

# GEO Member Story



*How the Butler Family Fund, a small foundation, is making great use of its ability to be a nimble connector, incubator and collaborator.*

The takeaway lesson from examining the work of the Butler Family Fund is that funder collaboration can lead to significant impact, particularly for grantmakers with limited resources.

Through aligned-funding partnerships, regranting relationships and other approaches, the fund has been able to support important policy changes in its two primary giving areas: criminal justice reform and preventing and ending homelessness.

“You can capture everything that the Butler Family Fund does under the heading of ‘collaboration,’” said Martha Toll, the fund’s executive director. “It’s really about impact. You have a much bigger impact if you’re working collaboratively.”

The fund’s leadership has identified advocacy and policy change funding as an effective use of its limited resources — choosing to fund issues and types of work that are often underfunded.

Toll said that for small foundations, doing advocacy grantmaking can make a lot of sense and have a strong impact. Accordingly, the collaborations that the fund is a part of are all related to advocacy and systems change.

“A lot of foundation boards really care about seeing something tangible. Of course, we’d love to see that too, but it’s hard to do,” she said. “Advocacy is very long-term work. It’s not a plaque on a building. We’re very lucky to have a board that understands that and is deeply invested in that.”

The flexibility of Butler Family Fund’s board of directors helps the fund to be a particularly nimble grantmaker that can seize on important, timely opportunities. This has allowed the fund to invest in innovative approaches and attract larger foundations to join in as well.

Recently, the Butler Family Fund saw an opportunity to build a bridge between groups working on homelessness with those working on employment in order to help homeless and formerly homeless people get jobs. This initiative came about through work that was being done by the fund as a regranter, and the fund is helping to strategize around its leadership and other important aspects — but the ultimate funding is likely to come from other, larger grantmakers.. Two larger foundations are now investigating the possibility of five-year funding for this new “hub” that will bring these disparate groups together.

*The defining question for small foundations is this: In the vast realm of philanthropic giving, how can we make a difference?*

-From the “Resources” section of the Butler Family Fund’s website

Toll said that the collaboration came together largely out of strong relationships that the grantmakers had with each other — relationships that capitalized on sharing knowledge and learning from one another, in addition to funding.

“There was a lot of intellectual exchange over what might work and an understanding that we all have separate things to contribute to this,” Toll said. “There was a shared understanding in the community that together we are more than the sum of our parts.”

She added that when it comes to collaboration, having the largest impact possible can mean following someone else, even a smaller funder, if they have identified the correct approach.

“It’s like what people say about leadership, “To be a good leader you also have to be a follower,”” Toll said.

In addition to the important relationships that the fund has with other grantmakers, insight and input from the Butler Family Fund’s grantees are essential for collaboration. Toll shared that not only is it essential for foundations to listen to the voices of grantees and folks doing important work, it’s crucial to amplify those voices so that they are getting proper attention among other grantmakers. Opening doors to new relationships with other funders and organizing in-person meetings are important ways to help effective grantees increase their impact.

“As a funder, it’s really our job to lift up great work and get it highlighted, featured and replicated,” said Toll.

Toll shared that small foundations can build on the advantages of their size.

“I think that there are strengths in the diversity of size,” she said. “We can make small grants, so we can incubate new ideas. We’re more nimble. We’re more flexible and have no bureaucracy because we’re so small. It turns out these are all assets.”

Learning from the Butler Family Fund, it’s apparent that grantmakers and grantees of all shapes and sizes can make important contributions to effective collaborations. We can all take time to learn from each other.

### *Collaboration Across the Pond*

Martha Toll shared about the Butler Family Fund’s collaborative efforts with The Oak Foundation (another GEO member) in a blog post for New Philanthropy Capital.

[Read the post here.](#)

[Find out more about the Butler Family Fund on their website.](#)

## **GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight:**

### *Pathways to Grow Impact*



### *Many Hands, More Impact*



### *Cracking the Network Code*

