• Organized free webinars to provide diversity, equity, and inclusion training to nonprofit leaders.</li> </ul>

with public health authorities. These differences have forced foundations to quickly shift response strategies based on incomplete knowledge and emergent learning (Liadsky et al., 2021), all the more so in coastal communities like New Orleans, where exhausted nonprofit staff are simultaneously preparing for and responding to hurricanes under pandemic conditions, such as by creating contingency plans for noncongregant shelter in vacant hotels (Hutton et al., 2021).

The Greater New Orleans Foundation has adapted and applied its disaster framework to

the unforeseen exigencies of the pandemic. (See Table 2.) It has the advantage of a documented disaster framework in place that allows rapid response yet is flexible enough to permit leaders to maneuver and adjust. Its leaders benefit from lived experience through multiple disasters, expertise in helping nonprofits and local government access federal funding streams, trusted relationships with both national funders and nonprofits embedded in communities, and knowledge and appreciation for which community members are most vulnerable and their most immediate needs. As a result of its guiding principles and experiences, the foundation has

perhaps responded more quickly than its philanthropic peers — especially given that New Orleans was an early epicenter for the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States — and with confidence borne from its preparedness about which issues to prioritize.

Indeed, the foundation activated its Disaster Response and Restoration Fund to respond to the pandemic by March 13, 2020 — less than two days after the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic and the governor of Louisiana and mayor of New Orleans declared official states of emergency — and announced immediate grants to four first-responding nonprofits (Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2020). Further, by that time, the foundation helped establish and co-chaired a nonprofit committee to coordinate efforts between the city of New Orleans and external partners. In a disaster context, speed of response is critical, but so is attention to equity and long-term recovery; the foundation’s disaster framework guided efficient and strategic decision-making organizationwide that effectively balanced these potentially competing priorities.

### **Applying the Disaster Framework to a Pandemic**

Immediately as the pandemic was declared, the foundation had the resilience infrastructure in place to disburse rapid response grants to pre-approved nonprofits aimed at serving the most vulnerable community members, such as the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions. The foundation had previously registered 20 nonprofits across the region as voluntary and community organizations active in disasters, facilitating expedited grantmaking (Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2020). It quickly established partnerships and organized free webinars to provide technical assistance to nonprofits seeking federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and other Small Business Administration loans. As the pandemic’s economic impact became clearer, particularly for workers in the hospitality sector, the foundation established individual assistance funds providing direct grants to unemployed residents and arranged for matched donations from local philanthropists.

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In further support of rapid response to and preparedness for the pandemic, just before the pandemic was declared the foundation hosted a “disaster summit,” convening representatives from 75 nonprofits to develop continuity of operations plans with guidance from statewide nonprofit intermediaries and the Governor’s Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. This summit was not organized in response to the pandemic, but rather was a regular annual event leading up to the start of hurricane season each summer. While hurricane-specific continuity of operations plans had to be adapted and updated in real time for a pandemic (University of New Orleans & Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2020), their existence nonetheless helped guide nonprofits’ pandemic response and mitigation at the organizational level, thereby promoting community-level resilience.

Soon after the pandemic was declared, the foundation leveraged its existing capacity-building programs and networks to offer grants and free webinars to assist nonprofits with updating their continuity of operations plans and sustainably expanding services, reopening in person, and forming new collaborations. The foundation also sourced and distributed essential supplies to nonprofits, including medical-grade masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE),



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as well as cleaning supplies, and worked with nonprofits to promote communitywide testing and vaccination. With speed critical in a disaster, the foundation responded with haste. These rapid-response strategies were again deployed in the aftermath of Hurricane Ida, disbursing \$1.8 million in grants to preapproved nonprofits within a month of the hurricane to support emergency food and shelter, legal aid and technical assistance for residents seeking public assistance, provision of supplies, and cleanup operations, including as early as the day before the fast-developing hurricane struck Louisiana.

The foundation also adapted its disaster response to new constraints created by the pandemic. Civic participation — traditionally an in-person activity in New Orleans, complete with food and cultural celebration — shifted online in the form of virtual town halls with nonprofit leaders and other community stakeholders, as well as two online needs assessments of nonprofits throughout the region. The second needs assessment, conducted almost a year after the start of the pandemic in partnership with the University of New Orleans, permitted the foundation to explore disparate needs by race of a nonprofit's leadership and target populations (Mumford, 2022; University of New Orleans & Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2021), guiding a more equitable response and helping to

hold the foundation accountable for its commitments (Beer et al., 2021). After the summer of 2020 inspired a nationwide conversation about racial injustice, the foundation established a Racial Equity Fund exclusively for Black-led nonprofits — which awarded almost \$1.5 million to more than 30 organizations through 2021 — and reframed capacity-building programs to prioritize the inclusion and self-care needs of nonprofit staff of color.

### **Evaluating the Foundation's Pandemic Response**

The Greater New Orleans Foundation has adapted and applied its disaster framework, organized by its four principles, to rise to the challenge of the pandemic as well as concurrent hurricanes (Hutton et al., 2021), and seize an opportunity to enhance the regional nonprofit sector's sustainability and equity (Lynn et al., 2021). In turn, local nonprofits are now better able to demonstrate resilience themselves (University of New Orleans & Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2021), which bolsters the resilience of the broader community to endure an unanticipated and prolonged crisis. The pandemic has taken a terrible toll on New Orleans, and it has also shone a light on the continued inequities facing the city despite all of the funding and efforts directed toward equitable rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina (Mumford, 2022). Having helped stabilize the regional nonprofit sector, the foundation now focuses its attention — and the application of its principles — on using the disaster as an opportunity to restructure communities toward a more ambitious vision of racial equity, starting with its own internal grantmaking.

Comprehensive and aggregated evaluation of outcomes supported by the foundation's pandemic-response grantmaking is complicated by multiple factors, including the following:

- Out of expediency and a desire to minimize burdens for grantees, the foundation's grant applications and reporting requirements have been streamlined and are brief.



- Grants cover a wide variety of activities promoting community resilience to the pandemic (Chandra et al., 2011), including flexible direct operating support to nonprofits of all sizes and subsectors, as well as direct cash assistance to the most harmed community members.
- As a pass-through for restricted grants and donations from a variety of funders, the foundation itself faces complex and uncoordinated reporting requirements that resist a succinct summary of overall impact.
- And long-term pandemic recovery is ongoing, set back by Hurricane Ida and structural barriers to equitable rebuilding, such as limited state funding and support of pandemic mitigation efforts.

However, to demonstrate the efficacy of its disaster framework, the foundation can point to the speed and size of its grantmaking and supply distribution to help meet the basic needs of nonprofits and community members; its ability to leverage federal and other public recovery funds, such as by helping nonprofits access PPP loans and have them forgiven; policy wins such as incorporating funds in the city of New Orleans' budget to support the right to counsel and aid residents fighting eviction in court; and relatively low levels of viral infection and hospital overcrowding in the region since the first wave of COVID-19. At the same time, the foundation recognizes the need to enhance its capacity for evaluating its rapid response grantmaking and has since adopted standardized grant application and reporting templates — which include consistent categorization of the specific community needs met, target populations served, partners engaged, and project-supported outputs and outcomes — and engaged evaluation consultants to more thoroughly evaluate its response to pandemic-concurrent Hurricane Ida over the short and long term. Early feedback from grantees suggest the streamlined grantmaking approach adopted through the disaster framework and adapted to the pandemic are appreciated by nonprofits, permitting them the flexibility

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### **Conclusion**

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck New Orleans in March 2020, the Greater New Orleans Foundation had the infrastructure of a flexible disaster framework in place, giving its leaders and staff a head start and sense of strategic direction from the very beginning of the pandemic. Its principles emphasize equity and long-term, sustainable recovery and rebuilding, while its preparedness allows for rapid response to enhance short-term resilience, including to concurrent disasters like Hurricane Ida, which devastated the region in the midst of the pandemic. The foundation's role as a trusted intermediary and community leader among many different stakeholder groups promotes authentic civic participation so it can continue to listen to local nonprofits and community members and respond to their emergent needs (Beer et al., 2021; Lynn et al., 2021). The pandemic has confounded us all, but the foundation's four principles have helped reduce the uncertainty (Liadsky et al., 2021).

The groundwork for this framework was laid after Hurricane Katrina, evolved in sophistication through subsequent disasters, and reached its zenith in transferability through adaptation

to COVID-19 and now Hurricane Ida. We hope other foundations can continue to learn from the Greater New Orleans Foundation's hard-won lived experience, as well as contribute insights to continue its framework's evolution. The silver lining of disasters is that they permit us to reimagine and reconstruct the status quo, if we are poised to seize the opportunity. Now that we are all disaster funders, fundamental transformation has never been more possible. The guideposts of resilience, sustainability, civic participation, and equity may help to keep philanthropy on the path toward more equitable rebuilding, in spite of the myriad twists and turns created by each new disaster.

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