

**THE CALIFORNIA WELLNESS FOUNDATION
ANNUAL GRANTS PROGRAM SURVEY**

1997 GRANTS PROGRAM SURVEY: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this survey is to increase TCWF's understanding of how applicants for funding heard about the Foundation, how understandable they found the Foundation's materials, how they were treated by staff, and how TCWF could improve its philanthropic activities. Surveys were mailed to all those who received and applied for funding in 1996.

Analysis of survey responses showed:

- Respondents heard about TCWF primarily through receiving materials from the Foundation, from other non-profit organizations and from media announcements.
- Almost nine out of every ten respondents (87%) reported that TCWF materials are understandable (53%) or very understandable (34%).
- Nine out of every ten respondents (94%) who had telephoned TCWF during 1996 reported being treated courteously and respectfully (58%) or very courteously and respectfully (36%).
- Staff were complemented for promptly returning calls, responding quickly to requests for information, being willing to have "in-depth discussions," and for giving direct, clear and useful information.
- Two-thirds (67%) reported that they received responses to their funding requests within three months (12% could not remember).
- Current grantees were much more positive than negative (4:1) about their relationships with program staff responsible for their grants, describing these relationships as "open, trusting, conducive to learning," "very responsive," and "excellent."
- More than half (56%) see TCWF as reaching out to organizations that typically do not have access to foundation dollars effectively (42%) or very effectively (14%).
- The survey encouraged respondents to comment on Foundation activities. About 1 in 5 took this opportunity, many of them report what they did not like.

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FINAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this survey is to increase TCWF's understanding of how applicants for funding heard about the Foundation, how understandable they found the Foundation's materials, how they were treated by staff, and how TCWF could improve its philanthropic activities. Surveys were mailed to all those who received and applied for funding in 1996.

METHOD

Tom David, Magdalena Beltran-del Olmo, Joan Hurley and Julia Pennbridge developed a 27-question survey which was distributed to 1,075 recipients (230 with approved grants, 845 declinations). Both closed and open-ended questions were used. Surveys were mailed with stamped addressed envelopes to be returned to a P.O. box temporarily obtained for this purpose.

Completed surveys were coded and entered into a computerized data base. Data were checked for accuracy using a 10% random sample and by reviewing intra-item relationships using the entire database. Quantitative data analyses included frequency and cross tabulations summaries using the standard SPSS 7.5 for Windows package. All hand written comments were separately analyzed for content and theme.

RESULTS

Over one thousand (1,075) surveys were mailed and 36.7% (395) were returned. Of these, one respondent claimed to never have had any contact with TCWF. This survey was not included in the denominator. Two other respondents seemed unsure about why they had received surveys but did not have some opinions about how TCWF functions; they were included in the denominator. Thus this report is based upon a total 36.6% response rate.

Raw quantitative data (numbers and percentages) for each question are provided in Appendix B. Summaries of the quantitative and qualitative data in nine different domains are presented below. The major points and highlights of data are presented in the Executive Summary.

1. The respondents (Questions 2, 24, 25, 26 & 27.) Data describing respondents' organizations and the populations they serve are extremely difficult to summarize. First, respondents did not follow the "check only one" instruction for question 24 and, second they took too liberally the "check all that apply" instruction for question 25. Consequently, only the most general statements can be made.

Over one-quarter (26%) described their organizations as community-based, 11% described them as human service agencies, and "other" was the next most frequently reported (9%) category. A detailed analysis of the "other" data essentially corroborated the overall pattern in the answers to this question. In describing the populations they serve, four categories were reported before "other": low-income (42%), at-risk youth (38%), families (22%), women and children (19%). "Other" was reported at 17%. The next groups, all ranging between 5 percent and 7 percent, included advocacy groups, community/free clinics, consortia/coalitions, educations institutions

(K-12), government agencies, and university/college/vocational schools. A further breakdown of the “other category” corroborated this overall pattern.

Survey respondents overwhelmingly reported being based in Los Angeles county (34%), with the next most frequent being San Francisco (8%), and Sacramento (6%). Eight percent were based outside California. Of those who are current grantees, 35% are in Los Angeles county, 10% in San Francisco and 8% in San Diego, Sacramento and Alameda counties.

Half the responding organizations had annual budgets of \$2 million or less, with about one-quarter (24%) having annual budgets between \$200,001 and \$1 million. One-fifth (20%) were larger, with budgets between \$2 million and \$10 million, and seven estimated their annual budgets at over \$100,000,000 million.

Of all respondents, 31% were current and 11% were previous TCWF grantees, 44% were unfunded applicants for an initiative RFP, and 24% were unfunded applicants for a general grant. TCWF distributed 230 questionnaires to organizations with grants and to 845 that had been declined grants. Thus, 73% of the grantees responded and 32% of those who were declined.

2. How they heard about TCWF. (Question 1.) Respondents had heard about TCWF in three primary ways: from TCWF materials (52%), from other nonprofit organizations (24%) and from media announcements (22%). Five other information sources—from other grantmakers, the applicant’s board of directors, TCWF staff presentation or suggestion and resource centers—each accounted for between 11 and 13%. While most written comments corroborated these findings, four additional channels for obtaining information were noted: TCWF board members, the Internet, a Los Angeles City Council person, and other publications (e.g., *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *Directory of Foundations*).

3. Understandability of materials and usefulness of Bidders’ Conferences. (Questions 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8.) The most frequently received materials were initiative specific brochures (59%), annual reports (56%), general grants brochures (54%), and RFPs (51%). E-mail was the least used source of information, although 15% had accessed TCWF’s website.

These materials were generally viewed as understandable (53%) or very understandable (34%) with agreement that the readers could understand TCWF’s interests and funding programs (86%) and determine their organization’s eligibility for funding (79%). However, about one-third felt they could not determine if it was worthwhile for their organization to submit an LOI (33%) or what it would be appropriate to apply for (37%).

Many respondents took advantage of being able to comment on this question, more negatively than positively (about 2:1). The positive statements emphasized that TCWF’s materials were “excellent,” “top notch,” “well-written and attractive,” “beautifully designed,” “clearly presented,” and “easy to understand.” They also commented on staff being responsive to questions and willing to discuss issues before proposals are submitted. The helpfulness of posting frequently asked questions on the web page was also mentioned (it seems as though this was done for at least one RFP and possibly for a NOFA as well).

The negative comments were primarily of four types: poor writing, the inability to understand what TCWF wants, the inability to understand if their organizations could successfully apply, and follow up. Descriptions of the poor writing ranged from “sometimes we joke about “Wellness Speak” academic, jargon and obtruse” to “couldn’t understand at all.” Several said the priorities

were not clear. Suggestions for making it easier to understand what TCWF wants include giving specific examples of the kinds of projects to be funded, the types of groups to be targeted, and the specific criteria used to determine funding. In particular, filmmakers need to know if media projects are welcome.

Different sized organizations had different problems in understanding whether their organizations could successfully apply. Smaller organizations in particular seemed unclear about whether it was appropriate for them to apply as individual organizations or whether it would be better for them to join with other, larger organizations. One put it thus: "Not clear whether small organizations and grassroots groups can be competitive in some programs. They seem to favor consortia or groups with large members. What is important—quality or quantity?" At the other end of the spectrum, national organizations were not sure if they could apply for a California-focused program and how much they would be penalized if they did (i.e., what are the advantages/disadvantages of being a national organization).

Finally, many respondents commented how important it was for them to feel that they could easily access TCWF staff and how frustrated they are when they cannot. All agreed that personal contacts with staff are the best source of information and the best way to clarify vagueness and lack of clarity in the materials.

Of those who received NOFAs or RFPs (277), 82% reported that the information was understandable (56%) or very understandable (26%). There were more negative than positive comments (about 4:1) about whether NOFAs and RFPs could be understood and some specific RFPs were mentioned. For example, the Wellness Village Formation RFP was described as "contradictory and confusing," TPPI as "vague in some areas" and "repetitive," and Computers in Our Future as too structured to "allow genuine innovation in a model program." It was generally agreed that the LOI process was efficient (although a couple thought the requirements for it were too onerous because they had to practically write a proposal before they could submit an LOI) but there was a sense that too few proposals are reviewed. One respondent wrote "the LOI process is efficient [but] TCWF might want to review more proposals." Positive statements complimented TCWF on professional, clear documents and on the usefulness of the website information in responding to a NOFA.

About one-third (35%) of the respondents had attended a Bidders' Conference for an Initiative RFP, most them for the Work and Health Initiative (35%), with 17% and 18% for the Community for the Community Health Initiative and TPPI respectively. Almost three-fourths (73%) reported that the Bidders' Conferences were helpful (50%) or very helpful (23%).

4. Contacting TCWF (Questions 9, 10, 11 & 12.) Four-fifths (80%) of the respondents reported telephoning TCWF for information, most of them (65%) calling the Woodland Hills office. Most had spoken to the receptionist (42%), a third had spoken to a program assistant (34%) and/or a program officer (36%), and one-fifth had spoken to a senior program officer. Respondents overwhelmingly reported (94%) being treated courteously and respectfully (58%) or very courteously and respectfully (36%).

Of those who marked "other," most commented that they had reached an answering machine (some indicating their annoyance by writing "MACHINE" or "Machine!!"); others reported having been put through to voicemail.

In response to the request for specific examples of how they had been treated, there were more positive than negative remarks (almost 2:1). The positive remarks included thanks for promptly returning telephone calls, for responding quickly to requests for information, for being willing to have in-depth discussions, and for giving direct, clear, useful information.

Most of the negative comments focused on calls not being returned, the inability to get information wanted from staff, and the sense that the person they were talking to could not care less about them or their project. Some respondents explained that when program officers were avoiding them, program assistants were put in the position of apologizing for program officer behavior.

For some respondents, the fact that their telephone calls were not returned corroborated the notion that RFPs could be “rigged from the start.” This was mentioned a few times and one respondent continued, “due to the ten agencies for all of CA and the need for extensive \$ investment by agencies to operate the centers. The \$ investment/facilities were not included in the PreRFP, RFP or PR mats (sic), shame on you.” Several others commented on communications difficulties when their program officers changed.

5. Outcomes of funding requests. (Questions 13, 14, 15 & 16.) Almost a third of the respondents (31%) submitted both LOIs and proposals during 1996, with 38% submitting LOIs only and 21% submitting proposals only. Of these, 53% reported that they received acknowledgements within three weeks, and 67% that they received responses to their funding requests within three months. Only 17% reported that they did not receive acknowledgements within three weeks and 12% that they did not receive responses to their funding requests within three months. Over one-quarter (28%) reported that they had been awarded a grant.

Of those who provided written comments, most said that they didn’t know what the outcome was because they hadn’t heard anything from TCWF since their submission. Several said they didn’t hear anything until they called and asked. Clearly some of these are applicants who reported not receiving a timely response (see the previous question).

6. Quality of working relationships with the program staff responsible for the grant. (Question 17.) These comments were overwhelmingly positive (4:1). They included the following statements: “very responsive,” “open, trusting, conducive to learning,” and “excellent.” Respondents emphasized the professionalism of TCWF staff, their helpfulness and courtesy. The strongest statement was truly complementary: “In 19 years as Planner/Planning Manager I rate TCWF staff among the best I have worked with. They are good listeners and through their actions showed me they see themselves/TCWF as a partner.” There was a definite sense that TCWF staff respond to the needs of these grantees with thoughtfulness, humor, and attentiveness.

The few negative comments included difficulty reaching staff, the general unavailability of staff, dissatisfaction with “day-to-day PO” which included poor communication, and the desire for a “more seasoned PO.” Others reported that they had no relationship at all with their program officer. The transition to new staff has been difficult for several grantees, with one commenting that the new program officer showed “minimal interest or involvement.”

7. Technical assistance. (Questions 18, 19 & 20.) Of the current grantees, 33% reported receiving technical assistance and of these 82% reported it as useful (41%) or very useful (41%).

For the 67% who reported not receiving technical assistance, most said that they did not want any technical assistance at this time. Of those who do want technical assistance, most requested help in developing future funding and resources. Other requests included: visits from staff so they could both show off their programs and brainstorm about future directions; support for upgrading computer hardware and training; assistance in obtaining media exposure; help with strategic and long-term planning (e.g., developing second generation leadership); and help preparing grant applications. One requested that TCWF hire a grantee advocate whose job it would be to identify areas of technical assistance needed by grantees and then to arrange for it to be provided; and another urged TCWF to continue hosting grantee meetings, which are “extremely useful.”

8. Reaching communities of color. (Questions 21 & 22.) The response rate to question 21 was low (54%) because “skip to” directions were omitted after question 16. Of those who did respond, 56% see TCWF as reaching out either effectively (42%) or very effectively (14%) to organizations that typically do not have access to foundation dollars. Ideas for how TCWF could better reach out to communities of color fell into three primary groupings: targeted funding (geographic, population, organizational); suggestions for community outreach; changes to TCWF.

Directing funding towards communities of color was considered one of the best ways to ensure their involvement in TCWF’s portfolio. Several respondents recommended that TCWF do more in rural areas by developing a rural initiative and/or by focusing on the Central Valley. Others suggested targeting funds to specific populations: particular minority groups (one respondent provided a lecture on the difference between rural and urban Native American youth), hard-to-serve populations, families of children with severe disabilities, grassroots, new organizations without track records, and local non-profit collaboratives. Others suggested combinations of populations and geographic area (e.g., African immigrants in San Diego!).

Recommendations for ways to conduct community outreach included: holding regional meetings in minority communities (to provide technical assistance, to discuss issues of interest to TCWF, to hold Bidders’ Conferences), TCWF staff making presentations to local groups (Elks, Rotary) and city councils, and/or visiting YMCAs, school principals and college presidents. Other suggestions included using local key organizations, service providers and/or current grantees in communities of interest to reach other organizations, and more extensive advertising by TCWF in minority newspapers, innercity libraries, etc. The strongest theme amongst these responses was for TCWF to show more interest in small organizations.

Suggestion for changes to TCWF that would improve its ability to respond to communities of color included: increasing board diversity by better reflecting California’s range of ethnic groups (including practitioners, not just “professional board members”) and hiring an outreach person who knows the communities. For the grant making process, suggestions included clarifying guidelines, making the LOI a check-off, requiring demographics in proposals and “heavily weighting those that provide services to minority communities,” and helping unfunded applicants (particularly if they are small, minority-based organizations) understand why they were not funded.

9.) Additional comments. (Question 23.) Of the 394 respondents, only 87 (22%) took time to provide additional comments. They overwhelmingly used this opportunity to criticize rather than congratulate TCWF (6:1). The positive comments thanked TCWF for its support, congratulated the foundation on its collaborative efforts and excellent materials, and commented on the promptness, courtesy and helpfulness of staff.

The negative comments tended to repeat or expand upon those already reported. The most important issues include a) desires for clear, reliable, accessible information about what they can apply for, why they were not funded and who was funded; b) feelings of being excluded from getting a TCWF grant, and c) changes which should be made within TCWF, both managerial and programmatic.

Many are frustrated about attempts to get the information they need to be successful applicants. These comments include: the language of TCWF materials is inaccessible; there is too long a delay, without updates, between their request and TCWF's response; and they cannot talk to program staff. The most disturbing comment was "Contact with TCWF was most disappointing and demoralizing."

Many who are not funded want to know why not. Respondents commented on how frustrating it is simply to be told "we received too many proposals," and one stressed the "strong need for information about why LOIs or proposals are not funded, particularly if the proposal was developed with community input." Another suggested that feedback on LOIs prior to proposal development is necessary so that applicants do not have to "play the guessing game about what is needed."

Several of those who had attended Bidders' Conferences and who had applied for an initiative RFP wanted to know who had finally received funding. This was particularly true for the technology grants (Computers in Our Future?). There was also a request for data from TPPI that grantees clearly expected to receive.

Feelings of being outsiders and unable to get TCWF funds were intimated by many different respondents. For example: "I don't know a single successful applicant to TCWF," "won't attempt again—a waste of time," and "continue to open up to all groups, not just those who know TCWF staff wants and needs." For some respondents, there is "mystery surrounding TCWF's funding process," the people involved "seem to be highly reactive, not proactive," and "grantees need to better understand the internal delineation of responsibilities."

Suggestions for TCWF management included involving more people in setting funding priorities and lightening the workload of program staff or providing them with time management training because "they clearly feel too busy." Other comments suggest another side of the issue. For example: "TCWF and TA people fax, mail, e-mail information daily—it has been information overload and there is no way to keep up with it" and "Wellness is very directive and controlling about what they want fundees to do—even if it is not necessarily what fundees feel works best or is in the best interest of the community."

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the survey results, the TCWF staff has a very good reputation amongst those it works with. Proportionally, almost three-fourths of current grantees completed the survey compared with one-third of those who were declined funding. It seems appropriate to assume that this one-third represents the most angry and frustrated of TCWF's client base. Of course, there will always be some applicants who are dissatisfied but given TCWF's almost 8:1 ratio of declinations to approvals in 1996, the staff can be proud of the image they have built for the Foundation.

However, procedures and operations can always be improved and several different lessons can be gleaned from this project. They include improving a.) the survey itself, b.) staff-applicant communications, c.) Foundation materials, d.) understanding situations where and when TCWF

must be particularly vigilant to prevent damaging its reputation, and e) how to make a good thing better.

Before looking at these specific areas however, it is important to remember three points. First, no single foundation (or any service organization) can keep everyone happy. A classic dilemma in philanthropy is that some applicants will complain if the categories for funding are too narrow and restrictive. Others want to be told exactly what they must do to be funded. Second, this means there will always be applicants who believe their project exactly fits what TCWF wants but they will not be funded. Third, there will always be applicants who will not gracefully accept the standard rejection letter. Thus all staff need the skills and strategies to say “no” firmly, but respectfully and empathetically.

Improving the survey. If future surveys are conducted, some questions should be reworded or restructured. Rewording could include listing specific RFPs that have been distributed rather than just the priority areas—this might help overcome confusion about the Work and Health Initiative and Computers in Our Future. Questions about describing the applicants’ organizations and service populations definitely need to be restructured and could, perhaps, be “fill-in” rather than “check-off.” The data analyzer could then develop appropriate categories of prioritized interests to TCWF. Finally, “skip to” instructions must be added where appropriate.

Staff-applicant communications. It is clear from this survey that the complaints were from those who felt they had not been heard and therefore, their project/services were not valued. All applicants want to make a connection with staff and are extremely pleased if they sense that there is an interest in their making a successful submission. It is also clear that applicants want to be told the truth. The following comment best captures this: “(PO) was very helpful with clarification of project fit. She informed me it was not a good fit but said I could apply for a special project. Thanks for the opportunity.”

It is important that program staff say “no” respectfully and that they be direct, honest and reliable. Once meetings, submission dates, etc. have been set, they should not be changed lightly. If they are changed, a clear message should go out to everyone with a rationale that includes the advantages of the change. Of course, timelines should be set with “reasonableness” in mind. All this requires an extremely professional staff, and indeed, many respondents to this survey commented that this is exactly what TCWF has. However, it takes special talent, and perhaps special training, to deal with the demanding, unrelenting, unsuccessful applicant and program assistants and other staff might need careful training if they are to successfully interface between such applicants and program officers. Successful interactions mean that the applicants do not feel “fobbed off” or sense that the program officer is avoiding them.

TCWF Materials. Overall, TCWF materials are perceived as being clear and understandable, particularly about TCWF’s interests, goals and priorities. However, organizations have a harder time applying the information in the materials to themselves. It behooves TCWF to clearly think through the kinds of organizations it considers appropriate for each RFP and provide as detailed information as possible. It might help to think about, and specify, what small organizations must do to be successful (this includes identifying the types of and amount of technical assistance that will be provided as part of a grant) and the advantages and disadvantages of them partnering with other organizations. The same should be done for national organizations. The criteria used to assess each letter of inquiry/intent or proposal should also be clearly delineated (and then followed). Wherever possible and appropriate, review processes should be designed to be open and public. They must be perceived as objective, neutral and fair.

Potentially damaging situations. These are situations where extra attention or consideration by TCWF might mitigate potential “bad press.” Three situations arose from the survey: how to deal with reassigned grantees, how to show TCWF’s concern for special populations, and how to make Bidders’ Conferences even more successful.

It seemed that several of the negative comments about perceptions that the program officer was not interested in the grantee/project could be associated with program officer changes. It is hard for new program officers to understand, or relate to, projects they have inherited from someone else, particularly if the project is not in their field of expertise or interest. However, the grantee remains a “client” of TCWF and, as such, deserves times and attention. At least, TCWF should have a policy about how grantee transfers should take place and how program officers should interact with grantees that they did not “bring on board.”

When asked how TCWF could better reach communities of color, many respondents suggested targeted funding. All funding is based on targeting particular issues or problems and the respondents are merely suggesting that other parameters of interest to TCWF (ethnicity, organization size/connection to the community, geographic areas, behaviors) be used to further target funding. While this might not be easy (and perhaps also not wise with all these parameters), two could be usefully combined: geography and small organizations. This survey suggests that some small organizations felt unable to access TCWF funds. Setting aside some monies in each RFP particularly for them (along with concomitant administrative, fiscal, planning and evaluation technical assistance) could help change this perception. Where such funds cannot be designated, TCWF program staff should have a comprehensive resource list of where small organizations can be referred for different kinds of technical assistance.

How to make something good even better. The Bidders’ Conferences were generally seen to be extremely helpful (the only frustration was being unable to get into one). They are an excellent form of community outreach, thereby making TCWF and its staff more accessible. They also provide essential information, opportunities to meet program staff, and a time to compare one’s own concerns with those of potential collaborators and competitors. They would be even more useful to potential applicants, and would further enhance TCWF’s reputation as a foundation that values collaboration, if they were designed with sufficient time and space to allow break-out groups for potential collaborators.

Finally, it must be pointed out that TCWF is obviously well thought of by both actual and potential grantees and being open enough to ask for their views about the understandability of Foundation materials, how staff treated them, and how TCWF can improve its philanthropic activities can only improve this reputation. TCWF’s willingness to act on some of these suggestions and its acknowledgement of applicant input to any changes that are made will further strengthen this already firm foundation.