Data and Technology Initiative

Bringing together a network of nonprofits, funders, and technology experts to collectively build necessary infrastructure for immigration nonprofits.

TIDESCOLLECTIVE
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Executive Summary

The Nonprofit Sector Urgently Needs Data and Technology Capacity

Amidst a global pandemic, racial movement uprising, mass economic instability, and threats to our democracy, nonprofits across the United States are pushing for progress in heroic ways. Conversations regarding internet privacy, misinformation, and surveillance are prominent during this historic election year. For nonprofits on the frontlines, data collection, sharing, and security are key to protecting and advancing the lives of those they serve. Yet, the nonprofit sector is sorely being left out and left behind across these areas. In our digital-driven world, an alarming number of nonprofits lack staff expertise in technology and rely on antiquated or ineffective data-management solutions to provide legal, advocacy, and community-support services.

In 2019, Tides hosted a series of interviews to learn about the data needs of immigration-focused nonprofits and how technology can address those needs. Our interviews led us to test the first stage of a collective approach to capacity-building: completing needs assessments, presenting recommended solutions, and supporting the implementation of low hanging fruit opportunities. To do this work, we paired four immigration nonprofits with a fully-funded team of data and technology experts.

From this effort, we elevate these critical areas for philanthropy to consider:

- Data collection, sharing, and security are core needs for nonprofits. The opportunity to address data needs and amplify organizational impact through technology is enormous and untapped.

- While funders are often reluctant to invest in “overhead,” long-term, trust-based funding to build nonprofit data infrastructure through technology is needed now more than ever.

Tides Connects Funders, Technologists, and Nonprofits to Amplify Impact

Tides’ Data and Technology Initiative connects fully-funded data and technology experts with nonprofits and donors to collectively and effectively defend the rights of immigrants and their families. Using a unique collective approach that pools funding and coordinates technology experts, the program aims to build and optimize data infrastructure for nonprofits to advance their impact.

This initiative uses the collective capacity-building model first introduced in this pilot by Tides. The sector approach to date has been a familiar routine: one funder individually invests in one nonprofit’s capacity through partnership with one consultant to address one pain point. But no one funder and single nonprofit can successfully solve systemic challenges alone; the hurdles
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we face are immense and require a collective effort. In this model, Tides leverages its expertise in convening, facilitation, and operations management to unite three stakeholders around the same table.

Under this approach:

- **Nonprofits** can transparently share their infrastructure needs with technical experts to receive support without fear of concern from donors for growth areas.

- **Funders** can build trust with nonprofits while developing their understanding of how technology and data management is used for program delivery and advocacy.

- **Data and technology experts** can work side-by-side with nonprofits and funders to deliver sustainable and dedicated data and technology capacity building to nonprofits, sharing their solutions across the field.

“This [approach] gives us a chance to take a step back and look at our tech infrastructure, and plan it in a way that enables us to scale our work to the rest of California and possibly the rest of the country.”

*Participating nonprofit*

Read on to learn about the urgent need for data and technology infrastructure, the genesis of our pilot within the field of immigrant-serving nonprofits, and our takeaways. Learn why we believe our collective capacity-building model can lead to a sustainable impact that builds collective power for the immigration movement. This work is ever-growing and actively in progress, we encourage you to join us.

**Introduction: Nonprofits, Infrastructure, and an Opportunity for Change**

**Building Data and Technology Capacity is Crucial**

According to a 2016 field survey by the Immigration Advocates Network and Idealware, “the power of a technology investment is particularly significant for the vast majority of nonprofits that are understaffed and that have under-invested in technology.”

The report confirms that “most nonprofits that are struggling with one or more aspects of their technology are already aware of the problems, but simply lack the operating budget for technology projects” and suggests that “joint technology consulting could help get all your grantees on even footing.”
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These needs are hardly surprising. The average information technology (IT) spending ratio of global nonprofits is just two percent of total budget, according to the Roadmap for Funders: Investing in Digital Infrastructure. In contrast, according to Harvey Nash / KPMG in 2019, revenue spent on IT in the private sector varies between “4.8% and 22.5%.” We might ask, why don’t nonprofits ask for more funding in this area? The Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) stresses, “the biggest barrier to including technology in grant proposals is that foundations do not have access to or knowledge of the many proof points that link [technology] solutions to end beneficiary outcomes.”

For nonprofits defending the humanity of oppressed and vulnerable communities, failed data management and lacking technology infrastructure have drastic real-world consequences. And, as Program Officer Michael Brennan, Technology and Society at the Ford Foundation, warns, “If digital infrastructure fails, the consequences will be the same as when physical infrastructure falls apart: people with privilege and resources will find other ways to navigate the world, while those on the margins will bear the brunt through higher costs, decreased access, and a related lack of opportunity.”

Immigration: A Full-Blown Humanitarian Crisis

Nonprofit organizations working to move the needle on complex, systemically entrenched challenges face unique barriers when it comes to leveraging technology to manage data. COVID-19 has only exacerbated these challenges for immigrant-serving organizations. Lawyers and community advocates need the ability to safely collect and share sensitive information for scenarios that range from representing refugees in asylum hearings, to tracing human violations in detention facilities, to organizing for legislative action.
However, nonprofits often only have superficial information and context on those they defend, while government lawyers, for example, have laptops and full databases at the ready. This “asymmetry of data” extends to government agencies, such as the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that purposefully obfuscates what should be accessible data to shield its actions from public scrutiny. When data needs shift rapidly (e.g., when COVID-19 infects a detention center full of immigrants), how will family members or attorneys know where individuals may be transferred, let alone know if they are safe? Data infrastructure needs to be in place already so nonprofits can act nimbly.

We also need to raise a less-often discussed consideration in building data infrastructure—immigrant trauma. As immigrants are shuffled around a broken system, from detention centers to shelters, then to an attorney’s office, and eventually to a courtroom, they are constantly asked to share their horrific experiences. Without streamlined and shared data, immigrants are re-traumatized repeatedly as they seek justice.

This work is not only about maximizing impact, it is about operating with dignity and compassion for our most vulnerable.

“If more foundations are willing to fund technology, together we can collectively shift our fundraising culture, moving to an era of co-created, co-implemented technology solutions that benefit more people in need.”

Bill Brindley, Former CEO, NetHope

Listening and Launching a Pilot

Discovery: Listening to Immigration Nonprofit Leaders

At Tides, we believe in centering those whose lives are most affected when we design our initiatives. When we set out to support the immigration sector, we began by listening. In more than 75 conversations, leaders at various immigration nonprofits across the state of California reiterated the need for consistent and reliable support to enhance data infrastructure and technology capacity—including the need for communications platforms that can support remote service provision, secure databases that house highly sensitive information, synchronized case-management systems between organizations, and more. These nonprofit leaders underscored the distinct need for dedicated expertise in the form of either paid-staff or committed
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consultants—making clear that one-off volunteers, weekend hackathons, and free credits towards a technology platform were not sustainable solutions for building data infrastructure and technology capacity.

As Tides held these conversations, nonprofits elevated two main needs that shaped our pilot program:

1. Stronger infrastructure for data management, sharing, and security within each organization, as well as across the immigration nonprofit ecosystem to enhance collaboration.

2. Unrestricted and long-term funding for people with expertise and sustainable solutions that will outlast current crises.

Testing a Collective Approach to Building Data Infrastructure

Based on our conversations with a diverse range of immigration nonprofits, in 2019 we tested whether a collective capacity-building model that brought together data infrastructure and technology experts, funders, and nonprofits could effectively scope individual and shared needs of several organizations. We paired four nonprofits with a team of paid-for technology experts to map data infrastructure solutions. Tides offered an unrestricted $20,000 grant to each organization to enable its critical efforts and to acknowledge the time and insights contributed to building this pilot initiative with us.

The Center for Effective Philanthropy and Taproot Foundation asserts that nonprofits need support through funded technology assessments. Per its 2018 report, “funding technology assessments helps a nonprofit identify a solution that truly meets its needs, saving them resources and expenses down the line. This larger analysis builds critical capacity by helping the organization plan for the long run while managing day-to-day needs.” These assessments are often costly for small nonprofits, and recommendations are both expensive and left to non-technical staff to navigate alone.

Nonprofit Partner Selection. Tides partnered with four immigration organizations that deliver legal services in various capacities—via direct representation, pro-bono representation, coordination of rapid-response networks, and referrals to providers. To protect the data security of these organizations and their communities, we have chosen not to identify them in this report.

Tides focused the partner selection in California, home to 11 million immigrants (24 percent of the U.S. immigration population). We intentionally chose four organizations that supported immigrant populations in California across a continuum of services (in addition to legal) for a
range of beneficiaries (including youth, families, and women). This allowed us to consider how we might better serve a larger network of similarly diverse nonprofits across the entire state and potentially the U.S.

**Onsite Visits.** The data and technology consultant firm Tides hired conducted a series of in-depth, multi-day, onsite visits with each nonprofit organization to observe and understand day-to-day workflows, to witness first hand each organization’s data-management, sharing, and security pain points, and to map recommendations for solutions that could significantly improve overall operations.

The consultant firm and Tides’ team were intentional about time spent with each organization being additive to their mission and not extractive of their time for the sake of field learnings—a dynamic that can present itself in funder-grantee relationships. We did not take lightly the opportunity to witness first hand, for example, immigrants being stripped of their due process in court or children being released from detention with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

**Here is an example of what we learned:**

A pregnant woman was detained by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Tragically, extreme stress and unsanitary conditions caused her to miscarry while locked in solitary confinement. After her body went into shock, she was taken to receive medical attention and then dropped off at an immigrant shelter. There, her information and experience were carefully recorded into a database during the standard intake process.

The shelter routinely shares its records of over 35,000 immigrants with the ACLU to identify severe cases of inhumane treatment. In this case, attorneys were able to isolate this woman’s information and litigate the human rights violations she experienced.

This example demonstrates that when data is organized, stored securely, and shared with intended partners in a systematic way, nonprofits and advocates can coordinate to deliver critical services for individuals in need.

**Design Sprint.** Together with the consultants, Tides led our four nonprofit partners—as well as a dozen stakeholders from across the immigration and data-for-good community—through a three-day, human-centered design sprint. Participants engaged in rigorous ideation and developed technical solutions to shared-data infrastructure problems, prioritizing the human perspective in all steps of the process.

For example, one shared tool the participants co-developed was a platform that could house sensitive client data for local and national organizations and serve as a secure place for
collaboration, i.e., on remote legal cases. The platform was aptly named The Alliance: The best and most efficient way to share immigrant information.

To summarize lessons learned throughout our initiative, we offer the following key takeaways to funders and nonprofits. We hope they enable funders to be confident in their infrastructure grantmaking and encourage nonprofits to emphasize this as a core area of needed organizational capacity.

**Key Takeaways for Foundations, Corporate Philanthropy & Individual Donors**

**For Funding Strategy**

/ Fund long-term experiments and iterative work. Tools are constantly evolving; solutions take time; and trying new things is important. Organizations need patient capital to build infrastructure. Be willing to wait several years to see the potential impact of your investment.

/ Trust nonprofits; this is paramount. When in doubt, defer to your nonprofit partners as the experts who know what they and their communities need. Spend time with them on the ground and see first hand how capacity-building on their terms can improve outcomes for them and the field. Be cognizant of funder-grantee power dynamics and keep asking: “Is this helpful? Is this working? Is this what you wanted?”

/ Research and implement solutions collaboratively, not in silos. Bring nonprofits, data and technology experts, and funders to the table rather than implementing one-offs. Facilitating collaboration among diverse viewpoints is challenging but can lead to innovative solutions that have ripple effects in the field.

/ Be aware that nonprofits fear funding will be re-routed, not increased. Organizations are wary that asking for data infrastructure funding will replace program funding. This needs to be a “yes, and” conversation where funding for programmatic work and infrastructure building is funded together, especially as these two areas are interdependent in achieving impact.

**For Nonprofit Capacity Building: Keep in Mind That Data Infrastructure and Technology**

/ Are core for nonprofits to achieve their mission. When a nonprofit has access to tech-knowledgeable staff or consultants, the organization creates new efficiencies (e.g. saving thousands of hours in manual-data entry), enhances its ability to advance its services further (e.g. pairing cases with remote attorneys to advance due process), and reduces risk for its community (e.g. increasing detention releases, decreasing deportations).
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/ Can support data-sharing between organizations. Data often needs to be shared with in-house staff, partners in collective rapid-response networks, advocacy groups, and additional service providers for follow-up support. Tools that organizations already use can be integrated with one another, or new tools can be created to make it easier to share information across organizations.

/ Can enable organizational learning. Tracking data improves processes, allocation of resources, and advocacy, making it much easier for an organization to measure its impact.

/ Are ongoing costs and not one-off improvement areas. Good technology is never “finished.” It needs to be updated and maintained continuously as user needs and field requirements become outdated quite quickly. Ongoing funding is needed so that successful data infrastructure and technology is built and deployed iteratively.

/ Have hidden costs and can be hard to navigate. Nonprofits are often encouraged to pursue free or low-cost solutions, but these can have hidden long-term costs. To make nonprofits more efficient and effective, paying for a customized tool, or one that has a robust developer community for updates, can be most effective in the long run.

One of the biggest things I am excited about from these recommendations revolves around how we use technology to gather data. [...] I am glad to have had an opportunity to interact with [our consultants] as they bring a different perspective on where we can make improvements and how we can further develop our in-house technology that is scalable.”

Participating nonprofit

We encourage funders, including foundations, corporate philanthropy, and individual donors, to acknowledge that unprecedented times demand bold new approaches. Build collective power through unrestricted grants for data infrastructure and technology capacity-building that benefit the nonprofit sector. Fund access to expert consultants or dedicated staff who can support a network of organizations. No one should have to go at it alone—we are stronger together.
The Collective Capacity-Building Model

Tides recommends a new model that brings together donors, experts, and nonprofits in a collective framework. Because the data infrastructure and technology challenges nonprofits face are complex, our model uses a dual approach that addresses both funding gaps and shared capacity needs with on-hand, free, and dedicated capacity-building that frontline organizations need to effectively achieve impact.

The sector approach to date has been a familiar routine: one funder individually invests in one nonprofit’s capacity through partnership with one consultant to address one pain point. But no one funder and single nonprofit can solve these challenges alone. While these entities collaborate within their groups (for example, funders with funders) and across groups (funders and nonprofits), they typically do not collaborate as a collective. The collective capacity-building model brings these typically siloed contributors of different expertise together.

The collective approach has three components:

1. Funders add dollars into a pooled fund.
2. Capacity-building is coordinated and implemented through a collective “hub” of experts.
3. A cohort of nonprofits are supported with both individual solutions, and shared solutions.
Benefits of a Pooled Fund

Maximized Resources. When several grants are combined, the impact is profound, making dedicated resources possible for several nonprofits. A lead organization like Tides coordinating and allocating resources can scale impact across various groups.

Reduced Burdens. Nonprofits don’t carry the burden of fundraising for work that is outside their area of expertise. Funders don’t need to worry about dissecting what impact looks like in funding proposals.

Coordinated Communication. Individual nonprofits don’t have to tailor messaging and manage updates, engagement, and reporting back to multiple funders. When grantmakers work collaboratively with like-minded donors, and learnings are communicated across the field, funders can strategize collectively to learn from their respective experiences and have a concerted impact on a specific field or issue.

Philanthropic Learning. The collective model provides a safe space for funders to build their understanding of data infrastructure and technology as essential to efficacious program delivery.

Benefits of a Collective Capacity-Building Hub

Organized Vetting. Nonprofits and funders don’t spend time individually looking for consultants and negotiating pricing. A lead organization like Tides manages sourcing and vetting of data infrastructure and technology consultants.

Coordinated Implementation. Groups that serve immigrant communities focus their energy and expertise on service delivery and advocacy, instead of on managing data and technology experts.

Shared Learnings. Hub experts and nonprofits share wins and challenges across a collective of organizations as well as across the larger nonprofit field—including the knowledge and experiences of building capacity staying in-house with either the individual consultants or nonprofit staff.

Increased Transparency. Nonprofits are able to openly share their infrastructure needs with technical experts and receive support without fear of concern from donors for growth areas.

Benefits of Simultaneous Individual & Shared Solutions:

Optimized Impact. Individual organizations benefit from solutions that meet their specific data infrastructure and technology needs while simultaneously a collective of nonprofits benefits...
from shared solutions that increase their capacity to collaborate, share data, and achieve outcomes. One is not sacrificed for the other.

**Informed Solutions.** In this hybrid model, we create a two-way flow of information that is mutually beneficial between individual nonprofits and the nonprofit collective—shared solutions are informed by the needs of individual nonprofits, and nonprofits can improve their individual strategy by leveraging shared solutions.

“We were worried we wouldn’t get anything out of a group-based approach, but it’s a resounding yes that we have and are grateful.”

*Participating nonprofit*

While the focus of our pilot initiative was on the immigration sector, we acknowledge that the collective capacity-building model, as well as the funding and nonprofit capacity building takeaways noted here, are applicable to:

- Other issue areas across the nonprofit sector that require effective data management, sharing, and security practices—such as reproductive justice services, domestic violence support, youth education, criminal justice reform, and health equity.

- Additional capacity building areas outside of data infrastructure and technology, such as program evaluation, governance, strategic planning, and financial management.
Conclusion: Join Us in Building Collective Capacity

*Tides’ Data and Technology Initiative* uses the collective capacity-building model to provide data infrastructure to immigration nonprofits through use of funded consultants and modern technology. We hope to spur urgency amongst our peers in philanthropy and activate significant pooled funding resources for sustainable infrastructure across the immigration and nonprofit sector at large. We invite you to collaborate with us on growing tangible capacity and influencing real change. Our goal in the next stage of this work is to build off of our learnings and deliver shared data infrastructure and technology capacity support to an expanded group of immigration focused nonprofits.

To learn more and become a partner in this effort, please email info@tides.org.

About Tides

We specialize in bridging unlikely partners to drive bold solutions to society’s toughest problems. To date, we have mobilized over $4 billion for social change globally and facilitated over $80 million in grants supporting immigrants and refugees—a majority focused on grassroots organizations led by people of color. The Tides network includes 50+ organizations and funds working on these issue areas.
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Sources


3 Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG) in conjunction with NetHope, NTEN, and TechSoup. 2020. Roadmap for Funders: Investing in Digital Infrastructure. p 3. ( “According to a 2017 study of NetHope members.” The 2017 NetHope study was conducted internally and shared only with NetHope members.)

