

Atlantic Canada's Community Foundations Are Already Making an Impact with What They Have

\$13.5M+

in community grants disbursed in 2025 (8 of 10 foundations reporting) – the true total is higher

0 of 10

foundations hold any ESG or impact investment in their portfolio – all assets in traditional instruments

80%

say specific tools or resources would make them more effective (QID70, Philanthropy Atlantic Survey 2025)

WHAT DID WE FIND?

Community foundations in Atlantic Canada are small organizations doing large community work. Together, they distributed more than **\$13.5 million in grants** to their communities in 2025, covering every major area from social services and education to health, the arts, and the environment. They do this with modest budgets, small teams, and investment portfolios invested entirely in traditional financial instruments. None of the ten foundations reported holding any ESG or impact investments. These organizations are also growing, trusted, and deeply embedded in their communities in ways no outside funder or program can replicate.

KEY FINDINGS

- **The scale of what they already do is significant and maybe understated.** The 8 of 10 foundations that reported grant data disbursed more than \$13.5 million in 2025 across hundreds of grants. All 10 support social services, education, and community benefits; the broadest possible coverage of community need.
- **They have community trust that money can't buy.** Interview participants described foundations as deeply embedded in long-standing relationships, mutual aid traditions, and local knowledge built over decades. A national program can't import or replicate these. These are the foundations' core assets, largely invisible to standard reporting frameworks.
- **Their investment portfolios represent a largely untapped community resource.** Every foundation reported portfolios held entirely in traditional instruments such as bonds, equities, and GICs. Not one reported any ESG screening or impact investment. Misunderstanding the prudent investor standard is part of the reason. The opportunity is real: investment portfolios aligned with community priorities could significantly amplify the impact these foundations already deliver through grants alone.
- **They are ambitious and growing but consistently stretched.** Eight of ten foundations are optimistic about the future. Many of them are targeting \$40-50 million in endowments. Awareness and brand recognition are growing year over year. But 60% mentioned operational capacity as a top challenge, 40% have board vacancies, and only 30% rate their board's strategic planning capacity as above average.
- **Community awareness remains a gap.** No foundation rated community awareness of their work as "high." Thirty percent reported low awareness, and 70% reported moderate awareness. This limits fundraising, donor engagement, and planned giving – the very sources of growth that would allow foundations to do more.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

- **\$13.5 million is a floor, not a ceiling.** Two foundations did not report grant values. The region's total charitable giving through community foundations in 2025 is higher and growing. The data

shows only the minimum of what these organizations are already contributing.

- **The investment opportunity is the biggest untapped lever.** Community foundations collectively hold considerably more in investment assets than they distribute in grants each year. If a portion of those assets were aligned with community priorities, as the prudent investor standard allows, the community benefit generated could be substantially larger than grants alone.
- **They are filling structural gaps that public programs don't.** Research on the region's political economy shows that Atlantic Canada's philanthropic culture is not only a cultural strength; it also responds to limited state and market investment in rural communities. Community foundations are doing community-sustaining work that would otherwise go undone. That makes them a public good worth investing in, not just a charity sector to support.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- **FUNDERS: Fund capacity, not just grants.** The most effective investment in Atlantic community foundations is not more grant dollars; it is organizational capacity - staff, board development, technology, and investment knowledge. Eighty percent of foundations say specific tools or resources would make them more effective.
- **PROVINCE: Provide legal clarity on what impact investing actually allows.** The prudent investor standard does not prohibit community-focused investing. Clear provincial guidance would give foundation boards the confidence to act
- **LEGAL PROFESSION: Help foundations understand what they can do.** Lawyers and advisors who work with foundations can create clearer shared interpretations of what the prudent investor standard actually permits and help establish precedent for community-aligned investment.
- **FOUNDATIONS: Name and pursue the opportunity explicitly.** Foundations that articulate a clear case for investment in their work and ground it in evidence of community impact are better positioned to attract the resources, partnerships, and recognition they need to grow.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full publication titled "Place-based Social Innovation and Community Foundations in Rural Atlantic Canada" can be accessed online: <https://ruraldev.ca/philanthropyatlantic/>

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