

In early 2020, the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) Community experienced abrupt conference and event cancellations due to COVID-19. The immediate financial impact to the FOSS community and event organizers was clear and potentially devastating. However, we did not know how this impact would fully manifest nor who would be affected the most. Given this understanding, we knew we had to act quickly. The result was the formation of the FOSS Responders working group.

FOSS Responders rallied nearly 100 volunteers from more than 20 organizations across the tech industry and FOSS Community. These volunteers focused their efforts on these core initiatives:

- Collecting support requests
- Fundraising for FOSS Responders
- Planning and execution for the UPLIFT! fundraising event
- Collecting resources for event organizers in need of support
- Communicating about the overall FOSS Responders effort
- Fielding individual support requests

The rest of this report details the collection of support requests, fundraising efforts, funds distribution, and learnings to date.

Collecting Support Requests

For the purposes of financial aid, we scoped the FOSS Responders effort to include only event organizers and individuals who had incurred financial losses from event cancellations due to COVID-19 e.g. “an event organizer who lost non-refundable hotel deposits” or “a conference attendee who had to cancel their travel and was unable to get refunds.” Using a combination of direct outreach, social networks, and other communication channels, we solicited support requests from individuals and event organizers whom we believed to be in scope. During the course of this outreach effort, it became clear that there was another category of request that should be in scope: organizations who primarily used events for fundraising activities of their own e.g. “an organization who used an event booth to raise donations for their non-profit.” We determined these requests should be in-scope and included them in our overall effort.

In total, we received 23 requests for organizational support and 7 requests for individual support (these numbers exclude requests that were clearly out of scope or fraudulent). As partner funds were not used to fund individual requests, these have been excluded from this report.

The 23 requests for organization support indicated total projected losses of over \$3.4 million dollars across all requesting organizations, with requested support amounts ranging from

\$2,500-\$100,000. Five requests came in after the UPLIFT! Event deadline and were not considered for the event. From the remaining 18 requests, 10 organizations were selected by a review committee to be invited to the UPLIFT! Event. These 10 organizations were [The Apache Software Foundation](#), [Drupal Association](#), [Electronic Frontier Foundation \(EFF\)](#), [FOSSASIA](#), [Free Software Foundation](#), [GNOME Foundation](#), [Open Source Matters Inc.](#), [Plain Schwarz/Berlin Buzzwords](#), [Python Software Foundation](#), and [The Tor Project](#). As tallied by interview, these organizations represent 1000s of open source contributors and 100s of employees.

Fundraising for FOSS Responders

Based on early interest from two large donors, we set a goal of raising \$200,000 for the FOSS Responders UPLIFT! Event. As the impact of COVID-19 unfolded across the industry, many expected corporate donors implemented spending constraints that inhibited overall fundraising efforts. Notably, a large social media company committed a donation of \$100,000, but this commitment was withdrawn after a change in spending policies at the company. At the time of the UPLIFT! event, we had raised a total of \$116,000 for FOSS Responders - \$50,000 from the Sloan Foundation, and another \$66,000 from a mix of private sector organizations and other foundations. Other participating funders were Indeed, Google, Sentry, DigitalOcean, The Linux Fund, GitHub, and The Ethereum Foundation. The Open Collective, who administered the collection and distribution of the funds, waived all platform fees for the FOSS Responders effort. Due to platform constraints, this took the form of donating platform fees back to the FOSS Responders Open Collective.

While less than the \$200,000 goal to which we aspired, the pool of funding stands as a significant achievement for the sustainability of the open source ecosystem. To date, there has been little collective contribution to the FOSS Community in response to the COVID-19 economic contraction by either the private or public sector. As events continue to be postponed, cancelled, or transitioned to a virtual format, organizations continue to cut staff and portfolio roadmaps. These organizations serve as the underpinnings of our digital infrastructure. The FOSS Community is clearly not immune to the economic contraction of COVID-19, yet unlike other industry responses there has been a dearth of directed review of impact of the open source technology sector and a commensurate stimulus response. Much like the projects that open source organizations support, the organizations themselves need to balance their needs against a scarcity of economic support.

Distribution Of Funds

Of the \$116,000 raised for FOSS Responders, \$11,000 will be transferred to the FOSS Responders General Fund, to be used to fund future individual and organizational requests (e.g.

the organizational requests that came in post-event). Of the remaining \$105,000, we have distributed \$66,024, leaving \$38,976 cash on hand from the UPLIFT! event. The remaining funds will be distributed when the rest of the recipients have finished submitting their distribution requests. All recipients have been notified, and their distribution requests are in process.

To divide the \$105,000 between the 10 recipients, we assembled a committee of representatives from the FOSS Community, tech industry, and participating funders. Each committee member was given an equal share of the \$105,000 to distribute and access to the requests for support. This approach allowed us to distribute decision making across a range of experiences and perspectives, while reducing the impact of individual biases on the distribution of funds. Final distributions ranged from \$5,292 to \$23,100.

Learnings To Date

We made several key observations during the execution of the UPLIFT! event and related activities.

Organizations with strong member bases appeared to be successful in making up their shortfalls by appealing to the community. Both the Python Software Foundation and the Drupal Association were facing significant losses due to the cancellation of their large annual in-person events (PyCon and DrupalCon, respectively), but were able to significantly reduce the anticipated impacts by energizing their existing member and sponsor bases.

Organizations with fundraising expertise made more requests than individual impacted community members. During the collection of support requests, we reached out to a number of individuals who were reluctant to request assistance on the grounds that “someone else needs help more than I do.” By contrast, organizations that have more experience and expertise in fundraising were less reluctant to ask for help. This observation points to the conclusion that *organizations most in need of support may not be the organizations requesting the most assistance*. This further defines the knowledge gap that exists between individual and institutional FOSS Community members, and is a topic worth exploring further: How can ensure that individual community members request financial assistance when it's appropriate?

Cross-organization communication, planning, and collaboration appears to be largely informal. During our regular FOSS Responder calls, it was not uncommon to have 3-4 volunteers with ties to large open source foundations. These volunteers regularly indicated that they don't normally have coordinated touch-points with each other, and expressed a desire to see the collaboration continue. With a finite pool of funding in the FOSS ecosystem, and anticipating constrained budgets in the near-to-mid term, coordination between these

organizations could play a key role in ensuring that there is enough funding to ensure operational stability through the COVID-19 crisis.

Next Steps

With most organizations having pivoted to virtual events for the foreseeable future, there have been fewer sudden, unanticipated event cancellations. This means fewer immediate, significant, and unanticipated losses. FOSS organizations have had time to adjust their fundraising strategies and innovate on ways to raise additional funds, though overall fundraising from corporate sponsors remains a challenge. The FOSS Responders working group was successful in mobilizing a crisis response, but as the FOSS Community has adjusted to COVID-19, efforts appear to have shifted to long-term resilience, maintaining operational stability, and innovating in the virtual event space. In this context, there are several next steps for FOSS Responders.

Distribute the remaining Cash-In-Hand. Individual support requests have stopped coming in, and we have a few organizational requests in hand with available funds to meet their needs. Our plan is to fulfill existing and pending requests for support, and retain \$10,000 in the FOSS Responders General Fund, to be used as COVID-19 impact changes in the coming months and to fund a potential re-mobilization of the working group. If these funds end up not being used, they will be redistributed to support other FOSS organizations.

Wind down and pause FOSS Responder operations. Over the next two weeks, the FOSS Responders working group will ensure that we have appropriately captured documentation related to the execution of the UPLIFT! event and any associated activities. Our intention is to pause operations and set clear criteria for when to mobilize the working group for another crisis response effort. The FOSS Responders [Resource Center](#) will be kept open for casual contribution so that organizations can share tips on how to organize FOSS conferences, fundraising campaigns, and future response efforts.

Initiate a cross-organization funding working group. A subset of the FOSS Responders working group will be spinning up a new effort to coordinate fundraising efforts across the FOSS organization landscape, with the goal of ensuring that participating organizations are sharing their needs, anticipated shortfalls, and strategies for raising funds from additional corporate or individual sponsors. This working group will also put some effort into mapping the flow of funding into the FOSS ecosystem, so that we can model anticipated changes across the landscape more effectively. This work will be announced via the FOSS Responders Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/fossresponders>

Research ways to bridge the fundraising knowledge gap between individual and

institutional FOSS Community members. When individuals refrain from asking for help because “someone else needs it more than I do,” it is unlikely that they envision that the recipient instead would be a large foundation with a significant budget. We should conduct additional research aimed at helping individuals recognize when financial assistance would be beneficial and/or vital to their project, and educating them on how to ask for money appropriately. By bridging this knowledge gap, we can work toward new models of distributing funds based on need rather than expertise or project popularity.