UNCOMMON EVALUATION

WHITE PAPER

CHASING GRANTS, UNDERFUNDING PROOF

How Survival-Mode Funding Weakens Nonprofit Impact, Evaluation, and Long-Term Sustainability

Chasing Grants, Underfunding Proof
How Survival-Mode Funding Weakens Nonprofit Impact, Evaluation, and Long-Term Sustainability

A white paper by Uncommon Evaluation
Prepared by Crystal Hincks
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Website: uncommonevaluation.com
Email: hello@uncommonevaluation.com

About Uncommon Evaluation
Uncommon Evaluation supports social, justice, and nonprofit organizations in building practical evaluation systems, strengthening outcome measurement, and communicating the value of their work. Our work focuses on making evaluation more useful, accessible, and strategically connected to funding, learning, and long-term sustainability.

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Disclaimer

This white paper is intended for informational and educational purposes only. It is not legal, financial, fundraising, or grantmaking advice. The analysis and recommendations provided are general in nature and may not apply to every organization, funding context, or program model. Organizations should consider their own circumstances, funding requirements, data capacity, and strategic priorities when applying the ideas discussed in this paper.

This paper responds to and draws upon themes from the Center for Effective Philanthropy's State of Nonprofits 2026 report. It is not produced by, affiliated with, or endorsed by the Center for Effective Philanthropy.

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ABSTRACT

This white paper responds to the Center for Effective Philanthropy's *State of Nonprofits 2026* report, which describes a nonprofit sector facing increased demand, funding uncertainty, staffing strain, and difficult decisions about future sustainability. Using those findings as a starting point, this paper examines how short-term funding pressures can push nonprofits into a survival-mode cycle: organizations need stronger evidence to secure funding, but funding instability leaves little room to build the systems that produce that evidence.

This challenge is especially significant for social and justice programs, where many of the most valuable outcomes are complex, preventative, and difficult to capture through standard reporting. Prevention, stability, reduced system use, and avoided harm may create substantial value, yet remain undercounted when organizations lack clear outcomes, usable data, stakeholder insight, and analysis capacity.

The paper argues that evaluation should be understood as funding infrastructure, not simply as an administrative requirement or year-end reporting task. Stronger evaluation infrastructure can help organizations clarify what is working, communicate value more credibly, make better strategic decisions, and strengthen the case for continued investment. This does not require every nonprofit to build a large evaluation department or launch a complex multi-year study. It does require treating evidence-building as part of how organizations sustain, adapt, and advocate for their work.

Ultimately, this paper calls on nonprofits and funders to recognize evaluation as essential to long-term sustainability. If organizations are expected to prove value, defend programs, and compete for limited funding, then evaluation cannot remain an afterthought. It must be built into how programs learn, communicate, and make the case for continued investment.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nonprofit organizations are being asked to do more, prove more, and adapt faster, often with fewer resources and less predictable funding. The Center for Effective Philanthropy's *State of Nonprofits 2026* report describes a sector facing increased demand for services, greater difficulty securing funding, staffing strain, budget uncertainty, and difficult decisions about how to sustain programs in an unstable environment (Grundhoefer et al., 2026). For many organizations, these conditions are not simply financial challenges. They create a survival-mode operating cycle.

In this environment, nonprofits understandably prioritize activities most visibly tied to immediate revenue, including fundraising, grant writing, donor engagement, and cost containment. These functions are essential. Organizations need funding to keep programs running, retain staff, and continue serving communities. However, when immediate revenue activity consistently takes priority over evaluation, organizations may delay the very evidence-building work that makes future funding more secure.

This creates a funding-evidence trap. Nonprofits are expected to report outcomes, justify renewals, demonstrate impact, and show funders that their programs are worth continued investment. Yet many are not resourced to build the evaluation systems, outcome measures, data practices, and learning capacity required to do this credibly. The problem is not that nonprofits do not care about evaluation. The problem is that the funding environment often rewards short-term revenue activity while underfunding the very evidence base that makes long-term sustainability possible. As a result, evaluation is often assembled after the fact, when a report is due, a funder asks harder questions, or a program needs to defend its value.

The consequences are especially significant for social and justice programs. These programs often create value through prevention, stability, reduced system use, and avoided harm. A program may help prevent homelessness, reduce justice involvement, stabilize families, improve safety, or reduce reliance on crisis systems. These outcomes can be highly valuable, but they are often difficult to capture through standard activity reporting. Without stronger evaluation infrastructure, the value of this work may remain difficult to see, explain, and fund.

This white paper argues that evaluation should be understood as funding infrastructure, not merely as a compliance task or year-end reporting requirement. Stronger evaluation can help organizations clarify what is working, communicate value more credibly, make better strategic decisions, and build stronger cases for continued investment.

The paper offers recommendations for both nonprofits and funders. Nonprofits can build evaluation earlier, connect evidence to fundraising strategy, and treat learning as part of sustainability. Funders can support evaluation capacity, reduce performative reporting, resource the evidence they ask organizations to provide, and create conditions for multi-year learning. If funders want stronger evidence, and nonprofits want stronger funding cases, evaluation cannot remain an afterthought.

> *The problem is not that nonprofits do not care about evaluation. The problem is that the funding environment often rewards short-term revenue activity while underfunding the very evidence base that makes long-term sustainability possible.*

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Effective Philanthropy's *State of Nonprofits 2026* report describes a nonprofit sector under significant pressure. Leaders are navigating increased demand for services, greater difficulty securing funding, staffing strain, budget uncertainty, and difficult decisions about how to sustain programs in an unstable environment (Grundhoefer et al., 2026). For many organizations, these pressures are not simply financial challenges. They create a survival-mode operating cycle in which immediate revenue activity, such as fundraising, grant writing, donor engagement, and cost containment, understandably takes priority.

This paper responds directly to the findings of the *State of Nonprofits 2026* report, but it is not intended as a critique of the report or its conclusions. Instead, it uses those findings as a starting point for a related question: *if nonprofits are being pushed into survival mode, what kinds of infrastructure could help them move from short-term reaction to longer-term strength*? One important opportunity is to strengthen the evidence infrastructure organizations need to make better decisions, communicate value more clearly, and build stronger cases for continued investment. If nonprofits are being asked to prove impact, justify continued funding, and make difficult decisions about which programs to protect or grow, then evaluation cannot remain separate from the funding conversation.

The challenge is that evaluation is often treated as secondary to fundraising, even though strong evaluation makes fundraising more credible. Without clear outcomes, useful data, stakeholder insight, and evidence of value, organizations may be left making the case for their work with activity counts, anecdotes, and urgency alone. These tools matter, but they are rarely enough to support long-term sustainability, especially for social and justice programs where the most important outcomes are often preventative, complex, and difficult to see in standard reporting.

This paper argues that evaluation should be understood as core funding infrastructure, not merely as a compliance task or year-end reporting requirement. In a difficult funding environment, stronger evidence can help organizations show what is working, communicate value more clearly, make better strategic decisions, and build stronger cases for continued investment. The current moment is undeniably difficult, but it also presents an opportunity to move from survival-driven reporting toward evidence-building that supports resilience, credibility, and social value.

CEP REPORT FINDINGS

Based on survey responses from 380 nonprofit organizations, the Center for Effective Philanthropy's (CEP) *State of Nonprofits 2026* report shows that funding instability is not only affecting budgets. It is shaping how organizations plan, staff, fundraise, and make decisions about the future.

According to the report, since January 2025, **almost 60% of nonprofit CEOs reported that foundation grants had become harder to secure, while 44% reported reduced funding from foundation funders.** More than **one-third also reported reduced funding from federal government sources, state or local government, and individual donors.** The report notes that these cuts are having real operational consequences. Organizations that experienced government funding cuts were more likely to reduce services, and those affected by state or local funding cuts were more likely to reduce both services and staffing (Grundhoefer et al., 2026).

The *State of Nonprofits 2026* report also highlights the psychological and strategic effects of an unpredictable funding environment. More than one-third of nonprofit CEOs said uncertainty in the current funding environment was their biggest challenge, apart from simply needing more money. Respondents described volatility in giving, reduced or dropped foundation support, donor overload, anxiety about public funding, and scarcity thinking across the sector. For many organizations, the issue is not only that funding has declined. It is that leaders do not know what funding they can count on next (Grundhoefer et al., 2026).

In response, nonprofits are making immediate survival-oriented decisions. The *State of Nonprofits 2026* report found that many organizations are considering or pursuing actions such as delaying planned staffing cost increases, using reserve funds, reducing programming or services, and reducing reliance on government or foundation funding (Grundhoefer et al., 2026). These actions may be necessary, but they also reflect a sector forced into short-term financial triage.

For this white paper, the key takeaway is that funding cuts and uncertainty do not simply create budget gaps. They push organizations toward immediate revenue activity and away from longer-term infrastructure building. **When leaders are trying to replace lost funding, retain staff, protect services, and reassure boards, evaluation capacity can easily be delayed or treated as secondary. The irony, of course, is that stronger evidence is often exactly what organizations need to make a more compelling case for continued investment.** The result is a survival cycle: organizations need better evidence to secure funding, but funding instability leaves little room to build the systems that produce that evidence.

One notable absence in the *State of Nonprofits 2026* report is the language of evaluation. The report describes a sector under significant pressure: nonprofits are facing increased demand, reduced or harder-to-secure funding, budget deficits, staffing strain, and deep uncertainty about the future. Leaders are responding by prioritizing immediate financial survival, especially through active fundraising, donor engagement, cost reduction, reserve use, and potential reductions in programming or services. What is far less visible in the report is evaluation as part of the response.

This absence is understandable, but important. **When organizations are operating in survival mode, evaluation may not feel like the most urgent investment.** Fundraising, grant writing, and donor engagement are more directly tied to short-term revenue, while evaluation can appear slower, more indirect, or easier to postpone. But this is precisely the strategic tension. The same organizations being asked to secure new funding, retain existing funders, justify programs, and make difficult decisions about services also need credible evidence to show what is working, what value is being created, and where limited resources should be directed.

In that sense, the absence of evaluation from the conversation is not a minor detail. It reflects a broader sector pattern: **evaluation is often treated as secondary to fundraising, even though it is part of the infrastructure that makes fundraising more credible.** Without strong outcome data, clear program logic, and evidence of value, organizations may be forced to make their case with activity counts, anecdotes, and urgency alone. Those tools matter, but they are not enough to support long-term sustainability.

The point is not that every nonprofit in financial distress should immediately launch a complex evaluation. That would be an impressive way to make a hard year worse. Rather, **the point is that evaluation needs to be understood as part of the funding conversation, not something separate from it.** If nonprofits are expected to prove impact, defend programs, and compete for scarce dollars, then evidence-building cannot remain an afterthought.

THE SURVIVAL-MODE FUNDING CYCLE

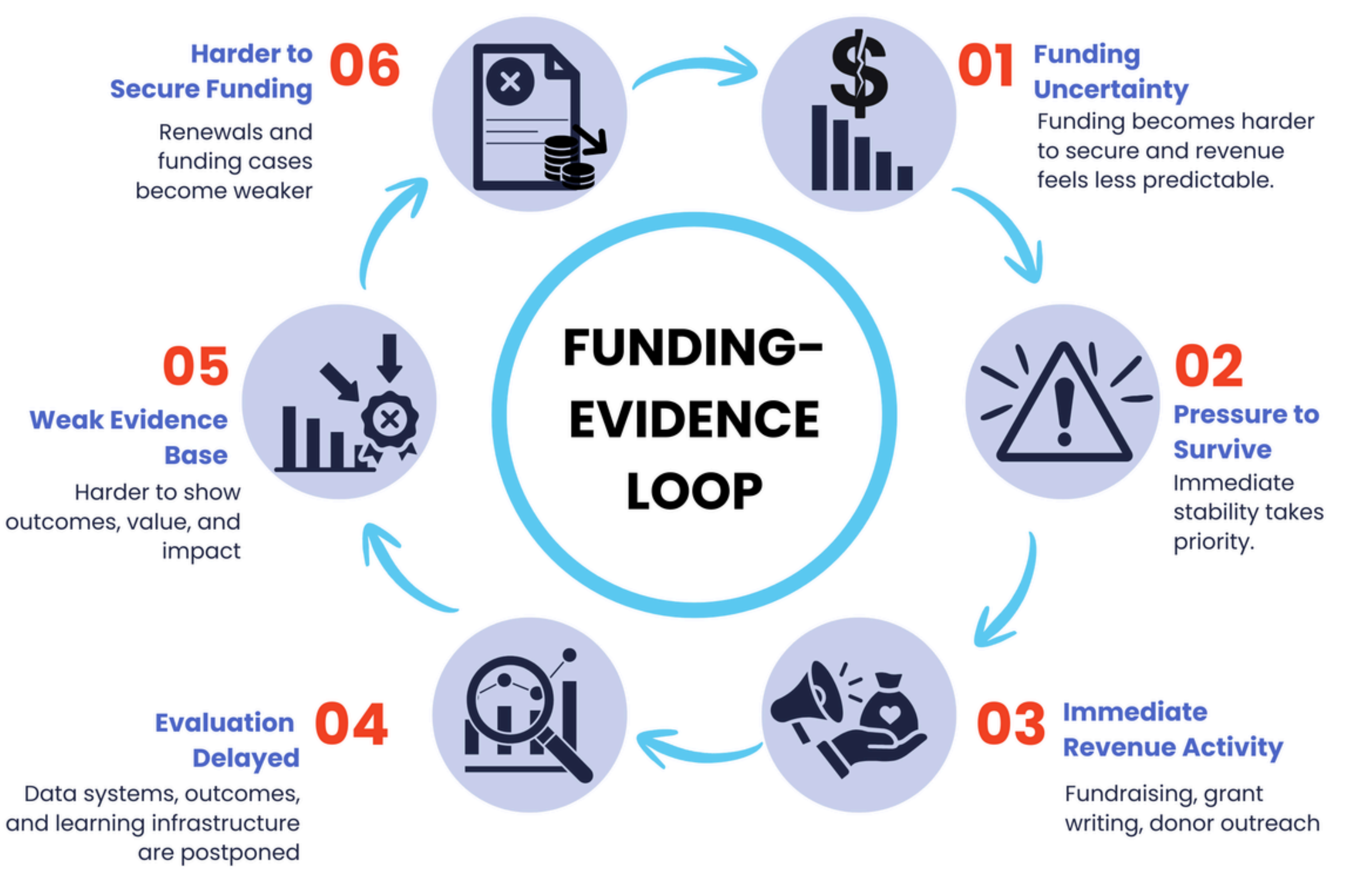
For many nonprofits, funding is not a stable foundation. It is a recurring deadline. Organizations move from one grant application to the next, one renewal period to the next, and one reporting cycle to the next, often while managing rising demand, staffing constraints, and uncertain revenue. The *State of Nonprofits 2026* report describes this operating environment clearly: nonprofit leaders are facing increased demand for services, an increasingly difficult funding landscape, and heightened burnout among leaders and staff. Survey results shared in the report found that 73 percent of nonprofit CEOs reported increased demand for services since January 2025, while almost 60 percent reported that foundation grants had become harder to secure (Grundhoefer et al., 2026). In other words, many organizations are being asked to do more at the exact moment it is becoming harder to fund the work.

This context pushes organizations toward immediate revenue activity. Fundraising, grant writing, donor stewardship, and business development become urgent because they are tied to short-term survival. These roles and activities are relatively easy to justify internally: they are directly connected to bringing money in the door. When an organization is worried about payroll, service continuity, or whether a program will survive another year, investing in development capacity can feel not only reasonable, but unavoidable. The logic is simple: without funding, there is no program to evaluate, improve, or scale.

The problem is that this logic, while understandable, can become self-reinforcing. As organizations spend more time chasing the next grant, they often have less time and fewer resources to build the evidence infrastructure that would make future funding easier to secure. Evaluation planning, outcome measurement, data quality improvement, cost tracking, and learning systems are pushed into the background because they do not always produce immediate revenue. They are treated as important, but not urgent. Naturally, “important but not urgent” is where many nonprofit infrastructure needs go to eventually develop into expensive future problems.

Over time, this creates a survival-mode funding cycle. Funding uncertainty leads organizations to prioritize immediate revenue generation. Immediate revenue generation consumes leadership attention and staff capacity. Evaluation and learning infrastructure are delayed or underfunded. When funders later ask for stronger evidence of outcomes, impact, or value, the organization has to reconstruct that evidence after the fact. This often requires more time, more staff effort, more consultant support, and more interpretive gymnastics than would have been needed if evaluation had been built into the work from the beginning.

The Survival-Mode Funding Cycle



The result is not only an evaluation problem. It is a fundraising problem. Grant writers and development staff are expected to make compelling cases for support, but they may be working with incomplete outcome data, inconsistent reporting systems, unclear program logic, and impact stories that are meaningful but not well connected to evidence. They are asked to demonstrate value without the infrastructure required to show it clearly. This can leave organizations relying heavily on outputs, anecdotes, and broad claims about impact when funders are increasingly asking more specific questions about effectiveness, value, sustainability, and results.

This dynamic is especially challenging for social and justice programs because their most important outcomes are often complex, preventative, and long-term. A program may help prevent homelessness, reduce justice involvement, stabilize families, improve safety, strengthen caregiver capacity, or reduce reliance on crisis systems. These outcomes can create significant value, but they are rarely captured well through basic activity counts. If the organization has not defined outcomes early, collected baseline and follow-up data, tracked participant change, or documented the cost of service delivery, it becomes much harder to demonstrate that value when funding is at stake.

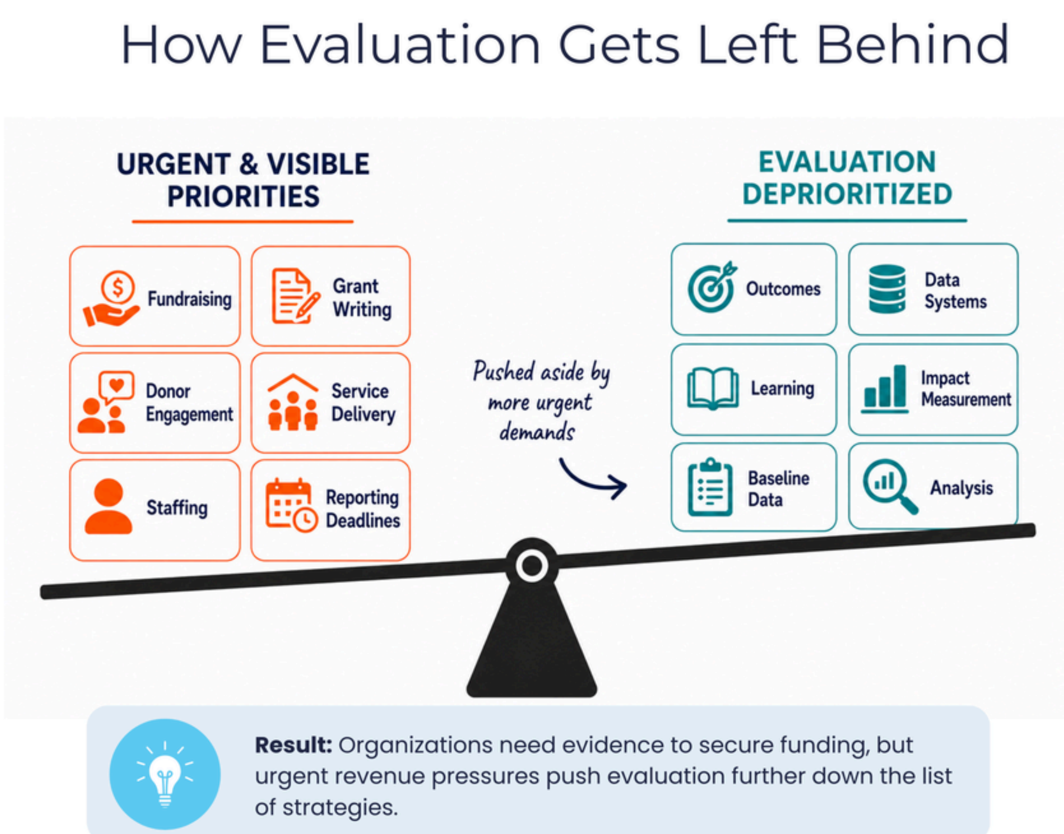
Survival mode also narrows organizational attention. When leaders and staff are overwhelmed, the focus understandably shifts to what must be done now: submit the application, complete the report, retain staff, keep services running, respond to urgent community needs. Longer-term questions are deferred. *What evidence do we need three years from now? What outcomes will matter most to funders, partners, and participants? How will we know whether the program is creating value relative to investment? What data should we collect now so we are not trying to rebuild the story later?* These are strategic questions, but survival mode makes strategic thinking feel like a luxury.

The irony is that evaluation is often treated as something organizations can postpone until they have more funding, when in practice it is one of the tools that can help them make a stronger case for funding. Strong evaluation infrastructure supports clearer grant narratives, more credible renewal requests, stronger board reporting, better donor communication, and more confident strategic decisions. It helps organizations explain not only what they did, but what changed, for whom, how they know, and why that change matters.

WHY EVALUATION GETS LEFT BEHIND

Evaluation often gets left behind not because organizations do not value learning, accountability, or impact, but because it is rarely positioned as an immediate survival function. In a constrained funding environment, activities that appear directly tied to revenue tend to rise to the top. Fundraising, grant writing, donor engagement, and development strategy are seen as essential because they are visibly connected to bringing money into the organization. Evaluation, by contrast, is often treated as indirect support: useful, important, and desirable, but not always urgent.

This distinction matters. **When evaluation is viewed primarily as overhead, it becomes easy to delay.** When it is viewed primarily as compliance, it becomes something organizations do because funders require it, not because it strengthens decision-making. When it is viewed as “nice to have,” it becomes vulnerable to cuts, postponement, or informal delegation to already-stretched program staff. The result is that evaluation is often added after programs are designed, after services are delivered, and sometimes only after a report is due. In other words, evaluation is asked to explain the value of work it was never properly resourced to track in the first place.



This pattern is reinforced by how nonprofit work is often funded. Many grants ask organizations to describe outcomes, collect data, report impact, and demonstrate effectiveness, but do not always provide adequate resources to build the systems required to do that well. As a result, evaluation becomes fragmented across roles. Program staff collect data while managing service delivery. Grant writers translate limited evidence into funder narratives. Leaders use incomplete information to make strategic decisions. Everyone needs evaluation, but no one has enough time, authority, or resources to fully own it.

The problem is not only practical. It is also conceptual. Evaluation is often separated from fundraising when, in reality, it should be understood as part of the infrastructure that makes fundraising credible. Strong evaluation helps organizations answer the questions funders, boards, donors, and partners increasingly ask: *What changed? For whom? How do we know? What value was created? What should continue, change, or grow?* Without that evidence, organizations may still be able to communicate urgency, need, and effort, but they are less equipped to demonstrate effectiveness, value, and sustainability.

Reframing evaluation as funding infrastructure changes its role. It is no longer simply a reporting task or a technical add-on. It becomes part of how organizations build a stronger case for investment, make better decisions, and understand the full value of their work. In this framing, evaluation is not competing with fundraising. It is strengthening it.

THE EVIDENCE GAP

When evaluation is delayed or underfunded, organizations are left with an evidence gap. They are expected to prove outcomes, demonstrate impact, justify renewals, and make compelling funding cases, but they may not have the systems or information needed to do so credibly. This gap often becomes visible at the worst possible time: during a grant renewal, a board presentation, a strategic planning process, a public funding decision, or a moment of financial uncertainty.

The evidence gap usually has several dimensions:

Lack of Outcome Clarity
Organizations may know the program matters, but still struggle to define the specific changes it creates. They may track activities, such as participants served, sessions delivered, or referrals made, without clearly showing what changed as a result. Outputs show that work happened. They do not necessarily show that the work made a difference.

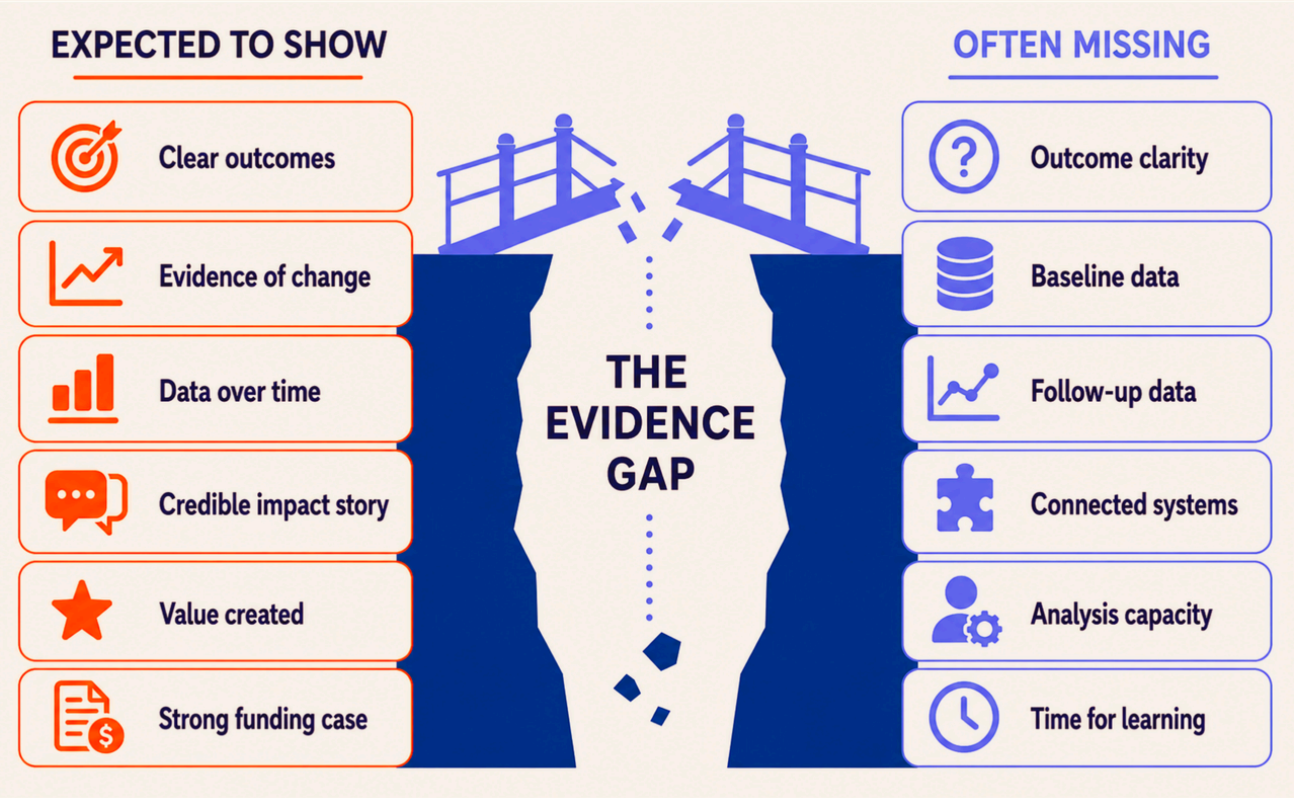
Weak Data Systems
Organizations may not have the systems needed to show change over time. Baseline data may be missing, follow-up data may be inconsistent, and information may be spread across case notes, spreadsheets, funder reports, client systems, and staff memory. Without connected systems, it becomes harder to show who benefited, what changed, and where outcomes are strongest.

Limited Analysis Capacity
Collecting data is not the same as using it well. Organizations may gather information but lack the time, skill, or capacity to interpret it, connect it to strategy, or use it to strengthen funding cases. Without analysis, even good data can sit unused instead of helping organizations understand impact and make better decisions.

The evidence gap also weakens the organization's ability to tell a complete impact story. **Many nonprofits have compelling stories of participant change, but stories alone may not be enough to support long-term investment.** Similarly, many organizations have output data, but activity counts alone rarely capture the depth or value of social change. Credible impact communication requires both: human stories that explain why the work matters, and evidence that shows what changed, for whom, and with what level of confidence.

This is especially important when organizations are trying to demonstrate value, not just activity. Funders and decision-makers may want to understand whether a program is effective, whether it is worth continuing, whether it should be scaled, or whether it creates value relative to the investment required. Those questions require more than good intentions and service counts. They require an evidence base built before the organization is under pressure to defend the program.

In this sense, the evidence gap is not merely an evaluation problem. It is a sustainability problem. **When organizations cannot clearly demonstrate outcomes and value, they may struggle to secure future funding, even when the work itself is meaningful.** The issue is not that the value does not exist. The issue is that the organization may not have built the infrastructure needed to make that value visible.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NONPROFITS

For nonprofits, the first step is to treat evaluation as part of program and funding strategy from the beginning, not as something added once a report is due. Evaluation does not need to be overly complex to be useful. In fact, many organizations would benefit from a simpler and earlier approach: define the program clearly, identify the most important outcomes, decide what evidence will be needed, and build manageable data collection into the work before funding decisions depend on it.

This requires a shift in timing. Evaluation planning should happen when programs are being designed, revised, funded, or scaled. Organizations should ask early: *What are we trying to change? Who will experience that change? What evidence would show that the change occurred? What information will funders, boards, partners, and communities need later? What data can staff realistically collect without turning service delivery into a paperwork obstacle course?* These questions are much easier to answer before the program is under pressure to prove its worth.

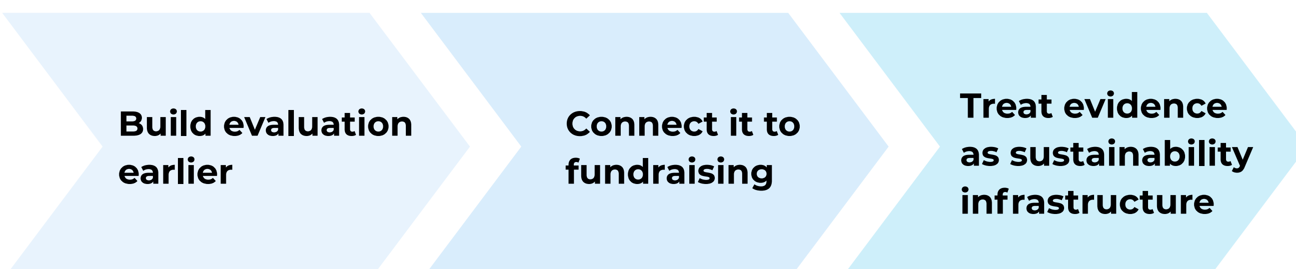
Nonprofits should also connect evaluation more directly to fundraising and development strategy. Grant writers, fundraisers, and donor engagement staff need more than compelling stories and output counts. They need credible evidence of outcomes, clear explanations of value, and a strong understanding of how programs contribute to longer-term change. **When evaluation and fundraising operate separately, development staff may be left trying to build funding cases with incomplete evidence. When they are connected, evaluation becomes a strategic asset that strengthens proposals, renewals, donor communication, board reporting, and public messaging.**

This does not mean every organization needs a large internal evaluation department. Many nonprofits, especially small and mid-sized organizations, may not have the budget or staffing capacity for that. But every organization can begin building evaluation infrastructure at an appropriate scale. That may include a basic theory of change, a small set of meaningful outcome measures, baseline and follow-up data collection, regular review of findings, better documentation of program costs, or periodic external evaluation support.

Organizations should also prioritize learning, not only reporting. Evaluation is most valuable when it helps leaders and staff understand what is working, where participants are getting stuck, which outcomes are strongest, and how programs could improve. **If evaluation is used only to satisfy funder requirements, organizations may miss its strategic value. Evidence should not sit in a report until the next grant cycle.** It should inform decisions about staffing, program design, partnerships, communications, and sustainability.

Finally, **nonprofits should be honest about what they can and cannot prove.** Credible evaluation does not require pretending that every outcome can be measured perfectly. It requires clarity about the evidence available, the limits of that evidence, and the assumptions being made. This is especially important when communicating social and economic value. A careful, transparent value claim is more useful than an inflated claim that collapses under scrutiny. Funders may be impressed by large numbers, but serious decision-makers need credible ones.

The central recommendation for nonprofits is therefore straightforward: build the evidence before the funding case depends on it. Evaluation should be treated as sustainability infrastructure. It helps organizations make stronger funding arguments, but it also helps them make better decisions about the work itself.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

Funders also have a central role in breaking the survival-mode funding cycle. **If funders want stronger evidence from nonprofits, they need to support the capacity required to produce that evidence.** It is not reasonable to ask organizations for meaningful outcomes, long-term impact, learning, equity analysis, participant feedback, and value-for-money evidence while providing little or no funding for evaluation infrastructure. The evidence funders ask for has a cost. It requires time, staff capacity, data systems, analysis, stakeholder engagement, and sometimes external support.

One of the most important shifts funders can make is to fund evaluation directly and adequately. This includes supporting evaluation planning, data collection, analysis, reporting, and learning activities. It also includes funding the less visible infrastructure that makes evaluation possible: data systems, staff training, measurement design, participant engagement, and time for reflection. Evaluation should not be treated as an unfunded expectation embedded inside a program grant. If evidence matters, it should be resourced accordingly.

Funders should also reduce performative reporting. Many nonprofit reporting requirements generate information that is time-consuming to produce but not especially useful for decision-making. Reports may ask for outputs, anecdotes, demographic tables, narrative updates, and customized indicators in formats that satisfy compliance but do little to support learning. This creates administrative burden without necessarily strengthening evidence. **Funders should ask whether the information they request is actually used, whether it helps nonprofits learn, and whether it contributes to better funding decisions.**

A more useful approach would focus on fewer, better questions. *What changed? How do we know? What are we learning? What barriers are affecting outcomes? What adaptations are needed? What value is being created that may not be visible through outputs alone?* These questions can create a stronger learning relationship between funders and nonprofits built mainly around compliance rather than learning.

Funders should also support multi-year learning. Many meaningful outcomes, especially in social and justice programs, take time to emerge. Prevention, stability, reduced system involvement, family strengthening, healing, safety, and long-term well-being rarely fit neatly into a one-year reporting cycle. Short grant periods can pressure organizations to overstate early outcomes or focus on what is easiest to count. Multi-year funding and learning frameworks allow organizations to track change more realistically and build stronger evidence over time.

Another recommendation is for funders to support shared evaluation capacity. Not every nonprofit needs to build the same tools alone. Funders can support cohort-based evaluation, shared measurement frameworks, technical assistance, evaluation communities of practice, or pooled funding for external evaluation support. This is especially useful for smaller organizations that may have strong community relationships but limited internal evaluation capacity.

Funders should also recognize the value of qualitative and community-defined evidence. Strong evaluation is not only about numerical indicators. **Participant voice, lived experience, staff insight, and community context are essential for understanding what outcomes matter and why.** This is particularly important for programs serving people affected by poverty, housing instability, violence, system involvement, exploitation, discrimination, or trauma. Evidence should be rigorous, but it should also be grounded in the realities of the people and communities the work is meant to support.

The central recommendation for funders is this: resource the evidence you ask organizations to provide. If stronger evidence is needed to guide funding decisions, then evaluation cannot be treated as a side requirement. It must be supported as part of the grantmaking strategy itself.

Fund evaluation for grantees

Reduce performative reporting

Support multi-year learning

Resource the requested evidence

CONCLUSION

If funders want stronger evidence, and nonprofits want stronger funding cases, evaluation cannot remain an afterthought.

The current funding environment is placing significant pressure on nonprofits. Organizations are being asked to meet rising demand, respond to uncertainty, retain staff, secure new revenue, and justify continued investment, often at the same time. In that context, it is understandable that immediate fundraising activity receives the most attention. Revenue keeps programs open, staff employed, and services available.

But **the same survival pressures that push organizations toward urgent revenue activity can also weaken the evidence base they need for long-term sustainability.** When evaluation is delayed, underfunded, or treated as compliance, organizations may struggle to show what changed, what value was created, and why their work should continue. T**he result is a cycle in which nonprofits need stronger evidence to secure funding, but funding instability leaves little room to build that evidence.**

This paper has argued that evaluation should be understood differently. It is not simply a reporting function, an administrative burden, or a technical exercise that happens after the real work is done. **Evaluation is part of the infrastructure that supports sustainability, credibility, learning, and value.** It helps organizations make stronger funding cases, but it also helps them make better decisions about programs, partnerships, strategy, and resource allocation.

The path forward requires shared responsibility. Nonprofits can build evaluation earlier, connect evidence to fundraising strategy, and treat learning as part of sustainability. Funders can resource evaluation, reduce unnecessary reporting burden, support multi-year learning, and ask for evidence in ways that strengthen rather than drain organizational capacity.

If funders want stronger evidence, they must help fund the systems that produce it. If nonprofits want stronger funding cases, they must build evaluation into the work before the next renewal deadline arrives. Evaluation cannot remain an afterthought waiting at the end of the grant cycle. It needs to be treated as part of how organizations survive, adapt, and show the full value of what they create.

Thank you for reading this white paper and making it all the way to the end, which is an act of perseverance that should probably count as its own outcome measure. The funding environment is difficult, and many organizations are being asked to prove more with less. But stronger evidence does not have to start with complicated tools or overwhelming data systems. It can start with clearer outcomes, better questions, and practical evaluation frameworks that help organizations show the value of the work already underway.

For more evaluation resources, or if your organization needs stronger evidence before the next funding deadline starts breathing down everyone's neck, contact us:

uncommonevaluation.com
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hello@uncommonevaluation.com

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