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The Foundation Providing Quick Disaster Relief in L.A. and Beyond

The Emergency Assistance Foundation helps corporations provide rapid aid without needing to run their own tax-exempt entity.

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When 80-mile-per-hour wildfires decimated much of the Pacific Palisades and Altadena on January 7, Doug Stockham was ready to give cash for whatever people needed: a hotel room, a meal, a change of clothes and underwear.

But he couldn't. Not because the Emergency Assistance Foundation, the charity he runs, wasn't prepared to provide cash to Southern Californians suddenly rendered homeless. EAF needed to wait a day until President Biden declared Los Angeles County a major disaster area. Then, Stockham and his colleagues began evaluating and disbursing \$500 to \$2,000 grants through its rapid system of emergency relief, based on the recognition that 37 percent of U.S. adults are unable to cover an unforeseen cost of \$400.

In less than a month, this little-known nonprofit — with a full-time, salaried staff of nine and rock-bottom administrative costs of 3 percent — disbursed \$815,000 to over 1,200 families affected by the fires. Since 2011, it has provided more than \$329 million to 411,000 individuals and families facing a range of financial hardships.

The money primarily comes from 350 big corporations that want to give in emergencies to their employees and others, but do not want to navigate the compliance requirements, risks, and staff costs of running a tax-exempt entity. Stockham, who spent most of his career in real estate, grew the foundation from \$207,000 to \$145 million between 2013 and 2020. Aspirationally, he talks of building “a billion-dollar foundation in a few years.”

Disaster philanthropy is a growth field, yet it is also as old as philanthropy itself. Organizations like the Red Cross and Catholic Charities have helped ameliorate suffering from environmental disasters, pandemics, and wars for more than a century. But as the Earth's temperatures rise, increasing the frequency and severity of fires, floods, and storms, the dollars flowing through disaster charities have risen in tandem.

According to data analysis from Candid and the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 1,000 of the largest U.S. funders gave \$860.2 million to support disaster relief in 2022, compared with just \$114.4 million in 2012. A ClimateWorks Foundation report found that in 2023, overall climate

giving grew 20 percent year over year, with foundation funding reaching a record \$4.8 billion — nearly triple the \$1.7 billion in 2019.

Among the new crop of environment-focused philanthropies are the Bezos Earth Fund, Jeff Bezos' four-year-old, \$10 billion commitment “to fund scientists, activists, NGOs, and other actors that will drive climate and nature solutions.” Also prominent is ClimateWorks, a global philanthropy platform to “innovate and scale high-impact climate solutions” that since 2008 has granted more than \$1.8 billion in over 50 countries. Meanwhile, well-established philanthropies like the Gates, Hewlett, Rockefeller, and Packard foundations, in the past decade or more have increased funding and started specialized units to address climate change.

But some experts say the current model of disaster philanthropy can't keep up. Last year brought the world to a dangerous warming threshold: Global temperatures averaged more than 1.5 degrees Celsius above those the planet experienced at the start of the industrial age — marking the failure of the 2015 Paris Agreement. The Institute for Economics and Peace, a nonpartisan think tank, calculates that fossil-fuel-induced climate tipping points could displace 1.2 billion people by 2050. Donald Trump's first acts as president to “drill baby drill,” exit the Paris Agreement, and renege on the U.S. International Climate Finance Plan also augur badly for a fully habitable planet.

“My hot take is that the current model of disaster philanthropy is growing increasingly obsolete in the face of 21st-century disasters,” said Jeffrey Schlegelmilch, associate professor of professional practice at the Columbia Climate School and director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness. “It's trying to run faster to keep up with a runaway train of disasters.”

Schlegelmilch said the Paris Agreement was an important, but largely unachievable goal that left little room to talk about climate adaptation, leading to a “lost decade,” and what's needed are new models that can funnel more money, pre-disaster, into preparedness and mitigation. Until then, he said, traditional postdisaster philanthropy will remain the place to turn to “when government assistance programs and other resources are not available.”

A Charity That Does One Thing

Doug Stockham never meant to be an emergency-relief expert. In 2007, he moved to West Palm Beach and was asked by a neighbor to serve on the board of the Delta Community Foundation. There, he became intrigued — and frustrated — that the nonprofit couldn't easily convert illiquid assets like real estate or private-equity investments. That led him to an expert in the field: Bryan Clontz, a longtime community foundation executive who in 2003 started a company called Charitable Solutions, which manages risk factors in philanthropy.

Stockham and Clontz started working together in 2011 assessing charitable needs in terms of charitable risks and soon found “there was a market need bigger than we anticipated,” said Stockham.

“If you have 10 companies each running their own corporate foundation,” explained Clontz, “then you have 10 charities, 10 boards, 10 990s [tax forms], and the accompanying registration, solicitation, compliance processes, which is just crazy inefficient.”

Creating a Specialized Nonprofit That Scales

Bryan Clontz and Douglas Stockham co-founded the Emergency Assistance Foundation with narrow fundraising and grant-making parameters and a goal to administer disaster and hardship relief on a global scale. To do that, they:

- Completed an in-depth assessment of more than 100 independent relief fund programs to determine industry gaps, best practices, and operational needs, settling on the third-party administration model of corporate funds.
- Partnered with a leading online grant application platform to develop a cloud-based system that could house a template application to be used by all funds and amended as appropriate.
- Remained adaptable, experimenting with new technology and creating scalable platforms and procedures, and then evaluating processes for improvement opportunities.
- Allowing personnel to work virtually and be located around the world. This structure eliminates the possibility of a single natural disaster affecting all team members and impairing services.

Clontz noticed that corporations were quickly forming foundations in response to emergencies like the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia or Hurricane Katrina. But they “either didn’t know what they were doing or they would throw a whole bunch of resources and staff at it,” he said. Then when the disaster subsided, they would redeploy the staff, but when the next disaster hit, the company “would have to do the whole thing over again.”

In 2011, a Fortune 100 company in California contacted Clontz to ask if there was an existing charity that could serve as a third-party administrator for its disaster philanthropy. He knew of several community foundations that might do this work, but they were all focused on local giving. So he reasoned, “Why not create one charity that just does this one thing? A one-trick pony for heavy scale.”

From the beginning, Clontz and Stockham decided the Emergency Assistance Foundation would hyperfocus on three things: philanthropic compliance, grant efficiency, and cost-effectiveness — “to the point where companies would ask: Why would we ever create our own one of these things?” said Clontz.

The nonprofit would also give grants only to individuals. Unlike most relief organizations, it would move money to those in trouble not in weeks or months, but in days — whether to help a victim of domestic violence find a safe home, an employee cover an unforeseen medical expense, or a family in Ukraine buy groceries.

EAF remained relatively small until 2017, when contributions leapt from \$2 million to \$22 million. That was because 2017 was a historic year for weather and climate disasters in the United States, with 16 weather and climate events exceeding \$1 billion each in financial damage.

Another big jump for the Emergency Assistance Foundation came in 2020, when corporations wanted to provide their employees and others with financial relief in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. EAF doubled the corporate funds it managed to more than 300, took in \$144.7 million in contributions, and turned around \$110 million in grants in one fiscal year.

“We had to go from hundreds of grant applications a month to 60,000 applications at peak,” Stockham remembered.

EAF varies its staffing levels, largely composed of contractors, as needed. All work offsite, many are abroad, and in total they speak more than 20 languages, as one-third of grants are made internationally. When Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria swept across North America in 2017, EAF saw a 1,234 percent increase in grants awarded and hired 27 additional contractors. Currently, about 130 members of its staff are contractors. “We can grow 10 times when needed, and I think we’ve done that three times,” Clontz said.

Stockham, who has a computer-science background and calls himself a “process person,” is proud of the foundation’s scaling tools. He has hired four full-time contractors who function as an automation department, looking for areas to make EAF’s systems more efficient for corporate fund partners, grant-application reviewers, and grantees. Half the foundation’s board has always been composed of representatives from the fund partners, to ensure productivity and cost-effectiveness.

In response to the recent Southern California wildfires, Stockham noted grant making has been quick because it’s easy to confirm whether someone’s home or place of work has been affected. “We have something called an immediate-response program, which is much more automated” than how other emergency events are handled, he said. “It’s a very small amount of money, less than \$1,000.” In other cases, EAF’s grant assessors have to do more digging to verify need.

The foundation charges its corporate clients 1 percent of donations, a figure that Stockham said has not changed since 2012. Although most funds are sponsored by companies like Quest Diagnostics, Experian, and Mattress Firm, EAF also has developed emergency-specific funds like the [People First Fund for Southern California Wildfires](#), to which anyone can contribute. Noncorporate donations currently account for 20 percent of EAF’s grant-making mix.

Cash is King

There has long been — and will always be — a debate within philanthropy about how best to help people in crisis. Should money flow through foundations staffed by experts who decide which specialized nonprofits should get grants and in which amounts? Or it is better to empower people by giving cash and letting individuals decide how best to help themselves?

“We scholars and practitioners a lot of times get caught up in the metrics and the idea of a logic model, theories of change, and all that good stuff,” said Sabith Khan, a nonprofit expert and associate professor at Catholic Lutheran University in Southern California. “However, I think the basics get forgotten.”

Khan recently argued that when it comes to disaster philanthropy, cash is king. “The takeaway today, as we see and hear about many disasters, is to always prioritize sending money if you can,” he said.

But many in disaster philanthropy note that nonprofit funding is also imperative. According to November 2024 research from the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 50 percent of disaster funding goes to the immediate response phase, with about 10 percent going toward long-term recovery and just a fraction to preparedness.

“Our team does what we call shoe leather philanthropy or sometimes Zoom leather philanthropy,” said Tanya Gulliver-Garcia, director of advisory and education services at the Center for Disaster Philanthropy. After the initial shock of the disaster, “we go into the communities and talk with leaders, community members, government officials, the nonprofits, the local foundations to find out what their needs are and how we can help them in the longer term,” she said.

Whenever possible, Gulliver-Garcia and her colleagues steer funding to local nonprofits, “because those organizations are familiar with the people who have been affected, the needs, the local culture, the local politics, all of the things that you need to have a successful recovery program,” she said.

The leaders of the Emergency Assistance Foundation are well aware of the need for these kinds of supports. But Stockham and Clotz say they will not veer from their original giving strategy even as their resources grow.

“This is all we do,” said Clotz. “A lot of nonprofits get ADD. They say, ‘Oh, this might be interesting. Or this might be interesting.’ And then they’ve got 18 little plates spinning. Or a new president comes in and he wants to be going left, but the organization has been going right. What we do is laser-focused with continual refinements and improvements. It’s more like a manufacturing or mortgage company, but the focus is on scaling individual grant applications.”