

The Busy Environmental Activist's Guide to Planned Giving

A Toolkit for Building
a Bequest Program
for the Long Haul

Position your
organization to
benefit from the
greatest wealth
transfer in history
without breaking a
sweat.

REVISED: APRIL 2025



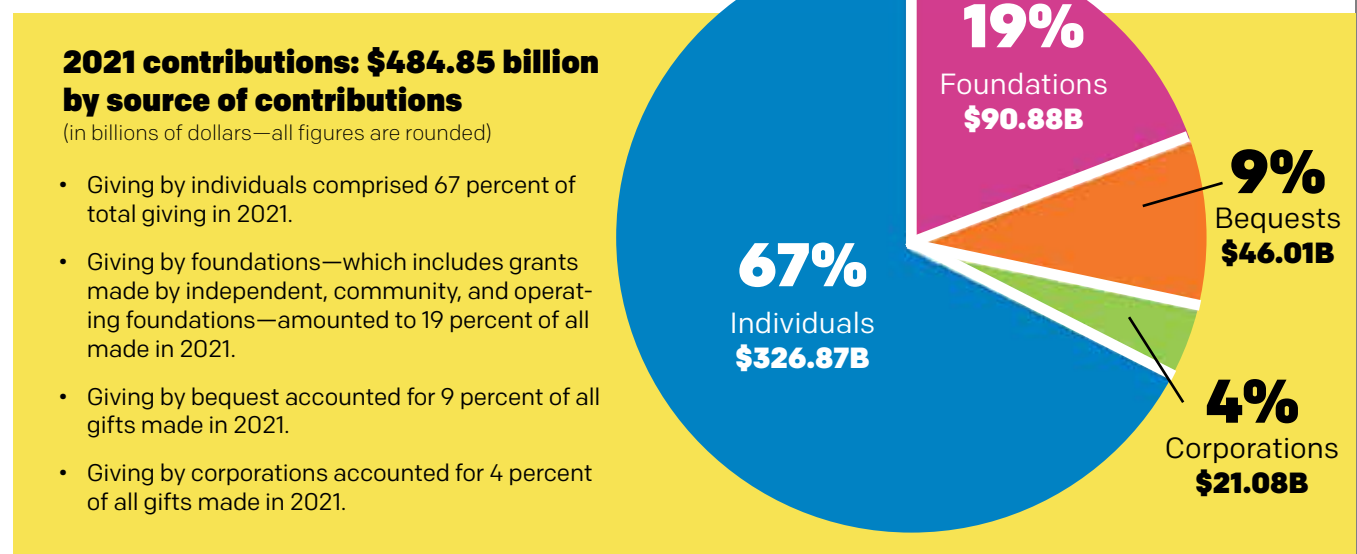
PLANNED GIVING: IT'S INTIMIDATING. IT'S STAFF INTENSIVE. IT'S SLOW TO PRODUCE RESULTS.

Have you crossed planned giving off your (multi-page!) task list or let it drop to the bottom (again and again and again) for any of these reasons? You wouldn't be the first harried nonprofit leader to do so. After all, the XYZ Foundation has a deadline coming up, and you don't want to miss that. Plus, the board meeting is right around the corner, and we all know what that entails. With everything you're juggling, spending precious time contemplating bequests, beneficiary designations, charitable remainder trusts, and other life income gifts is simply a luxury you can't afford—when payroll is due on Friday!

This toolkit is written with YOU in mind. It will offer you a short list of actionable, low-cost steps you can take this year that will help advance your organization's mission for decades to come. Skeptical? I invite you to read through to the end and then make your determination. Ten minutes now could be worth ten million dollars in the (not very distant) future.

WHY SPEND TIME PLAYING IN THIS SANDBOX?

Take a look at this chart from Giving USA:



You'll note that \$484.85 billion was given by donors to charities in 2021. Of that nearly \$485 billion, corporations only gave 4% and foundations only disbursed 19%. So maybe slow down on your race to apply for those grants—you and everyone else are trying to get them, and they actually constitute a comparably small portion of the pie, as it were.

In contrast, (living) individuals contributed a whopping 67% of 2021's gifts. Bequests (gifts via estates) alone made up 9% of the donations—twice what corporations gave. This is why organizations need a planned giving program, and, more specifically, why we should all work to build genuine rapport with our donors and volunteers.

At its most basic level, planned giving is all about building authentic relationships with our closest constituents. That way, when the time comes for them to consider their legacy, we'll be top of mind alongside their loved ones.

IMPRESSIVE NUMBERS . . . IF YOU'RE A HOSPITAL OR A UNIVERSITY. GIVEN OUR SIZE, I'M NOT SURE WE HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE A RUN FOR THESE DOLLARS.

Fair question. Let's unpack it. While it's true that health care and higher ed have among the most sophisticated planned giving shops, they haven't cornered the market on bequests. Keep in mind that while they have their donors, you have yours. When it comes to planned giving success, a constituency that cares about your mission and believes it should persist matters above all else.

Here are a few key indicators that your organization is ready to launch a planned giving program:

Your mission is durable. Single-issue organizations that will close up shop at the conclusion of their campaigns are unlikely to resonate with future-oriented legacy giving donors.

Your financial picture is stable and (relatively) secure. If you're having trouble keeping the lights on or meeting other essential monthly expenses, you're not yet in a position to attract planned gifts.

Your board leaders support the idea and are willing to allocate the resources necessary to get your program off the ground. Patience is key here. While the return on investment is significant, it's not immediate.

You have a handful of folks who are willing to step forward with early commitments. Leaders lead at the beginning, and that's certainly true here. For your program to gain traction, it needs a few cool kids' stories to share.

You have identified a staff point person who will oversee the program. While you may not be in the position to hire a full- or even part-time PG fundraiser, you will need someone on your team to lean in and coordinate the work.

OK, SO THERE'S REAL MONEY HERE AND IT'S NOT ALL SPOKEN FOR.

Bequests, which are gifts left in a will, make up 9 of every 10 planned gifts. Bequests are the easiest way for donors to make a planned gift, so that's where your organization should focus first. All a donor has to do to make this type of planned gift is include a couple of lines in their will or trust naming your organization as a beneficiary of their estate.

The Baby Boomer generation will pass on an estimated \$68 trillion over the next 25 years. Your future self will thank you for taking a few basic steps now to ensure your organization's participation in this enormous windfall.

WILLS . . . I KNOW WHAT THOSE ARE (IN FACT I'M OVERDUE TO UPDATE MINE!).

Still, aren't there lots of "Whereas" and "Now, therefore" clauses and recitals to master if I'm going to be of any help to my constituents?

Not really. By and large, the necessary language for including a charity in your will can fit on the back of your business card. Take a look . . .

Earthjustice values bequests, large and small.

**One sentence in your will or trust can help ensure that the earth
has a good lawyer for decades to come.**

**I, [name], of [city, state, ZIP], give, devise and bequeath to Earthjustice,
a nonprofit corporation currently located at 180 Steuart St., #194330,
San Francisco, CA 94105, federal tax ID number 94-1730465, or
its successor thereto, _____ [written amount or percentage of the
estate or description of property] for its unrestricted use and purpose.**

Thank you!

HMM, THAT'S . . . SURPRISING.

But short of handing out my business card all over town, how do we get in front of people with this information?

Good question! And an essential one to answer correctly so that you're not waiting decades for your first bequest gift to arrive.

To start a planned giving program, you need to know who to market it to. In the very beginning, you may want to send a communication to your entire supporter list. For example, many organizations include making a gift in a will as one of several ways to give on their fundraising reply devices. They may also include it as a postscript in a regular fundraising email.

If your organization has received a bequest, highlight that gift in your various communication channels. Focus on the donor's story – why the mission of your organization resonated with them, the impact the gift is having, and how it continues the donor's interests and passions beyond their lifetime.

To capitalize on such early momentum out of the gate, your first prospects will be your board members, employees, and volunteers. These are the people who have shown dedication to your organization.

You can also use research and donor attributes to identify your top planned giving prospects. Consider surveying your supporters to find any donors who have already made bequests or are interested in learning more about planned giving. Research your survey respondents, as well as longtime major and annual donors, to see if they have the traits of a planned giving donor – senior, single, childless, steadfast giving history regardless of the amount. You can then segment these prospects into prioritized lists for outreach.

As you collect more data over time, you'll be able to segment your prospects even further. Testing and tailoring your messaging to each group can help your organization receive more of these gifts.



caristo / Getty Images

Consistency is key. Prospects act on their timeline, not yours. That's why your stationery, your email signature, and nearly all your communication channels should appropriately ask, **Have you remembered [organization's name] in your will? Or, Please consider remembering [organization's name] in your estate plan.**

By keeping your planned giving information ever-present, you'll make it easy for prospective donors to know that your organization welcomes and accepts bequests, and that these gifts have a lasting impact. A prospect may glaze over this information in your newsletter or on your remittance envelope for months or even years. But if you consistently present the information, there will likely come a time when it resonates with them; perhaps they are helping an aging parent with end-of-life decisions, or another life event has motivated them to get their own affairs in order.

SOUNDS GOOD. SO ONCE SOMEONE TELLS US THAT WE'RE IN THEIR PLANS, THE WORK IS DONE. WE CAN MOVE ON TO OTHER PRIORITIES AND WAIT FOR THE GIFT TO EVENTUALLY ARRIVE.

Not so fast, multi-tasker. Think about it. When someone includes your organization in their estate plan, they've essentially elevated you to the status of family. Healthy families have life-long relationships. Your connection to your bequest donors should mirror this. After all, gifts made via a will or trust are changeable and revocable right up until your donor's death. Just as consistency in marketing is key, so is consistency in stewardship. Relationships require care and feeding to flourish over time.



Andriy Onufriyenko / Getty Images

A legacy society can be used to efficiently and systematically recognize those donors who have made a planned gift commitment to your organization. You can celebrate members of your legacy society in your annual report and newsletter, and at special events.

After you've established a legacy society and incorporated planned giving information into your organization's communications, don't stop! Continue highlighting every bequest, making it easy for prospective donors to access information about making a planned gift, and recognizing the members of your legacy society at various key milestones throughout the year.

By doing this, you will support and strengthen your organization's relationships with your donors for years to come. They will become invested in your organization's success and want to engage as much as possible. It may also encourage them to increase their annual giving!

MY TEN MINUTES ARE UP AND I'M SOLD. NOW ABOUT THAT \$10 million . . .

If you build it, the gifts will come.

Starting a planned giving program is a fairly straightforward process, but it does require a bit of strategy. Prioritize planned giving by allocating dedicated time and resources to your program. Even just a few hours a month devoted to running your program can be enough at the outset. Focus your energy on the 77-year-old childless widow who has made \$100 annual gifts for the past 15 years rather than the 54-year-old business executive in his third marriage. Remember, in the world of PG, it's the millionaire next door, not the millionaire in debt.

To recap, let's review a few essential takeaways from this toolkit:

What is a planned giving program?

A planned giving program is the dedicated set of strategies and processes that a nonprofit uses to secure and steward planned gifts from its donors.

Why should nonprofits have dedicated planned giving strategies?

Planned giving represents a major opportunity for nonprofit organizations to secure their futures. Planned giving has among the highest return on investment of all fundraising types when pursued efficiently. Not to mention, the Baby Boomer generation will pass on an unprecedented amount of wealth to beneficiaries in the coming decades.

What do you do once you've established a planned giving program?

Once your planned giving program is up and running, you'll start the ongoing processes of (1) promoting it to prospective donors, (2) tracking planned gifts over time to measure your progress, and (3) stewarding your relationships with planned giving donors. When made into a regular part of your routine, these three tasks will help ensure the success of your program.

While no one can say for certain if or when a transformational bequest will arrive, you can absolutely count on a steady and growing stream of revenue by consistently lifting up and welcoming planned gifts. If your mission warrants support in perpetuity and you offer your community of supporters the opportunity to join in securing your future, you will be successful.

Now, back to that board report!

If you would like to speak about starting a planned giving program at your organization, Earthjustice stands ready to help! Please contact a member of our PG team at (800) 584-6460 or legacy@earthjustice.org. Thank you for your partnership and best of luck on your resource development journey.

