
Fundraising During COVID-19: How Charities are Fighting to Move the Needle and Make a Difference

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The fundraising story during the COVID-19 pandemic has been something of a tale of two sectors.

For organizations that depend heavily on events, the enforced social distancing has created a disaster. At what should be the height of its fundraising season, for example, the Canadian Cancer Society (CCS) projected a \$20 million loss in April. It expects tens of millions more in losses in the months to come.

With its daffodil campaign and other events forced to move online, CEO Andrea Seale calls the pandemic “the greatest challenge that the Canadian Cancer Society has faced in our 80-year history. We expect to see a financial loss between \$80-100 million out of a total budget of \$180 million this year.”

The picture looks markedly different in other parts of the sector. While Food Banks Canada CEO Chris Hatch says the organization anticipates a 50% spike in people needing assistance, the group has seen a comparable surge in giving. FBC [launched a \\$150 million fundraising campaign](#) last month and is now half way to its goal, with \$9 million contributed by individuals, more than \$17 million from corporate donors and foundations, and \$50 million from the federal government.

“The response to date has been nothing short of incredible, especially when you consider that, in one year, we typically raise \$17 to 19 million in total,” Hatch says, adding that \$150 million would be enough to provide basic food staples to its existing client base.

According to Paula Attfeld, the national chair of the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP), “charities who stayed the course with their fundraising through COVID-19 are being rewarded with solid returns,” particularly in regard to direct mail and digital fundraising. “In major gifts, foundations, and corporate, we’ve seen some pulling back – because of the pandemic’s effect on the markets and investment revenue – but we have also heard of major donors stepping forward to increase their support for the organizations they really care about,” she says.

In an early May trends report, KCI Philanthropy, a Toronto-based consulting outfit, said it saw an increase in the number of cash gifts, while organizations “are not experiencing greater than normal year-to-date attrition.” KCI’s survey of its clients also found that, while many offered monthly donors the opportunity to suspend contributions for three months in order to prevent cancellations, “very few took them up on it.”

Certainly, many charities have been asking for support in the past two months, according to KCI and others. Barely days after Canadian provincial governments declared states of emergency and began shutting the economy, charities of all sorts – from large hospital foundations to small arts groups and social service agencies – began pushing out fundraising appeals and scrambling to deal with cancelled galas, door-to-door solicitation drives, marathons, and other events. Many campaigns have been directed to supporting front-line health care workers.

Giving Tuesday, which occurred on May 5, also demonstrated how much traction charities have with their supporters. Appeals came from a wide range of groups, including [the Haisla Nation](#), which raised hundreds of thousands for British Columbia’s Kitimat General Hospital Foundation; [Toronto’s Sinai Health Foundation](#); the Hamilton initiative [The Hammer Feeds Frontliners](#); and Red Door Family Shelter.

Baycrest Health Sciences, a prominent Toronto long-term care facility, launched a \$5 million “safeguard our seniors” campaign, with matching donations from the hospital’s board members (Baycrest didn’t respond to questions about the success of the appeal.)

“It’s still true that people give when they are asked, and so we think that direct response will likely see a resurgence because it represents an entirely safe way to communicate to donors, and for them to respond,” Attfeld says, adding that “it’s possible that the growth trend in online giving will accelerate, but we won’t know for sure for many months.”

The trend isn’t limited to direct cash donations. “There has been an almost entirely unexpected surge in interest in legacy giving,” Attfeld says. “People have been motivated by the pandemic to make or revise their wills, and in doing so, they are making provisions for their favourite charities. This latter trend will favour those charities who step up to market planned gifts aggressively but tastefully. Once again, the winners will be the ones who help their donors do what they themselves want to do – support the causes they care about.”

Recent national statistics affirm that Canadians have indeed been eager to respond. Data from the online fundraising platform CanadaHelps shows that charitable donations increased significantly during the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic. When comparing March 2019 and 2020, the number of donors increased by 62%, the number of donations jumped by 65%, and the overall donation amount increased by 92%, from \$12.3 million last March to \$26.6 million. Giving Tuesday donations, the organization reported, were also up: [four times higher](#)

than average Giving Tuesdays.

CanadaHelps also launched two successful fundraisers: the COVID-19 Community Care Fund and COVID-19 Healthcare and Hospital Fund, which together raised more than \$1 million, which the Gore Mutual Foundation matched.

But all this new fundraising hasn't been distributed equally. CanadaHelp's 2019 *Giving Report* shows that social service organizations are in the top category, followed by religion and health. The 2020 report showed social services remains in the top category for fundraising this March. The other top subcategories are poverty, housing, and homelessness, food services, and children/youth.

Fundraising consultant Cathy Mann explains that fundraising in this environment is forcing charities to think fast about how they operate. "Those groups that feel like fundraising is appropriate for them are busier than ever because they're having to figure out how to fundraise in new ways," she says. "I would say that most groups are desperately trying to figure out how they are going to replace lost revenue from many of their initiatives, so that really sends them down this path of thinking about what appropriate infrastructure looks like for fundraising in more of a digital capacity." Mann adds that many of her clients, which include Sketch, the Ontario SPCA and Humane Society, and Toronto Foundation, are facing this new reality.

Susan Vardon, national director of Right To Play, says the organization had to postpone door-to-door fundraising and an October gala that was set to raise between \$2.3 and \$2.5 million. The organization – which raises approximately half of its funds for programming delivered to Indigenous communities in Canada and the other half for global communities – has had to "recalibrate."

"We have to continue to raise money because our programming is in places where kids are going to be particularly hard hit, whether those are African countries or Indigenous communities that have poor water supply and a lack of good food," she says. "We have programs in 53 refugee camps – those are places where, if and when COVID-19 storms through, it will be devastating."

Right to Play programs are largely delivered in schools, however. With children kept from the classroom for now, the reality, Vardon says, is that the organization has had to shift gears. Luckily, she adds, a lot of monthly donors are "sticking with us, so I'd say there's been less attrition than we expected." Echoing Mann, Vardon notes that "staying close to donors and having lots of conversations" has been important.

Similarly, the Canadian Cancer Society had to migrate its campaigns online. It promoted its Daffodil Month through digital daffodil purchases that can be shared on social media. The campaign was amplified by partnering with Toronto-based Choir!Choir!Choir!, which orchestrated a virtual "sing-a-thon" in mid-April.

"Thousands of people from around the world participated in the event and made donations far surpassing our expectations," Seale says, noting that the event raised \$75,000. The CCS will also transform its signature Relay for Life event into a [virtual and interactive fundraiser called Relay At Home](#) in June. Although she says the organization expects to see a significant drop in revenue from the \$23 million that the event traditionally raises, Seale also notes that the virtual

relay model will reduce costs.

Food Banks Canada, for its part, usually sees a decline in donations in March. Hatch says his team knew that company closures, layoffs, and EI applications “would have a trickle-down effect to local food banks.” The group launched its \$150 million campaign in mid-March using social media appeals, a PSA campaign donated by Rogers Canada, and a 90-minute benefit concert featuring popular Canadian musicians including Justin Bieber, Buffy Saint-Marie, Drake and Celine Dion.

The drive also attracted celebrity donors, including Ryan Reynolds and Blake Lively, as well as 105 corporate partners and foundations, such as Walmart Canada, Subway, The Coca-Cola Foundation, The Slaight Family Foundation, and RBC Foundation. The organization’s plan, Hatch says, was to begin with corporate donors. “Our initial focus was on leveraging our greatest area of supporters through corporate partnerships to help us provide vital aid to those most vulnerable in our communities,” he says, adding that the campaign drew in new and existing donors, with funds supporting a large media and public engagement strategy.

Hatch also notes that one of the group’s key goals early on was to “remain in regular contact with the federal government, keeping them informed and updated on the impact to food banks at the ground level as well as [discussing] ways to support the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities.” FBC is now moving into a “mass-giving phase,” which includes a multi-platform public engagement strategy.

In terms of strategy, Mann has observed that one-on-one conversations have been the most effective. “In many respects, while the medium that we use to reach donors is different [due to COVID-19], it reinforces that some of the good old fashioned best practices are really important at this time,” she says, suggesting that the key to success right now is in the relationships that have been built over time.

“Any fundraiser worth their weight . . . will tell you that fundraising is all about relationships. That’s what I’m seeing with my clients. Those clients that have good, strong relationships with donors who feel like they are partners with the organization are having a much easier time picking up the phone and potentially making an ask for a special gift.”

Not all charities have the benefit of a plethora of donors, however, and smaller charities that service vulnerable communities can face an uphill battle when it comes to getting the help they need.

When the pandemic hit, Thomas Lopez, a founding member of the International Indigenous Youth Council (IIYC), found that many of the Indigenous youth the Council speaks to were unable to go to the grocery store. “By the time they got there,” they say, “everything was wiped out.” The cracks in the system were already well known, Lopez says, among them a broadening digital divide amongst Indigenous youth.

“The majority of young people and specifically the young people that we really want and need to be involved [in the Youth Council] are in rural communities, and a lot of them don’t have money to buy phones that can get onto Zoom,” says Lopez. “They don’t have money to get laptops that have webcams on them so that they can be part of our [social media] Live, they don’t have the money to pay for an internet connection that’s required to wire [money] to

someone in that location.”

To help make those connections, the IYIC sought corporate donations of unused computer equipment that can be distributed to youth leaders. It also launched a \$10,000 COVID-19 fundraising initiative geared toward those who need essential items. “The COVID-19 Community Fund is specifically a monetary option, so if you are struggling and you need help with the basic necessities whether that’s food, hygiene products, rent, or their phone bill,” they say the fund will provide support. “It may not be the biggest fund ever, but it’s something, and we’re just trying to make sure that our young people are being helped and their needs are being met right now.”

Lopez says that the group’s fundraising has been very minimal up until this point. Its campaign has been promoted largely on social media, through the Donorbox fundraising platform, as well as connections to like-minded groups, including the Future Coalition and Climate Strike Coalition.

The IYIC provided the first \$5,000 to help get essentials to youth in the early stages of the pandemic. But Lopez says that amount has nearly been matched by donors, with applicants being offered \$150 and the ability to apply multiple times. Of the 120 applications that have come in since March 17, each has received funding, with priority given to young parents and students. According to Lopez, requests have come largely from Dakota and Navajo peoples in the United States, as well as from Canada and Mexico. “We received a lot of donations from word of mouth – it’s been a very grassroots way of doing it,” Lopez says. “I’ve never seen us raise this much money this quickly. It’s been really awesome to see.”

Mann says it’s these types of fundraising appeals that will benefit from reaching out directly to donors for funds. “I would say that donors during this time are even more open to general support,” she says. “If your budget is going to go up because you have more people to feed because people in your shelters are staying there all day and they didn’t used to stay there all day, you can say that. What I’m seeing is that if you can give donors a sense of, ‘We need this amount of money because we have this increased cost,’ they’re open to offering unrestricted funds within the umbrella of the emergency response.”

It’s unclear what the future of fundraising will look like. The varied experiences of organizations like the Canadian Cancer Society and Food Banks Canada show there’s no telling where or how donor dollars will land in this climate. Vardon points out that with past crises, like tsunamis, earthquakes, or devastating forest fires, individuals and companies have been able to focus their desire to help towards a handful of organizations involved in relief efforts. “I would say COVID-19 is a different animal,” she observes. “Most Canadians feel more uncertainty about the future than they’ve had as a collective for a long time, so I would have to think that that will impact peoples’ giving.”

The charitable sector is responding rapidly to the expanding impact of the pandemic, in terms of outreach, operations, and advocacy. In the coming weeks, The Philanthropist will provide up-to-date coverage, as well as our usual reporting and commentary on other news of relevance to foundations, charities, and non-profits. [Read more of our COVID-19 coverage.](#)