

Moving From Formal Reporting to Genuine Conversation

By Ines Burbulis, Breanna Bycroft, and Virginia Gentilcore

In an attempt to reduce some of the administrative burdens for our nonprofit partners, the **Bainum Family Foundation** recently implemented an oral reporting component for one of our Family Philanthropy sub-initiatives. Although this did result in our needing more time to turn these conversations into written reports for our review committee, we immediately reaped the benefits of making that shift. By only asking a fixed set of questions in our written reports, we were losing out on the opportunity to gain insights from our partners that went beyond what had already been shared in their initial proposals and application.

The goal was to make these oral reporting calls with field staff informal and easy-going, yielding our power and making our time together more like a conversation and less like an interrogation. We quickly began building stronger relationships, and our field partners felt more comfortable in sharing their basic needs, which allowed us to better implement our program. On one call with an organization running a preschool program for refugee children, we learned that children's vital nutritional needs are often left unexamined in favor of other critical classroom necessities. The appeal was urgent and direct: Children cannot learn when they're hungry, and global food insecurity continues to be compounded by the climate crisis.

As a foundation, we're fortunate that we were able to provide the resources to meet this basic need so that children can learn as part of the early care and education program we were funding within a refugee setting. We're working to build trust with our nonprofit partners in the field and to gain a better understanding of what is most urgently needed on the ground.

“In listening to the voices of the people closest to the work, we've opened our eyes and ears as grantmakers in ways that numerical data or words on a page never could.”



At their 2022 staff retreat, Bainum Family Foundation staff reflected on their individual, team, and organizational impacts, which led to new opportunities designed to ease the burden on grant partners. *Photo courtesy of Bainum Family Foundation.*

Partners also shared their appreciation for this new process. They felt seen and heard while experiencing a lower administrative burden, giving them more time to do the work that matters.

In response to these findings, we've become more intentional in creating opportunities for connection, moving beyond depending as heavily on written applications and reports. We intend to continue evaluating our reporting processes through future grantmaking cycles. We want to remain nimble and adaptive in supporting community needs and partner priorities as part of our organization's core strategy. And to understand those needs, we are committed to seeking out and listening to our grant partners' stories. In listening to the voices of the people closest to the work, we've opened our eyes and ears as grantmakers in ways that numerical data or words on a page never could. **▲**



Ines Burbulis (she, her, hers) is grants manager, family philanthropy, at Bainum Family Foundation.



Breanna Bycroft (she, her, hers) is program manager, family philanthropy, at Bainum Family Foundation.



Virginia Gentilcore (she, her, hers), is director, family philanthropy and events at Bainum Family Foundation.