

Our History: A Look Back at How We Got Here

The Women's Fund of Santa Barbara is one of the largest collective giving circles in the United States. Between 2004-2025, it awarded grants totaling nearly \$13 million to address the critical needs of women, children, and families in south Santa Barbara County. (Click here for a list of [current](#) and [past](#) grantees.)

This remarkable story started in 2003 when the *Los Angeles Times* ran a feature about Everychild, a women-led organization that took a new approach to philanthropy. Instead of organizing costly fundraising events, women simply pooled the money they wanted to give and awarded grants to nonprofits doing important work on behalf of children. The story caught the attention of Carol Palladini, a local philanthropist who was experiencing her own case of fundraiser burnout. She invited Jacqueline Caster, the founder of Everychild, to speak at a Women in Philanthropy meeting sponsored by the Santa Barbara Foundation.

After the meeting, a dozen local women met to discuss collective giving and whether such a group might be a good idea in Santa Barbara. By April 2004, they had crafted a mission statement which laid out three principles:

- *The Women's Fund of Santa Barbara responds to critical community needs by making substantial gifts in the Santa Barbara area.*
- *Through the power of collective philanthropy, the fund serves as a catalyst for bringing women together with an emphasis on funding meaningful projects affecting women, children, and families.*
- *The fund is committed to educating and inspiring women to become leaders in philanthropy and demonstrating the impact of collective giving.*

After 22 years, those principles are still at the heart of the Women's Fund.

The founding committee included many women who were prominent in local philanthropy including Perri Harcourt, Shirley Ann Hurley, Jean Kaplan, Dale Kern, Joanne Rapp, Elna Scheinfeld, Meredith Scott, Kay Stern, Anne Smith Towbes, Marsha Wayne, and Fritzie Yamin. From the beginning, they were committed to keeping the structure of the organization simple so it could be volunteer-led and nearly all the money donated by members could be given away as grants.

The group turned to the Santa Barbara Foundation for help, and they generously provided three years of administrative support at no charge. As a Field of Interest Fund, the Women's Fund had access to staff expertise and basic services such as tracking expenses and donations, managing mailings and events, and acknowledging members and other donors. Being affiliated with the Santa Barbara Foundation also gave the Women's Fund the benefits of the Foundation's 501(c)(3) status.

The Founders also decided that instead of accepting applications for grants, the Women's Fund would do its own research into critical community needs of women, children, and families. Armed with that information, they would seek out local agencies with programs that could use a sizable grant to address those needs in effective and sometimes innovative ways. The first Research Committee met in August 2004 and presented a ballot to members in December.

Since then, the research process has evolved, but it has always depended upon a committee of researchers who diligently seek out nonprofits that have big ideas about how to improve conditions for women, children, and families in south Santa Barbara County. The Committee maintains a database that includes more than 150 community agencies. Before they can be considered for a grant, agencies undergo a rigorous financial review that confirms that they are financially stable and in compliance with state and federal regulations governing nonprofits.

Agencies with promising projects are invited to submit an application that explains exactly what they would do with a Women's Fund grant, why they believe it would be effective, and how they would sustain the project after the grant expires. Researchers also make Site Visits, either virtually or in person, and present their findings to the Research Committee.

The research process culminates in a ballot that is presented to members in the spring. Each vote represents a contribution of \$2,750. Although some members donate the entire amount, most participate in groups where members pool their donations to earn one or more votes. The groups are managed by Group Captains, and the group members determine when and how often their group will meet. At the very least, groups meet in the spring to discuss the ballot and decide how to cast their votes.

In its first year, the Women's Fund had 67 members and awarded two grants totaling \$140,000. The organization grew rapidly, in part because two donors offered to match contributions from members. Between 2006 and 2008, the Orfalea Foundation contributed \$878,000; between 2010 and 2012, Betty Elings Wells made matching grants totalling \$500,000. These matching gifts resulted in increased visibility and a dramatic increase in membership. As a result, the Women's Fund Steering Committee took steps to streamline operations to improve efficiency and avoid volunteer burnout. Among other things, they built a database for managing membership, redesigned the website, and replaced mailings with electronic communications.

In 2020, after 16 years under the auspices of the Santa Barbara Foundation, the Women's Fund became an independent 501(c)(3). The Women's Fund is managed by a Board of Directors and an Operations Management Team (OMT) which oversees committees devoted to governance, nominating, resource development, endowment, finance, membership, educational events, research, communications, and information technology. All committees consist entirely of dedicated and hard-working volunteers.

Over the years, Women's Fund leadership has introduced many innovations that help members stay connected to the organization and its mission. Regular surveys give members an opportunity to express opinions about critical community needs and the kinds of grants Women's Fund should make. An annual Ballot Review Meeting provides members with in-depth information about the projects on the ballot as well as an opportunity to ask questions of researchers.

In keeping with the intent of the Founders, the Women's Fund also offers regular opportunities for members to deepen their understanding of community needs and philanthropy. When the organization was smaller, volunteers organized annual bus tours of agencies that had received grants so members could see the impact of their donations for themselves. More recently, the organization has sponsored *Grants in Action* forums which bring together grantees who are focused on the same issue.

As membership has grown, grants have become more substantial. Since 2009, a Grant Liaison works with grantees to be sure grant dollars are spent as they are awarded. To maximize the grants pool, the Women's Fund Board has sought out sponsors who underwrite the costs of educational events and operations. To assure sustainability, the Women's Fund has established an endowment which is partially supported by the [Legacy Fund](#). With an emphasis on continuous improvement, the Women's Fund is committed to educating and inspiring women to engage in philanthropy that will make a positive and lasting impact in our community.