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## Houston Endowment grants \$1.5M to United Way of Greater Houston to bolster local nonprofit initiative




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Amanda M. McMillian, United Way of Greater Houston's president and CEO

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By **Sofia Gonzalez** – Reporter, Houston Business Journal  
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United Way of Greater Houston is ready to take on the challenge of supporting more nonprofits thanks to a three-year, \$1.5 million investment from Houston Endowment.

The grant will help support United Way's Coffee & Quality, an initiative that began in 2019 as a way to help nonprofits understand how to use data evaluation for continuous quality improvement. Specifically, the grant will help expand the program through a

new fellowship and a case study with Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

"The more knowledge that our nonprofits have about ways to measure and improve quality, the more our community benefits," Amanda McMillian, president and CEO of United Way of Greater Houston, said in a statement. "Houston Endowment has long shared this belief, and we are grateful for this generous grant. It will enable us to expand our support of local nonprofits and help strengthen their quality improvement data and evaluation efforts."

When Coffee & Quality first launched, it consisted of a small pilot of partners and nonprofits that came together monthly to hear about several topics related to data, Jessica Davison, senior director of mission and strategy at United Way of Greater Houston – who also oversees the initiative – said in an interview. The program took on people within any nonprofit sector who were hungry to learn how to use data to help express and improve the work they were doing, she said.

In 2020, United Way began its first Coffee & Quality expansion with a learning cohort, which took the pilot further with a deep dive into data visualization and data storytelling. Davison said the cohort model brings in participants for three months to learn this information and apply it, then the cohort continues to meet quarterly to strengthen and build on the work. On Jan. 4, the sixth cohort was welcomed.

Fast forward to today, and Coffee & Quality is expanding another step further with Houston Endowment's grant. Through the fellows program, an anticipated 10 to 12 organizations will have the ability to establish and sustain their data and evaluation practices over a three-to-four-month period.

Davison said \$125,000 will be carved out per year for the duration of the grant to spend on a stipend across the participating organizations to help those involved either update a technology tool they have or create one to have the data capabilities.

"We have seen firsthand how using data to make strategic, evidence-based decisions can help drive impact in our community," Ann B. Stern, president and CEO of Houston Endowment, said in a statement. "With this investment, United Way of Greater Houston will help bolster sound, sustainable data and evaluation practices within our nonprofit community and amplify the work these organizations do to meet the needs of Houstonians and make our region stronger."

As for the Kinder Institute's involvement, a pilot of the case study was first done last year with the nonprofit Angel Reach, an organization that helps those ages 16-24 who are either homeless or have aged out of foster care. Davison called the Kinder Institute an "analytic powerhouse." The institute's capabilities will allow it to help nonprofits build upon the existing data and evaluation practices that are already in place, she said.

Specifically for Angel Reach, the Kinder Institute **addressed questions, analyzed the data, then gave observations and recommendations**. The case study helped understand the goals that clients are setting to allow the nonprofit to better help.

Later this month, the Kinder Institute will support Joan and Stanford Alexander Jewish

Family Service – a social service agency – through another case study. The hope is to have two or three case studies a year; each is usually a five- to six-month time commitment, Davison said.

By strengthening the nonprofit sector’s data collection, it improves the work the organization is doing and allows it to better serve the needs of the community, Davison said.

“What we want to see is a more vibrant community, a more vibrant nonprofit sector,” Davison said. “We know that organizations having data and evaluation practices will just help and strengthen them.”

United Way of Greater Houston also has been focusing on **how local nonprofits can better attract and retain talent**. The turnover rate in Houston’s nonprofit industry is nearly 10 times more than the rate for all U.S. businesses. Local organizations are turning to increased wages and added flexibility to combat it, the United Way of Greater Houston’s 2023 Wage and Benefits Survey found.