

Fundraising Is a Relationship Game Now: What We Learned at the Impact Network Panel

BASED ON WORKSHOP RECORDING

Americans gave a record \$617.2 billion to charity in 2025, according to Giving USA 2026. Yet if you lead a development team, you may not feel like you are in a record year. The same report shows fewer individual donors, with the gains concentrated in larger gifts, and federal funding remains unpredictable.

On September 22, the [Impact Network](#) brought together three fundraising leaders to discuss building a revenue strategy that holds up over three to five years, not one fiscal year at a time. I had the privilege of moderating. Here is what stayed with me, and what you can do with it.

Meet the Panel

[Renee Davis](#) is founder and principal of [True North Philanthropy](#), a fundraising and nonprofit strategy firm focused on major gifts and campaigns. [Rebecca Parmet](#) is Vice President of Development at [Evanston Community Foundation](#), where she leads planned giving and grantmaking partner fundraising. [Candice Schaefer](#) is founder of [Dot Catalyst Partners](#), which helps nonprofits stress test and diversify their revenue models, and has served as a chief development officer. Anna Assenmacher opened the morning with the state of philanthropy data, and NextGroup CEO [Candance Chow](#) moderated the session to a filled room at First Bank Chicago, the Impact Networks' presenting sponsor, in Northbrook, thanks to [Courtney Olson](#), our partner.

Why This Matters to You

Renee said the quiet part out loud: "This is now a relationship game and transactional fundraising models are not going to be as successful." If your model leans on events and year-end appeals that are not rooted in one-to-one conversations, she warned, "you're gonna feel that squeeze." The good news from the panel is that most of the fixes are simple. They are just not easy to fit into a full calendar.

6 Lessons From the Panel

1. **Name your levers before you need them.** Candice lost \$30 million in government grants when the administration changed, about half the budget at her previous organization. Her advice: "Figure out what your levers are before you need to pull them." She suggests mapping each revenue source by how much control you have over it, then looking at earned revenue and corporate partnerships that go beyond checks to volunteering and board engagement.
2. **Look in your own database first.** Organizations often say they have no major donors, when they have people who have quietly given \$100 every year for a decade. Renee: those donors are "higher predictors of a future potential major giver than somebody who came to an event a year ago and gave you \$5,000" and then went silent. A few hours with your data may surface your first ten conversations.
3. **Ask for the gifts that are easiest to ask for.** Nationally, donor-advised funds total \$326 billion, according to the

National Philanthropic Trust's 2025 DAF Report. Rebecca shared what she calls the ask advantage: organizations that ask for a DAF gift are 87% more likely to get one. Planned giving is similar. Bequests reached \$62.2 billion in 2025 per Giving USA, and Rebecca called a legacy society "a pretty simple lift." Renee's three requirements are clarity of vision, comfort with the conversation, and courage. A checkbox on your donation form or year-end appeal is a fine first step. Rebecca also said DAF donors do not have to give in December, so the first quarter is worth a look.

4. **Count the cost of your focus.** Renee shared a story about a client whose summer dinner barely broke even while it consumed staff time. After the team compared hours, expenses and how many attendees gave again, they skipped it. The organization's fall event raised almost 20% more that year. Her point: count "the cost of your staff time, the cost of your focus."
5. **Track leading indicators, and protect the people doing the work.** Renee called revenue "a lagging indicator," the rearview mirror of fundraising. Visits, outreach, upgrades, and non-ask touchpoints tell you whether next year's gifts are on the way. That matters for retention, too. A major gifts program takes about 18 months to mature, and Candice noted development staff tends to turn over in about the same window. If you are a first-time manager or promoting someone into the role, a portfolio, a pipeline, and a clear definition of success at 6, 12 and 18 months are worth considering.
6. **Start simple.** Rebecca's permission slip was my favorite line of the day: "Don't get mad at yourself for using Excel. It works." What matters is that donor information lives somewhere that stays when staff changes. From there, tools like Bloomerang and Little Green Light can save time, and AI can help draft outreach, with one guardrail from Candice: keep donor names and addresses out of free public tools. Rebecca closed by saying a major gifts officer "should pay for themselves fully and bring you additional money." She has one on her team, and I am proud NextGroup helped find her. The credit belongs to Rebecca and her colleagues for seeing the value," shared moderator Candance Chow.

Bottom Line

Resilient fundraising is less about a new tactic than about relationships, time, and a revenue mix you have planned on purpose. You do not need to do everything this quarter. Pick one lever, one database list, or one checkbox, and start there.

Resources

- Giving USA 2026: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2025, released June 23, 2026 ([NonprofitPro summary](#))
- National Philanthropic Trust, 2025 Donor-Advised Fund Report ([summary](#))
- [Dot Catalyst Partners](#) | [Evanston Community Foundation](#), [Rebecca Parmet](#) | [True North Philanthropy](#).

About the Impact Network

The Impact Network is a peer-learning community for nonprofit, philanthropic, and civic leaders on Chicago's North Shore. Each workshop pairs subject-matter expertise with peer conversation, so leaders leave with practical tools and colleagues they can call on afterward. Learn more and register for upcoming workshops at impact-network-ns.org.

The partners behind the network

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